

Assisting refugees in protracted refugee situations: A never-ending story?

Written by Cindy Horst

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CINDY HORST, AUG 17 2011

The humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa is finding its way into people's living rooms again. We see deeply disturbing pictures of starving children, with eyes that have nothing childlike anymore. We read stories of parents abandoning their dying children to save the stronger ones. Being confronted with these images and stories, we are encouraged to send money and thus, save lives.

The stories and images of suffering are so far removed from our daily lives that it is impossible to relate to the people involved except as victims, as people who need our help. Of course it is crucial to save as many lives as possible and donations are fundamental. But when individuals face the most horrific realities in life, they are not necessarily reduced to helpless victims in need of protection and someone to represent.

By focusing only on the extreme vulnerability of the refugees and drought victims from Somalia, these stories deny us the opportunity to relate to those affected as holistic human beings. It is difficult to see a proud grandmother, a student with dreams of becoming a doctor, a hardworking farmer. It is extremely difficult to see the hopes, dreams, strengths and resources that those displaced by conflict and drought actually carry with them. This is especially problematic because assistance cannot be just an emergency response. Emergencies lose their urgency after a limited period of time and emergency responses cannot be never-ending. Longer-term assistance to refugees from chronic conflicts and crises as in the case of Somalia, needs to build on the resources, strengths, dreams and hopes of refugees themselves.

In 1991-92, many fled conflict and drought conditions in Somalia just like others are doing today. Some of those first refugees ended up in the Dadaab camps of Kenya, where they expected to receive 'temporary' assistance and protection. That was twenty years ago, and the refugee camps currently host a population of about 400,000 although they were designed for not even a quarter of that number. With the renewed worsening of the situation in Somalia from 2008 and refugee influxes that may still surpass one thousand a day, the existing camps – Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera – are in no position to absorb the new arrivals. This has led to extremely cramped living conditions and great levels of scarcity and malnutrition, worse than it has ever been in Dadaab. In a recent verdict, the European Court of Human Rights found that conditions in the camps violated the Article 3 requirement that "No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." In particular, the Court found that the risk of violence from Kenyan police and criminal gangs within and outside the camps; overcrowding; lack of adequate water; and restrictions on freedom of movement cumulatively resulted in inhuman or degrading treatment.

With the influx of refugees also came an influx of international agencies and shifts in the composition of those providing aid in the camp. As in most other refugee camps, UNHCR has a coordinating role while NGOs operate as implementing partners. Whereas before 2008, CARE International provided many of the services in the camps, they have now largely been replaced by NRC, OXFAM, LWF and IRC. These organizations face a number of serious challenges, including common issues like limited resources, one year budget cycles, high staff turn-over and logistical challenges. Furthermore, the presence of many agencies in Dadaab is not accepted nor is their work respected by the local Somali Kenyan population. Operations are sabotaged, such as when tents that are set-up one day are demolished overnight, complicating swift assistance and service provision. Some of the local population's

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grievances include that they should be given jobs that are now carried out by refugee 'incentive workers' and that they are concerned about the encroaching upon their land. Efforts to construct a new camp 'Ifo 2' have been going on for years but were halted by the Government of Kenya at various points in time. As such, the camps remain extremely overcrowded.

But while conditions deteriorate and new refugees arrive in dire conditions, those who are now established refugees are not just victims passively waiting for 'outsiders' to help. In Hagadera, a number of youth, in cooperation with community leaders, religious leaders and others established a 'Community Emergency Response Team' (CERT) to help refugees and drought victims who are arriving in the camps. They held a collection of food, clothes and other items to distribute to those who are waiting to be registered in order to receive assistance from the international organizations in the camps. Formal registrations of new arrivals can often take a long time, and even after that, international assistance is not always immediately forthcoming. As such, the CERT conducts needs assessments, and provides assistance to those in greatest need. It also offers the arrivals help with finding a temporary place to stay and plots are being bought in the region to temporarily host them until a new camp will be opened. The refugee-initiated support has expanded and money, food and other items are sent from Wajir, Garissa and Nairobi by the Somali business community and others in a position to assist. The mosques play an important role in collections and distributions as well, and so does the Islamic charity Al-Haramain.

Those who live in the camps, and *in particular* those who have done so for the last twenty years, need more than just shelter, food and water. They need opportunities to rebuild their lives beyond Dadaab. Rather than hand-outs, they need renewed access to the rights that citizens have. After all, what defines a refugee is the fact that she or he has lost the protection of her or his country of origin and with it, her or his rights as citizens. The kind of assistance a refugee really needs is the right to work, to own property, to move freely and to participate in political processes. A short-term focus on the current humanitarian crisis in Dadaab needs to be accompanied by a recognition of the fact that those who live in the refugee camps face a *protracted* humanitarian crisis. This long-term crisis can only be addressed through political measures that re-establish their status as citizens.

Cindy Horst is Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). She has conducted extensive research in Dadaab and has published a monograph on life in the camps, entitled *Transnational Nomads*. Her work focuses, *inter alia*, on protracted refugee situations, migration-development links and international humanitarian aid. Research and publications can be found on her website.

The pictures below are of the activities of the refugee-led Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), taken by **Mohamed Hassan Ibrahim**.

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