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Policy Brief

FROM DEPENDENCE TO SELF-RELIANCE CHANGING THE PARADIGM IN PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS

By T. Alexander Aleinikoff

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Executive Summary

While the ongoing emergence of new causes of displacement has placed the global humanitarian system under strain, an equally important cause of stress is the lack of solutions for the millions of forced migrants who continue to live in situations of protracted displacement. Long-term displacement not only limits the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to new emergencies, it also forces refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to live in limbo, their lives on hold. They are at risk of further hardship as international interest and support decrease over time.

Under these circumstances, transitioning from relief to development assistance may seem to make inherent sense, but implementing this transition in practice can be difficult. Refugees are not often seen as a priority group by development agencies and donor governments, and host states themselves may be reluctant to allow precious aid to be directed to non-nationals when their own citizens remain in need.

Applying development solutions to situations of long-term displacement will therefore require more than simply a shift in policy: a new narrative is needed, one that emphasizes the potential of refugee populations to contribute to both their host and origin communities through their own human capital, transnational connections, and dedicated international assistance. Perhaps the best way for humanitarian actors to make this new narrative a reality is from the ground up, by adapting current practices as much as possible rather than waiting for a full paradigm shift—opting instead for a paradigm “slide.”

A new narrative is needed, one that emphasizes the potential of refugee populations to contribute to both their host and origin communities.

The development potential of granting refugees the right to work in the host country (already provided in the 1951 Refugee Convention) has been demonstrated. Still, host governments are often reluctant to do so, and policymakers and humanitarian agencies could make greater efforts to encourage the implementation of these rights. Humanitarian actors may also consider ways to better support livelihood development at the individual level (such as coherent approaches that sequence social protection and access to capital) or larger-scale projects (such as infrastructure initiatives) that aim to improve the local economic environment in which refugees must act.

Taking development solutions for long-term displacement to scale will require the buy-in and engagement of donor and host governments, as well as development agencies. These actors, to date, have played a limited role in implementing long-term solutions to forced migration. Yet numerous factors argue for the greater involvement of development agencies: the effects of displacement on host communities (both positive and negative), the de facto exclusion of refugee communities from existing development streams, and the potential of refugees to support development in their origin communities upon return. Diaspora groups and the private sector can also play a role in advocating for more sustainable approaches to protracted situations of displacement, and in supporting the implementation of development projects that involve displaced people.

I. Introduction

Let us begin with two facts: (1) more than 51 million persons are displaced because of conflict and violence



in the world today;¹ and (2) the majority of the world's forced migrants—refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—are in protracted situations, with little chance that their displacement will end anytime soon. Taken together, these facts paint a deeply disturbing picture. Millions of persons have not only borne the injuries and costs of being forced from their homes, they continue to suffer those harms, their lives essentially placed on long-term hold.

These are unhappy facts, too, for host and donor states. The vast majority of the world's forced migrants reside in developing countries, which expect and rely on the international community to help provide assistance to the displaced. This is particularly so for refugees who, unlike IDPs, are not citizens of the states that have provided them asylum. While emergencies may attract a significant amount of funding,² support tends to diminish over time. Long-standing situations are perceived to have neither the urgency nor likelihood of resolution that draws heightened donor interest. Funds are disbursed year after year with little enthusiasm, amid beliefs that not much more can, or should, be done.

Viewed with a modicum of perspective, it should seem curious that assistance provided to refugees several decades after their displacement is categorized as “humanitarian” by governments and multilateral international organizations. Humanitarian relief is usually associated with emergency relief—tents, blankets, food, and medical care for those who have been forced from their homes after a cataclysmic event (earthquake, tsunami, civil war, targeted persecution, threatened genocide). As the United Nations (UN) guidance goes, humanitarian relief should give way—in fairly short order—to reconstruction; as the flood waters recede, people should leave their emergency shelters and begin to rebuild their homes and their communities.

Perhaps it is time to recognize more frankly the funding and spending category assigned to most of the world's displaced for what it is: dollars for dependence.

