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## THE GLOBAL REALITY OF REFUGEES IN PROTRACTED SITUATIONS: African case studies and ways ahead

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**B**y the end of 2016, there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 22.5 million of whom were refugees. While public discourse and debate is very much focused on new arrivals and, particularly in Europe, on a state's capacity to welcome more refugees, the reality is that a number as high as 11.6 million refugees **live** in a protracted situation. That is, these men, women and children have been in exile – in limbo – pending a durable solution for years. According to some accounts, the average time a person spends as a refugee is 16 years.

In the current international context, finding durable solutions for refugees is becoming increasingly complicated (there are three types of durable solutions: repatriation, local integration, or resettlement, each one of them with a different set of conditions and processes). In cases of protracted refugee situations, finding a way forward becomes even more difficult because of

donor fatigue (which results in lack of resources), resettlement fixation (an expression used to describe the “fixation” refugees have with relocating to a third state different to

the one of arrival – usually a rich state – and particularly observed in cases where refugees are hosted in developing nations), and difficulties in integrating into the host country after years or even decades living in a camp (oftentimes in isolated areas) or hiding in urban settings. Camps that host these refugees become increasingly hard to fund and, simultaneously, the lives of these people are brought to a situation of stagnation that is difficult to overcome. It is not only donors that become dissatisfied with the situation, local communities who at first may have been welcoming can also develop animosities, and humanitarian workers – including the staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees – find themselves having to operate with very few resources and lots of constraints.

**Speaking of a refugee crisis makes it seem that is temporary and exceptional. However, since the Syria war the number of people in this situation has multiplied, but lots of men, women and children find themselves trapped in this situation for years.**

**For protracted refugee situations, finding a way forward becomes even more difficult because of donor fatigue, resettlement fixation and difficulties in integrating into the host country after years or even decades living in a camp.**

**Large numbers of the population believe that refugees come to their country because they want to stay and are looking for hand-outs.**

**For policymakers and people working with refugees, the challenges are related to legal and logistical constraints. Culture and language also make the situation harder.**

**Not being able to enjoy the same array of rights as citizens of a state also usually means that refugees are more at risk of exploitation.**

**Perceived threats to “national identity”, lack of integration and not sharing the same language pose serious obstacles that haven't been addressed.**

**Hosting refugees also poses many challenges for the host country and community and, more often than not, keeping refugees in camps does nothing to alleviate the situation as time passes.**

Resolving this situation is first and foremost a humanitarian matter, but not coming to terms with this reality also has severe consequences for public opinion in host states. Public opinion studies demonstrate that large numbers of the population believe that refugees come to their country because they want to stay and are looking for handouts. The majority of the public does not favour granting permanent residency and, often, locals even question whether refugees are “really refugees” (More in Common, 2017). While the reasons refugees flee are not economically motivated, it is true that they are likely to remain in a host state for years; denying that reality and not implementing mechanisms that take it into account is likely to produce backlash and ultimately close up the space for more welcoming policies and open societies.

Ultimately, the goal should be to find a durable solution. In the interim, however, policies that better address the reality of protracted situations and that facilitate coexistence and understanding between refugee and host communities must be developed. On many occasions, establishing a refugee camp or maintaining refugees there for long periods of time is the worst policy option.

Confining refugees to refugee camps oftentimes condemns people to a dire situation, a reality that **UNHCR** acknowl-

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edged in 2014 with its “out of camp” policy. The policy has as its objective “to avoid the establishment of refugee camps, wherever possible, while pursuing alternatives to camps that ensure refugees are protected and assisted effectively and enabled to achieve solutions” (UNHCR, 2014). This policy promotes more inclusive, sustainable, and development-oriented approaches to programming and responds to the reality that many refugees don’t live in camps and that “living in camps can engender dependency and weaken the ability of refugees to manage their own lives” (UNHCR, 2014). Krisan Camp in Ghana would be an example of a camp in which the situation has become so entrenched that no one is satisfied with the current arrangement. In this camp, livelihood opportunities have remained scarce.

### **The reality of living in a protracted refugee: An example from a camp in Ghana<sup>1</sup>**

Ghana is a country that has a relatively small refugee caseload. As of March 31st 2017 Ghana hosted 11,939 refugees and 1,380 asylum seekers. Most of the refugees came from Côte d’Ivoire (refugees fled from the violence that arose in

the 2010–2011 crisis), followed by Togo (conflict in the early 90s and 2005) and Liberia. There are four refugee camps in Ghana but about 50% of the persons of concern (PoC) live outside of the camps.

