

Research Report

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Issue: Strengthening international cooperation and burden-sharing to support countries hosting large refugee populations.

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Introduction

Worldwide, millions of people lose their homes due to all sorts of horrible reasons. These people need a new place to stay, and countries have a responsibility in providing shelter for those who have lost their place to stay. Currently however, this responsibility is not shared equally among countries. Of the 117 million refugees, 75 percent stay in less developed countries instead of spreading out over the world (Global Trends Report, 2024). This causes developing countries to bear the brunt of the burden caused by large amounts of refugees, whereas resources to deal with this are more limited in these countries. It is the goal of this commission to find a solution and more equally share the burden large amounts of refugees create.

Definitions of key terms

1951 Refugee Convention

This convention lays the groundwork for the rights of refugees. It is considered the international minimum for the rights of refugees. Core aspects include: Right of housing, right of education and work. It also includes the duty for countries who signed the agreement to take care of refugees. Important to know is that at first these rights were only for European people who were displaced before 1951.

1967 Refugee Protocol

An amendment to the 1951 Refugee convention which expands the convention beyond the geographical and time-based restrictions to give refugees from every time and place the same rights. (UNHCR, 1951 refugee convention)

Refugee

Someone who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term "the country of his nationality" shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national.

~1951 refugee convention

General overview

First of all, it is important to study the consequences and challenges of hosting large refugee populations. Multiple case studies have of course been done on this subject, however it has been proven difficult to conclude decisive evidence from these reports, because the results of large refugee populations greatly vary from country to country due to the different situations the countries are in and how these are managed². Most often it is thought that refugees have a negative influence on the host country, however refugees can also have positive effects on the host. Due to an increase in population, local business owners and entrepreneurs can have an increase in income. However, other locals can suffer due to higher competition in the job market. Mainly vulnerable people suffer from this, such as low-skilled labourers, women and informal workers. So, depending on how the situation is managed, an increase in refugees can actually increase economic growth in the long term (Verme, 2023). However, in the short term, caring humanitarily for refugees is a costly affair for the host country.

But which countries suffer the most from these effects? The last study from the UNHCR, analysing 2023, found that Turkey is currently holding the largest number of refugees, a little over 3 million, followed by Germany and Uganda, with 2.4 and 1.5 million refugees. However, this does not paint the full picture. Turkey, Uganda and Germany each are relatively big countries, with already a lot of people that are not refugees. When accounting for the number of citizens a country has, Aruba leads the world, with 1 in five citizens being refugees, followed by Lebanon with 1 in 6 and Montenegro with 1 in 9. One could argue that these communities would be impacted the most because such a large portion of the population is a refugee.

According to that same UNHCR report, some of the places to keep an eye on for new refugees are Sudan, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Congo, Somalia, Palestine, Myanmar and Haïti. Also, the situation in Venezuela still creates large amounts of refugees. Given the fact that most refugees end up in their own country or a neighbouring one, it can be assumed that countries surrounding the current conflict zones mentioned above will have a tough time dealing with the amount of refugees.

Major parties involved

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The UN commission in charge of finding solutions for the problems arising from refugees. Also, a big provider and safe authority on data on refugees.

The West

The more developed countries of the world, mostly consisting of Europe and USA. Most countries in this group are reluctant to take in refugees, whilst being most capable of dealing with the challenges that arise from taking in refugees.

Developing World

Most countries in the world that do not belong to the West, given the fact that most of these countries have limited means, but take in most of the refugees of the world, these countries have the most to gain from the equal spread of refugees.

Timeline of Key Events

14-december-1950 ~ UNHCR is founded.

Initially created to help the large amount of people still displaced after World War 2.

28 - July - 1951 ~ The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

A foundation is laid on the fundamental rights of refugees.

4-October-1967 ~ 1967 protocol is adopted

March - 2011 ~ Start of the Syrian refugee crisis

2015 ~ Escalation in the Mediterranean refugee crisis.

17- December - 2018 ~ GA affirmed the Global Compact on refugees.

February - 2022 ~ Invasion of Ukraine.

Source: *UNHCR, History of UNHCR*

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Global compact on refugees

In 2018 the UN General Assembly accepted the Global Compact on refugees, a framework designed to promote reliable burden-sharing between countries, recognizing that a sustainable solution to the refugee crisis cannot be realised without international cooperation. Of course, neither the number of refugees nor equal spread of them has gotten any better since the Compact has been active. This is probably due to the lack of specific agreements in the compact. Given the fact that it is only a framework on which countries can later build, it is not surprising that the direct impact of the compact is not huge. However, if a direct impact is required to solve the issue, it is safe to say that concise decisions need to be made.

Refugee Platforms

As a result of the Global Compact mentioned above, the world comes together on a 4-year basis to discuss how to solve the refugee crisis globally. Up to this point there have been 2 platforms, one in 2019 and one in 2023. Given the fact that these platforms were only so recently, it is hard to ascertain if these platforms were successful or not.

Possible solutions

Spreading refugees equally

Most problems in refugee care arise because of the sheer quantity of refugees they must deal with. If all refugees were spread out across the world based on the number of refugees a country can actually care for, the problem of a few countries taking the brunt of the load should be solved. However, several humanitarian problems can arise from this solution. For example, it would be unethical to send refugees who come from a difficult situation into another difficult situation, however, most countries have some difficulties so then almost no countries would be able to take in refugees. Also, it would be unfair for refugees to have some of them end up in the developed world, whilst others need to scrape for scraps in the less-developed world. Lastly one can consider the implications of taking someone away from their lands and culture to place them in a society very different from them on the other side of the globe.

World Peace

Of course, the most elegant solution to taking care of refugees would be to ensure there aren't any refugees by making sure there is no reason to flee one's home. Whilst this would be a great solution, if possible, it simply isn't realistic for the UNHCR to create world peace, as previously stated in the 1997 report of the UNHCR on the state of the world's refugees.

Financial support

Given the problem of relocating refugees, maybe it would be simpler to simply provide the countries already taking in a lot of refugees the means to take care of these people properly. The wealthier countries with small amounts of refugees can provide funds and other support so countries with large refugee populations can overcome the challenges of these populations and more easily integrate refugees in a more similar environment for the refugees. Possible problems are that the countries hosting large amounts of refugees would still be subject to demographic changes due to the large amounts of people coming into the country, and there is a risk of mismanaging resources and money, resulting in refugees not getting the help they need.

Further reading

1. Stated below is a link to a map which shows which countries signed what treaty (<https://rimap.unhcr.org/refugee-treaty-legislation-dashboard>)

2. A lot of the statistics in this report are taken from the last UNHCR report, however it also contains a lot of extra information not in this report which can deepen understanding on the refugee crisis.
<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>
3. A spreadsheet with refugee data in 2023 sorted by country, useful for quickly gathering data on specific countries. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/annexes/trends-annexes.html>

Bibliography

1. “Economic and Social Impact of Massive Refugee Populations on Host Developing Countries, as Well as Other Countries: A Quantative Assessment on the Basis of Special Case Studies.” *UNHCR*, UNHCR Standing Committee, 3 Aug. 1998, www.unhcr.org/publications/economic-and-social-impact-massive-refugee-populations-host-developing-countries-well.
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3. “History of UNHCR.” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/history-unhcr. Accessed 5 Aug. 2024.
4. “The 1951 Refugee Convention.” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention. Accessed 5 Aug. 2024.
5. Verme, Paulo. “Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Refugees on Host Communities.” *World Bank Blogs*, 28 Mar. 2023, blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/theory-and-evidence-impact-refugees-host-communities.