

REFUGEES, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND REFLEXIVE PRACTICES: A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN AFRICAN REFUGEE CAMPS, FROM MY JOURNAL

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This narrative provides a critical examination of the policies, programs, and practices of social services for refugees and asylum-seekers in Africa based on original field research and field experience. Ethnographic research methods based in two refugee camp sites in Malawi provided information on the host country, the role and function of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the challenges it faces. Vignettes of two case studies are provided based on the experiences of rural Mozambican refugees in Nsanje and urban refugees in Dzaleka.

Believe in people,
In their strength,
In their ability to change,
In their desire to help each other,
And in their capacity to solve problems.
(UNHCR Social Services)

In recent decades, the numbers of refugees and the seriousness of their predicament has grown significantly. With the rising frequency of civil and regional conflict in many different parts of the world, many more people have been displaced from their homes and sources of livelihood. With 43.3 million forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2009—the highest number since the mid-1990s (UNHCR, 2010)—the question of how best to alleviate their suffering and promote social justice has gained currency among all concerned. The global refugee problem requires solutions which involve the international community as a whole in both the prevention and containment of those factors which cause people to flee their homes and seek refuge in other countries. It also requires a greater commitment to assisting refugees in obtaining their human rights through service provision. Ultimately, however, the refugee problem can only be solved if the international community takes steps which will either help refugees return to their homes, or to adjust and integrate into the host society.

Struggles for political and economic power between different factions, ethnic and national groups are the single most important cause of displacement and they are, unfortunately, the most difficult to manage. The international community has generally not shown much willingness to work collectively to prevent conflicts of this kind from spiralling out of control. Despite the potential of the world's multinational institutions to act decisively to reduce conflict, concerted action has seldom been taken to contain sources of conflict and to prevent hostilities from escalating into open violence and warfare.

According to Mullaly (2002), oppression is understood as a social justice issue. Lacroix (2006) explains that it is the precariousness of immigration status that defines asylum seekers as a marginalized and oppressed group. The call is for social workers to adopt a social justice framework in understanding the social structures, processes, and practices that have caused oppression, and advocating for the rights and opportunities of oppressed groups. Social work is well placed to serve refugees and to help meet their unique social needs. Unfortunately, social workers do not have a great deal of experience working with refugees; relatively few have been engaged in this field, and the social work literature on the subject remains underdeveloped. The contribution of social workers at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) and similar organizations represents a relatively small but worthwhile effort to articulate social work with refugees as a substantive field of practice with its own goals, methods, and knowledge base.

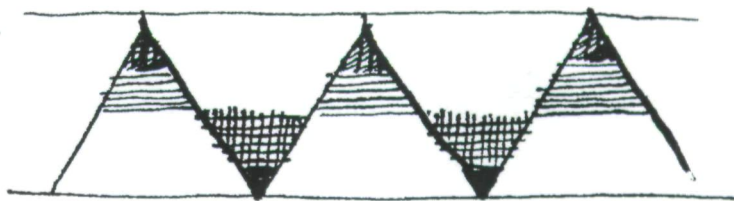
This narrative is the result of four months of ethnographic research conducted while I was a social services intern at the UNHCR Branch office in Malawi, Africa. My field experience has shown me what it means to be a refugee in human terms. The approach of this narrative transcends formal legalistic definitions of refugees by providing insight into the social dimensions of the problem. My experience in the field has shown me that it is not enough for governments to provide accommodations for refugees; their social, health, and educational needs are equally important and must be attended to. It is important to learn about the international practice context given the state of global migration in the 21st century, and the unjust practices associated with controlling migration by states.

Reflexivity is the act of becoming aware of the self as learner/researcher. My epistemological knowledge encourages the use of reflexive practices to locate the learner/researcher position. My personal experiences, thoughts, and reflections are used to communicate learning and knowledge by showing how students can explore and understand their multiple selves during their international field placements. In reflecting on my journal, I am now aware of how my journal texts become my way to re-express how I experience a pivotal learning experience as a social work researcher, practitioner, and academic. The role of reflexive practice to promote social justice is a valuable tool that can contribute to the process of educating social workers. A critical account of social work practice with refugees in Africa is an attempt to provide further assistance and information for social workers interested and involved in work with refugees.

I was surprised to learn of the limitations on international organizations in providing refugee assistance as they relate to the government of the host country. The degree of control exercised by Malawi officials

showed me how the work of the UNHCR was subject to the consent and approval of the host government. I was amazed by the sheer complexity of refugee work, the merging of social, political, economic, environmental, and legal issues, the long hours demanded by the field, the extensive international experience and varying degrees of personal commitment to the staff. Based on my experience in the camps, I found that community-based approaches cannot be presumed to be the preferred method of intervention, as they often do not recognize unique identities and personal histories. The social work profession needs to make an effective case for involvement in the protection function, encouraging a move beyond the predominant legal function of obtaining refugee status, toward supporting protection assistance: it is useless to be recognised as "a refugee" if your status does not provide you with food to eat, a safe place to live, and opportunities to grow and develop as a person.

Few governments have recognized social work's potential contribution to providing services to refugees. Despite the fact that social workers have been involved in the activities of UNHCR, the organization does not always seek the involvement of social workers. The profession needs to articulate its role more forcefully and demonstrate that it has the knowledge and skills which can make an effective contribution to solving the refugee problem.



Historical Context of Social Work Colonial Practices in Africa

Mupedziswa (Uprooted, 1993, pp.158-9) argues that even though social work in Africa is still a young profession, it has inherited a Western bias due to colonialism and the adoption of theories from British and American practitioners during the 19th and 20th centuries,

reflecting Western academic analysis and culture. By the mid-twentieth century it was widely believed that social work had a universally relevant methodology and an international identity, ready to be exported through the world. Patricia Kelley (1994) shows that in most developing countries students of social work were educated abroad and obtained Western or Western-oriented degrees. As they returned to their countries of origin with higher status than their locally educated colleagues, it was assumed that the knowledge and expertise they had acquired abroad could be transferred and applied to local needs (Kelley, 1994, p.56).

Some have argued that in the Global South the "foreign" nature and character of social work is responsible for its ineffectiveness there, resulting in repeated calls by its critics for politically, economically, culturally appropriate, and relevant methods for solving social problems. However, not only does this apply to social work: some authors have shown that the inappropriateness of imported ideologies has proved detrimental in other areas as well. For instance, Apt & Grieco (1994) have shown that in Africa, the concept of development in general has been greatly influenced by the colonial experience and Western modernization theory which posited that economic development and growth, mainly through industrialization, would automatically raise the living standards and meet the social needs of the population. Further, social welfare was viewed as non-productive activity and therefore accorded a low priority in national development planning and resource allocation. Therefore, in such a context, the scope of social policy is limited and cannot deal with the critical problems of mass poverty and deprivation afflicting the majority of African peoples, especially in rural areas (Apt & Grieco, 1994, p.111).

