

Employment and Livelihoods of Sudanese Refugees in Cairo¹

By Benjamin Petrini

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2012, this piece focuses on the social and economic welfare of Sudanese refugees living in Cairo, Egypt. The study unveils the challenges and constraints of this community in finding sustainable livelihoods, its coping mechanisms and employment options (formal/informal type of employment, gender dimensions, job search). Given the protracted nature of Sudanese refugees' displacement situation – a condition shared by countless refugees and IDPs communities globally – the study subscribes to a theoretical framework that focuses on long-term sustainable development solutions for forced displaced people, beyond their immediate humanitarian needs. Sudanese refugees suffer from lack of adequate livelihoods, unstable or lack of employment, and – since the 2011 Egyptian revolution – a protection deficit. Research briefly explores the relationship between employment, household welfare and gender relations.

Introduction

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2012, this piece focuses on the social and economic welfare of Sudanese refugees living in Cairo, Egypt. Within the conceptual framework of the development challenges of forced displacement and the search for durable solutions (Christensen and Harild 2009), the study unveils the challenges and constraints of this community in finding sustainable livelihoods, its coping mechanisms and employment options (formal/informal type of employment, gender dimensions, job search). Given the deteriorating status of the Egyptian economy and the deep political crisis throughout 2012-13, there is no evidence that the economic and social strains of Sudanese refugees in Cairo have been at all alleviated. If anything, the influx of 120,000 Syrian refugees in Egypt (UNHCR, September 2013) and increasing poverty levels among Egyptians further adds reasons for concern.

Through this specific case, this article demonstrates the need for a development approach (as opposed to a humanitarian and assistance-based one) to situations of protracted forced displacement. Such approach strives to address the long-term development needs of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been in displacement for several years and who have failed to achieve a durable solution to their situation (i.e. local integration, return, or resettlement). Through a focus on the development challenges, including land access, housing, livelihoods, employment and access to services (health and education), this approach puts emphasis on individual and collective self reliance of displaced people, away from aid dependency.

Increasingly, policy makers (World Bank and donors like the Danish International Development Agency, DANIDA) are focusing more attention to the development long-term needs of displaced people beyond the humanitarian level. In fact, there is wide evidence that of the estimated 10.5 million refugees and 28.8 million IDPs globally (IDMC 2012), a large portion live in a protracted displacement situation in an urban environment plagued by socio-economic vulnerabilities and protection deficit. Protracted displacement warrants development responses that focus on economic self-reliance and long-term sustainability in terms of housing, livelihoods and employment, among others. In addition, the plight of protracted displacement is especially pronounced in urban contexts, where refugees and IDPs may carry on a marginal and shadow existence. In urban settings, reliable figures on forced displacement are harder to obtain and, in turn, vulnerabilities may be more extensive.

The one presented here is a case in point: Cairo hosts one of the largest urban refugee population globally, has an estimated eight million people living in slums, and the Sudanese refugee community is one of the oldest and most established one (Sabry 2009, cited in Feinstein International Center 2012). Since independence (1956), Sudan has been engulfed in two major civil wars (1956-1972, 1983-2005), which produced mass waves of refugees.²

¹This article is the product of field research in Cairo and a succinct desk review of the literature. In January-February 2012, I conducted four focus groups with Sudanese refugees and five interviews with key informants; plus, I held a number of conversations with Sudanese refugees and I submitted a short questionnaire to twenty-five of them. In addition, I had countless informal conversations with refugees during March-July 2011, when I volunteered as a trainer at Refugees United for Peaceful Solutions (RUPS) in Cairo. Having had the privilege to hear their stories has been an invaluable enrichment. This article is dedicated to them. Special thanks go to Kathy Kamphoefner (Executive Director, RUPS), Enrico De Gasperis, Matteo Gozzi, and to a number of RUPS members for their generosity, logistical support and comments. I take sole responsibility for the content of this article.

²Until South Sudan's independence (2011), Sudan had the largest number of IDPs globally (estimated 5.2 million) and hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees in protracted displacement spilling throughout the region. The 1983-2005 civil war caused an estimated 4 million refugees (DeRouen and Heo 2007).

