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The role and impact of humanitarian assets in refugee-hosting countries

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Much as the rich nations seem to get donor fatigue, likewise those who have been hosting refugees for years with no solution in sight are similarly fatigued ... the fact that we are required to open our borders to refugees (while others are closing theirs) without much support thereafter is very frustrating indeed. Once we admit the thousands and millions we are left alone to cushion both social and economic impacts, something that puts our governments into confrontation with the civil population particularly in the refugee impacted areas.¹

Introduction

With growing concern being voiced by the governments of industrialized countries about the problem of asylum-seekers on their territory, one could be forgiven for thinking that the greatest refugee impact is being felt in the world's more prosperous states.² In reality, as UNHCR has argued, "the economic effects of hosting refugees are mostly felt in Africa".³ Further, "it is well known that in many emergency situations, the initial assistance provided to the refugees comes not from UNHCR or WFP, but from the local populations and authorities".⁴

The impact of refugees on host communities has largely been assumed to be negative.⁵ As the government of Tanzania has stated, "the refugee problem seems to have no end ... it is a threat to host governments – a reality which needs the appreciation of the world community".⁶ Pakistan has called for international recognition of the contribution of "host developing countries (when) faced with mass

¹ Statement by the Honourable Muhammed Seif Khatib, Minister for Home Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania, to the 53rd Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner for Refugees (ExCom), Geneva, 1 October 2002.

² On this, B S Chimni notes that the "EU debate focuses more on controlling migration from South to North than on addressing the root causes of migration or in assisting first asylum developing countries." in "Aid, relief and containment: the first asylum country and beyond", Expert Working Paper prepared for the Centre for Development Research Study Migration-Development Links: Evidence and Policy Options (February 2002), p9.

³ When persons of concern to UNHCR are compared with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, in Statistical Yearbook 2001: Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Other Persons of Concern – Trends in Displacement, Protection and Solutions, Population Data Unit, UNHCR, Geneva, October 2002, p65. In a statement made to the Third Committee of the General Assembly, in New York on 7 November 2002 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees pointed out that 35 of the 48 least developed countries host refugees.

⁴ Crisp, Jeff, "A state of insecurity: the political economy of violence in refugee-populated areas of Kenya", *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 16, UNHCR, December 1999, p13.

⁵ Karen Jacobsen, "Livelihoods in conflict: the pursuit of livelihoods by refugees and the impact on the human security of host communities", Expert Working Paper prepared for the Centre for Development Research Study: Migration-Development Links: Evidence and Policy Options, February 2002, p1. See also Harrell-Bond who takes a slightly more optimistic view, suggesting that refugees are an opportunity for host governments to "positively transform" their political economy. See *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, pp10–11, 331.

⁶ Statement made by the Honourable Muhammed Seif Khatib, Minister for Home Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania, (2001), op. cit.

influx of protracted refugee situations”.⁷ There has also been a tendency for this debate to operate within the binary parameters of “positive impact” and “negative impact”.

By focusing on the humanitarian assets and infrastructure provided to host countries, with particular reference to the situation post-repatriation, this paper adds to a growing body of research “that seeks to understand the consequences of refugee and humanitarian assistance for host countries and for refugees”.⁸

Representations of refugees

In presenting their perspective, host countries have largely represented refugees as passive recipients who drain resources or deplete natural resources. For example, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran stated that in the course of hosting large numbers of refugees “the government and the people of the Islamic Republic of Iran have encountered a lot of social, economic, cultural, political and security problems ... it is certainly not fair for host countries to be left alone to cope with the repercussions and consequences of this problem”.⁹ Nigeria “shares the view that the presence of large numbers of refugees or asylum-seekers within a state can constitute a serious pressure on the economy of the receiving states”.¹⁰

Other UNHCR reports have challenged this. For instance, Jamal found in Kakuma camp (Kenya), that based on observation measurement the net impact of refugees upon the host community could be considered a positive one.¹¹ In Côte d’Ivoire, along with an increase in aggregate production, refugees contributed to the level of economic activity through increased demand and to the local economy through work.¹²

In an effort to redress the situation, the High Commissioner for Refugees has promoted a potential role for refugees as “agents of development”.¹³ It is argued that through the support of livelihood activities and promotion of self-reliance strategies, refugees can not only contribute to the economic life of a region but also lessen their dependence on aid and reduce tension within a refugee populated area.¹⁴

⁷ Statement by Secretary, Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas and States and Frontiers Regions of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan at the 53rd Session of ExCom, Geneva, 30 September 2002.

⁸ Jacobsen, (2002), op. cit., p2.

⁹ Statement made by H E Mr M R Behzadian, Deputy Interior Minister for Planning and Programme to the 52nd Session of ExCom, Geneva, 1 October 2001.

¹⁰ Statement made by the Nigerian delegation at the 53rd Session of ExCom, Geneva, 2 October 2002.

¹¹ Arafat Jamal, “Minimum standards and essential needs in a protracted refugee situation: a review of the UNHCR programmes in Kakuma, Kenya”, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, November 2000, p27.

¹² Kuhlman, Tom, “Responding to protracted refugee situations: A case study of Liberian refugees in Côte d’Ivoire”, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, July 2002, p27.

¹³ See for example, statement made by Mr Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the Third Committee of the General Assembly, New York, 7 November 2002.

¹⁴ Jacobsen, (2002), op. cit.

One aspect of refugee impacts that has largely remained unexplored is the role played by the significant amount of material and financial inputs made by UNHCR, its implementing partners (IPs) and donor governments in a refugee populated area. It is true that “refugee impacts” can be difficult to measure or analyse, arriving as they do onto highly complex layers of host communities. But while we have come a long way in recognizing the heterogeneous nature of refugee populations, host communities are sometimes assumed to act with only one interest.

It goes without saying that any response to refugee movements must also consider the local population in a refugee populated area, not only those living in and around settlements but also stakeholders at the local and central governmental level. Host countries here refers to less developed countries that are more likely to receive large scale mass influxes of refugees.

