



CHAPTER 8

LIVELIHOODS AND FORCED MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

MILLIONS of forcibly displaced people living in and outside camps seek to support themselves and their families often with minimal humanitarian assistance, and in the face of active resistance by governments and citizens of host countries. Yet it is important that displaced people be supported in their livelihood efforts so that they can provide for their families when humanitarian assistance is insufficient. Pursuing a livelihood can also help people recover aspects of their lives that have been disrupted by displacement, including psychosocial damage. Recognizing this, UNHCR and their implementing partners have sought to implement various forms of livelihood programming since the late 1990s.

This chapter contributes to a theory of ‘displaced livelihoods’. I argue that such a theory is warranted because the pursuit of livelihoods by forced migrants is different from those of other migrants or those who are equally poor or discriminated against. There are three key differences, which create particular livelihood difficulties. First, all forced migrants begin from a position of loss, including the loss of assets, family and community, and often emotional and physical health. A second distinctive issue concerns the socio-political, legal, and policy factors in the host country. Forced migrants must try to re-establish their livelihoods in a policy context that is often weighted against them. One of the most obvious differences compared with other migrants is that refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are often required to live in camps. A third distinction is that refugees and IDPs, unlike other migrants, are often the recipients of humanitarian assistance, and increasingly, livelihoods programmes. While humanitarian assistance can support livelihoods, unexpected or indirect negative effects can arise, and sometimes such support can backfire.



As I will argue, these differences create specific disadvantages for forced migrants, and must be addressed if displaced livelihoods are to be supported. While the three issues are relevant for all forced migrants, I focus on refugees rather than IDPs, the most important difference being that IDPs are citizens rather than ‘foreigners’ and thus are not constrained by laws and policy pertaining to non-citizens. In any particular refugee setting, significant individual and group variation, even within the same host country, characterize each of these three distinctions. Not all refugees arrive at their places of asylum impoverished, and some nationalities do better than others. For example, in Cairo, many Iraqi refugees arrived with more assets, including education and financial assets, and are much less impoverished than other groups such as Ethiopians or Sudanese. A theory of displaced livelihoods must address these diverse outcomes.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the evolving theory of livelihoods and poverty, and social exclusion theory. I then explore the three distinctions in more detail and conclude with some proposals regarding future advocacy, programming, and research.

LIVELIHOODS THEORY AND FORCED MIGRATION

Most definitions of livelihoods stem from Chambers and Conway’s 1992 definition: *the means of gaining a living*, including livelihood capabilities, tangible assets, such as stores and resources, and intangible assets, such as claims and access (cited in de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 27). The study of livelihoods of forced migrants straddles the poverty alleviation literature and the literature on undocumented migration, since many refugees live without formal status in host countries. During the 1990s, ‘sustainable livelihoods’ became an important theme in development policy, with sustainability defined in terms of ‘long-term flexibility and . . . ecological soundness’ (de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 31). The sustainable livelihoods framework thus emerged, modelled as a system comprising the different capabilities, assets, and activities required to pursue a living. Livelihoods assets are more than simply material ones—such as land, livestock, or money—they include human capital such as health, education, skills and experience, and social capital. The latter is of particular importance to forced migrants, who draw on the social capital that comes from co-national networks already in place in their destinations. Such networks provide assistance when migrants first arrive and help them find housing and employment (Calhoun 2010).

However, households and individuals must be able to *access* their livelihoods assets. Refugees are often unable to utilize their human capital, such as skills and experience acquired in their home countries, because they are denied permission to work, lack the appropriate credentials, or are faced with discrimination at the workplace. A useful

approach to understanding this denial of access is social exclusion theory, which portrays poverty as ‘a failure caused by bottlenecks in access to capitals’ (de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 33; Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997). The mechanisms of exclusion include monopolizing access to resources through property relations (laws, policies, and regulations) or by using ‘certain social or physical characteristics such as race, gender, language, ethnicity, origin or religion to legitimize this fencing-in of opportunities... This “social closure,” a form of collective social action, results in exclusion and poverty and gives rise to social categories of eligibles and ineligibles’ (de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 34). These power relations in the host context are crucial in understanding the livelihoods experience of forced migrants.

