
Urban Refugee Assistance and the Informal Settlement: Past Precedents and Unrealized Potentials

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper was prepared for the Women's Refugee Commission as the culmination of a research project conducted under the Master of City and Regional Planning Program within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. The intent here is to add to the literature on refugee assistance by concentrating examples of programs that have channeled refugee aid to simultaneously support urban refugees and address the long-term needs of the local community. In this context, 'local community' is defined as any person living or working in a neighborhood for which there is a concentration of refugees. This paper seeks to shed light on those particular communities of informal settlements located outside of both the formal housing market and economy.

Over the past several decades refugee aid has been utilized for broader development and this paper will focus on its successes in three geographically disparate countries: Jordan, Tanzania and Ecuador. Each example presents a different sector of issues addressed through varying formats and at differing scales. An analysis of the context and application of these three examples will offer a better understanding of the connections between refugee assistance and development. One of the most pointed shortfalls of the analysis is the lack of information concerning refugees in informal settlements. Complementing the case studies will be examples of informal settlement upgrading that

have been implemented in each of the highlighted countries, in an effort to extrapolate linkages of refugee assistance and development. The intent is to begin the discussion and encourage future research that will inform new models for "providing protection, access to basic services, and the promotion of self-reliance in urban areas." (Buscher 2013) Scaling up refugee assistance for broader, more sustained impact of local communities has great potential to improve the experience of refugees and provide an opportunity for host countries to access resources needed to assist the urban poor. The combination of refugee assistance and development also has implications towards streamlining resources for efficient and enduring development impact.

Several opportunities for both programming and further research emerge from this report, including the following.

Implications for programming

- **Adapt to the current trends of the refugee experience.** This includes the growing number of refugees residing in informal settlements and seeking life outside of the camp setting.
- **Return to an approach of refugee assistance as a development issue.** With the commonality of protracted refugee experiences and proliferation of urban settlers, refugee conditions have

with development aid that recognizes the potential for long-term impact on host countries and communities.

One such example of the coming together of refugee assistance and development is the Refugee Aid and Development strategy (RAD), designed and implemented in the 1980s. RAD was supported by the UNHCR as a means for addressing the additional demands placed on countries hosting large refugee populations (Harild et al 2011). RAD was based on the assumption that the presence of refugees is inherently burdensome, an assumption that has witnessed both support and disagreement (see Zetter 2013 and the Standing Committee of the UNHCR 2005). RAD was developed to meet the needs of host countries on a long-term basis, but the design faced challenges with the development of the Rwandan exodus in the early 1990s. The magnitude of the Rwandan refugee crisis demanded extensive focus on managing the influx of refugees as addressed through the camp system. This shift away from RAD does not depict inherent failures in the system, rather it can be attributed to the unprecedented volume of Rwandan refugees, and the scramble to accommodate their immediate needs.

Just as the system of refugee assistance shifted toward RAD and away again, the field has experienced a more recent shift. In the late 1990s and early 2000s a call for the realignment of humanitarian assistance and development arose (Harild et al 2011). With the average length of displacement extending to 17 years, the camp methodology—which focuses primarily on “food aid and refugee subsistence allowance”—became unsustainable (Buscher 2013). The reinvention of the RAD policy sought to connect development and refugee aid, not for the alleviation of overburdened host countries but rather as a means of addressing growing numbers of urban refugees in a manner more sustainable than that of the camp methodology.

While the average length of displacement has increased, so too has the number of

refugees located outside of camps. UNHCR has estimated that more than 50% of refugees are currently living in urban settings. These individuals have chosen to follow a path of self-reliance, perhaps hoping to gain better access to services and income despite the uncertainty of livelihood and the departure from planned assistance. UNHCR has worked towards addressing the issues of refugee self-reliance and livelihoods since the idea of urban refugees was embraced in the self-reliance framework set forth in the 2009 “UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas.” Self-reliance is defined by the UNHCR as:

“the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Self-reliance, as a programme approach, refers to developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance” (UNHCR Handbook for Self-Reliance 2013).