Measuring impact

Before focusing on the role of assets and infrastructure in host countries, it is important to first consider how the “refugee hosting area” has been figured in the literature. Research measuring refugee impacts has taken a number of different starting points which inform this paper. Significantly the author has found that a large proportion of the literature relies heavily on unqualified assumptions about “impacts”. Where conclusions are made they rely on incomplete data and the outcome depends largely on the “objective of the interested party”.¹⁵ It would be fair to say that much research starts with assumptions about what the outcome is and so the debate continues in a fairly ad hoc manner.

Landau adds that much of our current impressions are driven by perceptions, in fact to determine, “ ... whether the aggregate effects on host populations and land are positive and negative ... is next to impossible and would require an elaborate indices of gains and losses and considerable more longitudinal data than are typically available for the areas involved”.¹⁶

In any review of the available literature on “impacts” one can find a significant amount written about the impact of large-scale movements of refugees on the environment.¹⁷ The fact that natural resources face increased pressure with the arrival of refugee populations is widely accepted. It is not the case though that this “...serious impact ... can be alleviated only with international assistance.”¹⁸ As Black

¹⁵ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, “Economic and Social Impact of Massive Refugee Populations on Host Developing Countries, as well as other countries: a quantitative assessment on the basis of special case studies”, 48th Session of the Standing Committee, EC/48/SC/CRP.40, 3 August 1998, p4.

¹⁶ Landau, Loren B, “Challenges without transformation: changing material practices in refugee-affected Tanzania”, Paper presented at the Conference of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration, Thailand, 5–9 January, 2003, pp1–3.

¹⁷ See for example, Thomas Hoerz, *Refugees and Host Environments: A Review of Current and Related Literature*, Refugee Studies Programme, University of Oxford, August 1995, p9.

¹⁸ Statement by Secretary, Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas and States and Frontiers Regions of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, (2002), op. cit.

has argued much of our understandings about environmental impacts have been based on “visual observation and consensus rather than measurement”.¹⁹

Draft environmental guidelines have been prepared by UNHCR that present methods to minimize impacts. Useful for this discussion are their recommendations for the re-use of infrastructures after camp closure so that it can benefit local populations and communities. In order to facilitate re-use, “the potential end-user of re-used camp infrastructure should be consulted, or ideally be invited to participate, in the planning and design of camp infrastructure”.²⁰

It could be argued that any assessment of the impact of refugee presence in host countries requires an economic component, however it is this very element of quantitative analysis that has been largely absent from discussions to date. While a comprehensive analysis of economic impacts of refugees is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to introduce some factors that can determine the impact of refugee presence.

UNHCR has recently attempted to “measure the burden shouldered by host countries caring for refugees and displaced persons”.²¹ Relying on currently available core statistics, namely refugee populations, populations of concern and asylum applications submitted, this analysis then compares these indicators with GDP, national population size and national surface area. It is acknowledged that by focusing on a national level, regional differences cannot be measured, but this study also assumes that refugees are confined to camps which results in a significantly increased burden to the host area as compared with the rest of the country.²² This fails to consider the large number of refugees living in urban areas and cannot account for the heterogeneous nature of refugee populations.

While this work introduces an element of the economic contribution of host countries, it does this in isolation from any social analysis. If we accept, as some commentators have, that local communities can also be beneficiaries, building capacity through resource sharing and knowledge exchange,²³ then we need more detailed socio-economic information about refugee populations and the host communities within which they are located. Overall it seems that we are approaching this question the wrong way around. First we need to ask what does “burden” mean both in social and economic terms and given this, what indicators are needed to present an accurate picture of the current situation.

¹⁹ Black, (1999), p39, cited in Tiina Salmio, “The interdependence between local-global problems and their governance: refugees and the environment – tentative thoughts and observations”, SAFIR Working Paper No. 7, Department of Political Science, University of Turku, September 2002 (forthcoming), p6.

²⁰ *Environmental Considerations in the Life Cycle of Refugee Camps*, draft environmental guidelines, Engineering and Environmental Services Section, UNHCR, Geneva, July 2002, pp17–18.

²¹ *Selected Indicators Measuring Capacity and Contributions of Host Countries*, Population Data Unit, UNHCR, April 2002, p1.

²² Ibid, p2.

²³ Quinn, Mick, “More than implementers: civil society in complex emergencies – a discussion paper”, *International Alert*, August 2002, p4.

But this is not the only place where one can locate a discussion about the impact of refugee populations on host countries. UNHCR's Agenda for Protection, the outcome of a consultative process between states, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as refugees, draws attention to the capacity of host developing countries, its declaration calling for state parties to:

commit ourselves to providing, within the framework of international solidarity and burden-sharing, better refugee protection through comprehensive strategies, notably regionally and internationally, in order to build capacity, in particular in developing countries and countries with economies in transition, especially those which are hosting large-scale influxes or protracted refugee situations, and to strengthening response mechanisms, so as to ensure that refugees have access to safer and better conditions of stay and timely solutions to their problems.²⁴

From time-to-time this issue has also been on the ExCom agenda with UNHCR recognizing that for “the majority of refugee-hosting developing countries, especially in Africa, combined with growing populations, scarcity of land and a series of natural disasters, has caused the traditional hospitality of these lands towards refugees to be severely strained ... refugees can no longer be considered in isolation within the regions and among the populations where they find themselves and that the very concept of self-sufficiency has to be re-examined in the light of the new circumstances”.²⁵

Another body of literature that can be helpful for this present discussion is that examining impacts on receiving countries and countries of asylum. It presents indicators that could also be used to determine the impacts of refugee populations' in a host community, taking “a field of study that has traditionally been the domain of economic migrants” and applying it to refugees.²⁶ Once again data limitations on refugees' skills and educational backgrounds hampers in-depth studies which rely on an empirical analysis of the impact of asylum-seekers on receiving countries.²⁷

Refugees can contribute to both host countries and countries of origin through remittances. It is estimated that developing countries receive more than \$60 billion a year in remittances. A country like Sudan receives \$638 million worth of remittances compared with \$225 million in aid.²⁸ It is impossible to calculate how much of this is

²⁴ *Agenda for Protection*, UNHCR, Geneva, June 2002, p4.

