

INTRODUCTION

REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS: CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATIONS¹

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The aim of the introduction to this special issue on refugee livelihoods is two-fold. First, it wishes to contribute to the recent policy and academic debates on what approaches to refugee assistance can guarantee sustainable livelihoods to refugees. It has been acknowledged by various actors that the current system of refugee hand-out-based assistance in camps does not work, and as this *Refugee Survey Quarterly* will illustrate, problems do not limit themselves to regional refugee camps. Similar livelihood constraints are faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs), urban refugees, those repatriating to their home country and those resettled in Western countries. A second aim is to introduce common themes in the subsequent articles, which provide very rich empirical material. This introduction will first briefly outline the current debates and discuss the concept of 'refugee livelihoods'. Then, a state-of-the-art review is provided, based on the literature available and the various articles in this issue, in order to illustrate the importance of knowledge on refugee livelihoods for improving assistance to refugees. Here, the question will be addressed of whether one can distinguish patterns of continuity or change in strategies to create sustainable livelihoods after people are forced to flee and become a subject of the refugee regime. Finally, conclusions will be drawn on how refugees manage and thus, which types of assistance do work best.

The international community in recent years has realised that refugees should be 'assisted to assist themselves', and could become agents of development in the regions that host them. At the same time, it is clear that there are many obstacles to refugee self-reliance, especially in situations where refugees are accommodated in remote and marginal border camps for extensive periods of time. The problems of hosting refugees in camps in marginal areas are widely acknowledged, and have been addressed within UNHCR through debates on 'protracted refugee situations' (see eg Crisp 2003b) and amongst various NGOs in the 'anti-warehousing campaign' (USCRI 2004). The attempts that refugees themselves undertake to develop sustainable livelihoods are often obstructed in these camps by the fact that they have limited freedom of movement, no access to land or capital, or are obliged to work for exploitative wages. In general, refugees have very limited livelihoods-related rights, even though various articles in the 1951 Geneva Convention include provisions that should enable refugees to rebuild their livelihoods.²

Furthermore, a hand-out approach is common in most of these camps, where in the absence of sound and sustainable economic alternatives refugees are forced to live on food rations, though these rations do not provide them with sufficient means to make a living. Attempts by the international community to enable refugees to engage in more sustainable livelihoods are limited, but refugees themselves are very resourceful in developing alternative strategies.

Whereas current interest by the international community focuses on those in refugee camps, it is an accepted fact that the majority of refugees in the region do not stay in camps even if they are required to do so. According to figures by Jacobsen (2005: 6-7), of the 14.6 million persons of concern to UNHCR worldwide in 2001, some 60 percent were self-settled – 13 percent in urban areas and 47 percent in rural areas.³ At the same time, this should not lead to the conclusion that the large majority of refugees manage well without assistance. Refugee households and communities are often only able to survive by strategically placing members inside and outside camps, with the most vulnerable ones inside in order to minimise risks and profit from food and non-food rations (see eg Harrell-Bond 1986; Jacobsen 2005; Horst 2006b). As such, there is no doubt humanitarian assistance is needed to enable refugees in different locations to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. It is needed not only in the emergency phase, when saving lives is the issue (see Hill et al., this volume), but just as much at a later stage, to guarantee the development of a sustainable livelihood. Yet the current system of providing aid has failed to do this, as critics of protracted refugee situations have clearly pointed out (Crisp 2003b; USCRI 2004; Jacobsen 2005) Alternatives to the handout system are sought by UNHCR, governments, NGOs and academics.

The UNHCR, in its attempts to find alternatives, is increasingly interested in refugee livelihoods. In 2003, the Refugee Livelihoods Project was initiated as a follow-up to the work on protracted refugee situations, seeking to understand refugee livelihood strategies and assess the effectiveness of different livelihood interventions.⁴ Within UNHCR's Convention Plus initiative, set off by UN High Commissioner Lubbers in 2002 to stimulate the creation of multilateral special agreements to complement the 1951 Convention, livelihoods also play an important role. Within the 'Targeting Development Assistance for Refugee Solutions (TDA) section, it is stressed that refugees in protracted situations should gain improved access to durable solutions by being incorporated into development planning (see also Betts 2005; RLN 2005). TDA focuses on countries of origin as well as on host countries of first asylum; with projects that facilitate reintegration and reconstruction, as well as those providing development assistance for refugees and projects focusing on local integration.

The European Union, led by states such as The Netherlands, Denmark and the UK, is interested in supporting these initiatives and developing its own. This is related to its aim to shift from a reactive spontaneous arrival asylum regime to a proactive refugee regime focused on improving protection capacities and access to durable solutions in regions of origin (Crisp 2003a). In this approach, improving conditions in the region through providing development for refugees has been, quite problematically, linked to EU asylum policies from the assumption that if the

general situation in the region improves, refugees are best cared for in the region.⁵ Whereas Convention Plus was partly set up to stress the need for states to share responsibilities and fulfil their international obligations towards refugees, the political will of states to do this remains limited and the process has been slow and biased towards regional solutions. While ideas on TDA were developed by UNHCR and EU from 2002-2003 onward, only recently have they been translated into project proposals to be implemented,⁶ so the effectiveness still needs to be evaluated.

