



Local Integration: A durable solution to the escalating refugee crisis during COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the importance of integrating refugees into local communities. Doing so is a form of preparedness.

According to the [UNHCR Report 2020](#), there are about 82.4 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, a volume unprecedented in human history. Amongst these are persons with disabilities, children, women, minorities and LGBTQ+, forced to embrace new realities in camps and isolated settlements. Previously exposed to warfare, refugees face risks of being deprived of basic freedoms and acceptable living standards. A case needs to be made for [local integration](#)—attained when refugees and host communities enjoy equal rights without discrimination—as a durable solution to the global refugee crisis. Local integration is also a human rights-based form of preparedness against COVID-19.

Issues with the present paradigm

Conflicts are increasingly assuming [extended durations](#) that may mean permanent stay for refugees. Governments are therefore reluctant to implement local integration strategies as this suggests using up scarce resources to meet additional demands. Yet

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failure to find durable solutions has culminated in the refugee crisis becoming [protracted](#). The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 has not helped, exacerbating vulnerabilities of refugees worldwide and rendering other groups more [vulnerable](#). Current political and ethical [conversations](#) in receiving countries hover around not just improving the current plight of refugees, but how to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 in camps.

As highlighted by [Barbara Harrel-Bond](#), in refugee camps, which are comparable to prisons, individuals are highly depersonalised, people have no access to land, and there is persistent shortage of food, with acute malnutrition registered among children: 'There is now much evidence that refugee camps are not good for anyone.'

Today, camps remain the main model that states use to shelter refugee groups, and there is little evidence that states envisage a shift towards a [more relaxed regime](#), especially as an appropriate response to the pandemic. However, this model ensures not only isolation of refugees, but also depriving them of access to basic rights.

COVID-19 and the need for alternatives

The [Refugee Convention of 1951](#) is the main international instrument protecting refugees. In addition, states that are not party to the treaty and lack domestic [legal frameworks](#) to protect refugees are nonetheless bound to offer protection under norms of customary international law. So for example, Pakistan today hosts about 1,435,445 registered [Afghans fleeing war](#) and although it is not a party to the Convention, the government has signed [agreements](#) with the UNHCR aimed at protecting refugees in its territory, with the immediate goal of arresting the spread of COVID-19. Libya and Eritrea are examples of non-signatory states to the Convention that urgently need to respect international customary law.

COVID-19 exposes the [structural vulnerabilities](#) of camps. In the Kenyan [Dadaab refugee complex](#), the largest in the world where hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees have been stuck for decades, a pent-up despair as well as fear and anxiety about the pandemic, is creating an unprecedented [mental health crisis](#). In Lebanon, where [891,300 refugees](#) are clustered around the outskirts of major cities, a [mathematical modelling simulation](#) illustrates that, in the absence of interventions, any increase of COVID-19 transmission among these groups could result in a large-scale increase of infection across refugee populations in the country. Meanwhile, in crowded camps hosting Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, social distancing and washing of hands are not possible given the limited facilities. Consequently, COVID-19 has dramatically [increased risks](#) both on the health front and in terms of accessing a safe and healthy living environment.

Across the world, although public authorities and individual practices have been transforming cities to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, refugee camps have generally fallen outside such planned metamorphosis. The potential consequences could be catastrophic as demonstrated in a study of the [Rohingya refugee camps](#) in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh.

Local integration: Alternatives to camps

So what is the alternative? Integrating refugees in host communities would provide them with a wider range of rights and possibilities as well as increasing resilience to the pandemic. Chapter IV of the 1951 Refugee Convention pinpoints the welfare services that states ought to make available for refugees. These include rationing of supplies to include refugees, providing housing of acceptable standards, education services and enacting labour norms that will permit refugees to benefit from employment opportunities and social security. All of these are factors that [WHO](#) has identified as salient to the needs of refugees during the current pandemic.

Furthermore, local integration generates economic processes that improve living standards for everyone. Indeed even when host governments do not welcome local integration, local public authorities often acknowledge the [benefits](#) and encourage it. In 2004 the UNHCR implemented [entrepreneurial ventures](#) for Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone in and around the city of Kambia: 17 years later, 20 per cent of the self-reliant ventures are still operational, a figure comparable to success rates of start-ups in the United States. Moreover, for the ventures that did not thrive, the explanations were straightforward and easy to anticipate: notably, inadequate attention during the period of complete handing over of these businesses to sole proprietors.

Constraints on local integration during COVID-19

At the same time it has to be recognised that refugees are a [burden](#) to host communities, and local integration is a difficult solution to sell to people with hope of one day returning home. It is a gradual, multifaceted process with legal, economic and socio-cultural dimensions. Moreover, during the pandemic, it raises fears about risks of spreading the virus. Relatedly it is time-consuming and requires substantial resources that are hard to access in light of other priorities arising from the global health crisis. In addition, local integration projects can be seen as security threats: it is argued that they generate an increase in petty and organised crimes, leading to militarisation and thus further threatening democratic institutions, especially in already weak states, in these already difficult pandemic times. Integration projects can also create demographic imbalances.

At the same time, as [Tom Kuhlman](#) argues, hosting refugees is a great opportunity for economic development, and crime waves in refugee-integrated communities are not worse than those within the host population.

A two-way process

Ultimately, local integration is a two-way process that requires efforts from the refugees on the one hand and from states and host communities on the other. While refugees need to be prepared to adapt to new realities to facilitate the integration process, it is incumbent on states to adopt [minimum standards](#) of integration.

Precarious living conditions, lack of consideration of cultural and linguistic diversity in service provision, limited local knowledge and networks, xenophobia, unequal access to rights and uneven inclusion in host communities affect refugees' ability to avoid

SARS-CoV-2, receive adequate health care, and cope with the economic, social and psychological impacts of the pandemic. Local integration could therefore be an ideal option in terms of human rights preparedness.