²⁵ “Refugee aid and development in the context of UNHCR's assistance programmes”, UNHCR, Geneva, 11 April 1989.

²⁶ Khalid Koser and Nicholas Van Hear, “Asylum migration: implications for countries of origin”, paper presented to WIDER Conference on Poverty, International Migration and Asylum, Helsinki, 27–28 September 2002, p1.

²⁷ Martin, Susan F, Schoenholtz, Andrew I, and Fisher, David, “Impact of asylum on receiving countries”, draft version (30 July 2002) of paper presented at WIDER Conference on Poverty, International Migration and Asylum, Helsinki, Finland, 27–28 September 2002, p2.

²⁸ 2000 figures cited in “The view from afar”, in “The longest journey: a survey of migration”, *The Economist*, 2 November 2002, p11.

sent to neighbouring host countries,²⁹ however, Koser and Van Hear make a distinction between asylum-seekers in the “near diaspora” who are seldom able to generate money to send home and instead have a role as conduits for resources from those in the “wider diaspora”. They present the case of Afghan refugees in Pakistan who, in the absence of a functional banking system in their country of origin, acted as conduits for remittances.³⁰

They found that remittances are also sent to refugees in countries of first asylum. Acknowledging that they take an optimistic perspective on the nature of remittance investment, they argue that money invested into housing, health and education contributes to development. In addition, freed of other demands, the receivers of remittances can then invest directly in more productive enterprises.³¹

Because there has been “... relatively little research on their (refugees) impact on receiving countries”,³² researchers have to look more broadly to the impact of asylum on receiving countries in order to learn more about impacts and how they are evaluated. The assertion that “government policies for handling asylum affect the impact of asylum seekers” is true for all host countries, as this affects entry into the economic sphere including work, access to public assistance and training programmes.³³ As this literature reveals, factors within the host country such as a secure legal status and freedom of movement can encourage refugees to participate as do host government policies that encourage integration and therefore refugees’ capacity to participate and the larger communities’ receptiveness to their presence.³⁴

In resettlement countries access can be limited due to lack of employment outcomes, transferable skills, language ability and networks. These conditions can also determine the position of refugees in host countries.³⁵ Without denying the significant differences between refugees and migrants, methods of research exploring the impact of immigration could be revealing for this debate if applied to the context of refugees and asylum-seekers. Without comprehensive demographic characteristics of asylum-seekers, it remains that “there is no single way in which the presence of asylum-seekers will affect a receiving country”.³⁶ This begs the question as to how we have arrived at a situation where refugee impacts in developing countries are assumed to be largely negative.

²⁹ Peter Gammeltoft “Remittances and other financial flows to developing countries”, Expert Working Paper prepared for the Centre for Development Research Study: Migration-Development Links: Evidence and Policy Options, Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, Denmark, March 2002, p.ii.

³⁰ Koser and Van Hear, (2002), op. cit., p6.

³¹ Koser and Van Hear, (2002), op. cit., p9.

³² Martin, *et al*, (2002), op. cit., p2.

³³ *Ibid*, p3.

³⁴ Koser and Van Hear, (2002), op. cit., p15, Martin *et al*, (2002), op. cit., p11.

³⁵ Martin *et al*, (2002), op. cit., p9.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p4.

Refugee-related assets

Every year a significant proportion of UNHCR's budget in various country operations is spent on procurement. This involves expenditure on both permanent and non-permanent infrastructure in host countries as well as countries of origin. But after a refugee population repatriates or abandons a camp, few questions are asked about what happens to the tangible inputs put in place by UNHCR and its implementing partners. Is this because we trust the accountability of international organizations or that we assume all the money has been spent? Some inputs may have a life-span beyond this active period for example, permanent structures such as schools, hospitals, water points and moveable assets like vehicles and equipment.

This question has rarely been explored in the literature and so this part of the paper will consider the role of assets using archival material and information gathered through interviews with key informants.³⁷ Case studies will then be presented of major repatriations from Thailand, Malawi and Pakistan.

The role of assets in host developing countries has been chosen as a topic of investigation because it is a quantifiable input, although regrettably the available information is not comprehensive. It is also a sizeable input, as one person interviewed for this research estimated, on average 40 per cent of UNHCR's budget is spent on procurement, logistics and transport activities increasing to up to 50 per cent for the Afghanistan operation. In 2000, UNHCR Headquarters (HQ) spent \$51 million on procurement, plus a further \$18 million regionally.³⁸ This increased by 62 per cent to \$71.3million in 2001. UNHCR's total recorded inventory stands at some \$300 million (acquisition value).³⁹

As part of its annual global appeal, UNHCR calls for a variety of inputs into host developing countries to support the needs of refugee populations. Increasingly, as is the case in Tanzania and Uganda, programmes also address the needs of local hosts.⁴⁰ Inputs are made up of tangible assets and infrastructure that may be permanent, for example, schools and pre-fabricated warehouses or temporary, such as plastic sheeting and tents. Infrastructure is constructed for refugees and for those supporting refugees which may include governments by way of police barracks, the extension of prison facilities and health posts. There are also a number of moveable assets such as vehicles, trucks and motorcycles.

UNHCR and its IPs have guidelines as to how these items are to be procured, but what happens to these inputs when refugee populations repatriate? This paper explores whether assets, if they still retain any value, contribute to the host country, whether they move with refugee populations to their country of origin or return to back to UNHCR or its IPs.

³⁷ This is limited to key informants at UNHCR Headquarters, the site for this research.

³⁸ UNHCR Mid-year Progress Report, 2002. All figures quoted are in US dollars unless otherwise indicated.

³⁹ Draft IOM/FOM, "Asset management policy", October 2002.

⁴⁰ Whittaker, Beth Elise, "Changing priorities in refugee protection: the Rwandan repatriation from Tanzania", *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 53, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, February 2002, p6.

