

Minding the humanitarian-development gap: Where do we stand?

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Refugees are often spoken of with the language of disaster – a human tide, flooding over borders – invoking a sense of emergency and crisis. Yet in terms of how we respond, how long should a refugee situation be considered a humanitarian emergency?

While increasing numbers of people are newly displaced, solutions to displacement are slow to come to fruition. As a result, amongst those refugees displaced for longer than 5 years, the average length of displacement is over 20 years.²

While a quick response of food, shelter, and medical assistance might save lives in the immediate aftermath of an emergency, as the length of displacement grows, the inadequacy of merely meeting refugees' basic needs becomes pronounced. Without access to skills development, livelihoods and the achievement of some measure of self-reliance, refugees are left in limbo, vulnerable to harmful survival strategies and deprived of the opportunity to live lives of dignity. This, then, is an issue of refugee protection.

Yet humanitarian agencies have traditionally been ill equipped to support local infrastructure and foster a conducive environment for sustainable livelihoods. These are typically the work of development actors – whose engagement in refugee situations, has been patchy at best.

Yet the development implications of displacement are significant, particularly as the majority of the world's refugees come from, and are hosted in less wealthy regions.³ The presence of refugees may have major implications for host countries' infrastructure, labour market and economy, presenting both a challenge to, and opportunity for, development.

This also bears upon the search for solutions to displacement. Refugees who have the opportunity to become self-reliant will be better placed to transition to any durable solution, whether in their country of asylum, origin or resettlement. And because many countries from which refugees flee are poor or fragile states, development is also relevant to creating the conditions for refugees to return in safety and dignity.

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² UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*, UNHCR, 2016 < <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>>, Xavier Devictor & Quy-Toan Do, 'How Many Years Have Refugees Been in Exile?' World Bank Group, September 2016 < <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/549261472764700982/pdf/WPS7810.pdf>>

³ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*, p2.

Clearly, then, displacement is not only a humanitarian issue, but a development one.

This is not simply a matter of terminology, but has real world consequences. Humanitarian and development interventions invoke distinct institutions, programmatic approaches and funding mechanisms, giving rise to a ‘humanitarian-development gap’ in responding to refugees.

Humanitarian assistance is driven by the imperative to save lives, based on need, founded on the principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality. It is traditionally intended to be quick and limited, and does not seek to address the underlying causes of crisis. By contrast, development assistance seeks longer-term solutions to poverty and involves larger processes of social transformation, generally in partnership with governments, and aimed at supporting national institutions and systems.⁴

The two activities also engage separate institutional architectures. Within the UN system, UNHCR was established as the lead organisation for refugees and the UN Development Program (UNDP) for development, with the Bretton Woods institutions - the World Bank and International Monetary Fund - also playing a major role in development. These organisations have widely differing institutional cultures, jargon, priorities and programs.

Further, these activities draw upon separate funding streams, with humanitarian funding typically being short-term only, and development funding being slower to come on stream but available for multi-year programmes.⁵

Together, these differences have hampered the effective linking of the two responses in displacement situations.⁶

The current consensus

A recent series of historic international summits has articulated an unambiguous call for these gaps to be overcome. The New York Declaration passed as the outcome of the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in September, strongly encouraged joint responses “to strengthen the nexus between humanitarian and development actors, facilitate cooperation across institutional mandates and, by helping to build self-reliance and resilience, lay a basis for sustainable solutions.”⁷

This echoed the consensus established at the World Humanitarian Summit in May, which called for a more comprehensive response to displacement, addressing immediate needs and longer-term resilience, and ensuring respect for rights.⁸

⁴ Christina Bennett, ‘The development agency of the future: Fit for protracted crises?’ Overseas Development Institute, April 2015

⁵ Julia Steets et al, ‘Donor strategies for addressing the transition gap and linking humanitarian and development assistance: A contribution to the international debate’, Global Public Policy Institute, June 2011.

⁶ Astri Suhrke & Arve Ofstad, ‘Filling “the gap”: Lessons well learnt by the multilateral aid’, CMI Working Paper WP 2005: 14, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2005.

⁷ *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, UNGOAR, 71st session, Agenda Items 13 and 117, UN Doc A/RES/71/1 (3 October 2016), [85].

⁸ *Outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit: Report of the Secretary-General*, UNGAOR, 71st sess, Agenda Item 70(a), UN Doc A/71/353 (23 August 2016), [23]-[27].