Krisan Camp was established in 1996 to host refugees fleeing from the war in Liberia. Subsequently, the camp received Togolese refugees, and more recently, since the early 2000s, Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers. These three constitute the top three nationalities in the camp in absolute numbers but, currently, Krisan hosts refugees from sixteen different countries. A vast majority of the refugees in Krisan are in a protracted situation; some of the refugees have been in this camp for more than two decades.

Since the opening of Krisan Camp, many problems have arisen. Refugees have struggled to find income-generating activities and are not self-reliant. Food insecurity is high and many refugees in the camp are highly dependent on charcoal production and net pulling, which do not provide sustainable sources of income and at best yield seasonal returns during the dry season (UNHCR-Ghana, 2016). Charcoal burning is illegal and dangerous and is generating tensions with the chiefs and local communities, as burning of charcoal produces deforestation and endangers the environment. Additionally, as the population of the camp has decreased, so have income-generating activities. Some refugees have stores in the camp or provide services, but demand for them has declined as there are fewer customers. Recently, fishing-related jobs have also started to decrease due to greater oil and gas exploitation in the area.

Many refugees de facto don’t live in the camp or spend long periods of time in other areas. Some refugees commute between the camp and urban areas and engage in jobs such as watchmen and building site assistants, jobs that are not sustainable and put them at risk of being exploited (UNHCR-Ghana, 2016). Still, for refugees who come and go from Krisan to Accra and other places (a journey that takes about six hours using the “trotro” system or the buses), Krisan Camp exists as a safety net; it is a place they can always return to. It is common in many rural African contexts that some people leave the settlements for a few weeks or a month at a time to get casual work in a more distant rural or urban environment, leaving their families in the settlement (Kaiser, 2006: 609). One of the refugees interviewed tried to move to Accra to find a job. After weeks working, the employer refused to pay his salary and, not having other options in Accra, he returned to Krisan where he retained his shelter. While having this safety net benefits refugees, it also has downsides. Local communities who might be struggling financially find it unfair that refugees are given a “free home” while for camp management and humanitarian staff it is harder to justify maintaining the shelters if people are not really residing in them.

Refugees have to compete with Ghanaians for the same jobs, for which Ghanaians have a competitive advantage. To work in the formal economy, refugees need to have a work permit. Ghanaian labour laws establish that in order to obtain

1. This section is based on field research conducted by the author between October 2016 and May 2017.

a work permit, a refugee needs to have a residence permit, must secure a job offer, and must follow the predetermined administrative procedure. This becomes an arduous process that makes it unfeasible for the refugee to obtain the permit. However, it must be noted that in Ghana about 88% of the workforce is employed in the **informal sector**. Thus, the types of jobs refugees are unable to access due to lack of a work permit do not constitute the bulk of the economic activity in Ghana or the region. Some refugees have skills and received training in their country of origin. The refugee population living in Krisan contains nurses and teachers, among others. Nevertheless, they cannot work as such because their licenses are not recognised in the country.

The experiences of men and women in protracted situations are also highly gendered, and the case of Krisan is not an exception. There have been claims of sexual exploitation and abuse. During the focus group discussions and in private interviews, some women claimed that rape, marital and extra-marital, occurs in the camp and that sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and survival sex are commonplace.

During the focus group discussions and in the interviews, the most recurrent concerns were related to women's health (particularly to childbirth), childrearing, livelihood opportunities, and sexual exploitation and abuse. Women complained about the lack of appropriate health services during pregnancy and at birth, about the difficulties in combining motherhood and work, and about the recurrence of sexual violence and abuse. The most positive observation was that women have created support systems amongst themselves. Some days, one woman would look after the children of other women and vice versa, and something similar happened with sharing food.

Women in Krisan resorted to a variety of strategies to fulfil their basic needs (or a combination of them). Some of the women have taken it upon themselves to develop a small farm behind their households. Others have tried to provide services, such as hair plaiting, but the small numbers of people in the camp result in insufficient demand. Both in the focus group discussions and in private interviews, some women claimed that they resort to prostitution to obtain an income and it also seems likely that some women marry based on the assumption – sometimes false – that the husband will provide for them. Already in a study conducted with Liberian refugees in Ghana, Shelly Dick observed that “women are particularly susceptible to dependency on relationships with men as a way to sustain themselves financially and to access luxury items that they value. As a result, teen pregnancy is common at the camp, giving many young women the added burden of providing for a child thus perpetuating the need to be dependent on a boyfriend” (Dick, 2002: 21).