A problem one quickly encounters when attempting to further investigate this aspect of UNHCR's work, is the organizational attitude to assets that has prevailed until recently. In 1993, of UNHCR's \$250 million assets, only 20 per cent was recorded at headquarters leaving 80 per cent of assets unaccounted for.⁴¹ As an official inter-office memorandum that called for proper resource management noted "reviews have consistently indicated that current management of project related assets is not adequate".⁴² But if the organization has been lax in asset management, this poses a difficulty for how it manages the next stage. That is, "... once the refugees repatriate, with the disposal of the physical assets associated with the care and maintenance programmes instituted to assist them".⁴³

Asset Management Boards (AMBs) are in place at local, regional and HQ levels and have the responsibility for making decisions about, for example, the disposal of assets, repairs, donation of assets and transfer of ownership.⁴⁴ The Asset Management Unit (AMU) is responsible for the consolidation of all UNHCR assets globally, with local asset management boards (LAMB, as well as the Regional Asset Management Board – RAMB) making recommendations to the HQ board (HAMB) which in turn makes recommendations to UNHCR's Controller.

In considering transfer of ownership certain factors must be taken into consideration including that transfers to IPs be limited to the total depreciated value of \$100,000 per partner per year.⁴⁵ But as one interviewee commented, problems exist with field level decision-making as assets are often not returned and people can be reduced to fighting over assets that they believe were "promised" to them.

Furthermore, UNHCR is not always the first to raise the issue of asset disposal. As one interviewee noted, "before refugees move, locals are already thinking of what they can get. It is a human reaction to think ahead of us. So, this issue is very early brought up by locals". What also determines the situation is how "we (UNHCR) present ourselves and approach things". As Shelly Dick has warned if refugee protection "is not clearly stated, refugees and the host government will conclude, on the basis of UNHCR's initial response, that refugee protection equals material assistance".⁴⁶

When, as one interviewee observed, "goodies" are driven through thousands of kilometres, it can be difficult to explain to locals where these assets originated from and to counter impressions that the local government is diverting funds in favour of refugees.⁴⁷ This has been confirmed by Bakewell, he interviewed a local Zambian

⁴¹ Inter-office memorandum 73/94, field office memorandum 75/94, (31 July 1994).

⁴² Division of Controller and Management Services, inter-office memorandum (IOM) 73/94, field office memorandum (FOM) 75/94, "Implementation of the new asset management system", UNHCR, Geneva (1994), p1.

⁴³ Quinn, (2002), op. cit., p4.

⁴⁴ The terms of reference and board membership is set out in inter-office and field-office memorandum 32/99, *Asset Management Boards*, UNHCR, Geneva, 1 March 1999.

⁴⁵ IOM/FOM 32/99, *Asset Management Boards*, (1999), op. cit., p5.

⁴⁶ Shelly Dick, "Responding to protracted refugee situations: A case study of Liberian refugees in Ghana", Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, July 2002, p7.

⁴⁷ As Harrell-Bond notes, an impression that refugees have a position of privilege leads to resentment and tension, (1986), op. cit., pp7-8.

who believed that “governments will only bring things like schools and clinics to an area if it holds lots of people and they won’t bother if the people have gone”.⁴⁸ Of course at this stage tension does exist “among local organizations and between refugees and host populations over access to external resources ... relief assistance can undermine rather than strengthen indigenous capacity”.⁴⁹ Items are handed over to locals for good reason or to “buy your way in”, but once this kind of relationship is established a “vicious cycle” begins.⁵⁰

Mitigating any impact of a large refugee presence, one interviewee noted, needs to be considered not just “at the end of the line, but along the way”. It was added that this is often dependent on the personality of individuals involved who may view an “emergency” as having no link to development or have no time to discuss these issues whilst working in highly demanding situations.

Another interviewee characterized this as a distinction between those who consider UNHCR’s assistance to require inputs and those who see a limited role relating only to protection. Without assessments of, or accurate data on, the local populations, UNHCR is often trying to build the wealth of refugees ignoring poorer locals in their midst.⁵¹ Related to this, one interviewee put forward that we must recognize the role of hosts as active participants throughout an operation, who often make assets available when refugees enter their territory.

Organizational culture has also influenced the disposal of assets. Until recently, as one interviewee noted, a culture prevailed of “handing assets over mainly to implementing partners, local organizations or the (local) government”. This so-called “culture of handover” developed as the organization had very few big operations and “therefore anything provided to an operation stayed there”. Another interviewee felt simply that “winding down means getting rid of stuff”.

This is not always advantageous for hosts as often when they “get the lot” it may include a large proportion of assets they do not want and may have to pay large amounts to maintain.⁵² This has been likened by one interviewee to giving the dogs leftovers after everyone else has eaten at the plate! For example, it was commented when disposing of non-expendable property (NEP) from Thailand, that “it should be noted that in most cases the items being disposed of are over 10 year old ‘junk’”.⁵³ Motorcycles used in Cambodia considered too expensive to maintain and therefore uneconomical for redeployment by UNHCR were recommended for donation to local agencies working in the field.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Bakewell, Oliver, “Repatriation and self-settled refugees in Zambia: bringing solutions to the wrong people”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol 13, No. 14, December 2000b, p363.

⁴⁹ Ian Smillie, “Capacity building and the humanitarian enterprise”, in Ian Smillie, (2001), p7.

⁵⁰ Interview, Geneva, 14 October 2002.

⁵¹ Interview, Geneva, 11 October 2002.

⁵² Interview, Geneva, 15 October 2002.

⁵³ UNHCR, Situation Report No. 2, Thailand, March 1994 (THA/HCR/0394).

⁵⁴ Arun Sala Ngarm and Jennifer West, “Mission to Cambodia to investigate the redeployment of assets”, 31 August–18 October 1993, UNHCR, Geneva, p5.