And last year the Sustainable Development Goals committed the international community to “leave no one behind” in its mission to eradicate poverty, explicitly including refugees and migrants in that effort.⁹

It seems the international community has agreed on the importance of overcoming the humanitarian-development gap. But how significant is this agreement? And does it represent a turning point in the way we respond to refugees?

A brief history of efforts to address the humanitarian-development gap in refugee response

The importance of bringing a development perspective into refugee response has in fact been recognised for several decades. Looking at the history of these efforts is essential to evaluating the significance of today’s consensus about linking relief and development.

As early as 1952, UNHCR’s first High Commissioner, Gerrit Goedhart, recognised that the protection of Europe’s displaced should be understood not only as a question of legal protection, but a social and economic issue for refugee hosting states, requiring support from post-war economic reconstruction and development institutions.¹⁰

From the 1960s, international development assumed a much larger place in refugee response, as mass displacement from post-colonial conflicts led UNHCR to launch large-scale operations in Africa and other developing regions.¹¹ UNHCR worked with development actors to establish agricultural settlements, where refugees received humanitarian relief to meet immediate needs, and tools and seeds to enable self-sufficiency.

But the experiment failed, largely due to its paternalistic approach, which imposed a model of development based on inappropriate technologies and cash crops, designed without understanding of local context, and ignoring the capacities of refugees themselves.¹²

In the 1970s, refugee hosting states called for greater ‘international burden sharing’ to address the demands placed by the protracted presence of refugees on their already strained economies and infrastructure. The result was the ‘Refugee Aid and Development’ approach, which targeted assistance at refugee hosting areas, aiming to benefit both refugees and their hosts.¹³

⁹ United Nations, *Sustainable Development Goals* (25 September 2015) <<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>>.

¹⁰ *Refugees and Stateless Persons and Problems of Assistance to Refugees: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, UNGAOR 1951 A/2011, 6th Session Supplement No. 19 (A/2011) Paris, 1952: [24]-[25] <<http://www.unhcr.org/excom/unhcrannual/3ac68c3d8/refugees-stateless-persons-problems-assistance-refugees-report-united-nations.html>>.

¹¹ Jeff Crisp, ‘Mind the gap! UNHCR, humanitarian assistance and the development process’, *New Issues in Refugee Research* No 43, UNHCR, May 2001; Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and world politics: A perilous path*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp105-123.

¹² Evan Elise Easton-Calabria, ‘From bottom-up to top-down: The “pre-history” of refugee livelihoods assistance from 1919 to 1979’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28(3) 2015.

¹³ Barry Stein, ‘Returnee aid and development’, UNHCR, 1994; Sarah Meyer, ‘The “refugee aid and development” approach in Uganda: empowerment and self-reliance of refugees in practice’, *New Issues in Refugee Research* No 131, October 2006.

While some limited results were achieved, there was a fatal lack of agreement about what ‘burden sharing’ entailed.¹⁴ Host states saw it as principally about increased development funding, but were unenthusiastic about recognising refugee rights – such as freedom of movement – that were needed to enable self-reliance. Donor states were reluctant to pour resources into countries they did not think were devoting them to durable solutions for refugees.

Further, prevailing development orthodoxy required low-income countries to implement programs of structural adjustment as a condition for international loans. Many refugee hosting states were made to implement economic reforms, that led to harsh social impacts like high unemployment and rising prices for basic goods. Little wonder that refugees came to be perceived as a burden, and confined to camps without employment rights. We now know that structural adjustment didn’t necessarily lead to sustained development, but to short term cycles of economic growth and contraction, again with devastating impact on the poorest.¹⁵

The experience of this period shows that project-based approaches to development - in the absence of rights protections and adequate social and economic policy settings – will not lead to sustainable outcomes.

In the 1990s, UNHCR continued to pursue development links, largely in the context of supporting the reintegration of returning refugees in their countries of origin, which were often fragile states facing insecurity, poor infrastructure, and weak governments in the aftermath of conflict.¹⁶ Here UNHCR’s key intervention was Quick Impact Projects – discrete projects aimed at rehabilitating infrastructure or supporting income-generating activities, such as repairing bridges, or providing livestock.

While these projects had many positive outcomes, they largely failed to achieve long-term impact. One reason was the failure to overcome differences in institutional culture and priorities between UNHCR and its main development partner, UNDP, and a lack of funding commitments from development donors (in particular) for fragile contexts.¹⁷ Another was that projects were not sufficiently integrated into national development efforts. Governments were unable to provide the personnel or supplies needed to put rehabilitated facilities to good use, or ensure their maintenance.¹⁸ The weakness of government capacity in these fragile contexts highlighted a flaw in the underlying assumption of efforts to transition from relief to development – that is, the assumption that this was a linear process along a continuum where emergency needs would end and state-led development would begin. Instead, in unstable contexts, relief, rehabilitation and development interventions may be needed simultaneously.

