

Long lasting refugee camps: a sustainable solution? Supporting agency of refugees and the role of UN institutions, NGO's, the state.

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I want to thank Hakim Chakim for the detailed paper on the complicated situation in which an aid organisation like Médecins Sans Frontières can end up caught between local policies of the Kenyan government, UN policies of particularly the UNHCR, and the interests of the Somali refugees in the Dadaab Camp, Kenya. He correctly asks who is responsible for this complicated issue and whether all involved parties including the aid agencies become co-responsible if caught in the dilemma how to proceed. I would like to unravel a few more general problems that seem to lay behind this, without the pretention to cover all factors.

Firstly the case seems to be an example of the problems which occurs when a camp that was meant as a temporary emergency solution turns into a long term settlement, with the civil war in Somalia continuing but the camp inhabitants not able to get equal rights to Kenyan citizens. It is very problematic that they cannot take care of their own livelihood, cannot find work and have no rights or options to slowly turn the camp into a regular town. It seems obvious to me that it should be avoided to keep refugees and draught victims, particularly those who have limited other options, dependent.

The strict divide between relief and development aid leads to a lack of initiative by the UNHCR and WHO in improving refugee's livelihood, as Cindy Horst, author of a book on Dadaab already mentioned. The idea that refugees go back in 2-3 years has proven to be totally unrealistic in many countries, and therefore it is important to support more durable solution from the start. In the case of Dadaab, initiatives of NGO's in this direction exist, f.i. the one of CARE, initiating micro finance programs to encourage women to start their own businesses, should be incorporated from the start.

Secondly the example shows the problematic lack of power that UN institutions such as the UNHCR have to influence governments. In this case the Kenyan government even after 15 years showed no willingness to provide Somali refugees a citizenship status, or to support them with legal problems. The Kenyans suspicion about these refugees came in the nineties from the fear that the large Somali presence might help the Pan Somali movements that wanted to merge the Kenyan Somali area with the other four parts in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somaliland and Somalia. Recently fears of Muslim extremism have high priority in the region, with already a long list of terrorist attacks by Al-Shabaab in Kenya. The bigger ones are well know like the one in Mombassa, in the Westgate shopping mole in Nairobi and the recently attack on a school in the nearest town to Dadaab, Garissa, where students were murdered on ground of their religion. Complicated for the Kenyan government is that connection were found in Daadab in the past. On the other hand Al Shabaab is gaining influence among locals: according to some accounts, 25% of Al Shabaab forces are young frustrated Kenyans. And inhabitants of Nairobi see how some Somali immigrants in Nairobi get extremely rich because of the war economy. Since governments are dependent on public opinion, all this means that they are careful about looking helpful to Somali refugees.

The UNHCR was set up in 1951 with very little authority and even fewer resources. Nowadays it is asked to bear more responsibility but this development was accompanied by a reduction in funds. Where Europe can negotiate with Turkey and promising large sums of money to help Turkey to improve the livelihood of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the UNHCR has nearly no possibilities to push the Kenyan government.

Now let's look at the role of NGO's such as MSF in this complicated picture. NGO's are by definition organisations that define their own targets in relation with their donors. In the case of MSF, but you know that better - medical emergency support. MSF is well organised and takes responsibility in the most extreme difficult situations. NGO's are much faster and more flexible than UN bodies, and it has happened quit a few times that this kind of professional and recognized organisation took responsible immediately in crises situation while the UN bodies was stuck in for instance meetings about political mandate. Let's not talk about the Ebola crisis or the situation in the Central African Republic last year, but about refugee camps. Smaller NGO's are even faster according to volunteers on the Greek coast. NGO's also seem to be more open to cooperation, whereas as Cindy Horst mentions, the UNHCR operates rather hierarchically, it tends to exercise of form of sovereignty in the territory of the camp, thereby irritating both NGO's and in the Kenyan case also the Kenyan government.

The last problem I want to mention is that refugee care and relief aid are often motivated in terms of charity or humanitarianism. This de-historicizes and de-politicizes the situation. Some authors call developmental aid an 'anti-politics machine'. The fear of Kenyans towards Al Shabaab is a factor in this development.

The dilemma in which MSF found itself, already several times, is that a situation in Dadaab cannot be considered a sudden emergency anymore, thereby not fitting with the organisations objective, but the political will for fundamental change is lacking and other systems are obviously failing. That makes it a painful dilemma for the medical staff to withdraw from the camp; while it's not clear whether those who take over will manage.

In the end it remains the responsibility of governments and the UN to coordinate aid, address these problems, and to think of sustainable solutions. As one of my students wrote in her thesis 'Sustainability of relief care in the Syrian region', capacity building is by far the most promising factor in the realm of sustainable and structural change. Capacity building will help refugees to create their own livelihood and to run their own schools and clinics, not forgetting the poor locals who live around camps. Strong international bodies are needed to create the political willingness to do this. It is necessary to work with both local and refugee populations to train them to be able to continue the projects set up by NGO's for their common benefit.