Several thousands fled to Egypt due to several factors. Geographic proximity, relatively easy access to Egypt from Sudan – via the Nile, via land, or via the Red Sea – and a common history of colonial domination by Great Britain, facilitated labor migration, trade, and the establishment of a numerous community of Sudanese merchants, laborers and business owners in Egypt throughout the XX century. Such existing networks of family or community members expanded in the XXI century and acted as a catalyst for Sudanese refugees.³

Despite this rooted history of migration and forced displacement, Sudanese refugees still lack services, struggle to make ends meet and suffer from a deficit of basic rights. In addition, these trends made it difficult at times to distinguish between refugees and migrants. Contrasting figures are startling: according to UNHCR, as of June 2013 Egypt is home to 202,000 refugees and asylum seekers. Among them, those from Sudan are around 23,000. Past estimates put the figure of Sudanese refugees and economic migrants living in Cairo between 500,000 and 3 million – with a total number of Sudanese in Egypt of 2.2 to 4 million (Azzam 2006; Kagan 2002). However, a recent estimate ranges from 55,000 to 65,000 (Zohri 2012, cited in Jacobsen, Ayoub and Johnson 2014). Arguably, the most vulnerable of them are those without stable livelihoods, housing and employment. Lately, the 2011 removal of President Mubarak from office triggered a period of heightened vulnerabilities and increased protection concerns: a faltering economy and declining living standards greatly affect refugees, who lack social safety nets and are more exposed to rising crime.

Profile of Sudanese refugees (2012)⁴

- For the majority of them Cairo was the first destination of displacement after fleeing Sudan
- Level of education among participants is high: twenty-one refugees studied and/or completed university degrees
- Length of displacement: Sixteen refugees have been in Cairo for eight or more years
- Geographic concentration: They do not live confined in one single neighborhood, but rather they are scattered around the city
- Housing: None of the refugees owns property in Cairo, all live in rental apartments. Refugees live with other refugees and/or migrants, and almost never with Egyptians. Tenants include friends, co-workers or community members.

Livelihoods and poverty

All focus groups' participants indicate a general dissatisfaction with living conditions, employment opportunities and prospects for durable solutions to their displacement condition. For most Sudanese refugees, life in Egypt is harsh and they suffer from a combination of unstable and informal employment, low salaries, lack of rights, shrinking access to services and assistance, rising prices, discrimination and renewed security concerns. The resulting livelihoods of Sudanese refugees is unstable, even more so for vulnerable categories (children, single-mothers, elderly).

Out of twenty-five respondents to a questionnaire, 60% stated that food is “sometimes scarce” and “often scarce” in their household, and only three said that it is “always available.” None of the respondents answered that salary is sufficient to meet household's monthly costs and expenses. And without other sources of income (aid, remittances, community assistance and solidarity), no household is able to get to the end of the month with their own means.

This situation hampers the possibility of self-reliance and increases a position of dependence upon aid organizations, relatives in resettled countries, and the community. Many participants stressed the aspect of survival: refugees only manage to survive, not live, and, as one participant stated, “This is not a life of dignity.” A Sudanese refugee, who currently works as a psychosocial worker, posited that the most important concern for refugees is their lack of any future vision outside of their condition of displacement: “No one has any plan for their life,” he said, and, due to the lack of proper income and job prospects, “No one has any hope.”

³More recently, an additional factor of Sudanese fleeing to Egypt has to do with resettlement policy. Since the mid-1990s UNHCR in Cairo has run one of the largest resettlement programs globally. More than one focus groups' participant referred to potential resettlement as the motivating factor to reach Cairo. By many accounts, several refugees were attracted by the prospect of resettling in a third country (Australia, the US and Canada were primary destinations, as were European countries). As one humanitarian professional put it, Cairo was perceived as “the Mecca of resettlement” by Sudanese refugees. Throughout this period, a quarter of UNHCR-protected Sudanese refugees benefitted from resettlement. Nevertheless, in 2005, following the peace agreement between Sudan and the rebels, resettlement of Sudanese came virtually to a halt, creating unfulfilled expectations and mounting frustration with UNHCR by the refugee community. Since revolution in Egypt and war in Libya, resettlement cases have increased again. Arguably, short-term resettlement programs, while considerably improving the lives of few beneficiaries, created false expectations within the refugee community at large.

⁴Based on a written questionnaire submitted to twenty-five Sudanese refugees administered in February 2012.

