Are Refugees a Burden or an Opportunity: A Sociological Discourse

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Abstract. The UNHCR report for 2018 estimates that "every two seconds, someone is forced to flee their home." And because this problem is so serious and widespread, it is not out of place to argue that forced migrations or global displacements are now a fundamental component of conflict in the modern world. In view of this reality, the study through discourse examines the global trends of the refugee crisis and how this can become a blessing in disguise. The finding of the study shows it is a pity that because refugee resettlement is commonly viewed as an international obligation and an act of generosity by the country receiving refugees, the many benefits refugees bring to their new country are often overlooked. It is true that sometimes refugees cause an upstart in their host countries. In fact, they are sometimes considered to disturb the national order of things. But that is not all about them. The study therefore opined that refugees who are lawfully present or lawfully staying can be a source of economic, demographic, and cultural blessings to their host community. The study therefore recommends that relaxing and making the legal processing of refugees fast and easy can help in nation building in human and economic diversification.

Keywords: Global displacement, Internally displace persons, Refugee, Resettlement and Sociological discourse

Introduction

It has been argued that the refugee problem is probably as old as history (Weis, 1971), but in recent times, the world has seen the problem escalate to an unprecedented level (McNiven, 2018; UNHCR, 2019). This is greatly championed by the post-modern world that is greatly characterised by an unprecedented risk that has bedevilled the world from all sides (Urry, 2011). We live in times that seem to elude the human grasp and control leading to more people living in the margins of society (Bauman, 2007). The new millennium was ushered in by two events that have continued to shape and influence national and international policies. It began with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Tower and Pentagon. This was later followed by the 2008 financial crisis and the great economic recession that forced many nations to review their national spending and foreign aid. These epoch-making events forced many nations to become stricter in their immigration policies leading to global instability. The Arab Spring in some nations in the Middle East caused an avalanche of migrants that led to the European migrants' crisis. These events set the world in a path she had never trod before.

The UNHCR report for 2018 estimates that "every two seconds, someone is forced to flee their home." And because this problem is so serious and widespread, it is not out of place to argue that forced migrations or global displacements are now "a fundamental component of conflict in the modern world" (Gatrell, 2016). According to Chhangani and Chhangani (2011) contemporary refugee movement and the causes of refugee flow have shifted from individualized political persecution to generalized violence, civil wars, boundary conflicts, decolonization, or massive violation of fundamental human rights, including ethnic, religious, communal conflicts or bad governance, environmental disasters and economic under-development, etc. Therefore, finding a solution to the successful integration of refugee populations has become an urgent and challenging task for many countries worldwide (Gericke

et al., 2018). Yet, even though the quest for a solution is a challenge to many countries, it is quite worrisome to see that the states hosting the vast majority of the world's refugees tend to be those with the fewest resources to do so (Miller, 2019). As it has been argued before, the refugee problem is as old as history itself, even though historians and policy makers have not given it a deserving attention until in recent times; even at that, very often where refugees do make an appearance in the pages of history books or an item in the agenda of policy makers, there is still a tendency to have them portrayed as miserable group of people … inescapable 'victims' of war or revolution, a bunch of trouble makers and liabilities. They are never seen as agents of change or great potentials for community building and development (Gatrell, 2016).

Incidentally, among these inescapable 'victims' of war could be entrepreneurs, technocrats and professionals who have had to abandon thriving businesses and promising careers back in their countries in search of safety nets. In some cases, therefore, welcoming refugees is not only a humanitarian and legal obligation, but also an investment that can yield substantial economic dividends (Legrain, 2016). This study therefore argues that refugees are not to be seen only as anomalies that need solutions (Turner, 2016). But that refugees should also be seen as agents of positive change and transformation. The fact remains that a vast majority of the refugees are hosted in countries of the global south. The refugees discussed here are those hosted by countries of the global north (Australia being the only exception).

