



Australian Refugee Rights Alliance

"No Compromise on Human Rights"

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Strategic Use of Resettlement

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INTRODUCTION

In its most recent progress report on resettlement UNHCR noted: 'Given the increase in resettlement needs globally and the limited number of places available, the Office tries systematically to use resettlement in a strategic manner in order to enhance protection more broadly.'¹ Reflecting this statement, UNHCR has endeavoured to maximise opportunities for the strategic use of resettlement in protracted refugee situations.

In recent years UNHCR has engaged with states to target protracted refugee situations in Asia, with 'the strategic use of resettlement' featuring prominently among broader strategies to create durable solutions for long-term refugees in this region.

So what is 'the strategic use of resettlement', what have been some of its impacts and how can NGOs work with UNHCR to alleviate some of its unintended consequences?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'THE STRATEGIC USE OF RESETTLEMENT'?

Traditionally resettlement is used when refugees can neither return to their country of origin nor be protected effectively and integrated into their country of first asylum. There are three traditional and equal goals of resettlement: 1) protection; 2) provision of durable solutions; and 3) burden sharing with countries of first asylum. Although resettlement is most commonly associated with the protection of vulnerable individuals (the first goal), the *strategic* use of resettlement emerges as significant because it helps to further the latter two goals. That is, the resettlement of some individuals may help to encourage other durable solutions for other individuals and allow the international community to share the work of protecting refugees.

The strategic use of resettlement also plays a broader role in a well-functioning and robust international protection system. States choosing to protect vulnerable individuals by resettling them are engaged in a primarily reactive process by responding to those in greatest need. The strategic use of resettlement, however, employs a more proactive approach by states, using resettlement as one part of a broader strategy to resolve a long-standing and/or acute humanitarian crisis. Offering resettlement in targeted situations allows the international community to demonstrate its solidarity on a particular issue, its readiness to support countries of first asylum and its willingness to support the population at risk. When implemented effectively, resettlement allows international agencies such as UNHCR the ability to leverage other durable solutions (local integration, voluntary return) for those individuals remaining. An increasing number of states are well placed to offer their resettlement programmes strategically, while still targeting those who are most vulnerable, to greater enhance international protection initiatives.

ISSUES WITH GROUP RESETTLEMENT FROM PROTRACTED SITUATIONS

Previously states have noted that for the strategic use of resettlement to work there needs to be a commitment to:

1. minimise pull factors out of the country of origin into the country of first asylum;
2. create conditions conducive to a safe and secure voluntary repatriation;
3. ensure that refugees' are adequately prepared to return home when conditions permit; and
4. encourage the country of first asylum to continue to provide effective protection and local integration opportunities to the limit of its capacity, supported by the international community.²

Even with these conditions met, it is important to note that there are long-term and short-term impacts on remaining refugees, as recent examples in Asia have demonstrated.

RECENT RESETTLEMENT FROM ASIA

For refugees in Nepal and Thailand, resettlement is currently being used strategically to improve access to other durable solutions and to enhance protection for refugees who cannot be resettled. As noted by UNHCR: *In some cases, this may mean that the host government will consider local integration if part of a group is resettled; in other cases, a particular group within a refugee population requires resettlement for reasons of vulnerability or because of their political profile.*³

While the resettlement of these populations has been roundly applauded, it may be useful to look at lessons from the Thai experience, where more than 20,000 refugees have already been resettled to third countries.

One of the most significant problems associated with resettlement of the Burmese from Thailand has emerged because a higher proportion of educated, skilled and experienced refugees has resettled first. As the skilled and educated leave, it is increasingly difficult to find replacements within the existing population for essential jobs, which has placed a strain on service delivery in the camps. This has had its strongest impact on two sectors of camp life: the health sector and the education sector.

For the health sector, the resettlement of many trained medics and nurses has severely affected the ability of health NGOs to deliver good quality health care. As the number of medical staff falls, so the risk of public health crises in the camps rises. The best trained teachers are also resettling in higher proportions, exposing the education sector to similar difficulties. Teachers must begin teaching with less training and students must contend with teachers with less experience.