The organizational culture was also such that “a new representative wants new stuff”⁵⁵ and expenditure was therefore never capitalized with the real value of assets not being recognized and managed. As one interviewee argued, if an asset is still within its serviceable life then it should be redeployed to other operations to save costs to the organization of acquiring new assets. If it is outside of its serviceable life then it could be sold or its ownership transferred.⁵⁶

It appears to be the case that there is definitely a place for handing over assets but, as one interviewee warned, “we need to ask why we are building capacity and who for”. For instance, they question the value of transferring ownership to international NGOs whose presence is often limited after an operation.⁵⁷ Instead assets should be transferred to local actors and NGOs, with better articulated policies for doing this, and “transfer to other UN agencies and international NGOs should be banned”.

It should be recognized that there has been a shift towards redeploying assets where practicable as opposed to donating them or transferring their ownership. By October 2002, \$121,933 worth of assets had their ownership transferred and \$33,692 had been donated due to phasing down of operations. By comparison, \$277,684 worth was redeployed.⁵⁸ The following case studies of major refugee repatriations illustrate much of what has been raised by those interviewed for this project. Whilst not exhaustive, they draw on the available archival material, and contribute to what is already known about the impact of operations on refugee impacted areas.

Malawi

In 1990 Malawi hosted the largest numerical and proportional refugee population in Africa, which peaked with over a million Mozambicans in late 1992.⁵⁹ Despite this, financial inputs into Malawi had been relatively modest. For example total annual UNHCR expenditure was approximately \$4.5 million (1987), \$22.9 million (1988), \$19.6 million (1989), \$23 million (1990) and \$28 million in 1992. A 1993 appeal for the Mozambican repatriation from all six countries called for a three-year financial requirement of \$203 million.⁶⁰

After the repatriation of Mozambicans between 1992–5, what was left behind was characterized in a UNHCR/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) development project as a severe negative impact on the economy and natural resources of the country. It was claimed that the government had to fund a portion of refugee assistance out of its own revenues, that refugees increased the pressure on

⁵⁵ Interview, Geneva, 14 October 2002.

⁵⁶ As was pointed out by the same interviewee, transfer of ownership really constitutes a donation but this term is used to indicate that UNHCR is no longer responsible for the ongoing maintenance of assets.

⁵⁷ For example, according to Alan Simmance, “Evaluation of UNHCR’s repatriation operation to Mozambique”, Inspection and Evaluation Service, UNCHR, February 1996, p36, after the Mozambican repatriation only one NGO, Médecins Sans Frontières, remained in Malawi after March 1995.

⁵⁸ Asset Management Board statistics, 10 October 2002, UNHCR, Geneva.

⁵⁹ Simmance, (1996), *op. cit.*, p24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p16. It is later pointed out that the operation cost much less; around \$150 million.

public resources services and increased demand on goods and services.⁶¹ The Malawian government also expressed concern over deforestation and land degradation in the refugee hosting districts, estimating that over 100,000 hectares had been affected by the time the last refugee left.⁶²

A US Embassy/USAID Malawi report cited in UNHCR's evaluation found that most Malawians believed that the refugee situation in their country was going to be long-term,⁶³ and a 1996 UNHCR evaluation highlighted that the government was "anxious to secure continuing support for restoration of the environment and the maintenance of the physical assets which are now its responsibility to administer".⁶⁴ Despite some effort to rehabilitate the railway line used to transport refugees, overall UNHCR's evaluation found that in Malawi the environmental and ecological consequences of hosting refugees was enormous. The complex physical infrastructure remaining "represented a major asset either to be used for the national benefit or left to waste".⁶⁵

What was to become of this enormous, complex physical infrastructure? At an extraordinary meeting of the Property Survey Board (now called the Asset Management Board) in April 1995, \$30 million worth of assets was recommended for approval to be transferred to the Malawi government. This consisted of 90 vehicles, 96 motorcycles, 1572 water points, 435 class rooms, around 9000 desks, 224 health facilities, 53 warehouses, 18 distribution sheds and 17 relief offices.⁶⁶ In addition 8138 hectares of the environment was re-afforested at a cost of \$2.5 million and "about 1000 kilometres of feeder roads that facilitated the transportation of food, were rehabilitated and constructed at the cost of approximately \$14.5 million".⁶⁷

In the case of assets, it was argued that "redeployment to other UNHCR operations was not a consideration on this occasion, in view of the age of some of the vehicles and the fact that the government would be continuing the existing projects until mid-1996".⁶⁸ UNHCR's evaluation of the Mozambican repatriation did not elaborate on this handover, instead noting that it "... reiterate(d) the importance of an orderly phasing out of relief assistance and the disposal of assets to the best advantage of the host nation which has borne the burden of the refugee presence...".⁶⁹

The agreement is similar to many made by UNHCR with governments and NGOs, stipulating that the assets be used for the "humanitarian and non-profit purposes which are consistent with the mandate and objectives of UNHCR, and that the

⁶¹ UNDP/UNHCR Development Programme Project of the Government of Malawi – income generating activities, 1993.

⁶² Minutes of 9th Meeting of the Tripartite Commission for the Voluntary Repatriation of Mozambican refugees in Malawi, held in Blantyre, Malawi, 25–26 July 1994.

⁶³ Simmance, (1996), op. cit., p26.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p37.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p35.

⁶⁶ Annexes I–VIII to the "Agreement Governing the Transfer of Ownership of UNHCR Assets between the Government of the Republic of Malawi, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees", 29 April 1995.

⁶⁷ Annex IX to the "Agreement Governing the Transfer of Ownership of UNHCR Assets between the Government of the Republic of Malawi, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees", 29 April 1995.

⁶⁸ Minutes of the Extra-ordinary Meeting of the Property Survey Board, 25 April 1995.

⁶⁹ Simmance, (1996), op. cit., p36.

recipient's pursuit of the said purposes will be enhanced by the transfer of the specified assets".⁷⁰ It also states that assets should retain existing UNHCR identification logos and marks. This recognizes the origin of the assets but it could lead to further confusion about the role of UNHCR.

Despite this donation of assets, a later World Bank "study of uncompensated public expenditures arising from the refugee presence in Malawi recommended an emergency assistance programme in 1990–91 of up to \$25 million ... this was the amount, after deduction of international aid provided through UNHCR, invested in refugee related government assistance and administration during the preceding two years".⁷¹

Pakistan

At present, UNHCR is undertaking one of its largest repatriation programmes in Afghanistan with over two million refugees returning to the country since March 2002. Given that this repatriation is still ongoing, it is too early to consider the effect of assets post-repatriation however some preliminary observations will be made here. This case study will highlight some aspects of the relationship between host and refugee communities.