This experience again highlighted two sets of problems underpinning the humanitarian-development gap. One related to poor institutional linkages, and the other to a deeper problem in the way interventions were themselves conceived.

¹⁴ Barry Stein, ‘Returnee aid and development’.

¹⁵ Jonathan Ostry et al, ‘Neoliberalism: Oversold?’ *Finance & Development* 52(2) 2016.

¹⁶ Jeff Crisp, ‘Mind the gap! UNHCR, humanitarian assistance and the development process’.

¹⁷ Joanna McCrae, ‘Aiding peace... and war: UNHCR, returnee reintegration and the relief-development debate’, *New Issues in Refugee Research* No 14, UNHCR, 1999.

¹⁸ Jeff Crisp, ‘Mind the gap! UNHCR, humanitarian assistance and the development process’.

Since then, UNHCR has continued a series of efforts to bring development approaches into refugee response, against a background of broader changes towards greater coherence and effectiveness in responding to crises.¹⁹

One was a process of UN reform, aimed at improving coordination in emergency response,²⁰ and development activities at the country level.²¹ This has included efforts to incorporate refugees into national development plans.

Another is a growing recognition that crises are increasingly complex, protracted, and – particularly in the face of climate change – more frequent. This is prompting an acceptance that the assumption that humanitarian interventions are normally short-term is flawed, and calls for a more fundamental rethink of the nature of humanitarian and development responses, in order to adequately address situations where widespread and unpredictable ‘emergency’ needs persist over multiple years alongside poverty and long-term structural vulnerabilities.²²

Skyrocketing needs have also prompted a movement towards greater aid effectiveness, requiring reform on the part of both donors and aid agencies, encouraging greater efficiency in aid delivery, and more flexibility in financing.²³

Where do we stand?

Where does this leave us today, and to what extent have we learned the lessons of past failed attempts? There does appear to be some promise of progress, and the Syria crisis seems to have forged some new approaches on these issues.

The Syria Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan²⁴ (or 3RP) sets out a strategy for responding to Syrian displacement in refugee hosting countries in the region. It incorporates both refugee and host country needs for immediate support *and* longer-term resilience, and has been formulated through partnership between host governments, UNHCR and UNDP. The 3RP has been hailed as a major step forward in bringing together development and humanitarian objectives under a single multi-year plan *with* national government ownership, learning some of the lessons from past experience.

¹⁹ Bryan Deschamp & Sebastian Lohse, ‘Still minding the gap? A review of efforts to link relief and development in situations of human displacement, 2001-2012’, UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service, February 2013.

²⁰ See for example, *Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations*, UN GAOR, 46th sess, 78th plen mtg, Agenda Item 143, UN Doc A/RES/46/182 (19 December 1991); *Humanitarian Response Review*, An independent report commissioned by the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator & Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August 2005.

²¹ See for example, *Guidance note on durable solutions for displaced persons (refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees)*, United Nations Development Group, 2004; *Note by the Secretary-General*, UNGA, 61st sess, Agenda item 113, UN Doc A/61/583 (20 November 2006).

²² *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility: Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit*, UNGOAR, 70th sess, Agenda Item 73(a), UN Doc A/70/709 (2 February 2016); *Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era*, Humanitarian Policy Group, April 2016.

²³ Rachel Scott, ‘Financing in crisis? Making humanitarian finance fit for the future’, OECD, 2015.

²⁴ *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) In Response to the Syria Crisis. Regional Strategic Overview, 2016-17* <<http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/3RP-Regional-Overview-2016-2017.pdf>>

In planning the Syria response, new collaborations between UNHCR and the World Bank have produced some careful analysis of poverty and vulnerability amongst refugees and their hosts.²⁵ The concept of vulnerability encompasses not only immediate needs, but also longer term susceptibility to shocks. Because of this embrace of both the immediate and the longer term, vulnerability may provide more coherent conceptual framework for identifying objectives that are common to both development and humanitarian response, compared to a framework based purely on needs (which engages mostly with current deficiencies).²⁶ Studies like this also provide a shared evidence base for the joint planning of responses. Ultimately, whether this results in better joined up delivery depends to a great extent on how it is implemented and whether it is sufficiently funded.