Not only UNHCR and governments have looked for new approaches of assisting refugees; academic and activist responses and alternatives can also be found. The US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) launched the anti-warehousing campaign in order to stress that hand-out approaches in camps needed to be replaced. It then moved on by analysing some of the alternatives to common practices of dealing with refugees. The USCRI took a critical stance on the UNHCR and EU-proposed 'new directions' in refugee aid, by stressing that the international community should rather focus on granting refugees their Convention rights. They indicated that new approaches should focus on enhancing the rights of refugees in a number of core areas, including freedom of movement; property rights; right to work and conduct trade; and legal status (Smith 2005). An academic model for refugee assistance in protracted situations that combines UNHCR's stress on regional development with the USCRI's insistence on a rights-based approach was then proposed by Jacobsen (2005). This alternative model consists of three principles: Firstly, host countries should designate a zone of legal residence for asylum seekers that is safe and provides them with opportunities to settle locally. Secondly, all asylum seekers should be given the economic and social rights assigned to them in the 1951 Convention. And thirdly, in the designated zones, education, health and financial services should be provided both to refugees and nonrefugees.

What these different proposals for new approaches to refugee assistance have in common is that they try to bridge the gap between relief and development. Yet, we have to realise that debates on and attempts to link the two are decades old. UNHCR has been struggling with it from the 1970s (Crisp 2001) and in the early 1980s, African states were already engaged in similar discussions (Betts 2005). Frerks (2005) locates the academic debate in the late 1980s, and convincingly analyses how, whereas there are various arguments in favour of linking, great problems arise in practice. First of all, the old conceptual model of modernist thinking on development in terms of stability and gradual, linear and progressive change does not incorporate current realities of instability, conflict and chaos (Frerks 2005: 170). Secondly, in some conflict-prone countries the institutional weakening or even collapse of the state has made the implementation of any type of structural development measure illusory (Frerks 2005: 171). And thirdly, relief and development bureaucracies are completely separate worlds with separate funding logics and procedures; leading to institutional, technical and implementational problems. Cooperation would require dramatic changes amongst the NGOs, governments and donors involved that may not be easily implemented (see also Crisp 2001).

THE 'LIVELIHOODS' CONCEPT

In current debates on finding alternative ways of assisting refugees, providing them with sustainable livelihood opportunities has been the central goal. This section will analyse what is a sustainable livelihood, and what can be learned from academic and policy discussions on livelihoods in other fields. Whereas the livelihood theme is relatively new within the UNHCR and in refugee studies, it has a much longer history in the social sciences and amongst development practitioners, who in livelihood studies concentrate on the actions and strategies of people trying to make a living in adverse circumstances (Kaag et al. 2004: 49). One of the first scientists to discuss the concept from a perspective that aimed to develop an economic science that was holistic and human-centred, was Polanyi. He considered the economy as socially, culturally and historically embedded, and stressed that people need a material base to satisfy their needs and wants (see Kaag et al. 2004: 51).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept took its current shape; both in academia and amongst practitioners. According to Chambers and Conway (1992: 7), 'a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation'. The ensuing livelihoods approach was distinct in its focus on the diversity of poverty situations and the multidimensionality of the poverty problem; focusing on the agency and the capability of actors and on strengths rather than needs (Murray in Kaag et al. 2004: 52). Interestingly, research had an influence on policy and practice, and for example caused a major policy shift in the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)'s development approach (Solesbury 2003). Whereas the sustainable livelihoods approach has since been continuously developed and widely used,⁷ there are also pitfalls to it. Firstly, as in any actor-oriented approach, the risk exists that people's strengths are overemphasised; thus ignoring the structural vulnerabilities they face. Secondly, when analysing capacities and vulnerabilities it becomes obvious that there are great differences in the level of power and choice of different individuals. Vulnerable groups cannot be easily captured in fixed categories, and are often the most difficult to reach both in academic research and by policy makers. And thirdly, livelihood research runs the risk of being strongly located in a fixed place and time, whereas people's use of resources and engagement in activities often crosses boundaries and changes over time (see also Kaag et al. 2004). A transnational and dynamic approach is needed to do justice to this fact.