The relief-to-development mantra can make sense in cases of natural disaster, when a temporary shock has taken a community off its normal development course. And this logic links to the *mot du jour*: “resilience.” A resilient society is able to withstand shock and begin rebuilding more quickly. But these concepts are more difficult to apply in situations of long-term displacement. Refugee camps and settlements persist in host communities, usually as isolated, unproductive islands sustained largely by the international community—or neglected altogether. Host states are not likely to include refugees in their national development plans, meant for their own citizens, and are not likely to want international funders to divert development dollars to non-nationals. As a result, international assistance to displaced communities continues to be sourced from “humanitarian” baskets no matter how long the displacement continues. A hallmark of such funding is that it usually bypasses host states—although state refugee agencies may receive financial support and host communities may benefit from some local services, such as schools and water, sanitation, and health (WASH) projects. Development funding, meanwhile, is generally bilateral and provided to states according to their development plans.

Not surprisingly, programming follows funding. The provision of emergency relief comes first, as dollars from donor emergency funds flow in. But soon after, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other multilateral and nongovernmental organization (NGO) actors shift to general forms of assistance, underwritten by grants from humanitarian funding streams. The result is somewhat pejoratively referred to as “care and maintenance,” and it is now the reigning paradigm for assistance

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Global Trends 2013: War's Human Cost* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), www.refworld.org/docid/53a3df694.html.

2 UNHCR alone received nearly \$1 billion in both 2013 and 2014 to assist refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by conflict in Syria.



to the long-term displaced. No officially sanctioned category is to be found between humanitarian and development funding—hence the stretching of the term “humanitarian” to cover assistance in protracted situations. But perhaps it is time to recognize more frankly the funding and spending category assigned to most of the world’s displaced for what it is: dollars for dependence.

Beyond “Care and Maintenance”

If long-term dependence (represented by the phrase “care and maintenance”) is the problem, then fostering self-reliance is a plausible solution. The question is how to make self-reliance acceptable to host communities and of interest to funding states.

It must be recognized that host states perceive major disincentives to promoting refugees’ self-reliance. For asylum states, refugees are temporary residents who should return to their home country as soon as conditions allow. To promote their self-sufficiency through economic activity and participation would be, in effect, to promote a policy of local integration—a hard sell to host community populations and national constituencies. Indeed, this is why states are reluctant to include refugees in national development plans; it is hard to argue to citizens that sovereign debt should be increased to take care of noncitizens. The promotion of policies that foster self-reliance also runs counter to the claim that refugee populations are a burden—a claim that is the basis for demands for greater financial support from the international (humanitarian) community.

The moral argument seems clear: long-term dependency for forced migrants, coupled with a lack of membership in a state, denies millions of persons a present and a future. The international community should neither support nor accept it. But it is likely that more than appeals to humanitarian principles will be necessary to move actors and to fundamentally change an ingrained set of practices and policies.

Progress toward self-reliance can be made by adjusting our lens, by redefining the situations of displaced persons and host countries. To be sure, in the midst of an emergency, forced migrants will need immediate care; but the idea of refugees as persons for whom the necessities of life must be provided should end when the emergency ends. After all, before the conflict that prompted their flight, refugees were likely to be living typical lives in their home countries—undertaking productive activity that provided for their families, caring for their children, and engaging with their community. Given the opportunity, there is no reason that most could not resume such lives again, albeit in a new country of residence. From this perspective, we should see refugees in development terms: they are a group of potentially productive persons, able to take care of themselves and contribute to the economy of the host community. Because many refugee camps and settlements are located in less developed areas of host states, the potential of refugees to contribute to development takes on added value.

The moral argument seems clear: long-term dependency for forced migrants, coupled with a lack of membership in a state, denies millions of persons a present and a future.

Indeed, refugees are more than potential skilled and unskilled workers, entrepreneurs, and small business operators. Because they are, in some sense, the responsibility of the international community, they provide links to international humanitarian and development funds. Refugees should thus be seen to offer dual benefits to the economic growth of host states, both through their own efforts and through the international funding their presence is likely to attract.

