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Policies should better support people trapped in long-term refugee situations

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Protesters demand rights and housing for refugees and migrants in Greece. Photo by ANGELOS TZORTZINIS / AFP

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People that are forced to live away from their homes for five years or more – such as refugees or

internally displaced persons (IDPs) – are said to live in a situation of protracted displacement. In 2018 it was reported that 78% of all refugees live in protracted displacement.

This is a very challenging state. Most are vulnerable and highly dependent on external support from governments, NGOs or relatives. They also have insecure legal statuses and don't have the ability – or opportunity – to rebuild their lives because of scarce economic resources, the legal framework that regulates their lives or societies that don't welcome them.

In many cases, they can neither return home nor move on to other countries, nor really integrate in the country of reception.

We've been carrying out research that explores the experiences and solutions for protracted displaced populations around the world. Specifically, we examine the rules that dictate people's ability to work, where they live, options for family reunification, and access to accommodation, education and health care.

We found that international and host country policies don't adequately address the challenges posed by forced displacement across the world.

The traditional “durable” solutions are return, local integration and resettlement. But these aren't realistic because of the way institutions and rules restrict refugees' movement, access to services and rights.

If refugees, for instance, aren't allowed to work, how can they become locally integrated into the host society? And if only a fraction do get access to resettlement programmes, then resettlement can't be seen as a sustainable solution to resolve situations that affect tens of thousands of people.

More innovative and long-term approaches need to be developed that recognise the fundamentals of human rights and livelihood security. They must also allow for the freedom of movement, ensuring people reach safe countries when they need to and allow for access to resources and networks in home regions.

Finally, policies can only be developed by including refugees, IDPs and migrants' own perspectives in policy-making. This creates ownership and 'buy into' by those affected.

Wrong focus

Recently, governments have made important strides in addressing refugee issues, putting more emphasis on improving social cohesion, host-refugee relations and promoting broader economic development in host countries.

But there's been an increasing number of displaced people. This makes the situation more complex and increases populist and racist trends in host countries. It requires more collaboration, coordination and constant improvement between stakeholders.

In many cases, especially in the Global South, national measures addressed to displaced people are strongly 'upward' oriented. They look to satisfy the international community – in particular the UNHCR, IOM, World Bank and EU – rather than concentrating on local socio-economic needs.

This is understandable as these international actors often provide funding and demand accountability, but it doesn't necessarily translate into a sustained focus on displaced people's actual needs and the realisation of durable solutions.

Waiting for regional initiatives

Another challenge is that regional blocs – such as the European Union, African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development – have policies that can sometimes protract, rather than resolve, displacement situations. For instance their policies could restrict people's freedom of movement and right to work.

An example of this is the EU's securitisation and externalisation of control agenda. This prioritises internal security and outsources border control to neighbouring countries. This overrules other agendas such as mobility, rights and livelihoods and could contribute to improving protracted displacement.

Yet studies show that people living in protracted situations rely heavily on social networks to survive and make a living. They also need to have mobility which allows them to cross borders and find security outside their home countries.

Internally displaced people and refugees should be seen as contributors to social and economic life in a receiving country. Disregard of this potential contribution also harms host-refugee relations. If they can't work it could protract the displacement situation. Italy and Greece are cases in point.

Read more: Refugee camps versus urban refugees: what's been said -- and done

New solutions

Looking at the type of policies and programmes in place to support internally displaced persons and refugees, there is an unmistakable focus on humanitarian interventions, especially emergency aid. This almost inevitably competes with longer-term sustainable solutions to protracted displacement as solutions are not geared towards becoming self-reliant but towards addressing immediate needs. This needs to change.

Initiatives such as the Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis are important steps to bridge the gap. This plan seeks to better integrate and complement humanitarian measures.

Mobility and translocal livelihoods are also significant strategies for displaced people but are often hampered by multiple restrictions.

Solutions do exist.

Humanitarian visas, for instance would allow people to flee from insecurity with temporary travel documents through ‘humanitarian corridors’ but thus far they are not regulated at a European level.

Another possibility is the introduction of private sponsorship schemes whereby private individuals provide financial and emotional support to the displaced. Over the past 40 years, the Canadian government has resettled nearly 300,000 refugees through this program.

These innovative ideas could go to great lengths in addressing protracted displacement around the world.

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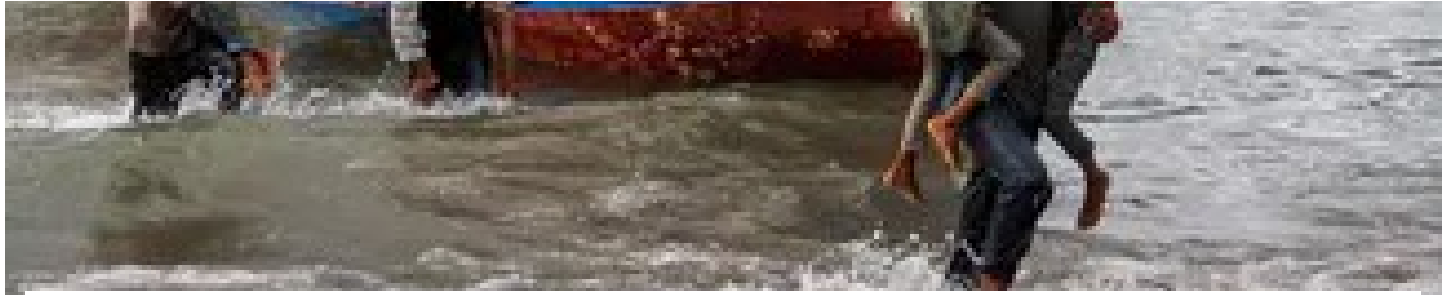


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