Social work is a profession concerned with the promotion of social justice, human rights, equality, and the alleviation of human suffering; the well-being of people and the systems within which they are functioning; and with strengthening the coping capacities of people to changing environmental situations. As professionals, social workers are regarded

as change agents who initiate action to bring about planned change that promotes optimum growth and potential of people and contributes to personal as well as national development. Taolo Boipuso (1994) has traced the concept of social justice and the safeguarding of human rights in social work literature. Additionally, Allan Halladay (1985) presents the suitability of front-line social workers to act on justice and human rights, given their ability to translate private troubles into public issues (p.48). Gil (1993) further demonstrates the importance for social work of understanding oppression and injustice, since the conditions which cause people to seek help from social services are usually direct or indirect consequences of oppressive and unjust social, economic and political institutions. Because the profession of social work is ethically committed to promoting social justice, insights into oppression, injustice and ways of overcoming them are essential aspects of the foundations of social work knowledge. Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice.

The legacy of colonial social work education in Africa is a call for change in making the profession more responsive to local needs. Innovations in the social development approach to social work education and practice in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is offering a new paradigm that is capable of addressing effectively the numerous social problems faced on the continent, including the refugee problem.

Methodology

Most researchers begin with a plan, a focus, and a research project. In international field work, the research preparation also includes visas, proposals, government approval, vaccinations, grants, literature review, and other organizational procedures (Agar, 1996). As a social services intern with UNHCR field office in Lilongwe, my multiple roles as an intern, social worker, and researcher offered a variety of personal and professional relationships. My experience in the field included working in two refugee camp sites (Nsanje and Dowa) in different regions of

Malawi, participating in planning and organizational meetings, implementing my own action research project, observing the management of other projects, and analyzing policy directives and their implementation in refugee camps. The research methods utilized during my four month internship are consistent with those used by ethnographic research. An "ethnography" is defined as any written report based on fieldwork (Werner, 1987).

World University Service of Canada (WUSC), a non-governmental organization, provided me with information on the geographic area and gave me assistance with my pre-departure preparations, as well as provided ongoing support in Malawi. The assistance of a Canadian organization in the field was crucial in realizing this international practicum given their experience in the country, their ability to coordinate personnel, their financial support, and general assistance provided to me. I was also offered the opportunity of meeting Canadian volunteers working in Malawi through WUSC, and of participating in a weekend seminar to discuss participatory rural appraisal methods used at that time in community development.

Ted Swedenburg (1995) has written about the way in which researchers choose their research interests and describes the complex mix of attachments, investments, relations, experiences, emotions, and understanding that connect them to the trouble areas in which they work. Such links usually cannot be defined as "academic," and we, as researchers and social workers, have therefore not been encouraged to speak about them. The usual assumption is that the "field" is unexplored territory for the researcher, and therefore ethnographic accounts—particularly in anthropology—are full of "first contact" fables (Swedenburg, 1995, p.29). My interest in the workings of international organizations and the field of international social welfare began during my undergraduate studies in history and political science. I often questioned the impact of institutions appeared to have on people, sometimes creating the same situations that led people to seek help in the first place. While a student at the University of Toronto, I became interested in refugee issues through a

sponsored student program organized in cooperation with WUSC, and subsequently hosted a provincial symposium with WUSC on the world refugee crisis. As I began my training as a social worker, my interests broadened to include Canadian and international refugee policy, mental health issues, and the consideration of social work practice. I sought to increase my own understanding of the circumstances surrounding refugees' flight from conflict and their experiences of life in refugee camps, as well as to consider how applicable or suitable social work might be in non-Western settings.

Throughout my four months as an intern, I kept a journal which I used as a retrospective record for my learning process. According to Agar (1996), the personal journal focuses on the reactions of the ethnographer to the field setting, the general sense of how the research is going, feelings of detachment, and involvement. These personal accounts bring the ethnographer's role more explicitly into the research process, and moreover provided a tool for retrieving memories and references in writing this narrative. It also became possible for me to reflect on my experience and include other reactions not recorded in my journal at that time. Writing in my journal allowed me to record and express my anger at certain things I witnessed in a "safe" way, as well as increased my ability to understand and reflect upon the contradictions apparent in the role of the United Nations in relation to a sovereign nation and a government responsible, in part, for the conflict in Mozambique, and later for providing assistance to the victims. El-Bushra and Mukarubuga (1995) further explain the operation of contract culture in emergency relief operations, whereby many international agencies see themselves accountable to their paymasters (mostly Western governments, and in terms of the provision of quantities of supplies), rather than to the communities they serve (p.22).

The ethnographic method used in my field work includes what Pieke (1995) describes as an evolving fieldwork experience known as dialogical fieldwork. This form of research differs from conventional fieldwork. It is not shaped by the researcher's preoccupations but

focuses on reality as it presents itself to an outsider who makes the effort to sensitize him/herself to it. In the case of my own fieldwork, there were two practical aspects to this. First, during my conversations and interviews, I did not pursue what I thought to be important, but tried to let my informants talk about what they considered to be meaningful events in their lives. While listening, I developed an understanding of how my informants gave meaning to their daily experiences, and how they shaped their own behaviour accordingly. Second, considering fieldwork as an experience which would develop rather than as a research plan to execute enabled me to make the best of sudden shifts and changes in circumstance to negotiate difficulties and to grasp opportunities presented. As I learned more about what was happening and about the people involved, my work became progressively easier. I had to struggle less and less for things to observe or people to talk to. Events occurred, and people eventually had fewer inhibitions in talking to me.

As a social worker, I chose to learn from people's lived experiences. My experience differs from traditional anthropology as described by Green (1995), as well as other UNHCR staff, who have traditionally approached conflict, war, and human aggression from a distance, ignoring the harsh realities of people's lives. Workers in conflict areas often become inured to the violence in order to survive emotionally and produce measurable outputs. Having trained themselves at first not to react, then later not to feel (or see) the lived experiences of others means that the context in which people live is ignored; including the context of the workers themselves (Green, 1995, pp. 108-109). The environment often includes what Robben and Nordstrom (1995) described as one of the most common and also complicated problems of fieldwork: how to deal with rumours. These authors show how every field worker runs across a good deal of gossip, hearsay, slander, rumour, and even character assassination while carrying out research in conflict areas. I agree with Nordstrom's (1995) position known as "the tragic fact that I can leave" (p.130). Working with victims and survivors

of war, studying, writing, and living in close proximity to conflict, calls into question some of our most enduring notions of reason. One of the most powerful aspects of studying war is not merely the deconstructive violence which attends it but the creativity of people on the front lines in reconstructing their shattered worlds (Nordstrom, 1995, p.131). Mozambique's "internal" war was developed and guided externally to undermine a democratically elected black-majority Marxist-Leninist government: the human rights violations that occurred in this country have been recognized by the international community as being among the worst in the world. My return to Canada and graduate studies in social work provided me with an uncomfortable period for reflection. However, the role of reflexive practice as a tool to promote social justice is important. Canadian refugee workers appeared to mirror Western governments' arrogant position as the providers of development assistance. I could not be persuaded to ignore the true providers and humanitarians in the international community, the refugees' hosts as donors who provided land, resources, and facilities, often at severe cost to their people and their environment. This position subsequently alienated me from several refugee assistance organizations in Canada and has further led me to question and redefine my own role as a social worker in this context. Fifteen years later, I find myself engaged in research on global migration issues.