UNHCR and NGOs are trying to redress the impact of resettlement on those remaining in the camps with rapid response trainings and flexible worker placements. At the same time, there is a need to highlight the unintended consequences of those states who continue to resettle individuals based on their 'integration potential,' as these practices deliberately select only the best educated individuals from a population and leave remaining camp residents without their experienced leaders.⁴

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

When looking at the strategic use of resettlement it is important to remember, as noted by UNHCR, that *resettlement serves as a protection tool and it is a durable solution and a clear manifestation of international solidarity (with countries of first asylum) and burden sharing.*⁵ In the past few years UNHCR has implemented comprehensive strategies to resolve refugee situations, particularly protracted ones in the Asia-Pacific region.

Undoubtedly while the strategic use of resettlement has created a number of important protection dividends, the depletion of skilled workers in the camps has in some cases exacerbated the difficulties of camp life for those remaining. As such, developing policies and programmes that alleviate the negative consequences of resettlement is crucial. As noted by Banki and Lang: 'Predicting how and when the gaps will occur, and planning for the future, will help to alleviate at least one of the consequences of resettlement.'⁶

Recommendations

The recommendations below are drawn from several sources, including independent research and UNHCR reports.⁷

First, in order to address the depletion of skilled workers it is important to:

1. encourage donors to fund training and capacity-building programmes and initiatives for inexperienced and new staff in the camps;
2. promote, as much as possible, an open and predictable resettlement process so that refugees know how long it will take for resettlement to occur, and agencies involved in delivering assistance in the camps know when their staff will be departing;
3. where possible, undertake a survey of skills and employment abilities of refugee camp populations in order to identify refugees who could be included in a pool of replacement staff;
4. consider seeking voluntary commitments from refugees, in cooperation with the resettlement country, that they will delay their resettlement for a certain period of time so they can remain to work in the camps or train new replacement workers;
5. encourage the country of first asylum to expedite permission for refugees, expatriate workers and local staff of NGOs and CBOs to work in and travel between camps; and
6. encourage longer-term contracts for expatriate and national staff to ensure continuity in the system.

Second, in order to ensure that resettlement is truly used strategically, it is important that resettlement countries, donors, and UNHCR:

1. promote the possibility of *local integration* in the country of first asylum by advocating for greater integration of remaining refugees into national health and education systems, in addition to formal approval of livelihood programmes inside and outside of refugee camps; and
2. promote the possibility of safe and secure *repatriation*, by addressing the underlying root causes of conflict that generated the protracted refugee situation in the first place.

ABOUT ARRA

ARRA: Australian Refugee Rights Alliance is a consortium of Australian Non Government Organisations attending the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs and the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. Its members advocate for change at the international level.

¹ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 'Progress Report on Resettlement', EC/59/SC/CRP.11, 2 June 2008.

² APCR Paper No. 5 'Discussion Note by Australia for the Agenda Item: Strategic Use of Resettlement', Geneva, 18-19 June 2002

³ UNHCR Global Appeal 2008-2009, p44.

⁴ Other problems associated with resettlement, but not discussed here, include confusion and anxiety amongst those who have not yet decided and depression and hopelessness for those who remain.

⁵ UNHCR Global Appeal 2008-2009, p18.

⁶ Susan Banki and Hazel Lang 'Difficult to remain: the impact of mass resettlement', *Forced Migration Review*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, issue 30, April 2008.

⁷ See, for example, Susan Banki, 'Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Anticipating the Impact of Resettlement', Austcare, Sydney, June 2008; Banki and Lang, 'Difficult to remain: the impact of mass resettlement', *Forced Migration Review*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, issue 30, April 2008; and UNHCR, 'Assessment of Recommendations Relating to the Impact of Resettlement on the Remaining Camp Population in Thailand', October 2007.