Crucial to this shift in perspective is the willingness of development actors to see displacement as an area of programmatic interest. This brief explores several practical options for increasing the priority given



to forced migrants by humanitarian and development actors, host states, and donor states. It begins by proposing several programmatic interventions that move beyond the standard “care and maintenance” response, and then discusses possible tools for implementing them. Taken together, these suggestions raise a provocative question: if development actors come to see displacement as a funding priority (and the funding provided is additional to that otherwise planned), can we imagine a world where states compete for the “privilege” of hosting refugees?

II. Programmatic Interventions

To say that forced migrants are valuable contributors to economic development does not make it real. The best way to bring the new model into existence would be to undertake projects *now* that are consistent with the new vision. Rather than a dramatic paradigm shift, what is being suggested is a paradigm “slide”—as a new way of doing business ultimately leads to a new way of understanding the business we are trying to do. The changes to current policy and practice needed to set this in motion include (1) improved implementation of refugees’ existing labor market rights, and (2) better development of livelihood opportunities at both individual and community or system levels.

A. Refugees’ Rights to Work, to Self-Employment, and to Pursue Professions

First and foremost, refugees must be given the right to work.³ This does not require a paradigm shift; it simply recognizes a right already included in the 1951 Convention⁴ that called the international refugee regime into existence. While no comprehensive study has yet investigated host states’ respect for the right to work, a recent analysis of the situation of nearly 5 million refugees (representing 18 different states) revealed that 45 percent of those refugees enjoy no legal right to work, while the remaining 55 percent frequently face significant de facto barriers to employment.⁵

Rather than a dramatic paradigm shift, what is being suggested is a paradigm “slide.”

The Convention does not stop at the right to work. It also guarantees an increasing bundle of rights to refugees as they develop deeper connections to their country of residence. Refugees *lawfully present* within a state are entitled to “treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, no less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances” with respect to the right to self-employment.⁶ Refugees *lawfully staying* within a state are entitled to enjoy “the most favourable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country in the same circumstances” with respect to the right to engage in wage-earning employment,⁷ as well as the right to practice a liberal profession.⁸ Even otherwise acceptable restrictions on foreigners’ employment rights are inapplicable to refugees who have completed three

3 This is not an issue for IDPs, who would have the usual rights pertaining to citizenship.

4 Here and throughout, the Convention being referred to is the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the subsequent 1967 Protocol; full text available at UNHCR, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010), www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html.

5 Asylum Access, *Global Refugee Work Rights Report: Taking the Movement from Theory to Practice* (Oakland, CA: Asylum Access, 2014), http://asylumaccess.org/AsylumAccess/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/FINAL_Global-Refugee-Work-Rights-Report-2014-Interactive.pdf. Identified barriers to employment include inadequate access to national refugee status, xenophobia, bureaucratic barriers, and inadequate access to vocational training and education.

6 Article 18.

7 Article 17(1).

8 Article 19(1).



years' residence in the country, or are spouses or parents of nationals of the country of asylum.⁹

Admittedly, host states may be reluctant to grant refugees a right to work if domestic populations believe that refugees will compete with them for jobs. One solution, to be explored below, would be to fold a right to work into broader development plans for host communities.

B. A Better Approach to Livelihoods

UNHCR and NGO partners fund tens of millions of dollars of livelihood development projects annually. Most projects are rather small, providing a limited number of refugees with some skills, such as tailoring, soap-making, or woodworking; supplying a family with a cow or chickens; or distributing seeds and tools for subsistence farming. Usually no significant analysis is conducted of markets for the goods produced or skills acquired, and little follow-up is done to see whether the incomes and prospects of persons passing through the projects have materially improved. Nor has UNHCR generated persuasive evidence that numerous “microcredit” projects have moved large numbers of refugees toward self-sufficiency.¹⁰

The fact is that livelihood development is not viewed as a core function of humanitarian organizations, particularly beyond projects for the displaced. To date, few organizations have had either the knowledge or trained staff to construct and conduct robust programs (including evaluations of project benefits), although this is changing. Humanitarian organizations are becoming more sophisticated in their approaches to livelihoods, as the following examples demonstrate.¹¹