Malawi as Host Country

Malawi is a geographically small, densely populated, land-locked country in South-eastern Africa. It is surrounded by Mozambique to the south and southeast, Zambia to the west, and Tanzania to the north. Malawi provided asylum to more than one million refugees at the height of the Mozambican influx—a ratio of 1:10 of its own population—along with countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, and South Africa. Dr. Kamuzu Banda, head of the Malawi Congress Party, achieved political independence from Britain in 1964 and then instilled a single-party system under his personal dictatorship.

Interestingly, during the time of my field work some Malawians continued to support Dr. Banda, revering him as the father of Malawi despite the widespread human rights violations during his thirty year rule, when political dissidents were silenced, tortured, and sometimes killed. On June 14, 1993, a referendum was held to decide whether or not Malawi should revert to a multi-party system after thirty years of single-party dictatorship; over two-thirds of the electorate rejected the single-party dictatorship. The results of this referendum made it possible for pressure groups to become legitimate political parties when parliamentary and presidential elections were called for on May 17, 1994. The United Democratic Front won the elections, bringing Bakili Muluzu to power as President of Malawi.

Historically, the flow of refugees into Malawi began in the 1960s when Mozambicans were fighting for their political independence from Portugal. During the Cold War, independence in Mozambique brought a socialist government to power when Mozambique was surrounded by capitalist countries such as Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). Within Mozambique a destabilization campaign was sponsored by South Africa, with the support of the United States. During this period, in order to protect its economic interests, Malawi remained an ally of the apartheid regime in South Africa; as such, it provided assistance to Renamo, the destabilizing political force in Mozambique. Interestingly, at the same time and of its own volition, the Malawi government graciously accepted Mozambican asylum seekers even before signing international refugee protection agreements. As the refugee influx increased, with thousands of refugees arriving in Malawi, the government acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, formally acknowledging its protection role and inviting international refugee assistance. Many researchers have posited explanations for the government's overwhelming generosity in providing for the refugees. A number of these hypotheses were presented to me while in Malawi.

First, it is believed that Malawians felt a deep sense of guilt for having contributed to the creation of these refugees as an ally collaborator in the destabilization campaign. Second, many believed Malawi needed to improve its international reputation from being a human rights violator under Dr. Banda's dictatorship, to a human rights supporter in the international community. Third, and perhaps most important, it is widely believed that the Malawian people viewed the incoming refugees as family, due to the close cultural ties they shared with their neighbours. The refugees spoke the same language and shared the same customs and traditions as Malawians. It was largely believed that the borders which separated the two countries were the product of their colonial past and served an artificial purpose. Fourth, the Malawian people had themselves suffered under the structural adjustment program imposed by the World Bank, which resulted in reduced spending for social programs in order to reduce the debt. Thus, foreign aid money to support social services and other essential programs for refugees was also used by Malawians, particularly food aid during the drought of 1992. In this sense, Malawi benefitted from its open door policy when building structures, motor vehicles, and computers amounting to \$37 million US dollars arrived. Moreover, government ministries and staff were provided with financial support to care for the refugees, and international agencies were invited to complement the Governments' activities and efforts. This was viewed as a highly successful initiative, using local expertise and supporting the Government's ownership of the refugee protection function.

Without a doubt, Malawi has proven to be a generous host with Mozambican refugees. However, it has proven to be less open in its accession to the international instruments governing refugee protection, since it made numerous reservations which, to a large extent, diminish the protection afforded to refugees in the country. For example, the Malawi government refuses to recognize the rights of refugees in the following areas: Article 7 relating to exemption from reciprocity; Article 13 concerning the acquisition of property by

refugees; Article 15 relating to the right of association; Article 17 concerning wage-earning employment for refugees; Article 19 concerning the practice by refugees of liberal professions; Article 22 on provision of public education to refugees; Article 24 concerning labour legislation and social security; Article 26 relating to refugees' freedom of movement; and Article 34 on naturalization and assimilation of refugees.¹ Even though all Mozambicans have left, Malawi continues to receive refugees into the country, although much more reluctantly. The situation of the new arrivals in Malawi will be discussed later in this narrative, because it is now necessary to look at the role and function of the UNHCR.

The Role and Function of UNHCR

When UNHCR was first established, material aspects and social services of refugee relief were seen to be the responsibility of the government which had granted asylum. However, as many of the world's more recent major refugee flows have occurred in less developed countries, UNHCR has acquired the additional role of coordinating material assistance and social services for refugees, returnees, and, in specific instances, displaced people. Initially, UNHCR's mandate was limited to people outside their country of origin. Over time, however, as part of its duty to ensure that voluntary repatriation schemes are sustainable, it has become involved in assisting and protecting returnees to their home countries.

The UNHCR's general mandate is to seek durable solutions for refugees at the same time that it offers international protection to refugees and coordinates assistance from the international community to assist governments and NGOs. The basic structures and legal instruments to ensure the protection of refugees was established when the Office of

the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was adopted in July 1951. The purpose of the Convention was to provide a general definition of who was to be considered a refugee and to define his or her legal status. Paragraph 1 of the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950) formally mandates the High Commissioner to provide international protection to refugees falling within his or her mandate, and to seek durable solutions to their problems. Since then, in accordance with the Statute, the UN General Assembly has extended the competence of UNHCR through a series of resolutions to cover returnees and displaced persons of concern to the Office. In addition to international law, the national law of the country of asylum governs the protection of refugees. Signatories to the 1951 Convention of the 1967 Protocol agree to cooperate with UNHCR in the exercise of its function and, in particular, its duty of supervising the application of the provisions of the Convention and Protocol (Article 35 and II, respectively). Further, national laws and policies determine what legal status an individual receives, where he or she will live, and what assistance will be provided.

The 1951 Convention is considered to be the most universal of the universal instruments relating to refugees. Within the meaning of the 1951 Convention, a person is a refugee as soon as he/she fulfills the criteria in the definition. However, a person does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognized because he/she is a refugee. Thus, recognition is a declaration of status. Persons who meet the criteria of the UN Statute qualify for protection whether or not he/she is in a country that is party to the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol or whether or not he/she has been recognized by the asylum country as a



refugee. Such refugees are called mandate refugees. In an attempt to broaden the definition the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1969 embarked on a major distinction by defining refugees to also include "those compelled to leave their country of origin on account of external aggression, occupation, and foreign domination events seriously disturbing public order." This definition takes account of the particular nature of refugee movements in Africa, where large numbers of persons have been forced to cross international borders to seek asylum in other countries due to civil strife or internal disturbances in their country of origin.

