

*How the Conceptualization of Refugees Impacts their Capacity to Fulfill
Their Social and Economic Agency*

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Abstract

By the end of 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had identified 14.4 million refugees globally (UNHCR Global Trends 2014). The growth of the refugee population is an increasing concern that affects origin countries, host countries, aid organizations, and, most importantly, refugees themselves. The tendency of governments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), aid agencies, and policymakers to conceptualize refugees through security and victimization frameworks prevents refugees from making valuable economic and social contributions. This paper argues that such frameworks inhibit refugees from enacting their agency and achieving their capabilities as human beings.

The paper will evaluate the extent to which particular refugee policies prevent or enable refugees to assume agency and contribute to their community. The study will qualitatively investigate common policies regarding the legal, economic, and social integration of refugees into their host societies. This analysis will explore how these policies differ among various host countries and the impact of those differences on refugees. This study recommends a conceptual shift in the refugee aid industry from a victim paradigm to one of empowerment and acknowledgement of refugee capacity. Moreover, increased cooperation between governments, the UNHCR, NGOs, and businesses is necessary to foster the conditions under which refugees have the power to make economic and social contributions. If implemented, these policy proposals would transform the landscape of the refugee crisis by facilitating mutually beneficial rather than contentious relationships between refugees and their host countries.

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Introduction

By the end of 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had identified 14.4 million refugees globally with developing countries hosting over eighty percent of them (UNHCR, 2014). The growth of the refugee population is an increasing concern that affects origin states, host states, international aid organizations, and, most importantly, refugees themselves. Often perceiving refugees as security threats and drains on the economic system, host States seek to marginalize the influence of these at times unwelcome foreigners on their communities. At the same time, governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) tend to view refugees as victims, and this framework leads them to respond to refugee issues with short-term fixes and handouts. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and the current failure of State governments and NGOs to promote refugee agency and the missed opportunities this presents for both refugees and their host States. Through a comparative analysis of refugee policies, we argue that approaching refugees as self-sufficient actors enables them to make contributions to their host countries that far outweigh the security threats they potentially pose.

Theory: Victimization vs. Capabilities

When conceptualizing the social and economic role of refugees, though it may be loosely contrived and underdeveloped, scholars, NGOs, and states are working from a particular theoretical framework (Hakovirta, 1993, p. 36). This model emphasizes the short-term provision of food aid and other subsistence resources through the lens of victimization of passive refugees who depend on these programs for survival.

This paper advocates a human capabilities model to understand refugees as actors and their ability to make contributions to their host states. The capabilities approach focuses on the type of life that humans are able to achieve, and emphasizes choice in relation to what people are able to be and to do (Wells, 2015). It focuses on the human's ability to achieve functionings, such as being adequately nourished, achieving self-respect, and taking part in the life of the community (Sen, 1989, p. 44). Through this framework, refugees become agents who have the power to enact political, social, and economic change.

Legal Integration

When refugees flee their home states in search of refuge in host states, they are met with differing forms of legal regulations and restrictions. Some countries have strict rules that compel refugees to become permanent residents quickly after arriving in the host state, while others impose restrictions that prevent them from becoming permanent residents for a long period of time or at all. These legal frameworks suggest particular conceptualizations of refugees and directly impact refugee capacity to integrate into their host state.

Some States require refugees to become permanent residents after a certain period of time residing in that host State. For example, the United States legally requires refugees to apply for Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status within one year of physical presence in the country. This status enables refugees to "own property, attend public schools, join certain branches of the US Armed Forces, travel

internationally without a visa, and, if certain requirements are met, apply for US citizenship” (Migration Information Source, 2012). Accrual of LPR status enables refugees in the United States to move freely within their host state and to seek most forms of economic advancement available to U.S. citizens.

Notably, numerous host countries do not allow refugees to gain permanent resident status at all. The Gulf countries in particular, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain, typically have no clearly defined legal regulations for refugees. These states display a strong reluctance to extend permanent residence rights to any non-nationals (Bayoumy, 2015). In Saudi Arabia, for example, refugees are allowed into the country on work permits which are temporary and can be canceled at any time (Amos, 2015). In most Gulf States, there is no opportunity for refugees to remain permanently without work, and once their work contracts have expired, these “migrant workers” must return to their home countries (Stephens, 2015). These states conceptualize refugees as political, economic, and demographic threats to their stability (Stephens, 2015). This security lens prevents refugees hosted in Gulf States not only from gaining protection afforded by refugee status, but also from assuming agency through legal integration.