The 3.3 million Afghan refugees, some of whom have lived in Pakistan for over 15 years, have largely been portrayed by the host government as a burden. The Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan has said that "Pakistan has sheltered 3 million refugees without any significant international assistance over the last two decades. Each refugee receives 8 to 10 dollars from the international community – the burden of this had been met by Pakistan".⁷² An earlier IRIN article stated that Pakistan found its Afghan refugees to be a "back-breaking economic burden" that they were unable to absorb. It added that it "... is unfair to expect Pakistan to be solely responsible for looking after the refugees".⁷³ A link was also made between refugees and crime, with the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) Inspector General of Police suggesting that 90 per cent of crimes are committed by Afghan refugees, who are also causing lawlessness.⁷⁴

These statements were made with requests for money, for instance in October 2001 Pakistan said that would it need \$120 million to cope with the refugee influx.⁷⁵ UNHCR's operation in Pakistan has gained an increased profile since the American

⁷⁰ "Agreement Governing the Transfer of Ownership of UNHCR Assets between the Government of the Republic of Malawi, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees", 29 April 1995.

⁷¹ UNHCR ExCom Paper, "Social and economic impact of large refugee populations on host developing countries", EC/47/SC/CRP.7, 6 January 1997, pp1–2.

⁷² Statement made by H E Mr Munir Akram, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan at the 52nd session of ExCom, Geneva, 3 October 2001.

⁷³ "Pakistan: Afghan refugees an economic burden, official says", IRIN News, 14 November 2000.

⁷⁴ "1.3m Afghan children eligible for Pak citizenship", Fayyaz Ahmed Khan, *Frontier Post*, 24 August 1991.

⁷⁵ "Focus on economic impact of Afghan crisis", IRIN News, 9 October 2001.

military action in Afghanistan, this has also seen its budget grow from \$16,499,652 in 1999 and \$17,913,028 in 2000 to \$35,203,309 in 2001.⁷⁶

As has been argued earlier, impacts are often discussed with no comprehensive information about the refugee population in question. For this reason it is important to present some information about the profile of Afghan refugees. Of the Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, 37 per cent are of an economically active age but the majority (59 per cent) are young people aged under 17 years.⁷⁷ As a recent UNHCR survey detailed, half of the refugees live in designated villages of NWFP and the remainder in urban areas of the province.⁷⁸ Most of these refugees, 73 per cent in villages and 85 per cent in urban areas reported having paid jobs with even 19 per cent of 10–20 year-olds employed.⁷⁹ It is quite clear that with many refugees also living in cities, including Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Karachi, a substantial number are well integrated into the local employment market,⁸⁰ often carrying out work that locals are not interested in doing.⁸¹

It can be very difficult to gain realistic information about remittances sent to refugees given that they are more likely to under-report income. Therefore it is not surprising that 94 per cent of Afghan refugees interviewed by UNHCR stated that they did not receive remittances from abroad.⁸² As was noted earlier, Afghan refugees in Pakistan did play an important role as conduits for resources during the 1990s when the banking system in Afghanistan was not operational.

Another economic activity is the so-called “grey” or war economy that operates in Afghanistan, with the smuggling trade between Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia about which we have limited knowledge.⁸³ A recent IRIN article cited research which had uncovered that the smuggling trade was worth up to \$2.5 billion every year. It went on to note that if the multi-billion dollar trade was curbed it could lead to unemployment for tens of thousands as “smuggling is a major source of income for people living on both sides of the border”, accounting for up to 40 per cent of income generation in NWFP and tribal areas.⁸⁴

As the limited evidence presented here suggests, the relationship between Afghan refugees and the host community of Pakistan is certainly more complex than burden and provider. As Landau has put forward, any large concentration of refugees near host communities has the potential to “fundamentally and unpredictably transform existing patterns of material exchange”.⁸⁵

⁷⁶ Budget information from Operations Review Board, rate of implementation over three years – 1999 to 2001, 22 April 2002.

⁷⁷ UNHCR cited in Koser and Van Hear, (2002), op. cit., p3.

⁷⁸ Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), “A profile of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and their intentions to return: results of a rapid survey conducted between February and May 2002 for UNHCR”, 7 August 2002, p1.

⁷⁹ NIDI, (2002), op. cit., p10–11.

⁸⁰ Cited in UNHCR 2001 Global Appeal, p155.

⁸¹ NIDI, (2002), op. cit., p7.

⁸² Ibid, p17.

⁸³ Jonathan Goodhand, “From holy war to opium war? a case study of the opium economy in north-eastern Afghanistan”, *Disasters*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2000, p14.

⁸⁴ “Pakistan: Focus on cross border trade and smuggling” IRIN News, 13 May 2002.

⁸⁵ Landau, (2003), op. cit., p8.

Further exploration reveals that now that Afghan refugees are beginning to repatriate many local businesses are complaining of a different problem, that of economic loss. As a recent article found, “while Afghan refugees were seen by many as a burden on the economy, their rapid repatriation from Pakistan, particularly from NWFP has caused a sharp downturn in the local economy, with many businesses recording severe losses and facing possible closure after the massive exodus”.⁸⁶

This case study presents evidence that Afghan refugees contributed to the local economy of Pakistan, but also goes towards supporting those commentators who suggest that an impacted area is greatly influenced by perceptions of factors such as refugee-related inflation and physical insecurity.⁸⁷

Thailand

The complex repatriation operation of Cambodians from Thailand is now widely agreed to have been both a successful and most effective undertaking by UNHCR. Under this operation 362,209 persons were repatriated from Thailand to Cambodia by 30 April 1993.

