

Filling the Gap in Private Sector Support for Refugees

Submitted by
University of Windsor (Canada) Faculty of Law Students:

Adrian Halpert, Diana Fonye, Victoria Sorge, and Sahar Talebi
(supervised by Dr. Anneke Smit)

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Recommendation Summary:

While seen internationally as a symbol of hope amidst the global refugee crisis, the Refugee Olympic Team at the 2016 Summer Olympics serves as a palpable reminder that there is a clear need for longer-term planning, transparency and accountability in refugee assistance projects offered by non-state actors when attempting to assist refugees through international community initiatives.

Any private sector project aiming to provide opportunities for refugees must include the necessary elements of long term commitment on the part of the organizers, adequate education of all parties involved, and a suitable action plan to achieve the objective of the initiative in a comprehensive and inclusive manner.

A Critical Gap in the GCR draft framework:

In recent years, the international community has shifted its focus from an individualized state approach to the provision of refugee assistance and support, to a multi-stakeholder approach. This encompasses a variety of private sector actors, organizations and entities which are increasingly encouraged to step up in assisting refugees through a wide range of initiatives.

While the emphasis placed on a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach has been helpful in achieving greater support and contributions in many areas, it has also led to a range of complications and difficulties for some refugees who have been participants in these initiatives. The severity of the problems associated with the lack of attention and resources dedicated to addressing these issues can be seen in the case of the “refugee Olympics team” which gained international attention in the 2016 Rio Olympics. The team, brought together through the efforts of the UNHCR and the International Olympic Commission, was hailed as a symbol of hope for the more than 65 million people around the world who have been displaced by conflict. Some team members, such as Syrian swimmer Yusra Mardini, have been able to capitalize on the opportunities presented to them through the Olympics. Others, such as Rose Nathike Lokonyen, a South Sudanese refugee, returned to refugee camps to face additional hardships caused by their participation in the Olympics which include violence, sexual abuse, and threats of bodily harm.¹

The positive aspects of initiatives such as the Refugee Olympic Team are applauded, while the negative consequences are often ignored. In order to effectively promote change and mitigate the refugee crisis, any successful private stakeholder initiative must actively commit to addressing any possible harmful consequences that may impact the refugees involved in the program, their families, and communities as a whole.

An Alignment with principles of international refugee protection:

A strengthened commitment to longer-term planning, and mitigating future adverse implications of this type of stakeholder involvement, is important because it allows the international

¹ McCormick, Ty. “*Refugee athletes captivated the world at the Olympics. But many returned to a life of despair.*” The Washington Post, Feb 2, 2018.

community to strive for more than just transient relief to refugee issues and focus on long-term, durable solutions. Implementing initiatives that result in fostering dependency in refugees is an incomplete commitment to many fundamental principles engrained in international law and refugee policy, such as a commitment to the international protection and human rights of refugees, and the imperative to “first do no harm” when crafting programmes focussed on providing assistance to refugee populations.²

This proposal engages the New York Declaration as it corresponds with the notion that practical experience must inform modifications and future applications of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.³ Additionally, these suggestions complement the intended objectives of The Global Compact on Refugees.⁴ Specifically, this proposal supports the concept of “stronger and more predictable humanitarian and development responses that are consistent with national development strategies and support sustainable development” and additionally, “increased investments in building human capital and resilience through support to...livelihood opportunities”. Further, this proposal suggests an enumerated framework for pilot projects crafted by non-state actors, outlined below, which supports the application of a comprehensive and protection-sensitive approach to such projects.

Private sector actors engaged in implementing refugee initiatives are in the best position to ensure that any negative ramifications related to a specific program are adequately

² See <http://www.msf.org.au/article/statements-opinion/%E2%80%98do-no-harm%E2%80%99-should-be-guiding-principle-forced-migration-policies>

³ United Nation General Assembly. “*New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.*” Annex II. September 19, 2016.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “*The global compact on refugees ZERO DRAFT.*” III. Programme of action. January 31, 2018.

addressed. They will best be able to address any issues with assistance and support from the international community, including the UNHCR and UN member states.

Proposed Solutions:

The necessary elements of a private sector project to provide opportunities for refugee must include:

- ***Commitment:*** Gauging the intentions of stakeholders when it involves their intervention with the lives of refugees. This may include the length of commitment, and what options or solutions are available to refugee participants following the initial engagement.
- ***Education:*** Educating all participating private sector actors on the impact their involvement may have on the lives of refugees, both positive and negative. Moreover, educating participating refugees on how they could play a part in mitigating the issue of global displacement and influencing the lives of other refugees.
- ***Action Plan:*** Creating a comprehensive action plan which states how actors aim to follow up on the initial action they take and some form of commitment to considering the potential long-term implications for participating refugees. This includes proper consideration of whether such programmes will offer a pathway to long-term protection for refugee participants, or whether they will be expected to return to their host communities following completion of the project. There is also need for clear communication of these project elements to the refugees as well as all other parties involved.

The success story of the Syrian Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini is a good example of the positive potential of a comprehensive action plan. Since the Olympics, she has gone on to become the “youngest goodwill ambassador for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR and has

pledged to continue her work with young refugees.”⁵ Yiech Pur Biel, a South Sudanese athlete in the 2016 Olympic Games, has talked about how life changing this support can be. *“This idea it was very good for us as refugees because you know, being a refugee is only a name. It actually gives us hope [...] it means you tell the world that we refugees are human beings...”*⁶

By contrast, some athletes received no support after their participation in the Olympics, much to their detriment. For Rose Nathike Lokonyen and the other four South Sudanese athletes still living in Kenya, long term success and a stabilized future has not materialized. According to reports, they returned from foreign competitions to face many of the same hardships they faced before they were Olympians: poverty, travel restrictions and a bar on gainful employment.⁷ This demonstrates that in order to make a meaningful impact on the lives of refugees, there is a need for clear and transparent commitment and accountability on the part of private sector organizations.

Call to Action:

In order to successfully implement the opportunities for refugees created by private sector actors, it is important to require assurance of their commitment to the long term outcome, transparent communication, and education of all engaged parties; ensuring the permanent success of the refugees involved, beyond the bounds of the proposed initiatives.

⁵ <https://www.olympic.org/news/refugee-olympic-athlete-yusra-mardini-appointed-unhcr-goodwill-ambassador>

⁶ From fleeing South Sudan to running at Rio 2016 | Refugee Olympic Team. [YouTube]

⁷ *Ibid.*