One of the interesting features of the Syria crisis is that the major refugee hosting countries are not developing countries but middle-income economies. Nevertheless the scale of the refugee influx calls for development-like interventions to address the stress placed on host countries' economies, labour markets and public services. This has prompted some welcome innovation on the part of the banks to create more flexible mechanisms to enable refugee hosting countries in the region to access concessional financing (that is, loans with lower interest rates and favourable terms that are generally only available to developing countries).²⁷

These financing arrangements are designed not only to enable middle-income countries to receive loans, but also to make that funding available to support not just immediate emergency needs but also longer-term development activities, and policy reforms in key sectors to support sustainable development.

In September, at the Obama Summit, it was announced that these arrangements would not be limited to the Syria situation, but would be made more broadly available to middle income countries under the World Bank's 'Global Concessional Financing Facility'.²⁸

This has been described by the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, as 'unprecedented in its approach',²⁹ and it does hold out the possibility that some of the traditional siloes between humanitarian and development funding – that held us back in the past – might be overcome.

Importantly, the availability of this more flexible funding is premised upon commitments by host governments to recognise refugees' rights, particularly the right to work. For example, under the

²⁵ Paolo Verme et al, *The Welfare of Syrian Refugees : Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016.

²⁶ Irina Mosel and Simon Levine, 'Remaking the case for linking relief, rehabilitation and development: How LRRD can become a practically useful concept for assistance in difficult places', Humanitarian Policy Group, March 2014.

²⁷ World Bank, 'International community endorses new initiative to support refugees, host communities, recovery and reconstruction in the Middle East and North Africa,' Press Release, 15 April 2016 <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/04/15/international-community-endorses-new-initiative-to-support-refugees-host-communities-and-recovery-in-mena>>.

²⁸ World Bank, 'Following the refugees: New Global Concessional Financing Facility', 4 October 2016 <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/10/04/following-the-refugees-new-global-concessional-financing-facility>>.

²⁹ World Bank, *Global Concessional Financing Facility* <<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/222001475547774765/FlyerGlobalCFF.pdf>>

Jordan Compact³⁰ announced in February, in return for grants and concessional financing, Jordan committed to allow Syrian refugees to apply for work permits, to set up businesses and make investments, and to be guaranteed a certain percentage of jobs created under private sector and donor funded projects.

Jordan is also required to implement a program of structural reforms as it enters into a new Extended Fund Facility with the IMF, including reforms to its tax regime, public financial management and labour market.³¹ Whether these avoid some of the harsh social impacts experienced with structural adjustment in the 1980s – and serve to reduce rather than exacerbate inequality – will depend on the detail of how these reforms are implemented, and whether adequate safeguards are put in place to avoid negative impacts on the most vulnerable.

Another initiative is the establishment of special economic zones close to refugee camps where both Jordanians and Syrians will be permitted to work, with preferential rules being negotiated to facilitate access to EU markets.³² The question will be whether or not these create dignified and sustainable livelihoods for Syrians and Jordanians alike, recognising that in the absence of adequate wages and labour protections, special economic zones may not necessarily lead to reduced vulnerability.³³

The jury is out in terms of whether these initiatives will lead to sustainable development and self-reliance for refugees and their hosts in the Syria situation, but there does seem to be some openness to new thinking.

What remains to be seen

A review of previous efforts to link development and humanitarian approaches in refugee response should prompt us to be sceptical of grand claims that we are now facing a watershed moment. The international community has expressed its support for such initiatives many times in the past, and the test will be whether sufficient political will exists to overcome institutional inertia, and to develop workable and well-funded mechanisms to bring about a shift in practice.

³⁰ 'Supporting Syria and the Region: The Jordan Compact: A new Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis' (Prepared for the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference, London, 4 February 2016)

³¹ 'IMF Executive Board approves US\$723 million extended arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility for Jordan', Press Release 16/381, 25 August 2016 <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/08/25/PR16381-Jordan-IMF-Executive-Board-Approves-US-723-million-Extended-Arrangement>>.

³² 'Supporting Syria and the Region: The Jordan Compact: A new Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis'; World Bank, 'Economic opportunities for Jordanians and Syrian Refugees Program-for-Results', Program-for-Results Information Document, 6 July 2016 <<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/665791469696489128/pdf/107270-PID-P159522-PUBLIC.pdf>>;

Alexander Betts & Paul Collier, 'Jordan's refugee experiment', *Foreign Affairs*, 28 April 2016 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-04-28/jordans-refugee-experiment>>

³³ Taina Renkonen, 'Special Economic Zones: a sustainable solution?' ARDD-Legal Aid, 25 February 2016 <<http://ardd-jo.org/blogs/special-economic-zones-sustainable-solution>>; Patrick Kingsley, 'Syrian refugees in Jordan: "If they cut the coupons, we will probably die"', *The Guardian*, 3 February 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/03/syrian-refugees-jordan-london-conference>>.