The study therefore is divided into four section. The first being the introduction that provides background to the study, the next section examines one of the key concepts by briefly discussing the right of refugees to employment under international law and other instruments. The third section argues that when host countries allow refugees the opportunities for self-actualisation, the refugees in turn will impact positively on those countries. Section four is the conclusion and recommendations based on the findings.

Who is a Refugee?

Shortly after the World War II, with an unprecedented number of more than 20 million people estimated to be homeless with no sense of identity and with a slim hope for a future, the office of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) was established in December 1950 with the sole mandate of protecting refugees (UNHCR, 2010). By July of the following year, the commission's 1951 Convention was promulgated defining basic characteristics of a person that fits the criterion of being addressed as a refugee. The Convention held that a refugee is anyone outside his or her own country and unable to return as a result of a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a social group. With this, the commission's mandate was established to coordinate and organise these displaced persons throughout the world and resettle them. The commission's hope and plan was that within three years, people displaced within their countries and refugees who had fled from their countries of origin would have all been settled or resettled and nobody in the world would still be described as a refugee. The circumstances and global situations today tell us that they were wrong, and we are still not even close to bringing the problem to an end. This is because as the world continues to advance in various spheres of life, the culture of conflict and displacement continues to take the central stage. This has been exacerbated to a level that it is a common language to see the words 'refugee' and 'migrant' used interchangeably either in writing or by the media (UNHCR, 2015). The contemporary society is developing in such a way that its developmental path is marked with new challenges and problems that have continued to trigger political, religious, social, environmental, ethnic, racial, national and economic factors of global displacements, some of which were not even identified as at the time of the UNHCR, 1951 Convention's declaration. These new triggers cause displacements that are often described as disaster-induced displacement, such as natural

disasters – floods, volcanoes, landslides, earthquakes – and environmental change or man-made disasters – deforestation, desertification, global warming, industrial accidents (like the Fukushima nuclear plant) – which are often interrelated (Philo, Briant & Donald, 2013). These multiple and extensive levels of displacements have prompted many regional and international communities to redefine who is truly a refugee or widen the criteria. According to Hatton (2020), the 1969 Convention of the Organization of African Unity, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America, and the European Union's 2004 and 2011 Qualification Directives, acknowledge that those suffering from persecution on other grounds and those fleeing generalized violence such as war or armed conflicts are also to be treated as refugees. According to Shacknove (1985) refugees are displaced persons who have crossed national borders either due to persecution or oppression in their home country with a view to seeking safety and protection in another state. It is difficult to find a universally accepted definition of the term "refugee" in international law (Eze, 1984). The concept has however, been defined, described, and interpreted differently by writers, domestic laws, the Constitutions, international or regional refugee instruments, organisations and in judicial decisions (Plender, 1998). The common denominator about the concept however lies in the fact that a refugee can be anyone who faces life threatening circumstances and for safety's sake have fled into another country or territory.

The Right of Refugees to Employment

As already stated, welcoming refugees is a legal obligation on states. The same thing is true of the access to employment (Global Refugee Work Rights Report, 2014). Some of the legal instruments or standards that guarantee refugees' rights to work are examined below.

International Instruments

Some international standards and legal instruments safeguard the rights of refugees to wage earning employment or self-employment as well as the practice of liberal professions. Some of these instruments include: The 28 July, Geneva 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Art. 17-19). The Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the main legal instruments that specifically deal with matters relating to refugees. But because refugees are human beings, ipso facto, they are also entitled to the protection of other instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 6), and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 23).

The right to work is also safeguarded as a universal right within some regional instruments such as European Social Charter (1961, Art.1), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012, Art. 15), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981, Art. 15) Charter of the Organization of American States (1948, Art. 45), the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man (1948, Art. Xiv), the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999, Art. 6), and Arab Charter on Human Rights 2004 (Almutawa & Magliveras, 2020).