According to this approach, host countries that provide the necessary legal rights for refugees to build self-reliance have the potential to benefit from the presence of refugees, challenging the common perception that their presence will create problems. Urban refugees can foster economic and social connections to their host community that can in turn foster an enhanced refugee-host relationship. Through this model of self-reliance, urban refugees can be seen as a beneficial alternative—for both the refugee and host communities—when compared to long-term encampment since their presence may enhance the local community and economy.

According to the 2010 UNHCR Global Trends report, nearly 80% of refugees reside in developing nations with many ending up in informal settlements such as in the case in Johannesburg (Buscher 2013) and Nairobi (Campbell

Although not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, Jordan's policy towards refugees is relatively liberal. However, the open policy is subject to economic and resource constraints, as experienced in 2007 due to an influx of Iraqi refugees. Throughout the years, Jordan has accepted large numbers of Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees and is described by the UNHCR as having "a tradition of hospitality." However, the UNHCR also points out the strains of a youth bulge and high unemployment rates that threaten the country's ability to support incoming refugees. After the U.S. invasion in Iraq, Jordan witnessed an influx of Iraqi refugees many of whom settled in urban areas such as Amman (Weiss 2009). Their presence was described as "massive" and the additional expenses necessary to support them were estimated by the Jordanian government to the amount of \$1 billion annually (Weiss 2009). Iraqis were blamed for all of Jordan's economic issues, including "rising prices of real estate, rent and food; for overcrowded schools and health facilities and for shortages of electricity and water" (Weiss 2009). Weiss describes Jordan's progressively tightening borders as a result of the 2005 hotel bombings which were followed by the exclusion of males over the age of 17 in 2006 and the borders were closed in 2007 with the exception of "essential" circumstances. While the bombings may have been a breaking point for the Jordanian government, the requirement for incoming refugees to invest was a clear indicator of the country's concerns for resource constraints. In 2007, for those refugees already in the country, Jordan was hesitant to permit their use of public utilities as the government viewed the Iraqi refugee presence as wholly burdensome.

What the Jordanian estimates and assumptions of burden fail to consider is the positive impact of the Iraqi presence. For example, a number of higher income Iraqis invested in "hotels, hospitals, agricultural and urban infrastructure" and became "visible business owners and property holders" (Weiss 2009). So, while Iraqis were not permitted to find legal work,

those of a higher income were creating jobs for local Jordanians. While these benefits were seemingly ignored by the Jordanian government, what is most important is the government's reluctance to acknowledge the need for policies to address the more vulnerable sections of the refugee population and the communities hosting them.

The Jordanian government was hesitant to respond with policies to address the estimated 750,000 Iraqi refugees, as this number was viewed as just that, an estimate. Without a clear understanding of the number of refugees who were in the process of moving to a third country or returning home, the Jordanian government felt unable to accurately address the situation. This is an ongoing struggle not only for host communities, but also for refugee aid agencies as refugee needs assessments and tracking are further complicated by those refugees settling in urban areas. Additionally, the Jordanian government was outspoken about the uneven support provided to Iraqi refugees by Jordan as compared to less substantial contributions by the U.S. and other Western countries. The Jordanian government called upon international assistance to support the growing number of Iraqi refugees, who were said to have accounted for nearly one sixth of the country's population of 6 million.

