

The world needs local policies to address the global refugee crisis

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The recent Greek coast shipwreck tragedy was another reminder that the lives of people fleeing remain at risk because they lack safe-legal routes, solidarity and life-saving assistance. Refugees are not migrants by choice. They have grounded reasons to leave their homes behind. To seek asylum is a Universal Human Right (Article 14) and not a crime. The global refugee crisis has grown enormously since 2010. Increasing sociopolitical, economic and environmental uncertainties can make any country insecure, resulting in people fleeing. Therefore, every country is responsible for providing safe harbour to asylum seekers.

South Asia, host to 3 million refugees, lacks inclusive policies to help steadily growing numbers. Refugees in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are from neighbouring regions. The region experiences protracted situations that demand local solutions, rather than relying only on refugee frameworks to which the countries are not signatories.

Why is the refugee system broken?: Long-standing refugee situations, such as the Syrian conflict's exodus, Rohingya movement from Myanmar, Afghan displacement and many others, are far from reaching any settlement. Unfortunately, solutions are sought within an outdated framework that can no longer absorb new migration regimes. Thus, depending on current international frameworks to address global problems is unsustainable.

Locally, refugee issues are approached from a 'management framework', claiming the necessity to 'manage' the crisis, thus restricting entry. From redirecting and stopping small boats to building walls have become a response to people fleeing painful

circumstances. Such policies are adopted by administrations that lack the political will for sustainable solutions. Ironically, the global north hosts only 15% of the world's refugees, but has financial power over refugee organizations.

Low and middle-income countries (LMCs) host 85% of all refugees. This indicates why it is not in the interest of the global north to solve this crisis. Consequently, 88% of the world's refugee programmes are underfunded, diverted from sustainable solutions to ad-hoc arrangements and also politicized based on ethnicities, religions and historical backgrounds. Underfunding also resulted from a threefold increase in in-donor refugee costs (4.6% 2021 to 14.4% 2022). Some countries see in-country refugee expenses as part of their Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) commitments and reduce funding for refugee programmes.

Refugee settlement can be done by integration, voluntary repatriation and third-country resettlement. The latter two are commonly considered the main solutions. Globally, 74% of refugees remain in protracted discomfort as host countries wait for them to leave. The possibility of 'integration' is mostly ignored for justifiable reasons like security, economic and national identity. Jordan, Kenya, Uganda, Germany and Canada instead choose integration through local policies and gain socio-economically, just as refugees do.

Interestingly, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan host many refugees and experience highly protracted situations, implying that local policies are required to facilitate integration. Regardless of location, the common challenge for refugees is identification documents. They usually flee without such papers and their prolonged stays create an ID crisis. International organizations cannot address this unilaterally, as identification requires a degree of acceptance by local communities. In Türkiye (with the highest refugee population), refugees faced challenges in accessing healthcare during the recent earthquake since they lacked acceptable IDs. In India, for refugees to access covid vaccines, Indian policy demanded they register through mandatory IDs they don't have; they were thus excluded by design.

For refugees to fill employment gaps is tough. Even a certified French teacher in Delhi cannot open a bank account or find decent accommodation without identity proof. Such individuals are exposed to exploitation, which is the story of many. Note that even a UNHCR refugee card is not an acceptable ID for accessing essential services.

Can public policies do better?: The root causes of global issues are often entrenched in local dynamics. The predisposition of citizens to accept refugees could depend on the economic, language and cultural impact. The notion that refugees weigh upon a country and contribute to economic problems has led to ripple-effect challenges for refugees. Often, anti-refugee perceptions are based on forms of xenophobia rather than reality.

The refugee crisis is not just a humanitarian one, but also a development crisis. Refugee issues and solutions intersect. Without policies to access services, refugees must rely on shadow economies. When refugee support is unregulated, human trafficking, illegal drug networks and black markets accelerate, fanning anti-refugee sentiments. Refugees,

however, are human capital. Providing them work opportunities is vital for their integration and self-reliance so that they do not burden their hosts. Providing legal work rights helps cut the cost of welfare programmes and minimizes the likelihood of refugees taking to illegal activities.

Systems thinking in public policy design can recognize the existence of refugees and grant them access to essential services. Valid IDs or public-private partnerships can facilitate this. Canada's refugee policy has supported 40,000 Afghan refugees since 2021 (a large resettlement programme), where newcomers are protected through public-private pathways.

Opportunities to acquire local languages can open doors in labour markets and enable refugees to participate fully in a country's society and economy. In Italy, refugees must have a minimum B1-level of Italian or their residency applications may be denied for insufficient social inclusion.

The Global Compact on Refugees, the most recent such framework, promotes integration through international cooperation. At least some integration holds the key to the refugee crisis and this can be achieved better through local policies than international frameworks. Integration can only occur when opportunities exist to contribute. Local integration policies, refugee well-being and host community perceptions are interconnected. Therefore, policies that address these intersecting streams can facilitate sustainable solutions to refugee challenges within local contexts as well as aid in solving one of the biggest crises of our times.

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