There were many actors working towards this outcome, not least the Thai government which was most eager to see the refugee population it had been hosting for many years return to Cambodia. For the Thais, the impact of this refugee population was made clear in a press statement which announced that “Thailand has had to bear the burden of Cambodian displaced persons for more than 13 years and does not wish to bear it any longer”.⁸⁸ Another reason for wanting to see repatriation take place was that Thailand’s regional and national priorities had changed, so that it no longer had either a geopolitical or economic interest in maintaining camps. The Thai authorities also wanted to exploit other opportunities in neighbouring countries.⁸⁹

At the outset of the repatriation operation attention had already been drawn to the impacts of the refugee population in Thailand, with a press release stating that “banditry remained a serious concern. Incidents had affected not only the Khmers in the campsites, but Thai villagers as well... Environmental problems would remain when campsites had been vacated ... Serious problems, such as land degradation and deforestation had affected Thai villagers living near the camps. Remedial and timely action was needed in response. The problems were of a major magnitude. An objective survey of the situation by competent authorities was needed. ... The international community must continue to render its assistance to United Nations humanitarian activities for those in need”.⁹⁰ In order to address this impact UNHCR

⁸⁶ “Pakistan: Afghan exodus impacts on fragile border economy”, IRIN news, 4 July 2002.

⁸⁷ See for instance Landau, (2003), op. cit., p22.

⁸⁸ “Cambodian civilians displaced into Thailand by the fighting inside Cambodia return safely to their country of origin”, press release of Permanent Mission of Thailand to the Office of the United Nations in Geneva, No. 9/2537, 1994.

⁸⁹ Crisp, Jeff and Mayne, Andrew, *Review of the Cambodian repatriation operation*, UNHCR Evaluation Section, September 1993, pp29–30.

⁹⁰ Thai representative, Nitya Pibulsonggram, cited in “Donors pledge \$6.7 million for assistance to Cambodians”, United Nations Press Release, 22 January 1991, p8.

undertook a number of quick impact projects (QIPs) as well as planting trees and maintaining access roads.⁹¹

Over the many years that it had been hosting Cambodian refugees, Thailand had already benefited from a procurement policy that gave priority, “without detriment to the UN financial regulations on competitive bidding ... to ordering goods and services in Thailand and in Cambodia”.⁹² This is no different from current UNHCR IP procurement guidelines that also encourages support for the economies of refugee hosting countries through the procurement of goods manufactured “in the area of operation”.⁹³

While the archival material available on this repatriation contains records of assets and decisions by various boards with regard to their disposal, one can find discussions about the ongoing maintenance of assets. For example, with regard to Cambodia it was noted that if buildings are dismantled and donated to local authorities, they may find it difficult to obtain complementary funding to expand facilities concerned.⁹⁴ While attempting to redeploy assets where appropriate, UNHCR staff also had to consider the role of assets in the reconstruction of Cambodia and they faced pressure to do this.

A press release of the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia urged the United Nations to consider the developmental needs of the country when making decisions about disposal of assets and to explore expeditiously how assets might be retained for benefit of Cambodia.⁹⁵ Transfer agreements with organizations operating within Cambodia, specified how assets were to be used and set a date of six months for implementation of this purpose. UNHCR retained the right to take back property within this period if it was not satisfied with the way it was being used. It appeared that while UNHCR wanted to use this property for positive means it also had concerns about the military use of property established for humanitarian purposes.

As an indication of how serious an issue the disposal of assets was, a mission was undertaken between 31 August and 18 October 1993 by UNHCR to investigate the redeployment of assets from Cambodia.⁹⁶ While this does not relate directly to Thailand, it is a useful example of how assets can be managed when planning repatriations.

The mission aimed to quantify and evaluate assets and the resulting report presented recommendations for action. Given that the total depreciated value of assets was

⁹¹ “Cambodia/Thailand repatriation and reintegration operation”, in UNHCR Global Report 1999.

⁹² Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding Among the Royal Thai Government, the Supreme National Council of Cambodia and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Relating to the Repatriation of Cambodian Refugees and Displaced Persons from Thailand, 199? (Check date)

⁹³ IP Procurement Guidelines – For Implementing Partners of UNHCR Funded Programmes, UNHCR, Geneva, November 2001, p4.

⁹⁴ General Briefing Note on Cambodia, UNHCR, Cambodia, 28 September 1993.

⁹⁵ Press release of the 1st Meeting of the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia – 9 September 1993.

⁹⁶ Ngarm and West, (1993), op. cit.

\$14,670,713 this was a significant undertaking.⁹⁷ Even more significant was its preference for transfer of ownership to voluntary agencies who "... are carrying out activities to serve the basic needs of the returnees and local residents. To facilitate the smooth re-integration of the returnees, it is only logical that UNHCR transfer the ownership of the vehicles to the agencies concerned, with the proviso that they will hand over these assets to the government/provincial counterparts or local NGOs".⁹⁸

This mission also highlighted the role of staff who need to be involved in the efficient redeployment of assets and who have the necessary skills to negotiate with governments, local authorities and organizations.⁹⁹ It pointed out that assets need to be recorded upon receipt and proper inventories maintained with information about use of equipment by IPs. As was noted previously, a problem can occur when decisions are made at a local level without reference to headquarters. In the case of Thailand it was claimed that due to lack of storage space, it was not always possible to await Property Survey Board decisions with regard to the disposal of some surplus NEP.¹⁰⁰ It appeared to have been the case that some decisions were being made regionally without adequate time for the AMB to respond.

Regardless of this, a number of assets were redeployed from both Thailand and Cambodia to other operations including vehicles to Laos, Myanmar, Dubai, Bangladesh and Mozambique, radio equipment to HQ, and surplus furniture to Myanmar.¹⁰¹ Many assets in Cambodia were transferred to operational partners and others donated and/or retained by the agencies to which they were already allocated.¹⁰² This could perhaps reinforce notions that once an asset is procured for an operation it continues to belong to an IP, breaking the link between the asset and UNHCR. It was also noted that by transferring ownership of assets a precedent was being set for the disposal of property following other large operations.¹⁰³

On the Cambodian side, a Field Property Survey Board (FPSB) was established in Phnom Penh which agreed to "donate" many goods to both local NGOs, IPs and the government. Priority was given to local NGOs involved in human rights and social services activities.¹⁰⁴ A further 83 vehicles in good condition were redeployed to other operations. In some cases goods were transferred to inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the World Food Programme with an expectation that they would eventually be transferred to local agencies or government authorities.