See also Marwan A Kardoosh & Riad al Khouri, 'Qualifying Industrial Zones and sustainable development in Jordan', Selected papers from 11th Annual Conference, Economic Research Forum, Cairo, 2005 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mohamed_Marouani/publication/5081272_The_Impact_of_the_Multifiber_Agreement_Phaseout_on_Unemployment_in_Tunisia_A_Propective_Dynamic_Analysis/links/09e4150b359a615d5d000000.pdf#page=156>.

While there does appear to be genuine improvement in facilitating cross-institutional linkages, we are yet to see the extent to which certain lessons have been learned from the past.

One of these is whether refugees and host communities will be adequately included in the process. In the 1960s, failure to consider refugees' skills and existing livelihood strategies in designing agricultural settlement schemes led to many refugees walking off settlements to pursue other, more suitable activities. Today, it is customary – even fashionable – to talk about refugees' economic agency, but their limited inclusion in heavily top-down planning processes does not reflect recognition of this in practice.³⁴ The question is whether this can be overcome, and the extent to which genuinely sustainable outcomes can be achieved in their absence.

Further, while the Syria situation has fomented interesting innovation, we are yet to see whether these initiatives will be extended to other situations that are less high profile, and less likely to result in onward movements of refugees to the global North.

Finally, I argue that the success of efforts to integrate refugees into host country economies in regions of origin will depend in part on whether the international community can reach some level of agreement on what responsibility sharing in relation to refugees entails.

Today, one question that arises is whether funding assistance to refugee hosting regions can itself constitute a sufficient contribution to responsibility sharing, in the face of increasingly widespread practices amongst Northern states to avoid respecting their own protection obligations, particularly through measures of deterrence.

I suggest that as long as Northern states treat overseas aid as a way of containing refugees in regions of origin, and justifying attempts to avoid their own protection obligations, the results will not be sustainable – no matter how well-linked, well-funded or well-designed those interventions may be. The reasons are twofold.

First, while improving conditions in countries of origin and asylum may reduce the need for people to move in a manner that is forced, it doesn't necessarily reduce migration. In fact, research shows that certain levels of economic development are correlated with greater population mobility, for reasons that are complex, but include the fact that with greater education and resources, people have both the means and expanded pathways to migrate.³⁵ That is not to say that development cannot contribute to stabilisation of refugee producing and hosting countries, but that people will respond to those changed circumstances in a variety of ways. So the use of development assistance to make people 'stay in their place' is ill-advised.

Secondly, strategies of containment, in the absence of broader commitments to protection, will be self-defeating. A recent study by the Overseas Development Institute demonstrates that Northern states' policies of deterrence have 'ripple effects' in the global South, encouraging

³⁴ Alexander Betts & Louise Bloom, 'The two worlds of humanitarian innovation', Working Paper 94, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, April 2013 <<https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-two-worlds-of-humanitarian-innovation>>.

³⁵ Michael Clemens, 'Development aid to deter migration will do nothing of the kind', *Refugees Deeply*, 31 October 2016 <<https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/10/31/development-aid-to-deter-migration-will-do-nothing-of-the-kind>>.

Southern states to implement their own measures to undermine refugee rights.³⁶ Thus, Northern states cannot push back refugees whilst expecting that Southern states will be willing to maintain respect for the rights that are so crucial to successfully integrating refugees into host country economies (such as the right to work, freedom of movement and so on).

We cannot expect that providing aid to refugees on the one hand, whilst undermining the international refugee protection regime on the other, will achieve sustainable results. To be successful, support for joined up humanitarian and development assistance must form part of coherent, comprehensive refugee policies that are based first and foremost upon the fundamental norms of refugee protection.

³⁶ Karen Hargrave, Sara Pantuliano & Ahmed Idris, 'Closing borders: the ripple effects of Australian and European refugee policy. Case studies from Indonesia, Kenya and Jordan', Overseas Development Institute, September 2016 <<https://www.odi.org/publications/10557-closing-borders-ripple-effects-australian-and-european-refugee-policy-case-studies-indonesia-kenya>>.