1. Assistance at the Individual Level

UNHCR is currently piloting a multidisciplinary approach to poverty reduction—the “graduation model”—that sequences social protection, livelihood development, and access to finance. The model supports refugees' immediate needs while building the foundation for longer-term human-capital investments.¹² Developed in rural Bangladesh, the model is now being introduced into urban environments in Ecuador, Egypt, and Costa Rica. The graduation model begins by targeting the stress caused by conditions of extreme poverty, such as food insecurity. In the second stage, participants develop financial discipline by creating a specific savings plan and learning about financial service providers. They then receive training focused on asset preservation and entrepreneurial skills, as well as health and social issues. Finally, participants are matched with sustainable economic activities based on their qualifications, existing market conditions, and assets (including available microloans). The Ecuadorean project is currently screening candidates, and is slated to take about 18 months to reach its final stage.

It is increasingly recognized that strategies to support livelihoods are likely to be more effective when beneficiaries are economically invested in projects. So, for example, in Zambia, as part of a program fostering the local integration of former Angolan refugees, farmers are advanced seeds and tools upon the condition that they pay back the cost of the inputs from profits generated by their activity. Other avenues may provide access to capital to support income-generating enterprises. Through a self-sufficiency initiative in Ecuador, for instance, Banco Pinchincha has begun to offer refugees bank accounts, microloans, and financial counseling.

2. Broader Development Opportunities

Far-reaching programs can be established based on an economic understanding of the refugee hosting area and broader market conditions. Rather than just giving refugees seeds to grow crops for household

⁹ Article 17(2). Notably, Article 17(3) further emphasizes the drafters' preoccupation with employment rights by requiring states to “give sympathetic consideration to assimilating the [wage-earning] rights of all refugees . . . to those of nationals.”

¹⁰ Indeed, many of the programs are justified more in terms of psychosocial support for vulnerable refugees or giving otherwise idle young men something to occupy their time than in terms of advancement toward self-sufficiency.

¹¹ See, for example, UNHCR, *Global Strategy for Livelihoods 2014-2018* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), www.unhcr.org/530f107b6.pdf.

¹² Ibid.



consumption, larger-scale agricultural projects can be envisaged that bring benefits both to refugee and host communities. Projects of this type have been initiated in Ethiopia and Chad and are being considered for refugee settlement areas in Uganda. The crops to be planted are chosen based on an analysis of the demand for them in the local area and beyond. Other kinds of agricultural programs are possible as well. In Burkina Faso, with the support of the IKEA Foundation, UNHCR is initiating a project to address a dramatic undersupply of milk by building skills in both the refugee and host communities to increase the production capacity of local dairies. If successful, the project will expand a valuable source of nutrition, increase income levels for both refugees and hosts, and provide refugees with valuable skills that they can take back to Mali when return becomes feasible.¹³

A less direct but potentially more useful route forward is to provide infrastructure (roads, energy, vocational schools, and hospitals) upon which economic activity can be based. The thinking is that refugee (and host community) enterprises will be started when there is a foundation to support them. An economically vibrant area should then generate the jobs and opportunities that are needed for self-sufficiency.

III. Instrumentalities

To move toward a new paradigm, humanitarian organizations will need help. Donor states will need to conceptualize aid to the displaced in a broader context; host states will have to recognize and support programs for the displaced that go beyond maintaining dependency; and development organizations will need to contribute program knowledge and new funding. All these actions are linked: Host states are more likely to accept a broader view of programming for the displaced if it comes with tangible benefits for host communities. Donor states will come to accept the new paradigm if it is supported by host states. And development agencies will contribute to the new approach if it is represented in national and local development planning. Nonstate actors such as diaspora communities and the private sector can also be invited to help implement new initiatives.

A. Development Actors

The involvement of development actors appears to be the greatest challenge. To date, development agencies have played a limited role in displacement for two reasons: (1) displacement has not been addressed by national and local development plans; and (2) these actors have not seen the development needs of the displaced as a funding priority, given the characterization of those needs as “humanitarian.”¹⁴ The first reason would be countered by making progress on the second—that is, it is highly likely that national and local plans would encompass areas that host displaced people if donors indicated a strong interest that they do so.