For many years, refugees living in Krisan Camp have been resettled to Canada and the United States. The prospect of resettlement became a pull factor for refugees who attempted

to reach the camp as they equated being in Krisan with being resettled in the future.<sup>2</sup> This situation has produced the expectation, on the part of refugees and asylum seekers, that they will all be resettled and the feeling that they are entitled to this durable solution. Refugees who have been resettled also share their new way of life on social media, creating a “picture-perfect” image of life in the resettlement country that further generates jealousy and resentment among the refugees who have stayed. As a result, a strong resettlement fixation has developed and refugees seem unwilling to consider local integration or repatriation. Additionally, in 2012 and 2013, a **cessation clause** was invoked for Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees, respectively. Liberian refugees were offered the possibility of local integration with a two-year renewable residence permit and a cash grant. The local integration process encountered many obstacles, including insufficient financial resources and it was worsened by the fact that refugees did not obtain their passports until later in the process. Some Liberian refugees, despite no longer having refugee status, have stayed in the camp and have become negative examples of what refugees consider to be their fate if they locally integrate in Ghana. Refugees also argue that not knowing the local languages constitutes an insurmountable barrier to local integration and that they suffer discrimination from members of the host communities.

## Having refugee status oftentimes comes with a series of constraints that limit people's ability to sustain a dignified life.

### A multiplicity of challenges

As the case of Krisan Camp elucidates, challenges to improving the lives of refugees increase as years go by. The challenges that refugees face are many, have society-wide reverberations, and are exacerbated when the situation becomes entrenched. For policymakers and people working with refugees, the challenges are related to legal and logistical constraints. Culture and language also make the situation harder.

Oftentimes, there is not an enabling legal environment. Although most countries in the world are signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the specificities of refugee law in each state are enshrined in national legislation. This means that on some occasions, refugees living in a country do not have permission to work or freedom of movement. Additionally, nationality laws add the complication that some refugees by marriage or birth can become stateless. Not being able to enjoy the same array of rights as citizens of a state also usually means that refugees are more at risk of exploitation.

2. This conception was also held by Togolese refugees in the Volta region. One of the interviewees expressed how he wished he had been taken to Krisan, as then – he thought – he would have been resettled to Canada or the United States.

Camps have some of the problems outlined above in the case of Krisan, but there is also a set of logistical considerations that accompanies the decision to establish or maintain a camp. Sometimes, a state will receive refugees, but will choose a camp location that is isolated to keep refugees separated from the local population. This can also result in what is commonly referred to as “warehousing of refugees”. That all refugees stay in a camp can make crisis more manageable, though, as it is possible to centralise services to attend to refugees’ specific needs. There are also economic considerations, but whether establishing a camp is a cheaper or more expensive option than other alternatives and which is more resource intensive is still disputed.

Clashes between the local population and refugees are common. Men and women in a protracted situation are usually resourceful and find ways to keep on going, regardless of their dire situation. Their recourse to unregulated activities can however create problems with the local communities. This is compounded by the fact that there is usually, in all societies, a segment of the population that has reticence towards outsiders. This reticence can be heightened where the economic situation is bad, particularly when refugees are given direct

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assistance and/or skills training and the local population is not. This is a catch-22 situation. Oftentimes, across countries, host communities will complain that refugees steal their jobs. Nonetheless, if refugees don’t work, locals will complain that refugees are lazy and only come looking for handouts. Both situations can make integration – or at least temporary cohabitation – more difficult, ultimately closing the space for policymakers to implement more welcoming policies.

Additionally, in the past few years it seems that cultural backlash is an even greater driver of public opinion. Perceived threats to “national identity”, lack of integration (which for many is actually equated to assimilation), and not sharing the same language pose serious obstacles that haven’t been addressed. This cultural backlash is being empowered and exploited by populist movements, as has occurred in France with the Front National, in the USA with Trump, or in Germany with Alternative für Deutschland. Providing better policies to address protracted refugee situations thus becomes even more important; creative solutions are needed.

### **Towards creative solutions**

Uganda and Ethiopia are two of the countries that **host the most refugees**, with 948,800 and 691,600 refugees, respectively. These two countries have been experimenting with different ways of hosting refugees, with more or less success. In Uganda, agricultural settlements or camp-like “protected villages” hosted refugees from different parts of the world. In

Ethiopia, an alternative to camp-based assistance was developed for Eritrean refugees.