Social Services: Moving Beyond Legal Principles

Yet international protection goes beyond adherence to legal principles. Equally important, the protection of refugees requires planning and enforcing priorities which will support their safety and well-being. There exists an intrinsic relationship between protection and assistance: protection concerns can often be best addressed through assistance-related measures (UNHCR, 1991, Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, p.9). Thus, the protection function of UNHCR cannot be seen in isolation from the mechanisms established to assist refugees. From the initial decisions that are made on camp design and layout, to the longer-term programs to assist refugees in finding durable solutions, the choices made in assistance sectors have profound effects on the protection of refugees. For example, the physical circumstances in which refugees are housed affect their safety. In many refugee situations, strangers are thrown together in new settings, expected to "suspend" their very identities that brought them to the camp as refugees in the first place. Access to services and information is often limited even when it is available to women and men in the host country. Serious mental health problems are not uncommon, arising from abuse prior to or after flight; depression and post-traumatic stress disorders often follow such experiences. The most serious mental health problems of refugees may manifest themselves in severe

depressive behaviour, self-destructive behaviour, violent or disruptive behaviour, alcohol or drug abuse, and a high degree of psychosomatic illness. The right to education is universal, although millions of refugee children are without education, even at the elementary level. Opportunities for secondary and university education for refugees are limited or nonexistent in almost all locations. Many skills which refugees bring with them are not immediately or directly relevant to their experiences in refugee camps or settlements. Although many of their skills are transferable, refugees often need training to undertake new roles in support of themselves and their families.

A social services officer of Malawian origin explained to me in the field that...

...international protection forms the basis for security and rights of refugees which are necessary for any assistance to be effective. Social services fit into this broader programme of international protection and assistance and as such, are more effectively used in coordination with other efforts to protect and assist refugees. Most social services are directed towards refugees achieving durable solutions (Nyirenda, 1995).

However, this same officer wrote:

Unless the basic physical needs of refugees are adequately provided for, social needs cannot be met effectively. The psychical safety of refugees must be secured. They must have access to adequate water, food and the means to prepare it, shelter, clothing, basic household items, and preventive and curative health services (Nyirenda, 1995).

Even though UNHCR acknowledges a recent increase in the number, size and complexity of refugee situations, and

recognizes that additional social services are necessary to meet immediate and lasting solutions, in practice a marked preference exists for the protection function, toward obtaining status as "refugees" rather than in providing needed social services.

"Social services," as defined by the UNHCR Handbook for Social Services, are measures taken to improve the ability of refugees to prevent, reduce or resolve their immediate problems and to achieve adequate and lasting social, psychological and economic well-being (UNHCR, 1991). In this way, social services are distinguished from other forms of assistance by their emphasis on improving the abilities of refugees to meet their own needs and solve their own problems. From its early years UNHCR has been involved in providing refugees with such social services as counselling, basic education, assistance in obtaining employment and rehabilitation.

The UNHCR continually emphasizes that its role in providing international protection primarily involves ensuring that national governments protect refugees and asylum seekers who may be refugees. Thus, the fulfillment of UNHCR's protection mandate, it stresses, requires active cooperation by governments, whose political and material support is, of course, crucial. Issues which are identified as meriting ongoing attention in this regard include the non-accession to the basic international legal instruments of refugee protection by a number of States as well as various restrictions in the interpretation of the refugee definition itself. It is recognized that even when States are not a party to the relevant international conventions, they have generally accepted the need to provide protection to refugees fleeing armed conflict and civil strife, whether or not such persons are deemed to fall within the terms of the Convention.

Simultaneously, UNHCR recognizes that many low-income developing countries whose resources are already strained face destabilizing social and economic effects from a sudden, mass influx of refugees. Their capacity to absorb these increases in population—often in fragile and remote regions—requires reinforcement through

development support geared to both physical and institutional infrastructure. The sectors which are particularly exposed in cases of sudden and large-scale influxes include security, water, sanitation, the environment, health, and law enforcement. With few exceptions, however, implementation of refugee aid and development projects has been seriously hampered by a lack of adequate funding, and past efforts have rarely addressed the full range of emergency and short-to-medium term inputs needed in the context of mass influxes.

Parallel and equally important measures of international solidarity are needed with respect to countries of origin, which may be seeking sustainable solutions to refugee problems as well as preventing their recurrence. In addition to early warning and prevention activities, this concern in particular supports voluntary repatriation programs and broader efforts to effect lasting solutions, including conflict resolution and reconciliation. The principles of international protection have been developed and strengthened, over time, by positive state practice. Conversely, actions by States which depart from these basic principles inevitably contribute to their overall erosion. This is particularly so when States traditionally regarded as standard-bearers of refugee protection, even in difficult circumstances, became unable—for economic, social or political reasons—to maintain their commitments in the face of new needs. Such practices are liable to be noted and even emulated, easily encouraging a general trend of more restrictive responses.

At the field level, however, the attitudes of some UNHCR staff towards their world, and their perceptions of the refugees as unreliable informants, has led to a more general tendency among a few administrators to characterize the refugees as dishonest, prone to exaggeration, and untrustworthy. In the eyes of UNHCR, refugees have become persons who are always "telling stories." Refugees are not trusted as the narrators of their own predicament and needs. When there is testimony about refugees, it tends to be testimony by "refugee experts" and "relief officials," not by refugees themselves. It is

necessary to state that these forms and practices of humanitarianism do not represent the best of all possible worlds, and that it is politically and intellectually possible to try and come up with something better. Acknowledging narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory is vital for those who are refugees, in Malawi and elsewhere.

Whether consciously, unconsciously, or through blind fortune, every organization has an implicit and preferred practice model. This model may be informed and consistent with one or more of the “defined” models. It may not. Either way it’s there; reflected in what the workers are asked to do, in how they are asked to do it, and in how they are trained to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills—the competencies—they need. Similar competencies do not necessarily result in similar practice. One manipulates, labels, and controls; the other engages, explores, makes alliances, and empowers. What accounts for the difference? Ideology formed of beliefs and assumptions about “what is” and “what ought to be” profoundly shape practice and the way in which we develop practice knowledge. In addressing ideologies, we have to wrestle with our most deeply held (and unquestioned) cultural beliefs, values, and purposes, and the way they are reflected in our practice, and organizational structure and processes. Ideologies are not competencies, but they determine the competencies for which we strive. This is particularly true in UNHCR.



Social Service during the Repatriation of Mozambican Refugees

The refugee programme which served Mozambican refugees is remembered as an overwhelming success by UNHCR and the Malawi government alike. When I arrived in Malawi in May 1995, preparations were underway to close four refugee camps in

Nsanje district, Southern Malawi. Approximately 55,000 Mozambican refugees remained from the initial influx and were to be repatriated in May 1995. The delivery of social services in the context of repatriation will be examined and the conditions inside Mozambique will be explored as they presented themselves during this period, as well as the impact of the refugees’ presence in Malawi. Contradictions will be explored regarding the UNHCR’s and Malawi government’s views of the repatriation, as will be shown.