Only a relatively small number of authors have done work on refugee livelihoods, although in recent years there has been an enormous growth of literature on the topic (see eg Jacobsen 2002; 2005; Al-Sharmani 2004; Horst 2004; Riak Akuei 2005). This increased interest in refugee livelihoods is often a response to common images of refugees as merely vulnerable and depending on aid, and these studies illustrate how refugees manage to build their own livelihoods and in many

instances can be valuable resources to local economies (see Dick 2003). Whereas originally livelihoods studies were mainly carried out in refugee camps, over the years much has been learned about livelihoods amongst internally displaced, in urban areas, upon repatriation, and in countries of resettlement. Refugees face similar as well as diverging opportunities and constraints in the different settings and this RSQ issue includes examples from all these areas, allowing for an interesting comparison. From the different articles, a number of factors come forward as determining the level of success that refugees have in developing a sustainable livelihood. These factors are related to conditions in the host country, and thus may vary in the different locations. They are also related to the relationship between conditions before and after flight, as well as expectations about the future; as I will illustrate.

STATE-OF-THE-ART: REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS

Whereas empirical work on refugee livelihoods has only started to gain importance fairly recently, a number of interesting findings have been presented. A state-of-the-art overview of existing knowledge is important for at least two reasons. In the first place, common assumptions related to refugee livelihoods are often incorrect and the hand-out approaches based on these assumptions are not satisfactory. In order to assist refugees to rebuild their livelihoods, programmes and projects should be far more knowledge-based (see also Pain and Lautze 2002). Secondly, there is a great diversity in livelihood strategies and responses to adversity amongst refugees. We cannot assume the background of different groups of refugees or individuals within these groups: we need to study and understand those backgrounds and their effect on current livelihood strategies. For example, people with a nomadic background may respond very different to encampment than those who were surviving through farming. Also, it is important to understand the exact situation refugees find themselves in at present. Every host country has its own rules, regulations and practices towards refugees, and international institutes and organisations commonly also play a vital role in providing refugees with protection and assistance. Existing laws and practices may both assist and obstruct refugees in developing sustainable livelihoods. In the following, the question will be addressed of to what extent continuity or change can be discerned in the livelihoods of people after they have been forced to flee.

Continuity in livelihood strategies

Refugees, like anybody else, have a very strong wish to gain self-sufficiency, and their attempts to reach it are often based on existing qualities and skills within the refugee community. Livelihood strategies employed by forced migrants as an adaptation to new environments not only impact but also derive from existing social structures and concepts of identity. Important strategies that often still play a great role in refugee situations, though possibly in transformed form, include the use of strong social networks; a high degree of mobility; making use of various agricultural, trading and professional skills; gaining education; and dispersing

investments. These strategies were often aimed at increasing capital and reducing risks even before flight, as many refugees come from contexts in which insecurity was a normal state of affairs. In many refugee-producing countries, people already had to deal with recurrent scarcity of resources and situations of conflict (see also Davis 1993). As such, it is not unlikely that the strategies developed to deal with these past insecurities remain valuable for the livelihoods of refugees after flight. Indeed, it is important to realise that refugees do not appear out of a historical vacuum lacking in social networks, skills and experiences (Dick 2003; Horst 2006b).

Social capital is a vital aspect of models for understanding livelihoods, and the importance of social networks for gaining access to other forms of capital is widely acknowledged. In refugee situations however, it is often assumed that these social networks can no longer be relied on. After all, due to war and conflict, trust is said to have been destroyed and refugees have lost relatives and friends because they died or were dispersed during flight. Although this is true, at the same time, consequences are not as dramatic as often assumed and forced migration does not necessarily lead to a breakdown of social networks and patterns of assistance. Amongst Somali refugees who fled from the Ethiopian Ogaden region in the late 1980s, for example, social support networks in the camps and settlements were far from breaking down (Kibreab 1993: 343). Liberians similarly continued to rely on existing social networks in order to survive in Ghanaian settlements where humanitarian aid was cut (Dick 2002). Gale (this volume) also indicates that existing social networks are vital for the livelihoods of refugees in camps; even though these social networks may move beyond the confines of the refugee camp.

Indeed, the nature of social networks often changes in the course of becoming a refugee. Social networks typically include relatives, friends, neighbours, or people with shared characteristics; and these networks have a variety of functions while changing over time. Networks change to deal with changing realities after flight, with neighbours, for example, playing a more vital role in assisting each other as a consequence of the absence of relatives. Gale (this volume) illustrates the importance of gender in creating differential access to social networks. In refugee camps, women's groups play an important role in livelihoods, as in the case of money-go-round systems (Horst 2006b: 85, 104). Increased support between women in camps likewise is related to the absence of (livelihood support by) men. In Afghanistan, existing social capital eroded but new associations and organisations emerged, when Taliban prohibitions limited the role of women in the public sphere while simultaneously leading to a covert network of schools for girls and women (Pain and Lautze 2002: 17). Different groups of people renegotiate their social position, developing new social networks in order to benefit from changing power relations after having become refugees. Schrijvers (1999) indicates how through female solidarity, many women refugees in Sri Lanka increased their space for manoeuvre, defying deep-rooted values and images of 'womanhood'. Turner (2004) illustrates how young men form new alliances in order to counter their weakened status in relation to women while strengthening their position towards elderly men.