This raises the question as to whether UNHCR has any responsibility for an asset after its ownership has been transferred and, if this is the case, how can it ensure that the asset is still being used for the intended purpose at the time of transfer of ownership. It was noted by the FPSB that assets could also be donated for more

⁹⁷ Of this Ngarm and West, (1993), identified \$6,205,144 worth of assets as being suitable for redeployment op. cit., p20.

⁹⁸ Ngarm and West, (1993), op. cit., p3.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p23.

¹⁰⁰ Situation Report No. 2, UNHCR Branch Office Thailand, March 1994 (THA/HCR/0394).

¹⁰¹ Situation Report No. 1, January–February 1994 (THA/HCR/0231).

¹⁰² Internal Memorandum, UNHCR, Geneva, 15 November 1993.

¹⁰³ Minutes of the First Meeting of the Field Property Survey Board, 23 December 1993.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of the First Meeting of the Field Property Survey Board, 23 December 1993.

general humanitarian activities rather than a specific designation should that cause unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion

Presenting the impact of large numbers of refugees in developing countries as either a burden or a boon is not a helpful framework for further exploration of this issue. Any influx of refugee populations, expatriate staff and an international relief effort means a range of inputs, including assets that are inevitably going to have some affect on the host community.¹⁰⁵ How to measure these inputs demands more detailed development of indicators as well as comparative analysis because “only through comparison with either a similar unit of analysis or against national trends, does it become possible to isolate those effects that are indeed influx related”.¹⁰⁶

While assets may be afforded a position of lesser importance in complex operations, what has been presented here demonstrates that there are very good reasons for this sizeable input, with potential benefits for both refugee populations and host communities, to be considered throughout an operation and particularly during repatriations. This reinforces that “... it is extremely important that phase-out arrangements and negotiations be conducted with great sensitivity and diplomacy, particularly where the host government is concerned.

The departure of the refugees means loss as well as gain to the host society and the need to assume responsibilities and administer assets, which have hitherto been handled by external agencies, may come as both a challenge and a shock. There is a natural desire to ‘squeeze the lemon’ for every last drop of aid before its too late. Future good relations may well depend on the spirit and manner in which the phase-out process is carried out”.¹⁰⁷

What happens to these assets when a repatriation operation is undertaken also relates closely to organizational accountability and financial management. While it might be obvious to state that the first consideration should be to redeploy any assets that may still be within their serviceable life in order for UNHCR to get the most out of its purchase, as the case studies have shown this is not always the case. If assets have been acquired by UNHCR for a particular programme then it could be argued that the assets should, as was the case with Cambodia, return with the repatriating population. Assets could then contribute to rehabilitation and reconstruction for the population for which they were acquired.

Another example is Malawi where assets not suitable for redeployment were handed over to the government who had contributed to hosting the refugee population. Handing over such a large amount of assets sets a significant precedent although there is no information as to how these assets are being used now and if the government was able to maintain them afterwards.

¹⁰⁵ Landau, (2003), op. cit., p7.

¹⁰⁶ Landau, (2003), op. cit., p26.

¹⁰⁷ Simmance, (1996), op. cit., p36.

The obvious problem associated with this action is that being perceived as a wealthy provider "... local authorities and security services are likely to ... turn to apparently wealthy international organizations such as UNHCR for support".¹⁰⁸ Crisp suggests that one way to avoid this is to ensure that Memorandums of Understanding between UNCHR and governments are clear about what UNHCR can and cannot provide.¹⁰⁹ However the risk is that this action can further increase competition between host governments competing for funds.¹¹⁰

Without more in-depth research conducted into what Martin *et al.* terms "the broader economic life of a receiving country",¹¹¹ we lack the capacity to further consider the role of these assets. However if one is of the opinion that "... increased recognition should be given to the sacrifices asked of the country of first asylum, and everything possible should be done to compensate it in such a way that the potential benefits of the new immigrants for development are realized and the inevitable burdens minimized" then perhaps the handing over of assets is one way to achieve this.¹¹² This could also be a way for UNHCR to demonstrate its commitment to capacity building in less developed countries, noting that capacity building is more than just trucks and warehouses but involves less tangible inputs such as skills and knowledge-transfer.

With donors who "are no longer passive paymasters, but are seeking to be informed purchasers of humanitarian services",¹¹³ how the organization treats this important infrastructure, taking into account its own needs, that of refugee populations as well as those affected by their presence, is no easy task but demonstrates a commitment to financial management. UNHCR needs to take the complexity of repatriation operations into consideration and this can be achieved by tailoring policies to address the needs and priorities of each specific context.¹¹⁴ Methods such as a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Constraints (SWOC) sector analysis have been employed to achieve this.¹¹⁵ It has also been demonstrated that community-based approaches are the most appropriate way to for UNHCR to be involved with camp closures and interventions during repatriations.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁸ Jeff Crisp, *Lessons learned from the implementation of the Tanzania security package*, EPAU, UNHCR, May 2001, p4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ For more on this see Harrell-Bond, (1996), *op. cit.*, p8.

¹¹¹ Martin *et al.*, (2002), *op.cit.*, p6.

¹¹² Kuhlman (2002), *op. cit.*, p40.

¹¹³ Overseas Development Institute, "The 'bilateralisation' of humanitarian response: trends in the financial, contractual and managerial environment of official humanitarian aid: a background paper for UNHCR", October 2002, p19.

¹¹⁴ Whittaker, Beth Elise, "Changing priorities in refugee protection: the Rwandan repatriation from Tanzania", *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 53, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, February 2002, p14.

¹¹⁵ Petersen, Morten, "Rehabilitation of refugee-affected areas in Eastern Sudan – findings from an inter-agency mission", Engineering and Environmental Services Section, UNCHR, October 2002, p23.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p31.

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