The “success” of the Mozambican programme begins with the way in which the refugees arrived in Malawi, with their family units and social structures virtually intact. Given the circumstances inside Mozambique, their arrival was expected and perceived as legitimate by Malawians, the Malawi government, and UNHCR. The adaptation and integration process of the refugees into the country was facilitated by the similarity of the geographical environment, and the refugees’ expectations beyond the border. The refugees shared the same rural landscape and living conditions, and it was often discussed that the borders which separated the two countries were artificial and the product of colonialism. Having lived for many years in close proximity to one another, the refugees expected that Malawi would be a safe country. Additionally, Mozambican refugees shared strong cultural and ethnic ties with the Malawian population among whom they have settled. Very few have an education beyond the primary level, although some of the more educated speak Portuguese and English. Both shared a Christian faith.

As mentioned above, the Malawi government adopted a generous open door policy with regard to Mozambican asylum seekers. The Refugee Act of 1989 validated Malawi’s liberal policy and made it legally operative. Though some of the provisions of the 1951 Convention are not binding on Malawi, any reservations were implemented with flexibility. For the refugees the benefits included a broad education program for Mozambican refugee children, as well as the opportunity to be employed albeit within the

refugee community. Furthermore, refugees moved freely within the country without hindrance.

Thus, these factors show that the Mozambican refugees indeed shared many ties with Malawians. Recent studies also demonstrate a co-existent relationship between the two groups. Msuka (1992) describes how the health situation in refugee camps is closely related to conditions in the local Malawi communities where they are located. A good harvest by Malawians in the past gave Mozambicans greater access to food. Crop failures, on the other hand, promoted Mozambican refugees to share rations with their hosts. Msuka (1992) further explains this relationship in the context of the drought of 1992 when severe food shortages were experienced across Southern Africa, and the harvest in Malawi was expected to be less than half the previous year's total. The districts hosting the majority of the refugees were also the most severely hit by the drought. Even in the best of times, there is a high level of malnutrition among children in Malawi: one-third of them die before reaching the age of five; and of those who do survive, 56 percent suffer from permanent nutritional defects. An estimated 1 million Malawian children were affected by the drought. Without massive food aid for Malawians and Mozambican refugees, a sharp increase in infant and child mortality rates was likely, but was prevented because of sharing.

According to UNHCR, their experience with the Mozambican caseload in Malawi has indeed been very positive and valuable. UNHCR claims that by adopting a holistic approach, maintaining lean functional structures, supporting government-line ministries, involving non-governmental organizations and the refugees themselves, the daunting task of providing international protection and assistance to such a large number of refugees was carried out efficiently and cost-effectively. Another contributing factor cited is the hospitality of the Malawian people at the grass-roots, district, and national levels, which came not only from the commitment which Malawi undertook when it acceded to the international and regional

refugee conventions, but was enhanced tremendously by the grace, generosity, and goodwill of its people. While this is true in substance, I will later point to how the impact of the refugees' presence in Malawi brought out other perceptions, emotions, and realities rarely spoken of.

With the signing of the 1992 peace accord in Mozambique, promotional activities within Malawi were used to encourage the refugees to return to Mozambique on their own; a process known as spontaneous repatriation (UNHCR, 1994, September). In 1994, the repatriation process gradually shifted towards "assisted spontaneous repatriation," when transport was provided for those refugees who wished to return home, but could not easily do so on their own. Finally, the organized repatriation resumed at the end of the rainy season in April 1995, to provide transport assistance for the remaining 55,000 refugees (UNHCR, 1994, September, p.2).

From my journal:

My practicum has now taken me to Southern Malawi, an area where a relatively large number of Mozambican refugees are awaiting transport to assist them in their return home. This repatriation operation, as everyone at the office refers to this task, is very hectic and demanding. Approximately 10 buses arrive in the refugee camp at 6:30 am. Prior to the official announcement, an information campaign was held to notify all Mozambican refugees that transport would be provided until the 9th of June. My role in the repatriation is multifaceted: to listen to the concerns of returning refugees and provide assistance when needed; to assist in the repatriation process; to supervise the loading of buses; to examine the provision of social services in reception areas in Mozambique and to locate and record the addresses of foster families returning to Mozambique with unaccompanied minors.

As this describes my internship in Nsanje, social services were provided in the context of repatriation. As much as possible, social workers had to incorporate their interventions with the repatriation programme to prepare refugees for their return to Mozambique. The tracing of unaccompanied minors was intensified, and subsequent changes in the location of foster families were documented.

From my journal:

One day, I accompanied a Malawian social worker on a few follow-up visits in Mankhokwe refugee camp. There was one particularly interesting case. It involved an unaccompanied minor, a boy about twelve years of age. His mother had died of tuberculosis and it was believed his father had already returned to Mozambique. The boy was being taken care of by a distant relative, who was willing to provide for the boy as long as he was willing to work on his fishing boat. This raised some concerns among the social workers because a young boy cannot work or be held in ransom by his family. During the interview, the uncle mentioned that he had spoken with some of the boy's closer relatives who were willing to care for him beginning in July 1995. The social worker thus planned the necessary follow-up on the Mozambican side in order to locate the father and other relatives.

During the repatriation phase, campaigns in the camps provided information on the possible conditions in Mozambique. But rumours were rampant, and many questioned the legitimacy of the information presented. UNHCR vehicles with loudspeakers would announce the availability of transport for a given period, at which time all refugees were expected to pack their belongings, board the buses and boats, and travel for the last time from Malawi to Mozambique.

From my journal:

I traveled with the refugees back to Mozambique in buses and boats along the Shire River. Sacks of maize, grass mats, bicycles, clay pots, goats, and chickens can be found on top of the buses. There are more than 100 refugees in each bus. From Mankhokwe, the journey takes about 1.5 hours in each direction. The refugees are greeted in Mozambique at the reception centre and provided with additional transport to their home provinces. It generally takes between three to five days before a refugee family actually returns to their place of origin.

The repatriation of vulnerable groups often requires special assistance (Mupedziswa, 1994). Conventional definitions of vulnerable groups include the following categories of refugees: the physically and mentally handicapped, the elderly, unaccompanied minors, single women and widows, single parent families, and unaccompanied women. Vulnerable refugees are also identified in outreach assessment by field workers in camps or settlements, and using information from the elders, community leaders, and other members of the community.

From my journal:

Some very interesting cases arose throughout the course of the repatriation. For instance, one refugee male approached the UNHCR with a special request – he wanted UNHCR to provide his family with a bus of their own! At first, staff was quite critical and actually laughed at his proposal. But then, the officers began to look into the issue and found that this man had 7 wives and 24 children, not to mention about 25 chickens and 10 goats! His family did require an entire bus to move themselves across the border.