As scholarship on livelihoods has evolved, the importance of livelihood assets has come to be recognized beyond simply meeting basic needs. Rather, they are seen to give meaning to a person’s world:

Assets should not be understood only as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents’ power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources. (Bebbington (1999), cited in de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 32)

If assets give people power to act, the loss of assets becomes doubly consequential. For refugees, losses incurred during the journey combined with lack of access to assets in the host country means they are deeply disempowered, constrained in their ability to act and to challenge rules and power structures. The strategies which refugees utilize to overcome such disempowerment are therefore of great interest, as they point the way to empowering other marginalized groups.

Lack of Data

Theory and related empirical work on refugee livelihoods is characterized by a notable lack of quantitative data from nationally representative probability samples that have refugees as the target population. Surveys of immigrants in the US and Spain have enabled cross-country comparisons (Connor and Massey 2010), but few studies have sought to focus on refugees in such data sets. Population-based studies focusing on the livelihoods of forced migrants in developing countries are almost completely absent, and there is a notable shortage of economic analysis of displaced livelihoods. There are a number of reasons for this paucity of data. In areas of conflict and displacement, reliable secondary data such as census data or household surveys are often unavailable because data collection is dangerous or logistically difficult. This lack of data means it has been difficult to quantify the impact of displacement on livelihoods (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2009). Independent researchers not affiliated with aid agencies also find it difficult to work in such areas, their travel impaired by insecurity and high expense. Much of the research on livelihoods thus takes the form of qualitative studies, often by anthropologists, and evaluations or assessments by aid

agencies. While these are valuable, there is a significant lack of comparative analysis or population-based studies.

Nonetheless, in recent years, a number of surveys and profiling studies have begun to fill the livelihoods data gap, including studies of Iraqi refugees in Syria (Doocy et al. 2012), of IDPs in Sri Lanka (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2009), and of refugees and other international migrants in four African cities (Landau and Duponchel 2011). The author has also conducted a series of profiling surveys comparing forced migrants and their neighbours in a variety of urban settings (FIC 2012a). Many of these studies have sought to demonstrate how refugees differ from other populations, and our knowledge and understanding of refugee livelihoods and the contextual problems they face has increased. However, the extent of such data is still relatively small and unsynthesized, compared to other areas of refugee research, and there is much room for additional studies if we are to understand how best to address the livelihood problems of forced migrants.

HOW DISPLACED LIVELIHOODS ARE DIFFERENT

As suggested earlier, three distinguishing sets of factors influence the ability of refugees to regain their livelihoods.

Loss, Trauma, and Impoverishment

With displacement, whether elsewhere in the country or across borders, comes the loss of economic and non-economic assets. Compared with labour migrants who can better plan their journeys, refugees and other forcibly displaced people often have to move quickly and have to abandon assets in their home areas. A study of Colombian IDPs found that 83 per cent had their land taken from them or had to abandon it when they fled (Kirchhoff and Ibáñez 2001), and this experience is widespread globally. One of the first scholars to model displacement was Michael Cernea, whose impoverishment risk and livelihood reconstruction model identifies eight types of losses that increase the risk of impoverishment when people are displaced. These losses include the expropriation of land, the loss of wage employment, and of housing, cultural space, and common property assets. Each type of loss has an impact on economic power, but also has psychological or cultural impact, leading to reduced social status and ‘a psychological downward slide of . . . confidence in society and self . . .’ (Cernea 1997: 1572–3).