Social Integration

The elements that impact the social integration of refugees in their host states, such as NGO policies and the social environment towards refugees play a crucial role in the capacity of refugees to fulfill their human agency. NGOs tend to view refugees as either capable actors or as helpless victims, and these views determine whether they will act to foster refugees’ long-term self-sufficiency or their reliance on short-term handouts. In Sierra Leone, at a time when it hosted close to 100,000 refugees, an NGO called The Foundation for International Dignity “conducted mediation workshops between refugees and host communities in camps in Sierra Leone” (Knoydyk, 2005). Such programs have helped to mitigate the tension between refugees and their host communities and, as such, have assisted in greater ease of refugee integration into Sierra Leonean society.

The social environment surrounding perceptions of refugees and the consequent actions of individuals also play a significant role in refugee attainment of agency and capacity to contribute. For example, the recent arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey has sparked security fears and violent xenophobic attacks. In 2013, a car bomb aimed at Syrian refugees coupled with numerous violent acts against individual refugees caused many of them to flee violent discrimination in Turkey to return to their unsafe homes in Syria (Krhon, 2013). These xenophobic environments cause refugees to live in fear, preclude their enactment of agency, and prevent them from successfully integrating into their host societies.

Just as a xenophobic environment and security lens inhibits social integration, a welcoming environment facilitates social integration. In Germany, individual volunteers are gathering in groups around refugee camps and housing “to offer language classes and assistance in dealing with authorities or medical services” (Bershidsky, 2015). These strategies suggest a view of refugees as a valuable asset and welcome addition to Germany’s social fabric.

Economic Integration

The host state's facilitation or inhibition of economic self-sufficiency demonstrates a clear view of refugees as victims, security threats, or assets. The employment laws and welfare regulations and provisions related to refugees determine their capacity to act as valuable economic resources in their host states. The refugee employment policies of host states also affect refugees' capacity to develop skills, and, therefore, impact their future ability to reintegrate into the economic life of their home state upon repatriation.

Some States have short waiting periods for refugees to receive work permits and impose few requirements. In the United States, refugees have the right to work immediately upon arrival, and must merely show their refugee admission stamp to employers as proof of employment eligibility (USCIS, 2015). In Germany, refugees can begin working after residing in the country for three months, but must obtain approval from the municipal immigration office before accepting the job (Hamann, 2015).

As an extreme example of employment restrictions for refugees, Saudi Arabia requires refugees to obtain residence permits and sponsorship from an employer in order to live outside of refugee camps and gain employment. Given the aforementioned xenophobic environment in Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, employers are unlikely to provide this necessary sponsorship.

How Refugee Agency Benefits Host States

It is clear that giving refugees the legal, social, and economic means to integrate into the society of their host states enables them to act with agency and dignity and to develop skills that will aid them in maintaining self-sufficiency in their host states and upon possible repatriation. However, conceptualizing refugees as more than just victims in need of handouts also yields benefits to host States and home States.

A Human Resources Manager at Vermont's Koffee Kup Bakery in the United States has argued that "her refugee employees have been instrumental in growing the company's revenues 30 percent annually for the past three years" (Margolis, 2015). In addition to business declarations, studies have shown that workplace diversity increases productivity (Soergel, 2015; Saxena, 2014; Peri, 2012). Moreover, in 2012, Chmura Economics & Analytics found that local refugee agencies spent \$4.8 million in Cleveland, Ohio to help refugees establish themselves; however, in that same year, refugees contributed approximately \$48 million to the community (Soergel, 2015).

Conclusion

Conceptualizing refugees as self-sufficient actors rather than passive victims enables them to transcend the savior/victim and security threat paradigms to make significant social and economic contributions in their host states. An engaged understanding of refugees as dignified actors can mitigate tension between refugees and host communities and enable refugees to be economically independent and constructive members of their host states.

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