Outreach and assessment involves walking around the area or sending word through various channels, appealing to those

who are vulnerable to show themselves so that they can be assisted.

From my journal:

While it was officially stated that pregnant women were not allowed to board buses or lorries returning to Mozambique without a medical note certifying their safety, a pregnant woman was forced to leave a bus at the border in order to give birth to her child in the bushes behind the immigration office – I later visited her at the health centre on the Malawi side of the border and found a few essential items for her.

It is important to ask: how voluntary is voluntary repatriation? The question is posed in light of past experiences which have shown that, in some instances, people have been coerced into going back to their country of origin. Many writers argue that voluntary repatriation, particularly in the context of Africa, is sometimes happening under duress. In the past, Mozambique has not escaped accusations of inducing refugees to repatriate. According to Plugge (1995), a protection officer within UNHCR, "the free choice of the refugee remains the most important element of repatriation." Part of the protection task of UNHCR is to ensure that no pressure is exercised. The question is: how spontaneous is this form of repatriation when refugees return to circumstances in which their basic needs are not met? While spontaneous repatriation occurs at the initiative of refugees themselves, usually with little or no assistance from the international community, international organizations do play a role in encouraging groups to return home. It is said that the role of UNHCR in facilitating and assisting this form of repatriation is still underdeveloped due to the unpredictability of its nature. However, with increased economic and political pressure, the organization does in fact place pressure on groups to return.

From my journal:

The reception centres in Mozambique are operated by

UNHCR – Mozambique. However, it is necessary for each Branch Office to coordinate the movement of refugees on each side of their respective border. On Wednesday, the representatives of each branch office met in Mutarara. At this point, UNHCR Malawi was capable of moving more than 4,000 refugees a day. UNHCR Mozambique was unable to respond to this increase, and asked UNHCR Malawi to stop the repatriation operation until the following week, so that they may move those refugees already in the reception centre. UNHCR Malawi refused – and suggested each side find a local solution to a local problem. This actually meant that each side should continue as they have been doing. I could understand this position because Malawi does not have the sanitation facilities in the area where the refugees are waiting for the buses. The field officer in Nsanje was afraid that if the refugees were left to stay in Malawi until the following week, severe health problems would spread in the camp, especially cholera. It was thus imperative that repatriation continue.

Felsman (1994) highlights some of the problems associated with voluntary repatriation. He identifies a policy of humane deterrence in Malawi where food rations were used to control the movement of refugees; for example, that feeding centres were closed in Malawi to deter refugees from crossing the border and returning to their asylum communities (Felsman, 1994, p.74). The question remains: how voluntary is this form of repatriation, if, for survival purposes, a person is forced to leave their asylum home and seek their basic needs elsewhere?

In a statement by UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner Gerald Walzer (1995), it is shown that areas to which refugees return typically have been devastated by the effects of long periods of conflict, economic decline, and neglected infrastructures.² When conflicts

are resolved and fighting subsides, countries must be reconstructed so that they can support their: returning refugees and displaced persons, as well as those who never left. Thus, UNHCR proposes that the success of the repatriation which has so far been achieved in Mozambique will depend ultimately on the resolve of its people and the commitment of the international community to contribute to a sustainable economic and social development.³

From my journal:

Inside Mozambique, there is very little infrastructure standing after 16 years of civil war. The roads are terrible – it can take almost an hour to travel 20 km. We saw what was left of the Bank of Mozambique in Mutarara. The roof was bombed out, the walls were cracked, and the windows were just empty square spaces. As my first war experience, I felt very perturbed by the widespread devastation and destruction. It's hard to believe so many people are returning to these appalling conditions.

For returnees to Mozambique, many challenges exist. International organizations recognize that for refugees to return and reintegrate, peace alone is not enough. Conditions are far from ideal since peace is fragile and relatively new to the country; land mines are abundant, and roads, water supply lines, and basic amenities have been all but destroyed. In addition, the country's regional administration only functions with great difficulty and risks being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of returnees, internally displaced, and demobilized soldiers. Furthermore, Mozambique still suffers from recurring drought. According to a UNHCR officer:

*People should not be brought back to conditions that may be worse than in camps. If they don't have food, schools and health centers they'll go elsewhere to find these basic needs. And where? Back to the refugee camps.*⁴

Regardless, Mozambique is an overwhelmingly rural society, and well over 90 percent of returning refugees are expected to resume their existence as small-scale farmers. The long war and severe drought of 1991 and 1992 have badly damaged the country's ability to produce all the food it needs. Although UNHCR provided some tools and seeds to the returnees, Mozambique's agriculture still remains vulnerable to climatic and natural change. UNHCR relies on the creativity and endurance of the farmers to ensure that the country can become self-sufficient in food.

Despite numerous rivers and lakes, much of the country faces acute water shortages. The war left most of the water retrieval and distribution system in a drastic state of disrepair. Successive droughts have dried up many rivers. As a result, 8.4 million people living in rural Mozambique had no adequate access to clean water. After 16 years of conflict, the scars of war are visible everywhere. Up to 2 million land mines are planted throughout the country. If normal life is to be re-established, for residents and returnees alike, demining is essential. However, for UNHCR, Mozambique is a story with a happy ending. UNHCR has stated that "the environment of confidence and security prevailing in Mozambique has provided a durable humanitarian solution to the problem of its returnees." Thus, it is clear where responsibility lies in the development of Mozambique.

For Malawi as the host country, the impact of the refugee influx is not difficult to imagine. Refugees arrived with nothing in a densely populated country where there was already a serious shortage of land. It was Malawian villagers, already suffering from the impact of drought and local economic disruption caused by security problems in border areas, who bore the brunt of the emergency. Stanley Moyo, a Divisional Chairman of the Malawi Red Cross, explained that:

The real problem is a shortage of land. There is just not enough. In some areas the refugees are able

to establish small vegetable gardens to supplement their rations, but they will never be able to achieve self-sufficiency, they will need food aid for as long as they remain in Malawi, and they will continue to place serious strain on local resources (Msuka, 1992, p.18).

Serious land and environmental degradation resulting from the presence of refugees will continue to be felt in Malawi; unfortunately, the international community has only been able to make limited contributions to offset, at least partially, the impact on the environment. The phase-out period of the Mozambican program will continue until all areas are vacated and demolished (huts were to be destroyed and pit latrines filled) to prevent refugees from resettling on a permanent basis, and to encourage Malawians to once again use that land for cultivation.

According to Chadza's (1995) work on the impact of refugee settlement on selected rural communities in Ntcheu, at one time (1992) the refugees formed almost a tenth of Malawi's entire population. As could be expected, mass refugee populations have an impact on the country's socio-economic infrastructure, and on the overall development process itself (Chadza, 1995, p.2). Chadza found that many Malawians in the Dedza district lost their land in order to make room for refugee settlements, which resulted not only in low food production but rendered them destitute (p.3). Approximately 93.3 percent of the Malawian respondents lost land which was used for farming (Chadza, 1995, p.8). The refugees were allowed to cut trees for fuel and construction of their homes, which the local inhabitants had been denied for years. These trees protected the hills to avoid erosion, conserve water, and maintain fertile soil (Chadza, 1995, p.10). Large scale deforestation was the result.