Social networks often change during conflict and after flight, but their importance does not decrease. Before, during and after flight, social capital enables people to access resources and make choices they might otherwise not be able to make. Migration, for example, including forced migration, is mostly possible through the assistance of relatives; in terms of financial support, information and contacts. Especially in the current restrictive climate, where human smuggling often has become the sole option to enable refugees to move, such networks are vital (though not necessarily guaranteeing success). Even return to one's own country at times is only possible with the assistance of relatives, while at the same time the wish to re-establish this kinship network is one of the reasons why return is opted for; as in the case of return to Lebanon (Holm Pedersen 2003: 13). But being part of a social network does not only involve receiving support; it also involves providing it. For many refugees, developing a self-reliant livelihood incorporates the responsibility to take care of relevant others in different locations. These networks of responsibility link refugees in camps to those in urban areas and in the home country; as well as linking regional refugees with members of the wider diaspora.

Besides social networks, another common livelihood strategy that existed before flight and is often still used is mobility. This point has been made for a number of communities, including the Afghan, Somali and Fula cases.⁸ In Afghanistan, regional back-and-forth population movements have been common for decades and, as Stigter argues in this volume, will continue to do so despite high levels of refugee return.⁹ In her view, migration can be seen not only as a response to war and poverty but also as an efficient livelihood strategy for households and a key contribution to the Afghan economy. This complicates strict dichotomies between economic migrants and refugees, as Afghans move for a wide variety of reasons at any particular point in time. Amongst Somalis as well, migration has been a vital part of their livelihoods and way of life for many decades (see Kleist 2004). Flight from Somalia to neighbouring countries and subsequent (dreams of) migration to resettlement countries should be seen within this context of continuity even though the nature, purpose and destination of such travel differ through time (Horst 2006a). The story of the Fula refugee Mr. Bah as presented by Gale in this volume is remarkably similar in stressing the importance of long-term migration patterns and transnational connections to allow refugees to re-establish their livelihood activities. Again, this indicates that amongst certain communities, forced migration cannot be seen in isolation from a much wider history and culture of migration.

Further comparison with other groups would be very interesting in order to establish the level to which the continuation of existing migration strategies is widespread. This is relevant in the first place because of the fact that current policies effectively obstruct migration strategies of refugees. Furthermore, comparison would be useful because the groups amongst which similarities are found all have a pastoral or trading background and come from marginal environments. A comparison with typically agricultural communities will be enlightening in this respect. Migration is often a risk-reducing strategy as people move away from a crisis situation and develop translocal or transnational networks that enable them

to disperse investments. Whereas this is one of the main reasons why migration is such a valuable strategy after flight, one may wonder how less mobile agricultural communities respond to these new circumstances in exile. Was migration important to them in response to crises such as drought, but on a smaller scale or in a different way? Have they been forced to develop new strategies that did include greater mobility? Or are they less likely to move from camps allocated to them, even if such camps do not offer agricultural opportunities?

A third livelihood strategy that has been identified to remain important for refugee communities after flight, is investing in education and skills development. In situations where refugees live in camps for decades, they are often not able to transfer agricultural or pastoral skills on to their children. When return is seen to be the most likely option for the future this is a problem, but in many situations different futures and livelihoods will be envisioned. Refugees often see the education of their children as a principal way of ensuring a better future for their family, regardless of where that future will be (Dryden-Peterson 2004). Indeed, education may prepare children to a new, less localised, future. As such, the ability to gain an education in a refugee setting is very highly valued, and refugees are willing to invest in education despite their limited opportunities to do so. However, in order for education really to be of value in the future, wherever, several factors play a role, including the curriculum, language of instruction, certification and quality of the education provided. Choices like these are very complex in situations where refugees do not know where their children will need to build a sustainable livelihood (Dryden-Peterson, this volume). And yet, investing in education does seem a relatively safe and stable investment. As Holm Pedersen (2003: 33) illustrates in the case of those returning to Lebanon from Western countries, education was of great value. Whereas social capital from abroad was hardly transferable, cultural capital such as education was, providing access to the better-paying jobs in Lebanon.

