

Addressing protracted displacement

Lessons from the past

Addressing protracted displacement has been a major concern since the beginning of an international refugee protection regime in the 1920s. The search for solutions has been a central theme ever since.

From “solutions” to “durable solutions”.

In a historical perspective, efforts to resolve protracted displacement have been diverse, being devised in response to both domestic and international constraints and opportunities. Already in the 1920s, Fridtjof Nansen—the League of Nations’ first High Commissioner for Refugees (1921-1930)—believed in refugees’ own capabilities and thus pursued a “bottom-up” approach. His overarching aim was to make refugees self-reliant—this same goal is central in today’s [Global Compact on Refugees](#).

It was not until the late 1940s that (voluntary) return, local integration and resettlement began to appear as the three central “top-down” solutions pursued by states to address refugee situations.

The term “durable solutions” is of more recent origin. It came to be used more frequently from the late 1990s onwards, in conjunction with the notion of “protracted displacement”, a term coined by the UNHCR to denote situations “in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo”.

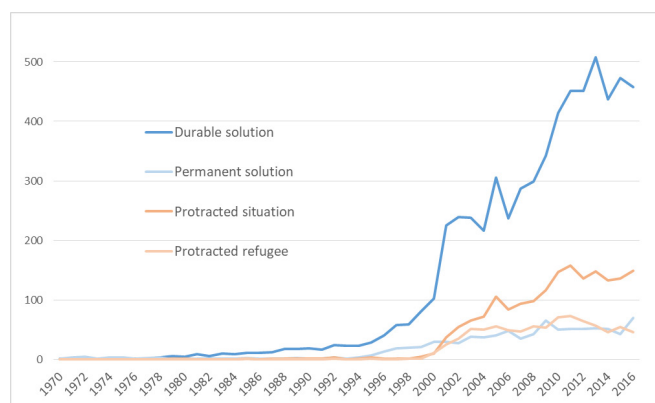


Figure 1: No. of documents found at REFWORLD related to durable solutions and protracted displacement, 1970–2016 © Albert Kraler

Employment and political considerations have been central for resettlement in the past

In the 1920s, one of the central protection instruments was the so-called “Nansen passport”. This identity and travel document enabled refugees to move onward to countries to find employment. As result and in combination with an International Labor Organization (ILO) placement programme, unemployment among refugees was indeed significantly reduced by the late 1920s.

After World War II, resettlement was considered the most important tool to resolve displacement situations. In relative terms, resettlement peaked immediately after the war. As in the interwar period, resettlement was strongly linked to labour migration, which displaced persons always saw as important strategy to find protection and to sustain their lives in the longer run.

Skills-based resettlement was, however, often not pursued in contexts where skills did not match demand and where large cultural distances were perceived, such as in post-colonial African situations. Only the shift towards vulnerability-based criteria in the mid-1990s brought African refugees into resettlement programmes at a significant scale.

But already the resettlement of Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s and 1980s was based on political rather than employment considerations. Both in absolute numbers and in relative terms, resettlement from Indo-China constituted the largest resettlement effort since World War II.

The resettlement of Syrians never achieved the same scale.

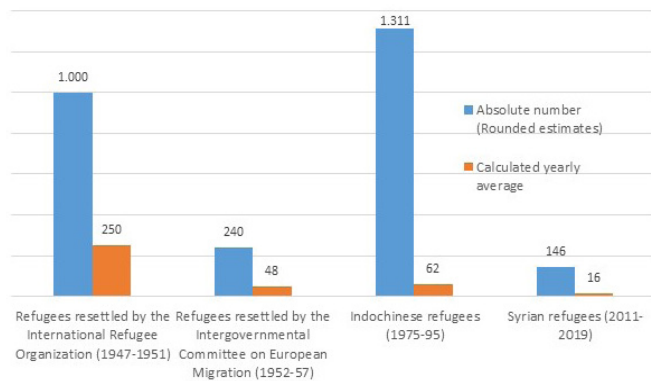


Figure 2: Selected historical instances of large-scale resettlement (in thousands)
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Imposing solutions top-down has never been particularly successful.

Solutions for displacement situations were often imposed top-down, particularly in the Global South from the 1960s onwards. In Africa, for instance, moving refugees to rural settlements became a major strategy. Focused on the promotion of self-reliance, local settlement aligned well with broader developmental strategies, such as the “Refugees and Development” approach. Yet, the outcomes were often disappointing, due in part to the technocratic implementation of development projects. Renewed efforts to integrate developmental approaches into refugee assistance and protection must learn from past failures of “imposing aid”.

Considering different forms and rationales for the mobility of refugees has the potential of enlarging the role of “resettlement” in addressing protracted displacement.

Camps and other place-based solutions limit rather than open up opportunities.

Camps have been recurrently used as a “spatial fix” and as means of containment. Encampment has been a key element of Lebanon’s approach towards Palestinian refugees since 1948, separating them from the general population in terms of welfare and public services. By contrast, Jordan established camps for Palestinian refugees rather as a pragmatic instrument and as suburbs connected to cities. As evidence from Lebanon and Kenya shows, encampment severely limits opportunities.

Encampment has proliferated since the 1990s. In parallel, return has increasingly been promoted, often by means of direct or indirect force. In many cases, such semi-voluntary returns result in secondary displacement or remigration, calling into question return as a “durable solution”.

Mobility and connectivity can be a resource for displaced persons.

By and large, literature on displacement in the 20th century supports the TRAFIG project’s hypothesis that mobility and connectivity can help refugees cope with protracted displacement and, in some cases, find more durable solutions. Research on remittances has, for instance, shown how important these transnational financial transfers are for refugees. They help them to cover their basic needs. Yet both mobility and connectivity also

have a stratifying effect, and so do policies promoting or hindering the development of such connections. They can increase the gap between those who have access to mobility or translocal networks and those who do not.

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