Another loss—in the form of a serious financial burden incurred by migrants and refugees—is debt arising from travel costs during the journey, including loans for smuggler fees. Migration-related debt is compounded when households borrow to smooth

consumption needs, particularly upon arrival and before employment is secured. The following quote from a Colombian refugee in Ecuador is typical of many refugees' experience around the world:

Before arriving here, we had a 'finca' (ranch) and we planted vegetables and fruit. We had a chicken farm too. We ate well and lived well. It was our land. Then the armed groups began telling us we were with them and not the other. They declared us 'objetivos militares' and we had to escape. But they controlled us and we had a curfew. They would only let us out from 9am–6pm. If we didn't follow their directions, they would kill us. Finally, we escaped by pretending my wife was sick. We left everything behind like engines and more than 700 chickens. When we left, we only had a motorbike, which we sold for very little to buy shoes and to escape to Ecuador. (FIC 2012b)

Many forced migrants also experience intense personal loss—both of family members and of their mental, physical, and emotional health—as a result of the homeland experience that forced them to flee and their harrowing journeys. The experience of violence, trauma, loss of family members, and community all take a toll on people's ability to restart their lives (Cernea 1997). Yet there is almost no research on how this psychosocial loss affects people's livelihoods. Existing psychosocial research focuses on what can be done to help people recover from trauma (Nickerson et al. 2011; Hardgrove 2009), but much less has explored how psychosocial issues affect the ability of forced migrants to restart or pursue livelihoods—or how livelihoods could help people recover. This is clearly a gap in the literature.

All these losses put forced migrants at an economic disadvantage upon arrival. Over time, unless they can recover their livelihoods, they are at risk of further impoverishment. However, recuperating asset losses after displacement can be extremely difficult, because of the social exclusion at work in the host country context.

Obstacles and Enablers in the Host Context

Livelihoods recovery for forced migrants is often less about accessing assets lost in the place of origin—because these are too difficult to regain¹—and more about finding ways to access livelihood assets in the destination area. These can be assets refugees already possess, such as the education and skills they bring from their home country, or new assets available in the destination country. However, access to assets is often blocked by social and political exclusion processes that arise within both the host population and the various refugee communities, and at the level of the state and institutions. This section explores these processes by focusing on two components of livelihoods: access to employment and access to services, especially financial ones. For each, we explore how refugees have attempted to circumvent the exclusion mechanisms in order to pursue livelihoods.

STATE REFUGEE POLICY AND REGULATIONS

At the state level, exclusion mechanisms constraining livelihoods take the form of restrictive laws and policies, and the bureaucracies and authorities that implement these policies. International refugee conventions, such as the 1951 Convention, include several Articles pertaining to livelihoods. These include the rights not to be deported (*non-refoulement*), to freedom of movement, and to work and own businesses. Some of these rights pertain only to those who are legally defined as refugees; others, such as *non-refoulement*, pertain to all asylum seekers (Bailey 2004). However, it is host country policies, rather than international refugee law, that determine the extent to which refugees are able to exercise these rights. Most host governments, particularly those of neighbouring sending countries, view refugees as ‘guests’ and establish a policy environment that prevents or inhibits permanent settlement. One way to do this is to obstruct refugees’ livelihoods and integration by limiting freedom of movement and their ability to work or own businesses or property. Policy mechanisms include encampment policy, while bureaucratic obstructions prevent access to business licences or work permits.

Encampment

Countries with large populations of refugees often require refugees to live in camps, where their basic needs are provided by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. In 2010, of the 71 host countries with more than 5,000 refugees, 19 had encampment policies, all of them in Africa or Asia (UNHCR 2011a). Livelihood activities outside camps are strongly discouraged, and governments try to restrict refugees to camp areas by limiting permission to work or travel beyond the immediate area. However, particularly in protracted situations, humanitarian agencies are not able to meet all basic needs in camps, including food requirements (either in terms of dietary diversity or quantity), and necessities such as firewood for cooking. To meet these and other needs, families seek livelihood opportunities in and outside camps. Some family members remain in the camps where they can access food aid and other humanitarian assistance, and others move to urban areas to find work. In many host countries, large numbers of refugees live outside camps, often in informal settlements that lack facilities and livelihood prospects.