Obstacles faced in exile

While it is vital to understand people's strategies in dealing with insecurity before flight, it is also important to realise that the circumstances they face have changed. Many assets have been lost before or during flight, and the displaced find various obstacles to creating a new livelihood once in exile. Young et al. (2005) analyse the effects of the conflict in Darfur on the livelihoods of IDPs, noting that livelihood failure and asset loss was created by systematic asset-stripping by government forces; production failures; market failures; failures of access to natural resources and constraints on remittances of migrant workers. In such a context of continued conflict and insecurity, IDPs obviously face many obstacles to gaining sustainable livelihoods and need assistance in order to merely survive (see also Hill et al., this volume). The position of IDPs is particularly problematic as they do not benefit from a treaty nor a specific institution designed for their protection, and largely depend on their government for protection and assistance (Chetail 2005: 7). Goswami (this volume) illustrates the negative consequences this may have. Yet, for those fleeing across international borders, to

neighbouring countries as well as resettlement countries, the situation is not much better, as various articles in this volume show. They do fall under the protection of the refugee regime, which has been defined by Van Hear (1998: 342) as 'the national and international body of institutions, law, policy and practice that exists to deal with refugees and with forced migration'. But the actual workings of this regime does not only guarantee entitlements and create opportunities for forced migrants, but it also creates obstacles for those trying to obtain a livelihood. Some of the main obstacles mentioned include a problematic legal status and a consequent lack of rights; restrictions in movement; and negative perceptions towards refugees amongst the local population, host governments and aid organisations.

The lack of legal status and subsequent rights is often noted as one of the main obstacles to obtaining a livelihood. As indicated earlier, Convention refugees have a number of rights that are aimed at enabling them to develop sustainable livelihoods. Yet, the majority of refugees at present is in a situation where they have a lesser, temporary or *prima facie* status, or even no legal status at all. Governments currently are very reluctant to provide forced migrants with full Convention status exactly because it gives them access to a host of rights. As a consequence, there is a complex hierarchy of different statuses with great differences in related rights and obligations. Refugees in refugee camps are generally allowed to stay in these camps, but not beyond, and have a *prima facie* status with lesser rights. Often, these camps are situated in border areas where local citizens are ethnically similar to the forced migrants; leading to a strategic use of categories. As locals and refugees have different rights and obligations towards the state and the international community, this affects their livelihood opportunities, at times also causing conflict between the two groups.

Urban refugees have often moved to town without permission to do so, making their status in town illegal and complicating their search for a livelihood, as Campbell et al. (this volume) note. Having no documentation or permit to allow their stay in town, refugees are very vulnerable for police abuse and exploitation by employers and landlords, such as in the case of forced migrants in Johannesburg (Landau 2005). The lack of documentation furthermore complicates their search for housing, jobs and education. And as Jacobsen (2005: 45) indicates, even in countries like South Africa and Egypt, which allow refugees to be in urban areas, obtaining and renewing refugee identity documents and work and travel permits are a constant burden, which requires long hours and expense. In Cairo, for example, obtaining legal status is extremely difficult, whereas those without legal status have very limited access to various rights and are thus forced to live on the extreme margins of Egyptian society (Grabska 2005). Yet, this should not lead to the conclusion that those with legal status are necessarily well-off. Even though refugees living legally in urban areas have rights to employment, identity documents, and freedom of movement, numerous examples exist of the deportation, detention, and exclusion from employment of urban refugees with legal status (Bailey 2004). Furthermore, they face alarming levels of poverty. Legal status is not enough as it does not necessarily provide access to the rights guaranteed in

international treaties or to socio-economic opportunities, and does not protect refugees from discrimination, xenophobia and general human rights abuses.

In resettlement countries, as Jacobsen (2005: 58) points out, the first obstacle to finding work is legal status. Those recognized as Convention refugees are permitted to work, but those with lesser status or no status at all (yet) are in much worse position. Policies differ between countries, but in most cases those with temporary or no status are not allowed to work and have access to only very limited services. Essed and Wesenbeek (2004) for example illustrate the consequences of illegality on access to health care in The Netherlands, showing just how grave these are and how severely they limit the choices of forced migrants without any kind of legal status. In this volume, McMaster convincingly shows how western countries' policies towards refugees have become increasingly restrictive, leading not only to increased numbers of 'illegals' but also to the creation of various temporary protection forms. The temporary protection visa introduced in Australia entitle the holder to reduced rights and lead to uncertainty, negatively affecting livelihood opportunities. However, again, this may not necessarily lead to the conclusion that a more secure legal status in resettlement countries does guarantee the necessary pre-conditions for obtaining a sustainable livelihood. Cunliffe and Bahiray (this volume) show that both asylum seekers and refugees with status have very limited employment prospects in the South West UK; so other factors form major obstacles as well.