Between 2007 and 2009, the presence of Iraqi refugees garnered approximately \$305 million for the government of Jordan with the intention of bettering the lives of refugees through various means. UNHCR provided \$65 million to the Jordanian government in order "to build the capacity of such institutions as schools and hospitals to handle a huge Iraqi influx" (Seeley 2010). These institutions, while potentially beneficial for the Iraqis, would also provide better services for the host population. Similarly, USAID contributed \$110 million to the Jordanian government and an additional \$45 million was spent on renovating and building better schools in low-income areas housing a significant number of refugees. The funding

Upgrading of Informal Settlements with Refugee Aid: Incremental Upgrading in East Wahdat

Jordan has experienced the connection of refugee aid with development in host communities—as witnessed in the previous example. Although this aid has been focused mainly on low-income areas it has not systematically reached the most vulnerable segment of the refugee population. In most countries including Jordan, refugees are barred from working in the formal sector and many, even those from a background of luxury, underestimate the duration of their displacement and therefore underestimate their monetary needs. Often, these refugees drain their savings accounts and are then unable to keep up with inflated rents placing them in an increasingly vulnerable position where their only option may be to live in an informal settlement at the margins of society. Within these informal settlements are the most vulnerable populations with the absolute lowest incomes and greatest risks with regards to precarious living and working conditions. While there is little research related directly to the number or proportion of refugees residing in informal settlements, it is clear that concentrations of refugees relocate to informal settlements due to a lack of resources. These refugees are in need of recognition by the international humanitarian assistance community.

It is suggested here that the model utilized in Jordan that focused on simultaneously improving the lives of the host community and refugees residing within the community, can be applied to the upgrading of informal settlements. This model can help to address a section of the population that struggles most with regards to acquiring daily necessities. Neither idea is brand new to the field of international assistance nor even to Jordan itself, but the novelty suggested here is their connection. Jordan, along with the international community, has experience connecting refugee assistance and development and they have also utilized programs of upgrading in informal settlements.

So, while the two pieces of the model suggested here are not in and of themselves unique, their connection has yet to be employed on the ground. While the previous section discussed successful and simultaneous implementation of refugee assistance and development, this section will discuss a successful informal settlement upgrading project in Jordan in order to depict the opportunities for connecting refugee assistance with development specifically in informal settlements.

Jordan has experienced a number of refugee influxes, beginning with the first Palestinian inflow in 1948 and again in 1967. The rapid increase in population led to the establishment and development of a number of informal settlements, particularly near the refugee camps. While the estimates provided by the Jordanian government regarding the numbers that lived in informal settlements at the time were unrealistically low, the upgrading initiatives that have taken place since have led to a reduction in the number of informal settlements in Amman (Ababsa 2010). One of the most successful of the initiatives was implemented in East Wahdat in 1981. The settlement was afflicted with poor health conditions, an extremely high infant mortality rate (68%), no access to infrastructure, and precarious housing units (Ababsa 2010). A program of “incremental housing” was employed by a joint venture with Jordan’s Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDC) and the World Bank.

East Wadhat was an informal settlement composed entirely of Palestinian refugees who were unable or unwilling to settle in the Wahdat camp. First, a community center was established in order to provide social services and mobilize the community. Alongside their community-wide offerings, the centers were particularly aware of the needs of women and provided vocational training in order to promote employment and “access to credit” (Ababsa 2010). Community participation was a key element in the upgrading process, so structure

improvements were witnessed in the health industry.

Local hospitals that accepted refugee patients were paid for their services and provided additional equipment by UNHCR. Additionally, local Tanzanians in the district of Ngara were welcomed in hospitals established for refugee assistance where services were provided free of charge (Rutinwa 2013). Improvements to and support for the healthcare system lead to a decrease in maternal mortality rates for births within the Ngara district from approximately 300 per 100,000 down to 114 (Rutinwa 2013). Additionally, more than 50 schools and 120 water systems were upgraded or installed throughout Western Tanzania with funds from the World Food Programme, UNHCR, the European Union, Oxfam, the Embassy of Japan, Tanzania Water and Environmental Sanitation, and a number of other non-governmental organizations (Rutinwa 2013). In the regions where these water service upgrades were made, access to clean water increased from the national average of 40% to over 60%. Additionally, the provision of transportation to public schools and books for students and teachers lead to a 97.8% enrollment rate for school-aged children (Rutinwa 2013).