Refugees who seek work outside camps face significant travel and other transaction costs, often in the form of bribes. Authorities tolerate violations of restrictive policies by ‘turning a blind eye’, but such ‘tolerance’ can take the form of extortion by state officials. Reports of such extortion are widespread. An illustrative example is the case of Bangladesh, where Rohingya refugees from Burma have lived in Cox’s Bazar district since 1978, some in camps but most outside the camps in informal settlements (UNHCR 2011b). The Rohingyas have been the primary workers at the port for fifty years. In 2011,

the local MP decreed that Rohingyas were not to be hired at the docks since they did not have national ID cards. This rule was slackened immediately when the authorities found themselves facing a shortage of labour on the docks. However the Rohingyas do not receive fair wages, and are extorted by a variety of actors, including the local political leaders who dominate the port. In addition, Rohingyas who collect firewood in the jungles around the camps must bribe forestry officials to gain entry to the forests (WFP 2012).

The Bangladesh case is typical of host countries where governments refuse to allow refugees to become self-reliant, while nevertheless allowing state and civil society actors to exploit them economically. Economic desperation drives refugees in and outside camps to pursue highly risky livelihoods strategies (called ‘negative coping mechanisms’ in the literature) including entering the sex trade and being recruited by gangs and militias.

Legal Status and Documentation

While host country regulations differ, having formal legal status generally allows refugees to reside in the country outside camps, to work, and to access a range of services. In most developing countries, however, relatively few refugees have formal status; they are more likely to be asylum seekers or (especially those in camps) to have *prima facie* status, and lack the right to pursue livelihoods. In such contexts, documents proving legal status can be an important source of protection; even documents granting only *prima facie* status can reduce police abuses such as arbitrary arrest or extortion by having a paper to present when stopped. However, as Landau argues, documentation does not always prevent abuses. In South Africa, official documentation does not prevent corrupt police forces or civil servants from ill-treating refugees. Official documents are poorly designed—often handwritten and illegible, or flimsy and easily destroyed—and they do not look legitimate. Documentation must be recognizable by authorities, and authorities trained to act according to the rights conferred, in order to provide effective protection (Landau 2006).

The extent to which legal status enables livelihoods is not clear. Many refugees work in the informal sector, where law enforcement is lax and refugees can circumvent the need for paperwork (Böhme and Thiele 2012; Prost 2006). Although this could mean that legal status and supporting documentation is less important, lack of documentation nonetheless makes refugees vulnerable. For instance, employers can exploit undocumented refugees and migrants who are less likely to report abuses due to fear of arrest or deportation.

Legal status can thus be seen as a social exclusion mechanism, as are work permits and licences to own a business. Even if permitted to work, like all foreigners, refugees must usually obtain a work permit, and this process is often difficult and financially burdensome. Many refugees lack awareness of their rights, of what a work permit is and how to obtain it, and they often lack the financial resources required to navigate complex and expensive

bureaucratic procedures. For example, Egypt hosts some 95,000 refugees, does not require them to live in camps, and allows refugees to work (according to Article 53 of the Egyptian constitution). However, Egyptian labour legislation requires all non-nationals with valid residence to obtain a work permit. Foreigners must find an employer sponsor and pay application fees. The cost for a yearly work permit varies by nationality: Sudanese and Palestinians pay only 200 Egyptian pounds (approximately US\$40), but Somalis, Iraqis, Eritreans, and Ethiopians pay 4,530 Egyptian pounds (US\$900). Applicants must also prove that they are uniquely qualified, and that their work cannot be performed by an Egyptian. This is particularly challenging as most refugees are low skilled—like poor Egyptians. Several other regulations make it difficult for refugees (and all non-nationals) to be hired or to open a business (Jacobsen, Ayoub, and Johnson 2012).

In sum, even when refugees are permitted to work or own businesses, social exclusion processes, including bureaucratic procedures, can make obtaining work documents so complicated and burdensome that most refugees forgo them. The host authorities then turn a blind eye—both to the work and the exploitation that goes with it—because refugees provide cheap labour, or labour that nationals are unwilling to do. By contrast, host governments can choose to promote refugees' self-reliance. For example, in Ecuador, the Constitution guarantees equal rights for refugees, and the Ministry of Labour provides all refugees with a free 'work permit' that helps clarify their status to potential employers and facilitates initial entry into the market (Asylum Access 2011).