Further still, some specialist human rights and anti-discrimination treaties also protect the right to work of refugees. Some of these are; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979), the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1969), the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICPRMWMF, 1990).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is the international official body saddled with the responsibility of protecting refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless

persons and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in different parts of the world (UNHCR, 2015). There are different aspects in the protection of refugees (UNHCR, 2014), some of them are: safety from being returned to the dangers they have fled from; access to asylum procedures that are fair and efficient; measures to ensure that their basic human rights are respected, and to allow them to live in dignity and safety (UNHCR, 2014). In principle, states have the obligation to offer this protection as demanded by international law and other regional treaties. Therefore, the UNHCR works closely with governments, advising and supporting them as needed in the provision of this protection. To this effect, the UNHCR issues guidelines that provide guidance regarding the interpretation of different articles of the Convention. The commission also forges partnerships and collaborates with national and international non-governmental bodies (NGOs). For instance, the UNHCR established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1983. It has been argued that the MoU promisingly expanded upon the ILO and the UNHCR's joint normative basis to support refugees' right to work while fostering their rights at work (Garnier, 2014). In September 2012, both bodies co-organised a workshop in Geneva on Labour Mobility for Refugees (UNHCR-ILO, 2012). Participants at this workshop were drawn from states, international organisations, members of the civil society and academics. It was an opportunity for the participants to explore whether and how enhanced labour mobility for refugees could increase opportunities for self-reliance and facilitate access to durable solutions without undermining international refugee law principles (UNHCR-ILO, 2012).

More practically, the UNHCR contributes to the ability of refugees to carry out safe and secure livelihood activities in host communities and also help them to develop an enabling environment of protection and support services, assisting refugees to gain lawful access to markets and supporting them to acquire the human, financial, social, and physical capital required to work productively (UNHCR, 2018b).

The Categories of Refugees

One of the implications of the obligations of states to the demands of the above international and regional instruments is that refugees are entitled to claim the benefit of a deliberate and coherent system of rights (Hailbronner, 2006), but then, these rights are not automatic. These rights accrue to refugees incrementally depending on the legality of their situation in their host country and the duration of their stay there (EU, 2015). It is only the Convention that makes it very clear that these rights are for refugees. It further gives a hierarchy, so to say, in the enjoyment of the rights. The ones discussed here are those that accrue to refugees who are lawfully present and those who are lawfully staying in the state because these are the levels of attachment that must be satisfied for refugees to be entitled to self-employment and wage-earning employment rights (Asylum Access, 2013).

Refugees Lawfully Present

Just like other rights, refugees who are lawfully present are explicitly entitled to engage in self-employment (Hailbronner, 2006). However, the Convention is not very explicit on what it means to be "lawfully present". But the international legal position on the concept has been expounded by Hathaway as cited by Hailbronner (2006) who observed that: a refugee is lawfully present in any of these circumstances; First, a refugee is lawfully present for the duration of any period of time for which his or her admission is authorised, even if only for a few hours. Second, and of greater contemporary relevance, a refugee is lawfully present while his or her claim to refugee status is being verified, including the time required for exhaustion of any appeals or reviews. Third, a refugee is lawfully present if the reception state opts not to verify his or her refugee status, including when formal status determination procedures are suspended in favour of so-called temporary protection regimes (Hailbronner, 2006). A refugee

who fits into any of the above circumstances is allowed the prospects of generating his or her own income to take care of his or her own needs.

Refugees Lawfully Staying

For refugees who are lawfully staying, the Geneva 1951 Convention prescribes the right to engage in wage earning employment and the practice of liberal professions as well as other rights. Again, the Convention is not explicit on what is "lawfully staying". However, the Michigan Guidelines argues that: refugees "lawfully staying" in states party to the Convention include those recognised as refugees through individual refugee status determination (RSD) or as prima facie refugees (refugees whose status has been determined on a group basis) whether by the state or by UNHCR; asylum-seekers in a state that fails to determine or to comply with an RSD system or where the procedure is unduly prolonged; and refugees waiting for resettlement in another state (University of Michigan Law School, 2010). In principle, refugees of the above category are entitled to employment that guarantees wages and the practice of liberal professions. However, there are obstacles they sometimes must surmount. The developed states place some "few restrictions on the right to work of persons formally recognized as refugees" (Hailbronner, 2006). In spite of the Michigan Guidelines some persons still undergoing refugee status assessment have traditionally been denied the right to undertake employment by some developed countries such as France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (Hailbronner, 2006).