The argument that development actors should make displacement a focus of concern is threefold:

13 UNHCR, *Milk Solutions for Livelihoods and Self-Reliance of Malian Refugees and Host Communities in Burkina Faso: Seeds for Solutions 2014-2017* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), <http://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/milk-solutions-livelihoods-and-self-reliance-malian-refugees-and-host>.

14 In extreme cases—such as Lebanon and Jordan—development actors have shown interest in displaced communities, but the kind of participation observed in these cases (helping local communities withstand immediate crisis) is of a different nature than what is being suggested here. Post-emergency and long-term displacement situations require more than a bifurcated approach, in which UNHCR and its partners focus on refugees, while the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and development actors focus on host communities. Development actors must be a part of the refugee response itself; that is, the goal of the development work should include refugees’ self-reliance and host communities’ growth, as well as the rehabilitation of the communities affected by crisis.



- First, it is clear—at least in some situations—that displacement has an impact on national economic growth;¹⁵ that is, the arrival of forced migrants affects the development trajectory of the host state. Seen positively, displacement presents opportunities for economic growth because of the talents and capacities of forced migrants combined with the host community.
- Second, whether or not an effect on host-country gross domestic product (GDP) can be shown,¹⁶ refugees are highly likely to be doubly excluded from development assistance—that is, both from the country they fled and from the country that has granted them asylum. The proof of this is everywhere, and indeed it accounts for the never-ending obligations of humanitarian organizations to provide relief. If one of the hallmarks of post-2015 development thinking is universality and inclusion, then areas hosting displaced populations are prime candidates for focus and concern.
- Third, development programming for displaced populations will improve their chances of a sustainable return to their home state, while benefitting the overall development of that state. So, for example, one might appropriately view development assistance to Somali refugee camps as implicit development assistance to Somalia.

It may be that these three arguments—based on recognizing impact, ending exclusion, and facilitating return—are enough to motivate development actors to recognize displacement as an area for attention and funding. And indeed there are some hopeful signs. A World Bank initiative in Africa’s Great Lakes region recommends that development actors encourage the inclusion of displaced populations and host communities in wider development plans, support education efforts for displaced children, and develop and fund approaches “to enhance the voice and representation of displaced communities by strengthening their civil society and contact with local authorities.”¹⁷

It may be that structural change within development organizations would be the surest way to focus attention on displacement.

But it may be that structural change within development organizations would be the surest way to focus attention on displacement. One example of such a change is the creation of an office in Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) dedicated to displacement. Initiated with a 170 million euro budget, the unit is intended to link development plans to relief for displaced populations.

To say that development planning is crucial to a new paradigm for solving situations of forced migration is not to imply some kind of handover from humanitarian to development agencies. Rather, the needs assessment and planning processes should be joint from the start—perhaps coordinated by the UN Country Team, with UNHCR in the lead.

15 A recent World Bank report notes that “forced displacement . . . has important economic, social, political, and environmental impacts on the places of origin and destination”; Dilip Ratha et al., “Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook (Special Topic: Forced Migration)” (Migration and Development Brief 23, World Bank, Washington, DC, October 2014), <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief23.pdf>. A report on Africa’s Great Lakes region (GLR) also concludes that “[i]mpacts of displacement can be a source of fragility for the region, with displacement having the potential to negatively affect the stability and prospects for economic development in the GLR as a whole;” see World Bank and UNHCR, “Forced Displacement in the Great Lakes Region” (Internal Draft, World Bank and UNHCR, Washington, DC, 2014), 47–8.

16 For example, a World Bank report concludes that, for the years 2012–14, displacement caused by the Syrian conflict may cut real gross domestic product (GDP) growth in Lebanon by 2.9 percent each year; World Bank, *Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/09/18292074/lebanon-economic-social-impact-assessment-syrian-conflict>.