CIVIL SOCIETY

At the level of civil society, social exclusion processes are played out through anti-migrant xenophobic attitudes and behaviours towards refugees. These take the form of discrimination (exclusion from jobs, services, and social spaces) and harassment, ranging from verbal and emotional abuse to physical harassment. Open extortion takes the form of forced payment of bribes and unwarranted detention. Such actions create a culture of fear and intimidation that affects refugees' ability to pursue livelihoods. One consequence is increased livelihood transaction costs in the form of bribes (often related to the lack of documentation²), higher rents (because of discrimination by landlords), and extra 'fees' charged by employers (who use refugees as cheap labour). A culture of harassment also means refugees face greater threats from criminals, who know they are less likely to seek recourse or protection from the authorities. In times of political crisis, such as the Arab Spring or national elections, xenophobia increases, as it does when economic competition is high (Jacobsen, Ayoub, and Johnson 2012). Under such conditions, refugees habitually choose to stay inside or keep their children out of school, and do not pursue self-employment initiatives where the risk of being jailed or extorted is higher than the amount earned.

Some refugee-hosting countries, such as South Africa and Israel, have active media and civil society organizations that publicize and criticize this phenomenon of

anti-migrant violence. In other host countries, such as Bangladesh, Kenya, and Egypt, where xenophobia is equally widespread, there is much less civil society opposition.

INSTITUTIONS

The provision of financial, educational, and health services is another zone of social exclusion, in which organizations and institutions create rules of access for refugees. In some cases, legal status is required to use services, but more often access is limited by charging refugees higher fees, or requiring them to obtain special documentation. In Nairobi, harassment by the police and extortion are barriers for urban refugees in accessing services such as education, healthcare, legal aid, and livelihoods (Campbell, Crisp, and Kiragu 2011). When school fees and hospital bills exceed their monthly income, individuals must take out loans and become indebted to other community members, employers, or moneylenders.

One problem confronting refugees is lack of access to financial assets in the form of services from formal institutions such as banks and microfinance institutions (MFIs). Credit facilities are not available to refugees because banks and MFIs consider refugees to be poor credit risks. Refugees are also excluded from access to savings accounts or investment accounts, as well as most forms of insurance. To open a bank account one needs evidence of a residential address (such as a utility bill), and often a national identity card, and most refugees lack this kind of documentation. In some countries, advocacy organizations have worked with banks to expand their access. For example, in South Africa, some banks waive the required 13-digit identity number, allowing refugees and temporary residents to open accounts. However, this is uncommon, and lack of access to bank accounts means refugees have to carry their cash around with them, increasing the likelihood of being extorted by police and making refugees a target for criminals (Landau 2006).

The absence of formal credit facilities means refugees have to take out loans from other sources. A common coping strategy is to borrow from their community, but informal credit and loan practices can result in extortion and entrapment of refugees. For example, in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Rohingya refugee fishermen become victims of entrapment by loan sharks. Many refugee fishermen are unable to afford fishing equipment, and they borrow from local rich fisheries owners. Market buyers refuse to buy the refugee fishermen's fish because they know the refugee fishermen must repay their loans to the powerful fishery owner first, by selling their fish to the owner. The fishery owners are therefore free to determine the price of the fish, which they set lower than the market. This exploitation persists because refugee fishermen rely on the loans—which are also used for bail when the police arrest them (WFP 2012).

Refugee livelihoods are therefore constrained by social exclusion mechanisms at all levels: by the state, in civil society, and through institutions. Refugees seek to work around these constraints by drawing on the resources of their own communities. Humanitarian agencies also seek to support them.