Contributions of Refugees to their Host Countries

There is no doubt that the costs associated with hosting refugees can be enormous for host countries: but it is also certain that there are benefits in the long term (Dadush, 2018). Often, a lot of time is wasted on some bureaucracies while resources are being expended on refugees. It will be a better option if most states can accelerate the vetting process and allow asylum seekers and refugees to work as quickly as possible (Dadush, 2018). This will in a way transform the so-called liability into an 'economic machine' that can better the lives of the refugees themselves as well as their host communities. In a lot of cases, these refugees are driven by the passion to succeed and excel in their host countries (Chu, 2015). This is, most times, owing to the difficult lives they have left behind and the desire to have a better future. This explains why when a refugee manages to find employment, they try to make maximum effort to keep the job (Khouni, 2018). Added to that is the fact that people who have been uprooted from one culture and exposed to another tend to be more creative, while studies show that diverse groups outperform like-minded experts at problem solving (Lagrain, 2016). Therefore, when refugees who are lawfully present are allowed the right to self-employment and those legally staying can access wage-earning employments and practise liberal professions, there are dividends that can accrue to the host country.

About ten years ago, the Refugee Council of the Australian Government (2010), Department of Immigration and Citizenship undertook a research to ascertain Economic, Civic and Social Contributions of Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants. One of the key findings of this study was that Australia's refugees and humanitarian entrants have found success in every field of endeavour, including the arts, sports, media, science, research, business, civic and community life (RCAG, 2010). The findings of the study are quite instructive because they represent the position of a government (of the developed world and a refugee receiving country) rather than that of an individual. A similar study was undertaken by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission. Its submissions are equally compelling. One of the conclusions of the study (based on their simulation results) was that "although the refugee integration … is costly for the government budget, in the medium-to long-run, socio-economic and fiscal benefits may significantly outweigh the associated refugee integration costs" (Kancs

& Lecca, 2018). When considered together, it is clear from these two studies and other literature on the subject, that in the long-term, the contributions of refugees to their host countries can be enormous. In this study, some of them are discussed within the context of their impacts on the following areas: culture, demography, and economy.

Culture

One of the major distinctive features of the modern states especially those with mega-cities is the reality of social, cultural, religious, and racial pluralism (Beeden & Van Zyl, 2015). Dynamism has become an intrinsic element of the modern society. It is a society that is made up of people of different backgrounds and persuasions. One can also talk of a multicultural society. The concept of multiculturalism … stresses the importance of recognizing cultural diversity within a given social and political environment (Liu, Volcic & Gallois, 2018). The refugee crisis of the last few years has led to countries having to welcome people of other cultures into their societies. Some of these encounters are truly difficult for the host countries' nationals. However, the encounters should be considered as opportunities for expanding their culture. Refugees can "change culture for the better by introducing new ideas, expertise, customs, cuisines, and art. Far from erasing the existing culture, they expand it" (McCarthy, 2018). It is argued that nowhere is this more evident "than the United States, where hundreds of different ethnic groups live in harmony under the banner of the American flag building a collective culture" (McCarthy, 2018). This position has been an issue of debate (Wellman & Cole, 2011).

Further still, one thing the tide of globalisation has done to the world is to have advanced the world in global interconnectedness that she can be described as a global village, having a common stage and with almost common aspirations and desires (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). People of different cultural backgrounds will always meet in different circumstances of life. People are bound to meet others whether as tourists, business associates, course-mates, professional colleagues, etc. It is thus in the strategic interest of everyone to have an idea of the culture of others. Countries that host refugees should exploit the opportunities presented by the presence of such refugees to learn about other cultures. There seems to be a lot of emphasis on teaching the refugees to integrate into the new society with almost no mention of what can be learnt from the refugees owing to their experiences.