One of the 1951 Convention rights that is related directly to people's ability to gain a livelihood independently is the right to freedom of movement (art. 26). And yet, the ability to move and settle freely within the host country or beyond is in most cases severely limited (see eg Jacobsen 2005: 31-33). Mobility restrictions already start during conflict and situations of increased insecurity, affecting both stayees and internally displaced. In Darfur, for example, IDPs were finding it extremely difficult to move as a consequence of insecurity, looting, disputes over trade routes and access to pasture (Young et al. 2005). For those who do manage to cross international borders in the hope of finding a safer place, encampment is the most common policy response by the international community. Refugees in many parts of the world are assisted only in refugee camps, and they are expected to stay in those camps. At the same time, these camps are commonly located in remote, politically and ecologically marginal areas. This has negative consequences for the welfare of refugees because refugees usually rely heavily on natural resources to meet their basic livelihood needs (Wilson 1992: 229-230). In a study in Mozambique, for example, it was found that refugees made extensive use of natural resources for their livelihoods, including farmland and supplementary 'wild' foods, but especially woody biomass for housing and fuel wood (Barnett 2003). In and around the camps however, it is often difficult and dangerous for refugees to find adequate building materials, firewood, gathered food or productive agricultural land.

Other problematic aspects of the location of camps include the absence of a proper infrastructure, the distance to towns and markets, the poor quality of land and the location in insecure border zones (Jacobsen 2005: 31); although the

degree to which these problems occur differs per location. The Dadaab camps in Kenya's Northeastern Province are a clear example of refugee camps facing all these limitations (Horst 2006b: 21-23). When refugees find themselves in such a place, where they can only imagine a temporary life but not a permanent solution to their problem, this is likely to affect their willingness and ability to rebuild livelihoods, as regional investments may be lost when moving to a new location. This has not only been observed in refugee camps, but even in urban contexts such as in Cairo, where Grabska (2005) argues refugees fail to integrate in the host society as many see Egypt as a transit point on the way to a western country.

A further obstacle that refugees face in attaining sustainable livelihoods is related to how they are perceived by host society, government and refugee regime. The fact that local communities have negative perceptions of refugees has been found in widely varying contexts. Case studies in Sudan and Colombia indicate the negative perceptions IDPs face in their host community, and show how the effects of such perceptions can be addressed by enabling IDPs to participate in projects that serve that community (Hill et al., this volume). Congolese refugees in Nairobi face negative stereotypes as well, frustrating their attempts to make a living providing services to locals (see Campbell et al., this volume). Refugees are blamed of all ills in society, becoming scapegoats to benefit the government or certain groups in society. As Jacobsen (2005: 17) states, locals believe that the presence of refugees is linked to a rise in criminal activity, delinquency, prostitution and drug abuse; even though these problems were already existing in countries experiencing rising poverty, unemployment and other structural economic problems not caused by refugees. In fact, as in the case of Johannesburg, refugees are far more often victim rather than perpetrators of crime. And yet, xenophobic attitudes and harassment not only potentially create situations of violence but also hurt refugees' income and stability as a result of petty harassment, extortion and discrimination in hiring, housing and access to services like health and education (Jacobsen 2005: 46). Cunliffe and Bahiraey (this volume) likewise stress that the negative images of asylum seekers and refugees in media and amongst politicians in the UK affects their chances of creating sustainable livelihoods; eg in finding employment.

Besides being blamed for negative aspects of society and facing abuse by locals and police, refugees are typically seen as vulnerable victims at best and costly burdens at worst. As Dick (2003: 19) indicates, host countries and the UNHCR typically conceptualise refugees to be expensive, and instead of capitalising on their human resource potential they are continuously seen as a burden to the local economy and society as a whole. While representatives of European governments blame African host countries of not utilising the skills of refugees, indicating that integration would be the best durable solution in the region, these same European governments close their borders to forced migrants and complicate their participation in society by allowing only temporary entrance. Indeed, the image of refugees as burdens is worldwide. And yet, research strongly indicates that refugees contribute much to local economies; whether in the region or in resettle-

ment countries. For example, in Cairo, refugees pay high rents and are consumers on the Egyptian markets while the remittances they receive constitute significant cash inflows (Grabska 2005). In Nairobi, contrary to official state pronouncements and local popular opinion, urban refugees are not an economic burden but rather have proved themselves to be successful entrepreneurs (Campbell 2005). In other contexts the argument has been made as well that governments should harness the economic power of refugees rather than looking at their costs only.¹⁰

Transformations of livelihood strategies

The question remains of to what extent refugees are transforming known livelihood strategies in order to deal with these obstructing conditions after flight. In Bosnia, research indicated that displaced households responded to major changes by using both short term coping strategies (such as changes in consumption, household composition and location) as well as long term adaptations, including extensive shifts in the nature of livelihood strategies (Stites et al. 2005). In general, refugees take initiatives to improve their livelihoods that are flexible and spread risks; even if these initiatives are not considered correct or even legal by host country authorities and representatives of the international refugee regime. Refugees are often looking for long-term, sustainable solutions rather than the short-term technical ones offered by international aid. They do this by moving into regional towns, trying to integrate in local economies and in fact contributing to them. Refugees also engage much in trading activities and providing services: activities that can be carried on in other areas. And they look for sustainable solutions by engaging in transnational activities. Despite their inventiveness and strength in finding ways to survive however, it is important to note that still, many of them live very marginal lives.