The Tanzanian situation in the 1990s witnessed the benefits of refugee hosting as the additional stress on services were mitigated. Due to the presence of refugees and the assistance that arrived on their behalf, infrastructure and access to basic services improved for the local community. Handling the influx of refugees drove resources to the area and provided an opportunity to enhance daily conditions for the local population. Such improvements were able to sustain beyond the initial refugee crisis.

Upgrading of Informal Settlements with Refugee Aid: Securing Tenure

Four out of five people living in Dar es Salaam, as of 2010, were living in informal settlements with "precarious tenure," high disease rates, repetitive flooding, and a lack of access to

formal infrastructure and social assistance, such as hospitals and schools (UNHABITAT 2010). To address the prevalence of informal settlements in and around Dar es Salaam, the government of Tanzania teamed up with Dar es Salaam Local Authority and UN-HABITAT in 2005 with funding from the World Bank. The goal was to upgrade infrastructure in at least half of Dar es Salaam's informal settlements by 2020 while preventing future unplanned settlements.

The Community Infrastructure Upgrading Program (CIUP) constructed roads and roadside drainage in order to improve access to infrastructure in 16 informal settlements as a means of addressing safety and economic issues. The program also included the addition of new road connections to alleviate traffic, resurrected streetlights, and implemented a solid waste collection program (Cities Alliance 2013). An essential element of the program design was the inclusion of key stakeholders throughout the visioning and planning process. The program focused on urban planning, securing land tenure, safe housing, and building the capacity of the local government to implement the programs and resist future informal settlements.

One of the most significant outcomes of the upgrading process was its effect on rental availability, the improved accessibility of which allowed for the establishment of stores and markets employed by the residents. A large portion of urban poor cannot afford to own a home and are preoccupied with concerns of meeting their daily needs and security of tenure. So, "for a large number of low-income urban residents, rental accommodation provided by private low-income landlords in informal settlements, constitutes the only form of affordable shelter in the city" (Precht 2013). The significance of rental properties is their ability to meet the demands of a population unable to afford homeownership, or in the case of refugees, those who are planning to stay temporarily. The economic benefits of the upgrades al-

flock to the larger metropolises of Quito and Guayaquil (Ospina, Santacruz 2011).

The government of Ecuador has solicited and encouraged the support of foreign governments to help fund some of their programs aimed at assisting refugees. In 2011, Brazil pledged to support Ecuador with the refugee situation in Sucumbíos, recognizing the flight from Colombia as a trend with regional significance. This regional support agreement was unprecedented at the time in Latin America. The financial support from this agreement is being channeled towards efforts to address issues of education, water and sanitation and gender-based violence. While much of the support focuses on the refugee population, such amenities as a playground have been built with Brazilian funds to benefit both the local and refugee communities (Aguilar 2011).

In 2011 the World Food Program in conjunction with the International Food Research Institute initiated an evaluation of their transfer assistance program that targeted both Colombian refugees and low-income Ecuadorians. The study focused on the food, health and social outcomes of the assistance program for both the refugee and local populations. The initiation of the program came from a request from the government of Ecuador and has received funding from the governments of Spain, Brazil, the United States and Canada (wfp.org 2013). The program selected urban centers in the border areas of Carchi and Sucumbíos including Tulcán, San Gabriel, Lago Agrio and Shushufindi. One of the primary criteria in the selection of these areas was the concentration of Colombian refugees (accounting for more than 10 percent of the population) and an overall poverty rate that exceeded 50% of the total population (Hidobro et al 2012). The program identifies poverty as a common issue among refugees and the local population and directs resources for refugees in such a way that both communities may receive assistance. Sucumbíos and Carchi were selected specifically because of the high volume of refugees. The pres-

ence of refugees was the driver that channeled resources to this area, while the benefits of the program were not isolated to the refugee community but extended to impact the local population.