Demography

According to the European Parliament, the ageing of Europe is among the EU's most serious challenges. The continent's long-term social and economic potential is limited by its looming demographic crisis (EU, 2015). The birth rate cannot absorb the shock posed to the social security system, including pensions, and health and long-term care. In a society where the population is dwindling because of low birth rate, Khouni (2018) believes that refugees can fill the demographic gaps. Legrain (2016) also thinks that ageing societies with a shrinking native working-age population, such as Germany, can benefit immensely from the arrival of younger refugees, who can provide a demographic dividend happily and actively. They can also complement the skills of older and more experienced workers. Refugees can help pay for the growing numbers of pensioneers. They can also support population numbers, and thus boost investment and growth.

Economy

Refugees can and indeed do contribute to the economy of their host country in many ways. It could be as workers, innovators, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, consumers and investors. Their efforts can help create jobs, raise the productivity and wages of local workers, lift capital returns, stimulate international trade and investment, and boost innovation, enterprise, and

growth (Lagrain, 2016). As workers, they are likely to engage in some jobs that natives would ordinarily not want to do. And so, because they are available for the low-skilled jobs, the natives are afforded the opportunities to do the "higher-skilled and better-paid jobs that they prefer. Through innovation, refugees can also contribute to development by providing skills and resources, and spurring production capacity and consumption demand" (Khoudour & Andersson, 2017). As soon as they can earn their own money, refugees' welfare dependency is reduced (Gericke *et al.*, 2018). As a result, resources that would have been spent on their welfare payments are then put to other use in the development of the state. In addition to this, they begin to pay taxes too which help in building up the revenue base of their host country. Further still, some of them go on to establish themselves as entrepreneurs. For instance, in the 2000 Business Review Weekly's annual "Rich 200" list … five of Australia's eight billionaires were people whose families had originally come to the country as refugees (Refugee Council of the Australian Government, 2000). In the United States, refugees have higher entrepreneurship rates than the U.S-born population and the foreign-born population (National Immigration Forum, 2018). Google co-founder, Sergey Brin, WhatsApp co-founder, Jan Koum and PayPal co-founder, Max Levchin were all refugees (Lagrain, 2017). Brin was from the Soviet Union while Koum and Levchin were both from Ukraine. These are companies known world-wide with a huge customer base. They also employ a lot of people. They are typical examples of what motivated and determined refugees can accomplish in systems that work.

Conclusion

It is a pity that because refugee resettlement is commonly viewed as an international obligation and an act of generosity by the country receiving refugees, the many benefits refugees bring to their new country are often overlooked. It is true that sometimes refugees cause an upstart in their host countries. In fact, they are sometimes considered to disturb the national order of things. But that is not all about them. As it has been seen here especially in the case of Australia, when accorded the enabling environment, refugees can be a force for positive change, progress and development in countries that welcome them and support them to integrate. Although it is an established fact that states make refugees, … refugees can also make states. And they can also be an opportunity rather than a burden.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The media must stop presenting refugees as a group of helpless people which often lead to labelling of refugees as completely helpless dependent people who can offer nothing to the receiving community or country.
- International regulations on refugees should not only be left to the decisions of states alone but states that rejects and expose vulnerable people to harm and even death be sanctioned and made to pay compensations. This will help reduce the stringent regulations especially on refugees in dare needs.
- Refugees must also present themselves in such a way and manner that receiving states will be willing to receive and harness their potentials for reciprocal benefits
- Regional governments and organisations must see people displaced or refugees within their regions as collective responsibility and build up a network of cooperation in helping and alleviating the plight of the refugees which in turn will help to make them useful members of that region.

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