While refugee host countries pay a high price for their hospitality given increased competition for scarce resources such as land, water, housing, and food, Malawians also benefitted from the refugees' presence. Chadza (1995) reported that in some locations

it is known that refugees supplement their rations by providing cheap labour to their hosts, and are likely taken advantage of (p.4). Malawians also benefitted from income-generating projects operating for refugees by the sale of products at affordable prices (Chadza, 1995, p.14). Shallow wells and boreholes were drilled to provide additional water sources for everyone. These resources continued to be of benefit to the local inhabitants, even in the absence of the Mozambican refugees.

According to UNHCR, Malawians received Mozambican refugees with open arms and warm hearts. They selflessly shared their meagre resources, and the two communities lived side by side in harmony as members of the same African family. The government and the people of Malawi have made enormous sacrifices to accommodate the massive influx of refugees from war torn Mozambique. Nevertheless, there exists another reality which remains to be told: the plight of urban refugees from other African countries seeking protection in Malawi.



Urban Asylum Seekers in Dowa Refugee Camp

Unlike the Mozambican refugee camps in rural Malawi, the UNHCR and Malawi government created a very different camp in 1995 near the capital city of Lilongwe. With the unexpected arrival of refugees in the capital city, new issues presented themselves to those already experienced in refugee organization and management. The arrival of refugees from other African countries with special and unfamiliar needs surprised many, especially at a time when large numbers of refugees were returning home. Given the

increased number of conflicts, a new phenomenon began to emerge: the movement of refugees traveling hundreds of miles, often crossing several countries, to seek asylum. A new refugee programme was established to organize the determination process. With the differences between this programme and the program for the Mozambicans, it is important to examine the presenting issues of this group compared to the former.

In 1991, the first refugees to arrive—in small groups or as individuals—were from South Africa, Somalia, Tanzania and Zaire. By May 1994, approximately 1,308 persons from Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Angola, and Zaire also sought refugee status in Malawi. These asylum seekers, though small in number compared to the Mozambican caseload, “present[ed] new and peculiar challenges” to those involved in their management. From 1991–1994, the urban refugees lived in Lilongwe; in 1995 a decision was made to relocate the group to a government-provided site which would serve as a refugee camp.

When I arrived in May 1995, UNHCR staff were not permitted entry to the camp for security reasons, due to a riot in February 1995 in which several UNHCR staff were physically threatened. Unfortunately, the provision of service to many vulnerable groups including women, children, the elderly, the handicapped, and unaccompanied minors was delayed owing to the precarious situation in the camp. My intention was to work as a counsellor in Dowa with refugee women and children, though I was unable to do so for various reasons as will be shown. I quickly learned how important it is for social workers in international settings to operate with maximum flexibility, as it is often impossible to predict events.

With the arrival of non-Mozambican asylum-seekers, a decision was made by UNHCR that these persons' claims for refugee status would be determined on an individual basis; unlike the Mozambican programme, where refugee status was conferred upon the entire group. At first, asylum-seekers were detained by the Malawian authorities upon their arrival, but that stopped due to increasing UNHCR representations. The Malawian Refugee

Committee, formed in 1989, considered these individual claims on an individual basis. The Committee was composed of representatives from the Office of the President and Cabinet (O.C.), Ministries of Justice, External Affairs, Health, Community Services, Police, and Immigration. UNHCR participated as an observer in this process. Initially, UNHCR took full responsibility of this group by providing a monthly allowance sufficient to cover subsistence living expenses in the township of Lilongwe. However, as the numbers of these urban asylum seekers grew, the question became what attracted these asylum seekers to come to Malawi in the first place, crossing countries which could have been a country of first asylum.

According to UNHCR staff, the urban asylum seekers were attracted to Malawi because they sought much needed peace; second, the cash handouts were an incentive; and third, the non-availability of camps in which they could be kept. To be more explicit, there was no camp available to lodge and keep the new arrivals, which was considered an attraction. This in turn brought about its own problems. The government attributed increased lawlessness in the capital city to the presence of asylum seekers; and the UNHCR found that scattered urban residences hampered the effective delivery of protection, community-based care, and maintenance. The steady increase in numbers also exerted pressure on the government's and UNHCR human and financial resources.

The diversity of the caseload further compounded the problem in terms of culture, languages, and disposition of services, since non-Mozambican urban asylum seekers in Malawi had come from Angola, Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Zaire, and Liberia. As of January 1995, the caseload constituted: 74% young single males, aged 17–28 years old; 18% families (couples, widowers), and 8% single females. It was found that the majority of these people were literate in their own language; however, only a few of them had a high school education and could speak English. These same factors were believed to contribute to the public's negative perception of the non-Mozambican asylum seekers.

Thus, the Government established a camp at Dowa—formerly a prison known as Dzaleka—used by former President Banda to punish and silence political dissidents. The government's stated aims in creating this camp were to restore a sense of security and spirit of self-help and self-reliance amongst refugees and asylum seekers; to improve the image of the asylum seekers who threatened the country's security; to create a sense of community and oneness among the refugees and asylum seekers; and to return the responsibility regarding issues in their lives to the refugees. During my internship, the government and UNHCR were unsuccessful in meeting these broad goals.

While some renovations and improvements were made to the old buildings at Dowa and other facilities, it soon became overcrowded. The camp was initially meant to accommodate six hundred yet, as was previously mentioned, over 1,300 people resided in these facilities. The establishment of this camp remains controversial at best. Should UNHCR have provided consent to house refugees in a former political prison, with few minor repairs? Rather than conducting an information and education campaign to sensitize Malawians to the difficulties experienced by this group, it seems that the Malawian government and UNHCR sought to remove and isolate the problem. Yet the problem was far from being resolved.

The government and UNHCR concurred that "as is normally the case, change brings about mixed feelings – good or bad." Thus, when the decision was made that all refugees were to move into the camp where they would receive rations as opposed to cash handouts, the asylum seekers were perceived to have very high expectations. According to government and UNHCR, their expectations were not fully met, which led to staged demonstrations and protests on various occasions and culminated in extensive damage and loss to the government, Malawi Red Cross and some individuals' property. The causes of such disturbances appeared to be what the asylum seekers and refugees termed as "DEMAND OF THEIR RIGHTS." Perhaps more aware of the roles and responsibilities

of asylum, governments, and UNHCR, these refugees were not afraid to present their claims for food rations and other commodities. Yet according to a paper written by government and UNHCR workers,

...although this was their cry on the surface, it was noted that there was rather a hidden agenda – namely dissatisfaction of the decision by UNHCR in consultation with the Government to stop the cash handouts. In view of this, most of them resorted to cheating during time of distribution and verification to enable them to obtain more food and non-food commodities which once their plans were achieved were sold for cash. It is a fact that many asylum seekers/refugees, how enlightened they may be, employ all sorts of methods to defeat Government's system and thus achieve their ends. It is here where the difference between rural refugees/asylum seekers [Mozambican refugees] and those from urban areas [Dowa asylum seekers] can easily be seen. At Dzaleka, refugees/asylum seekers have not been connecting electricity in tents and houses that did not have power. Refugees have been seen to unlock cars that were locked, stole drugs that were good and left those that had expired. The list of examples is inexhaustive (p.7).