One common strategy refugees engage in is not to stay in the camps they were assigned to, but to move to town. A substantial number of refugees are urbanites with entrepreneurial skills and technical qualifications. They had lived most of their life in an urban environment, and felt they would be unable to cope with the conditions of life in a refugee settlement (Macchiavello 2003: 6). Others move to town because of the better services, living conditions and livelihood opportunities there. As Lammers (forthcoming) stresses, they are part of the large-scale migration movements from rural areas to cities so common in Africa for the last few decades, but also elsewhere. Refugees move because food rations in camps are insufficient to cater for themselves or their families, they move to town in search of gainful employment. They come to town because of what they see as intolerable conditions in the camps, and because of the very limited possibilities for improving their quality of living (Sommers 2001; Lammers forthcoming). And they come to town because they have the opportunity to do so; for example when receiving remittances from abroad (Horst 2006b). At the same time, even though they manage in town, a number of authors have stressed that urban refugees lead very marginal lives in the different global cities of the world (see eg Grabska 2005).

Since various livelihood rights are hardly ever put in practice, refugees are unlikely to engage in wage labour and the majority of them earns a living in the informal sector through petty trade and the provision of services. Refugees engage in the buying and selling of (relief) goods in small quantities; providing a wide variety of services for refugees and locals; and engaging in 'incentive work' for UNHCR or NGOs in the camps (Jacobsen 2005). In the region, refugees are often self-employed, finding niches in the informal economy; at times being very inventive at that. Dick (2002) describes how Liberians in Ghanaian camps got involved in three areas where needs were not met: telephone communication; provision of water and construction of housing. Campbell (this issue) indicates how in Nairobi, Congolese refugees provide much wanted services including the performance of Congolese music; tailoring and hair styling. Also, illegal activities are resorted to, such as engaging in black market deals involving stolen goods, foreign currency and weapons. Indeed, according to Jacobsen (2005), many people are so desperate that they will resort to illegitimate and dangerous livelihood strategies, including scams, crime and prostitution.

Survival in the region and post-conflict reconstruction often is dependent on the assistance of resettled relatives. In this respect, a new 'durable solution' could be envisioned where refugees in different parts of the world build transnational networks that strengthen their livelihood opportunities in a specific location (see also Van Hear 2002). Such networks are beneficial for those in various locations as flows of people, goods, money and ideas are moving in various directions, connecting those in different parts of the world. As Lubkemann (2000) argues, trans-nationality, in which life strategies are based on developing deep social ties and economic activity in multiple locations, is one of the most effective of the range of risk-diversification strategies available to displaced populations. Acknowledging this fact has great policy implications, because it first of all would require a shift in thinking away from assumptions of settlement in one primary place of residence (either through integration or return). Secondly, it means that obstacles to gain a sustainable livelihood in one place may also have a negative effect on livelihoods elsewhere. Legal restrictions and stereotypes faced by resettled refugees, for example, do not only restrict their local livelihoods, but also have an effect on the ability of these migrants to engage in transnational livelihoods and assist their relatives in the region.

The transnational livelihood activities of refugees include socio-cultural, political and economic exchanges, but the main focus currently in both academia and policy is on remittances. In the debate on the migration-development nexus (see Van Hear and Sorensen 2003), it is indicated how remittances constitute a vital contribution to the livelihoods of migrants in general, and refugees in particular. The amount in many cases exceeds the total amount of international aid and on a societal and personal level can have other great advantages. In Afghanistan, for example, exchanges allow for the reproduction of social ties despite insecurity and dispersion, thus securing the livelihoods of many (Monsutti 2004). In Somaliland, remittances are not only spent on family consumption, constructing houses and establishment of businesses, but they are also being increasingly used to fund new organisations and development projects. Somali

organisations established abroad invest in health and educational facilities including hospitals, schools and universities (Hansen 2004). With virtually no existing public services, both individual remittances and collective donations by diaspora organisations are crucial for the survival and future of people not only in Somaliland but in many similar (post-)conflict zones. At the same time, there is also a downside to transnationalism, as various authors have indicated. First of all, it may not work equally well for all segments of society and may even create new forms of vulnerability (Lubkemann 2000). Remittances are often not distributed evenly, and may help perpetuate conflict when they provide support to warring parties (see Van Hear 2003; Koser 2001). And the obligations to provide remittances may be very demanding and even obstruct the livelihoods of the senders (Riak Akuei 2005; Jacobsen 2005: 61-64).

