

Review – Refugee Resettlement

Written by Paulina Larreátegui Benavides

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Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance
By Adèle Garnier, Liliana Lyra Jubilut, and Kristin Bergtora Sandvik
Berghahn Books, 2018

The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its Protocol (1967) are the core stones of the international refugee regime. In 2001, the Convention Plus initiative reinforced the validity of the mentioned instruments. Simultaneously, it launched a proposal to adopt new “special agreements aimed at managing the refugee challenges of today and tomorrow in a spirit of international cooperation” (UNHCR, 2005). More concretely, the spirit of the Convention Plus and the special agreements was to negotiate international cooperation to enhance durable solutions to effectively fulfill the duty of protecting refugees (Colville, 2003). In that sense, the Strategic Use of Resettlement (SUR) is considered one of the most successful strands of the Convention Plus. Resulting of the 2001 Global Consultations and the Agenda for Protection, this initiative was a promising opportunity to reinforce the resettlement programmes and even increase the number of resettling countries. However, this strategy has been criticized for its lack of clarity and accountability (see van Selm, 2013).

Books like *Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance* are crucial in the described scenario. This book reflects on resettlement programmes featuring worldwide voices, such as crucial voices from the Global South, through multidisciplinary approaches. The title of the book reflects on the three assertive perspectives of the resettlement process: (i) the influence of uneven *power* relations within resettlement processes; (ii) the influence of *politics* in defining the resettlement process and the lack of accountability for the hosting countries, and (iii) resettlement as a multilevel form of *humanitarian governance*. This review takes each of these considerations to illustrate the book’s contributions.

The uneven *power* relations within the resettlement

Through worldwide cases, the book points out one conductive thread: global inequality and uneven power in international relations are crucial elements determining the development of resettlement programmes. Given that most refugees come from and are located in the Global South, the book assertively addresses resettlement programmes considering the uneven power dynamics in those regions. For instance, some authors provide insights on refugee resettlement programmes in South America (Chapter 3 by Liliana Lyra Jubilut and Andrea Cristina Godoy Zamur; and Chapter 10 by Marcia A. Vera Espinoza). Similarly, Kristin Bergtora Sandvik reflects on resettlement programmes in Africa (Chapter 2). The mentioned cases illustrate the opportunities and hindrances of resettlement programmes in those regions. Furthermore, they can offer an idea of the potential magnitude of South-South cooperation in resettlement matters.

The book also addresses the dominant role of the United Nations Refugee Agency – the UNHCR – as a critical player with the power of persuasion and negotiation at the international and local levels. On the one hand, the UNHCR has directly influenced the redefinition of resettlement programmes and the selection criteria through different mechanisms such as the SUR. On the other, although its power to negotiate is high at the local level, its power of persuasion is limited at the international level. The book’s introduction illustrates how the UNHCR could be perceived as a leader in identifying and developing resettlement processes. However, its power is constrained by

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scarce resources and the political environment. The above would explain the decreased number of resettled refugees in recent years and why resettling countries encourage repatriation or other forms of protection for the most vulnerable.

The influence of *politics* in defining the resettlement process and the lack of accountability of resettling countries

According to the UNHCR, there are twenty-seven resettling countries at the moment. Most of them are industrialized – the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Sweden being the top five resettling countries in that order (UNHCR, n.d.). As resettlement is not part of international law, governments might suspend their resettlement programmes without infringing any law. One significant challenge of resettlement is the lack of accountability of the system. Jessica Darrow (Chapter 4) analyzes the contested values of US resettlement, adding to the conclusions that the political environment in the Trump era negatively influenced the perception of refugees and resettled people in the US.

Given the changing political dynamics, new resettling countries are emerging in the Global South, like Brazil and Chile in Latin America. Liliana Lyra Jubilut and Andrea Cristina Godoy Zamur (Chapter 3) study the Brazilian resettlement process. They conclude that Brazil is a positive example and a case study of power relations in the region, reaffirming the need for research on the Global South. Simultaneously, Marcia A. Vera Espinoza (Chapter 10) uses critical geography and anthropology to study Colombian and Palestinian resettled refugees in Chile and Brazil. She confronts the resettled refugees' expectations with the resettlement organizations. This multidisciplinary approach contributes to recognizing resettlement programmes in the Global South from a more comprehensive perspective.

Likewise, questions over the selection of refugees to be resettled is another main issue highlighted as an accountability matter. The UNHCR and its partners have been criticized for being subjective and non-accountable in resettlement programmes. The book raises awareness regarding the operational challenges that the resettled refugees face. The biggest concerns are (i) the lack of information, which directly affects their right to a transparent and fair process, and (ii) the lack of formal requirements regarding the time of the process, which creates confusion and uncertainty among candidates. Therefore, the book appropriately suggests that further studies on administrative processes applied in resettlement programmes could contribute to adopting better resettlement policies and advocate for more resettling countries.

Resettlement as a multilevel form of *humanitarian governance*

One of the book's main contributions is considering resettlement as a tool of long-term humanitarian governance at the local, national and international levels. Considering the mentioned three levels is crucial to understand how the resettlement system works and how to improve it. For instance, at the local level, considering resettlement as durable humanitarian governance could improve the conditions of resettled refugees in host countries. Adèle Garnier (Chapter 5) and Ibolya Losoncz (Chapter 6) study the disadvantages of resettled refugees in the labour market. Both cases illustrated that limited proficiency in the official language and education and lack of recognition of foreign credentials prevented resettled refugees from integrating into their host communities.

In the concluding chapter, Astri Suhrke and Adèle Garnier highlight resettlement as a system that contributes to the protection of at-risk refugees and “serves to remind rich and stable societies in a direct and visible manner of a basic humanitarian obligation to alleviate the consequences of wars elsewhere” (p. 250). However, these authors conclude that the resettlement regime is a fragmented structure built on a non-standardized normative and a UNHCR dependence on the resettling states. Finally, Amanda Cellini's annex compares the current twenty-seven resettlement programmes worldwide. The list, which is updated to 2016, details national resettlement laws, actors, eligibility criteria, and the role of the UNHCR for each programme. This annex is a practical tool for those interested in exploring resettlement programmes from an institutional and public policy perspective.

Given the above, *Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance* contributes to better

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understanding the role of power, politics and humanitarian governance in resettlement programmes. In that sense, the book provides some hints on potential approaches to current debates, such as those related to the SUR. Moreover, the multidisciplinary approach, the geographical scope, and the applied theoretical framework in the book make it a recommended source for students, researchers, and practitioners in refugee studies.

References

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