In a 1995 paper entitled "Malawi Red Cross Society's Activities at Dzaleka Refugee Center," prepared by the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness, Relief, and Rehabilitation Department, a list of physical problems were identified in the camp. Given the camp's location on a hill, pneumonia cases were rising due to the cold; malnutrition cases increased, and supplementary feeding programmes were suggested; the behaviour of refugees was sometimes worrisome; and environmental activities needed strengthening. It is important

to note that while the relocation of this group to the camp was completed in January 1995, no action was taken to address these problems until June 1995. Thus, the refugees' claims of neglect were validated to a certain extent. Nyirenda (1995) stated that the situation in the Dowa Refugee Center was unique, and had no precedent to learn from. The camp housed refugees with varied cultural backgrounds, interests, and beliefs.

The Malawi Red Cross Society was chosen to work in Dowa based on their success with the Mozambican refugees and local non-governmental organizations, and also because UNHCR wanted to support local indigenous groups. The framework developed to implement social services in Dowa was conceived as a community-based approach. The principle that continues to guide all social service work with refugees is that they should be helped to meet their own needs. As can be appreciated, trauma caused by different aspects of war is very evident in this group.

From my journal:

Within my first ten minutes inside the camp, a young man who presented himself to the staff of the health clinic grabbed a bottle of pills and swallowed them whole in an attempt to kill himself. The social worker I was with began to scold the man, demanding to know why he would try to kill himself in Malawi, a safe country, when he could have died at home in his own country?

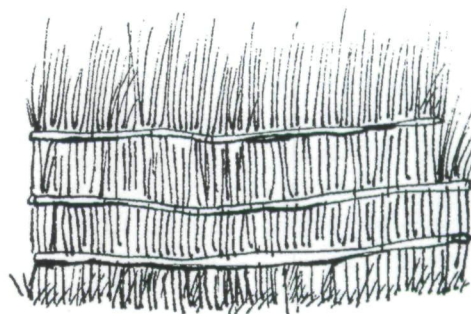
It must be stressed that social services are results-oriented, not ends in themselves, trying to resolve immediate problems as well as achieving adequate conditions over the long-term. Approaches which are integrated mean that refugee needs and problems are seen comprehensively, since action in one area is likely to affect others. In this regard, social services staff must have a clear overall picture of protection and assistance efforts; ensure that staff in other areas of assistance and protection understand how social services will contribute to meeting immediate need and achieving durable solutions; and plan and

implement social services in coordination with other activities

From my journal:

While fleeing Somalia, he was shot, and must undergo a series of operations. Arrangements were made for him to travel to Nairobi, as they have the hospital facilities to care for his leg. However, he refused to go because he was afraid of returning so close to Somalia. Other arrangements were made for him to seek medical treatment in South Africa, except that he must have an HIV test prior to the operation. If he is HIV positive, his leg will be amputated; if the test is negative, the operations will be carried out. The problem is that this Somali man does not want to know whether he is HIV positive. The social worker will continue to offer counselling and support until he makes a decision.

Community-based approaches and social work with individuals and families are two different but complimentary ways to meet refugee needs. The goals depend on the shared needs of a community or groups within it. However, a case-by-case approach is often used with individuals and families whose problems cannot be solved through broader community efforts. Consequently, when social services are considered in UNHCR, attention is first given to establish community-based programmes.



Conclusion

The voices and experiences of African refugees in Malawi have taught me a great

deal about the organization and management of the agencies and institutions responsible for their care. Certainly, refugees flee their homes because they cannot avail themselves of protection in their country. Their protection needs are great, but cannot be satisfied only by the legal status conferred to them. UNHCR and government within the international community must recognize the value of moving beyond the legal status of the refugee. The acknowledgment of refugees' unique identities and personal histories not only affect but define their protection needs. This narrative argues that, given this scenario, there is an urgent need to take a fresh look at the intervention strategies currently in place. To this end, I feel that there is a strong case for social work intervention and for applying accepted social work strategies to refugee work.

Humanitarian work must be strengthened in a way that acknowledges personal experiences and histories. My fieldwork in Malawi showed me the evolution of a host country's support, as well as the importance of perceptions in deciding the terms of assistance which can change over time and diverge according to the characteristics of the refugee population. The influence of the host government is perhaps the most significant factor in determining refugee assistance, as these officials have the ultimate power in deciding who receives protection and what services will be provided.

The growing emphasis on community-based approaches in social work is not always an appropriate intervention with refugees, as demonstrated in the Dowa case study with urban refugees. Financial restrictions have an impact on protection and the services rendered for their survival. Greater cooperation is necessary among all concerned to meet their needs, particularly in family planning issues and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. It should be noted that when assessing a situation and deciding on action, preventative measures should be emphasized over services that respond only to the effects of a problem. Most importantly, the needs of the refugees should be considered according to the standard of living of the surrounding host community, with due regard to the resources and services

available to that community and to recognized minimum standards of well-being. Problems often result when the resources available are inadequate to meet the needs of the entire population; are not appropriate to certain needs; are not accessible to all who need them; and are not culturally appropriate or acceptable to some or all concerned. And yet, while appreciating this fact, it is important to remember that refugee needs and resources change over time. Social workers are well placed to carry out periodic need assessments to determine whether priorities should be shifted. Refugees may be able to solve their own problems if certain restrictions are removed. This may involve international protection rather than assistance.

UNHCR is uniquely equipped to reflect on and recommend preventative strategies, but their preventative role is a limited one. Prevention is essentially political, and is made ineffective by the inertia of governments. Early warning is abundant, yet rarely followed by early action. A key concern is thus, "the future of humanitarianism in the absence of political will." Despite its critical impact on issues of peace and security, the refugee issue has failed to reach the political prominence it deserves, and is frequently used as a cloak to avoid decisive action to resolve conflicts. We can recognize the paradox between the political and the humanitarian, between the security of states and the security of people. Reflection on human issues should take into account of political realities. In taking these issues into account, social workers are, therefore, well placed to serve refugees and to help meet their unique social needs.

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Footnotes

¹ The Articles are found in greater detail in the UNHR's Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, Reedited in January 1992.

² Statements of the Deputy High Commissioner, Mr. Gerald Walzer, at the Handover ceremony in Nsanje, Malawi, 29 April 1995.

³ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁴ As recorded in my journal.

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