The study found that participation in the cash transfer portion of the program had social benefits for both the Colombian refugee population and the local Ecuadorian population. Members of the community that received cash transfers were less likely to discriminate against the other group while trust in institutions increased (Hidobro et al 2012). Although some of the challenges are distinct between refugees and the local population some of the basic needs are similar enough to be addressed through the same program. Participating in a similar program can provide additional agency to the refugee population. As seen in this program having an inclusive initiative not only supported a broader range of experiences but also enhanced integration. In addition, refugee experiences can be improved if the local population realizes the benefits of the refugee presence, decreasing the stigma and isolation that can become prevalent if refugees are seen as burdening resources or alternatively receiving special treatment. Overall improvement to the urban centers and communities where refugees settle is beneficial for both the local community and the refugee population.

This type of program has the potential to be scaled up throughout Ecuador and in different countries. Government support was a key factor in designing and implementing this initiative. This commitment varies according to country and will be a key factor in determining if such a program receives the institutional and financial support necessary for success. Assistance in the form of cash, food and voucher transfers exist for both refugee populations and local low-income populations. Using the presence of refugees to leverage funding and to target populations is the innovation needed to scale up impact.

tionship with the host community. The model suggested here is one in which the host community can benefit from the presence of refugees through the utilization of refugee assistance to upgrade informal settlements.

The use of refugee funds for the benefit of both communities is not a novel idea nor is the upgrading of informal settlements without precedent. What is suggested here, however, is the combining of these two programs so as to meet the needs of those members of society with the lowest income and who are most likely to witness the greatest benefit. The model suggests the improvement of the livelihoods and strengthening of the self-reliance of these two communities that will promote an improved quality of life on a more long-term and sustainable basis. However, the program idea is reliant upon a country's policies towards addressing the refugee community.

In the examples provided here, each country initially accepted the influx of refugees. Even when the policy of Tanzania sought to keep them in camps, the local community supported their self-reliance. However, in all three countries, large and continuously growing refugee populations led each government to enact stricter policies that made asylum more difficult or impossible to obtain, as in Jordan where the borders were completely closed. Assistance from the international community to support the institutions and infrastructure of countries that have been open to the acceptance of refugees could mitigate some of these shifts in policy that restrict access. Should these countries with virtually open borders feel too overburdened and completely close their borders, the effects could have severe repercussions.

Furthermore, these cases depict the importance of the policies towards refugees of host communities. Countries that permit urban settlement of refugees and allow them to become self-reliant through the legality of obtaining work may be a more attractive choice to refugees as they determine where to settle during

their displacement. This can lead to a situation similar to Ecuador, where a majority of the region's refugees settle in that country or as in Jordan where refugees accounted for one out of six people at one point. In these instances, these countries may feel the weight of the increased population on their infrastructure and institutions. What is suggested here is to support these accepting countries through more effective channeling of refugee assistance. What cannot be lost, however, is the importance of protecting the rights and safety of refugees as primary. No funding should be channeled in such a way that the number of refugees receiving assistance is dramatically overestimated as in the case of Jordan. As the field of refugee assistance continues to evolve to address these changing needs, research should be conducted and best practices developed in order to avoid similar misunderstandings. Additional research will be needed to gain a better understanding of the magnitude of urban refugee populations in informal settlements and the best ways in which to address their needs in tandem with that of impacted host community members.

Implications for Programming and Future Research

In conducting the literature review to compile this report, it became apparent that despite the prevalence of poverty among refugees and the increasing rate of settlement in urban areas there is very little information available regarding urban refugees in informal settlements. One of the hurdles is the lack of adequate data on urban refugees, particularly in informal settlements, and the cost and capacity needed to secure an accurate picture (Lyytinen, Kullenberg 2013). A lack of information can hinder advocacy efforts and approaches to programming. This population, along with the surrounding host community, is at the highest risk for disease, limited access to education and increased risk of gender-based violence. Targeted programming aimed at diminishing these vulnerabilities could have significant impact. Yet

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