Humanitarian Assistance and Livelihoods

Since the 1990s, humanitarian agencies and UNHCR have recognized the need to support the livelihoods (or 'self-reliance') of the displaced, because over half of the world's displaced people live outside camps and cannot be fully supported by humanitarian aid. Most of the large international NGOs and UNHCR now have rural and urban livelihoods programmes. In the past few years, how-to manuals and strategic plans have been written, and donors have contributed large amounts of funding both to assess how livelihoods can be supported and to fund programmes. As the Women's Refugee Commission says, 'everyone, from local community-based organizations to international nongovernmental organizations to policy makers and donors, wants to support, fund and implement more effective programs to support the self-reliance of the displaced' (WRC 2009: iii). Livelihoods programmes for refugees generally seek to support self-employment and wage employment by building human capital through vocational training, and by supporting small businesses through, *inter alia*, the provision of micro-finance and business development services, legal support, job placement, apprenticeships, and mentoring.

Several problems confront livelihoods programming, however, particularly for refugees. The most important problem is political. Host governments are generally opposed to livelihoods programs, first, because they are seen as an avenue to permanent settlement, and second because governments resist enabling refugees to compete on a more equal economic footing with citizens. Such competition often results in opposition by citizenry—an unappetizing prospect for governments. Government resistance means that advocacy for refugee livelihoods, including the right to work, must be undertaken very sensitively, recognizing that more harm than good can be accomplished if governments react adversely. In settings where the government tends to turn a blind eye to refugees working, overly enthusiastic promotion of 'the right of refugees to work' can backfire significantly. The government might cease to turn a blind eye and respond harshly, even changing its refugee policy for the worse. The author has been told (off the record) of situations where UNHCR's efforts to promote refugees' right to work have resulted in a souring of the government's attitude and threats of more vigorous enforcement of restrictive policies.

A second problem is the risk that livelihoods programming targeted at refugees can lead to resentment and hostility by the host population. Outside camps, refugees live amongst the host population, sometimes sharing their housing and land and often dependent on them for their good will. Targeting only refugees for livelihoods programming can jeopardize this good will and lead to problems long after the programme has come to an end or run out of funds. One way around this is to adopt an *inclusive* approach by designing programming that supports the livelihoods of both the host population and the refugees. There are several reasons why such targeting could improve the livelihoods context for refugees. First, the government is more likely to look favourably on such programmes since they provide benefits to their citizens. Second, bringing nationals and non-nationals together in a learning environment (such as vocational

training or business services development) can benefit refugees in terms of networking, potential partnerships, and an increased understanding of the local context. Third, inclusive programming can build social capital with the host community and potentially reduce antagonism, both because refugees are seen to be bringing resources (in the form of programmes) and because working/learning together is good for social relations.

CONCLUSION

Forced migrants arrive in asylum contexts having experienced many losses, and then confront numerous challenges as they try to pursue livelihoods. Social exclusion mechanisms, ranging from encampment policies to xenophobia and harassment on the street, limit their rights and abilities to pursue economic activities. Refugees must find ways to generate income, whether for start-up funds to finance a business or to pay the necessary bribes to obtain documentation. However, their income-generating activities often create new risks and forms of exploitation. Aid agencies search for ways to support refugee livelihoods, but achieving effective and feasible livelihood programming has proven difficult. Government authorities and many in civil society see refugees' livelihood success in terms of the competition it poses, and as a pull factor for others in the sending country. These fears are expressed in xenophobic attitudes that create significant problems for refugees. Combating the resistance of host countries to refugee livelihoods is thus a key advocacy issue for UNHCR and other refugee agencies. It may be that, rather than bringing in new and expensive livelihood programmes, aid agencies can best serve as advocates and facilitators of livelihoods—by helping refugees make connections (both among other refugees and with the host population), supporting activities that promote integration, or providing business development services, mentoring, and training. Nonetheless, aid agencies can only do so much; in the end it is the communities in which the refugees live that will be the strongest source of support.

NOTES

1. When people flee their homes and abandon their property, regaining ownership can be difficult, especially if others have claimed these assets and much time has passed. In Colombia, Ibáñez and Moya (2009) found that only one-quarter of IDP households were able to recover their original asset base.
2. The need for funds to pay bribes to obtain documents, work permits, and licences is widely reported. In South Africa, corruption plagues the process of obtaining asylum documents; applicants often have to offer fees in order to file their asylum claims, even though this process is free by South African law (Landau 2006: 317).

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