



Lateral solutions to developing better global arrangements for displaced people

David Evans

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My first thoughts regarding those needing to leave their homeland under the threat of 'leave or be killed' are for their family and associates not able to get away who have to remain at their home in imminent danger.

Refugees who escape are lucky if they find a refugee camp where life's necessities are available. The flight for a family known to me now living in Australia was from Burundi to Zimbabwe. Six years living in the refugee camp was described as 'like living in a boarding school', yet they told me camp life was meaningful and positive. This theme is echoed in a 2014 article in *The New York Times* entitled 'How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp', which reported that meaningful and positive life is possible within such confines

The shame of our Australian-supported refugee camps is that the talents of refugees are not being fostered and the concept of positive living in the camps is hard to find. In part this is due to the jurisdiction of the camp, where conditions cannot be first world western style with social support equivalent to what we have in Australia. Such conditions are also not feasible for the vast majority of global refugees.

Is there a way forward with realistic possibilities? Could we build a new country?

'New Country'

My vision for refugees is of a 'New Country' with states on lands allocated by countries hosting long-term refugee camps all around the world. For a peppercorn rental and with local support, each state would be leased to the United Nations. The UNHCR would offer UN Citizenship with identifying passport to refugees registering with UNHCR. The jurisdiction and legalities would be established by United Nations.

The ideal refugee camp would train its own citizens, especially the young, making them eligible for skilled visas to countries other than the state where they reside. Refugees with nowhere to go other than their present long-term refugee camp would become UN citizens, some of whom would be offered placements in



other countries while others would make their refugee camp liveable and train their young in skills needed around the world.

The key elements to realise this vision are as follows:

- A place for refugees is provided
- Basic essentials of food and housing are available
- Health and Security support are provided
- Food production is undertaken
- Education is fostered
- Social activities are encouraged
- Voluntary local administration is established
- The principle of being self supporting is achieved wherever possible

In the present reality the UNHCR seeks to provide basic needs whilst investigating repatriation and resettlement possibilities. Key aims and concerns are listed in the '2015 UNHCR subregional operations profile – South Asia' report as:

- The need for sustainable livelihoods, reliable community-support networks, and access to specialised services for people with special needs.
- Refugees and asylum-seekers may face discrimination from local communities with little understanding of refugee issues.
- The quality of public health and education in Nepal's camps has been adversely affected by the departure of skilled refugee workers, who were resettled.
- UNHCR fills the gaps in terms of protection, assistance and durable solutions. It focuses on the most vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and those with special needs.

- UNHCR also advocates adopting national refugee frameworks and accession to international refugee instruments. Through stronger partnerships with the various Governments, UNHCR aims to enhance asylum space, including by: identifying opportunities for local integration; improving livelihoods for urban refugees; ensuring the smooth voluntary return of refugees ... identifying durable solutions for refugees ... supporting a sustainable return for those displaced,
- In 2015, UNHCR will continue to advocate for a favourable protection environment in South Asia, including freedom from arbitrary detention and *refoulement*.

What is missing from this report, however, is the concept of making life good wherever possible. The ideas behind the 'New Country' approach offer refugees a chance for self determination albeit confined to restricted travel within New Country, in ways that provide the UN and UNHCR with a way forward for refugee/asylum seekers.

Australia is part of South East Asia and needs to contribute support for refugees in the region. What we hear from the present Australian government is that new refugees will be exported in one way or another. However, there is no mention of us taking a responsible position in housing refugees (with nowhere to go) in long-term camps of the South East Asia Region. We need to work for UNHCR standards in these camps of the region, using more 'successful' camps as the yardstick. A study of these camps and working with UNHCR to create affordable positive living that does not insist on western standards may be necessary. Refugees confined to long-term refugee camps want to work and self provide. Let's make it happen.

The starting point will be currently functional refugee camps, with the following add on elements:

- Self-government on embassy-type land in a host country leased to UNHCR. The leased land will remain the property of the hosting country and can be changed by mutual agreement.
- The host country will provide external security.
- The refugee community will establish internal security. This may need help from the lessor and lessee if acceptable administration cannot be established.
- Standards of care will be on a liveable needs basis rather than Australian (western) social security standards that are unaffordable in most parts of the world.
- The concept of 'refugees as global citizens' will complement the current UNHCR registration of refugees and travel by a 'global citizen' will still need visa permission.

Refugees say 'Give us opportunity and freedom to work. We will do it ourselves.' Could Australia lease the first state of New Country to the UN on some part of Christmas Island, Manus Island, Nauru or elsewhere, and be prepared to help UNHCR with security and allow NGOs to help socially as well?

In summary, refugee resettlement placements are few both globally and in South East Asia including Australia. The realistic expectation for refugees is a long period in a refugee camp without guarantee of a placement. However, there are examples of refugees living on the land of the hosting country who make life meaningful and progressive if not hampered by legal restrictions. New Country is a concept for the self-management and government of refugees within the confines of allocated land, which will substantially assist the UNHCR (in collaboration with supportive NGOs) in their mission to provide safety and support for refugees with nowhere to go.