17 World Bank and UNHCR, “Forced Displacement,” 47–8.



B. *The Diaspora*

The diaspora—defined here as conationals (and their descendants) living in a third country—is an untapped resource with potentially great interest in supporting displaced populations. If the paradigm “slide” discussed here involves replacing “care and maintenance” with self-reliance, then diaspora communities are likely to have means and talents to contribute. They may also have close ties to the country of origin and could assist in producing sustainable return programs. In addition, diaspora communities may include influential political actors in resettlement countries that could generate support for donor-state policies that foster the self-reliance of displaced populations.

Effective mobilization of the diaspora will require new efforts by humanitarian organizations, which typically lose touch with displaced populations once they have achieved a solution. There are some promising signs. The 2014 Addis Abba Commitment Towards Somali Refugees (a product of High Commissioner António Guterres’ Global Initiative on Somali Refugees) recognized that “the Somali diaspora have an important role to play” in turning the commitment into practice.¹⁸ Another example is the “Refugee Congress” established by the UNHCR Regional Office in Washington. The Congress includes resettled refugees from each of the U.S. states and promotes advocacy in the United States on behalf of refugees.¹⁹ It could also be mobilized to support persons who have not yet found a solution to their displacement, by providing scholarships, marketing assistance, contractual work, and professional opportunities.²⁰

C. *Private Investors*

Once we shift our focus from continued humanitarian assistance to the self-reliance of refugees and the development of their host communities, it becomes logical to ask what role private investment might play. Given the presence of underutilized economic actors—that is, of refugees who are not participating in the economy either as producers or consumers—the private sector may see opportunities for investing in infrastructure and start-up businesses. Humanitarian agencies could develop tripartite agreements among host states, investors, and multilateral organizations that provide incentives to private developers while also securing the rights and the advancement of the displaced.

IV. *Conclusions*

The negative consequences of protracted situations of displacement have long been understood. They undermine human development for the displaced, whose lives are essentially put on hold. With apparent solutions out of reach, hosting states may face growing burdens as the international community loses interest and donor support declines. As protracted situations become the norm, it is clear—for both moral and practical reasons—that the long-term dependency of millions of displaced persons cannot be an acceptable outcome for the international humanitarian system.

To better foster the self-sufficiency of refugees and the development of host communities will require a new narrative, new interventions, and new partners. Recognizing the development potential of displaced populations for both host- and origin communities is essential to shift the common perception

18 UNHCR, *Addis Ababa Commitment towards Somali Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), www.unhcr.org/540dac2c6.pdf.

19 UNHCR, “Refugee Congress Gathering Brings New Voice to US Policy Debate,” (news release, December 13, 2014), www.unhcr.org/52ab2fe56.html.

20 The Refugee Congress issued an August 2011 Proclamation that encourages UNHCR to recognize that “refugees and asylees represent an untapped resource when responding to refugee situations around the world” and calls upon the Office to “incorporate [them] . . . in providing protection and delivering humanitarian support.” UNHCR, *Proclamation of the Refugee Congress* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2011), www.unhcr.org/4e6e045f6.pdf.



of displacement from that of a *burden* to a *benefit*. To bring this new paradigm into being, humanitarian actors should consider what actions they can take now to help displaced populations demonstrate their full potential. Promising approaches include more fully realizing refugees' right to work, improving livelihood interventions at the individual level, and considering broader development projects (like infrastructure support) that would benefit host communities and refugees alike.

Development actors in host states, donor development agencies, and international financial institutions would do well to focus attention on situations of protracted displacement. While solid arguments exist for including displaced groups among development priorities, humanitarian agencies and policymakers will need to consider how best to communicate the case for greater cooperation among their development counterparts. Diaspora groups also have a role to play, both in supporting the implementation of development projects and in drawing political attention to the hardships faced by those in protracted situations.

To bring this new paradigm into being, humanitarian actors should consider what actions they can take now to help displaced populations demonstrate their full potential.

Bringing together such a range of actors with disparate agendas and interests will be challenging, and it will require policymakers and humanitarian actors to think creatively and search actively for opportunities to cooperate. Amid the mounting pressures placed on the humanitarian system by new crises, finding sustainable solutions to long-standing refugee situations is a critical priority.



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