The experience of refugees in Uganda is almost unique. Some refugees established in agricultural settlements are allocated a plot (or plots) of land for residential and agricultural purposes in a place determined by the government (Kaiser, 2006: 601). The opinions of refugees living in this type of settlement for long periods of time were captured in a study published in 2006. Up until that date, movement out of the settlement was only officially allowed with a travel permit issued by the government’s representative in the settlement, who was known as the settlement commandant. In general, these refugee settlements were not fenced and where refugee villages had developed, small markets, churches, and other spaces had opened. This type of arrangement received mixed criticisms. There are some aspects that were indubitably good (particularly the generosity of Ugandans in making land available) and some refugees stated that they found that the settlement existed as a safety net, a protective environment. The problem was its remoteness and distance from markets (Kaiser, 2006: 606). The main criticisms stemmed from the lack of freedom of movement and lack of freedom to decide

where refugees preferred to settle. Their lack of choice and the location of some of the settlements entailed that refugees in these settlements were not able to fully enjoy their rights. Since 2006, **refugees in Uganda** have had freedom of movement (subject to some restrictions), employment rights, and access to some services. According to the latest available information,

in the new settlements UNHCR and partners are opening to host South Sudanese refugees, refugees are going to live side by side with members of the Ugandan host community. In recognition of the **efforts** being made by the host community, about 30% of the resources of the humanitarian response go toward benefitting host communities through improvements to local infrastructure and other actions. This way of managing refugee situations has been lauded internationally.

The Ethiopian government developed an alternative to the encampment policy for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. This was not an initiative to phase out camps but focused on out of camp assistance. The government established the “**out-of-camp**” scheme through which Eritrean refugees were allowed to live and study outside of camps if they proved that they were able to sustain themselves and had an Ethiopian relative who sponsored her or him. The scheme was based on the recognition that encampment prevented the development of livelihood mechanisms among Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia and that the low connection to urban markets and weak internal demand in the camp limited the development of endogenous economic activities. The scheme did not yield as many results as expected. The requisites to be eligible for this scheme were cumbersome and the out-of-camp scheme does not come with freedom of movement, beneficiaries were not included in urban assistance mechanisms and, according to a 2014 study (Samuel Hall, 2014), UNHCR and implementing partners were not able to closely keep track of the beneficiaries once they moved outside of the camp.

## Conclusion

Speaking of a refugee crisis makes it seem as if the existence of people whose lives have been wrecked as a result of conflict and had to flee their homes is an aberration that is temporary and exceptional. That is far from the truth. The situation has been severely aggravated over the past decade, and since the outbreak of war in Syria, the numbers of people in this situation have multiplied. Nevertheless, lots of men, women and children find themselves trapped in this situation for years. The conflict in Syria is far from being resolved, and the same can be said about the other conflicts that are generating more refugees (South Sudan and Afghanistan). This probably means that the numbers of refugees who will be in a protracted situation are likely to increase.

The situation in Krisan Camp illuminates one of many realities for men and women who find themselves trapped in exile without leaving behind refugee status for years. There is a tendency to essentialise refugees and forget that this is a legal aspect of people's lives. Being a refugee means that this legal status has been recognised and that several rights derive from it. But while protection and some benefits stem from refugee status, the truth is that having refugee status oftentimes comes with a series of constraints that limit people's ability to sustain a dignified life. Hosting refugees also poses many challenges for the host country and community and, more often than not, keeping refugees in camps does nothing to alleviate the situation as time passes.

Men, women and children in this situation become "the other" and concerns among the population are exploited by authoritarian movements who reinforce a narrow definition of the in-group built on the rejection of the other. This is the case in states all over the globe and has consequences that are far beyond the realm of immigration and refugee policies.

In a world in which borders are diffusing, national identity is perceived as eroding and terrorism is a reality, moving beyond a focus on the arrival moment and shifting to integration and cohabitation for refugees of long duration is necessary. In order to make this easier, evidence suggests that a set of conditions are necessary. There needs to be an enabling legal and socioeconomic environment accompanied by context-specific policies. For a policy to succeed, freedom of residence and to choose where refugees want to live and a possibility for refugees to integrate in that area are a few of the preconditions. The strategy should also be underpinned by protection and solutions and it is more likely to succeed if part of the assistance or the programme – as in Uganda – benefits the host community.

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