In general, when looking at the different livelihood strategies refugees use to deal with the consequences of forced migration, what is most clear is that refugees are capable actors. Flight and refugee life, apart from causing losses and traumas, can also have some gains (Essed et al. 2004: 3). For refugees, it is important to be able not to rely on handouts to maintain or regain a sense of dignity, as is indicated in the articles by Jacobsen et al., Hill et al, Campbell and McMaster. Refugees are not only able to build new livelihoods; they are also able to contribute something to their host societies. When analysing options to assist refugees in this process, people's agency, or level of choice and power, should be a vital aspect. At the same time, it is necessary to ask at what costs and under what circumstances refugees manage; as well as who manages and who does not. As many of the articles in this volume show, it is vital to realise that we cannot talk about 'the refugee', as refugees are not a homogeneous group. While acknowledging the agency of refugees is important to deal with negative stereotypes and their consequences, at the same time we also need to recognize the specific vulnerabilities of refugees. Between and within specific refugee groups, great heterogeneity exists. Different characteristics, such as a refugee's social network, personal assets, level of mobility, education and language skills, may have an effect on her or his level of power and choice in creating a livelihood.

IN CONCLUSION

New ways of providing assistance that guarantee refugees sustainable livelihoods are sought. As this article has argued, such new approaches need to be based on thorough knowledge about the opportunities and constraints faced in gaining such livelihoods.¹¹ Some of the main obstacles various groups of displaced face are related to a lack of legal status and rights; restrictions to their mobility while being forced to remain in marginal areas; and negative perceptions by locals, governments and the international community. As various articles in this volume show, such obstacles can and should be addressed in order to improve livelihood opportunities. There is a direct link between issues of protection and refugee livelihoods, and the international community may need to take a far more rights-based approach when dealing with the existing problems. Working towards improving

refugees' legal status and livelihood rights however is far more difficult than the current 'care and maintenance' approach common in protracted situations, as this requires a political will that seems largely absent.

As such, it may be important to start by addressing the common negative perceptions about refugees. Refugees can make positive contributions to the local economy and are able to survive despite the obstacles they face, as is illustrated throughout this special issue. Programmes that create awareness about the potential of forced migrants can help to tackle negative views, as for example is shown in the article by Hill et al. (this volume). CHF enabled the internally displaced in Colombia to contribute positively to community projects in their host communities, including construction work and maintenance of public resources, thus improving relations between locals and displaced people. This is an excellent example of 'good practice' that may work in many other contexts as well. Whereas the programme aimed to reduce constraints faced by the displaced, at the same time it tried to build on their own skills and capacities.

This introduction has illustrated how refugees are able to build on existing livelihood strategies after flight, while at times also being forced to transform these strategies and develop new ones because of the changed environment or a loss of resources. In order to avoid the need to resort to illicit or damaging strategies, programmes can be developed to assist the displaced in regaining a sustainable livelihood. Such programmes may involve vocational training, and microcredit also offers great potential. The Alchemy project described in this volume (Jacobsen et al.), for example, provides micro-credit and banking services to internally displaced because one of the main problems they faced was related to insufficient access to financial resources. The article indicates how such a programme can be materialised to contribute to improved livelihood opportunities in other contexts as well. Indeed, most of the articles that follow provide further recommendations of great use to policy makers, practitioners as well as academics. What becomes clear is that, when refugees are only offered a temporary solution in a certain area, awaiting return to their home country, a move to a third country, or legal certainty, livelihood choices will be geared towards that, uncertain, future. But as Dryden-Peterson (this volume) convincingly points out, it is vital to reconcile current and future livelihood strategies when providing services to refugees. When a durable solution has not yet been found, the challenge is to provide livelihood support that is useful for both displaced and host communities now and in the future; wherever that future may be.

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Notes

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- ² Articles 17 and 18 of the Convention allow refugees to engage in wage-earning employment and agriculture, industry, handicrafts and commerce. Additional livelihood rights are related to freedom of movement, settlement, property rights, transfer of assets, and citizenship; as included in articles 13, 19, 26, 28-30 and 34 (UNHCR 1996).
- ³ Take note that the actual number of refugees worldwide is estimated to be much higher; in the range of 20 million refugees and 25 million IDPs. Not all refugees are registered by UNHCR and especially numbers of self-settled are underestimated as they often do not register with the authorities and do not receive any type of assistance.
- ⁴ See <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/research?id=3f7152407>.
- ⁵ A good overview and critical analysis of these developments is provided by Amnesty International (2003).
- ⁶ See for example UNHCR's Strengthening Protection Capacity Project in Kenya (Dube and Koenig 2005).
- ⁷ See for example DFID's Guidance Sheets at http://www.livelihoods.org/info/info_guidancesheets.html.
- ⁸ See also the discussions at the workshop "The dynamics of migrant diasporas: comparing the Afghan and Somali experience" (<http://www.gcim.org/news/?id=2006/01/05/01>).
- ⁹ See also Stigter and Monsutti (2005).
- ¹⁰ See eg Macciavello 2003; Essed et al. 2004b; Jacobsen 2005; Horst 2006b and various articles in this volume.
- ¹¹ The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) provides a good example of how this can be done, and such research units could be set up in various refugee producing and -hosting areas to support policy and practice.