Employment

According to the Egyptian law, refugees have the right to a work permit, as any other foreigner. Conditions for Sudanese refugees are slightly different. Given the historic ties between Sudan and Egypt and the several waves of displacement mentioned above, the two countries signed the Wadi El Nil Treaty (1976), which allowed Sudanese refugees and migrants to enter Egypt and obtain residency without needing to file for asylum. However, the increasing number of Sudanese forced Egypt to ask UNHCR to start asylum-seeking procedures (1994). Then, in 1995, a life attempt on President Mubarak in Addis Abeba (which was attributed to Sudanese Islamist) was followed by a dramatic revert of benevolent policies toward Sudanese, with the revocation of the treaty.

In 2004, the Four Freedoms Agreement between Sudan and Egypt stipulates Sudanese refugees' exemption from seeking a residency and work permit. In reality, the agreement is not implemented, which has a negative effect on Sudanese refugees' livelihoods and ability to find work. In fact, obtaining a work permit is a nearly impossible process (Jacobsen, Ayoub and Johnson 2014; Feinstein International Center 2012). No refugee that I spoke to has a regular work visa: no one stated to have even met a refugee with a regular work visa. One NGO coordinator stated that none of the refugees that work or volunteer for her NGO has a work visa. Thus, refugees work illegally and/or in the informal sector in basic professions regardless of their level of education.

Men are usually employed as unskilled laborers in construction sites on a temporary basis, and employers are usually Egyptians. Not having a work visa dramatically affects refugees' vulnerability: refugees earn a lower salary than Egyptians, and are not covered by work insurance. Although laborer's jobs are on a temporary basis (day by day or week by week), they are relatively well regarded among Sudanese refugees since they guarantee a salary and pose little danger in terms of personal security.

Most participants referred to street vending (with watches and perfumes as the two most commonly cited items) as the second most common job for male refugees, but one that is difficult and dangerous. Margins for profits are low and uncertain, and insecurity is rampant. Refugees claim that all street vendors have to pay a bribe to the police in order not to be harassed. It is common that refugees are taken into custody and brutalized, or it may also occur that their goods get confiscated. Regarding this, more than one participant admitted that because of vendors' illegal status, police have sometimes fabricated charges of illegal drug possession or other felonies in order to arrest them.

Educated Sudanese tend to look for jobs as teachers, translators or interpreters. Usually, Egyptian schools do not hire refugees. One participant recalled his personal experience: in 2003, he was hired as an English teacher in an Egyptian school, but he was offered a lower salary than his Egyptian colleagues. Sudanese teachers are hired in Sudanese-run schools to teach English, Arabic, and literature, among other courses. One participant, for example, taught Arabic and music at the Modern Education Center for Sudanese in 2006-2010. Nevertheless, jobs as teachers and translators are in high demand and only a few manage to work in these capacities. Other work positions mentioned in focus groups include clerk, office worker and cleaner, driver, gardener, maintenance and repair, tour guide and seasonal jobs in the tourist industry, mainly in the Sinai.

Gender relations and employment

Given men's low salaries and difficulty in finding jobs, women – whose traditional social role confines them in the household and not on the job market – are often forced to look for employment in order to supplement household income. Unemployment rates for men are higher than for women, who can more easily find employment. Women overwhelmingly work as domestic workers, mainly as housekeepers, cleaners and/or baby-sitters for Egyptian families. Salaries are substantially higher than what men earn.

This situation poses strains on households and on gender relations. Women who work are also expected to fulfill their domestic role of caring for the children and the house – and sometimes they can't. Some female refugees are employed as cleaners and nannies living full-time with the family employing them, especially during summer when Egyptian families move to holiday resorts on the Sinai or the Red Sea. All participants lamented that women are often mistreated and abused by their Egyptian family: given their refugee status, women do not receive benefits, insurance, and are in constant fear of losing their job. More than one account was reported of refugees not paid after work is completed and sometimes abruptly laid off.

Participants (both men and women) reported that unemployed men grow increasingly frustrated and humiliated due to their inability to find work and to the fact that their spouse is employed. Domestic violence and alcoholism are therefore frequent. Regardless of their level of education, most participants in focus groups (both male and female) agreed that women's role should be in the house, caring for children and managing the household. Evidently, this situation adds a gender dimension and further complexity to refugees' livelihoods and household welfare: lack of employment and sufficient income put strain on Suda-

nese household traditional social norms, and act both as a catalyst and an impediment to women's emancipation.

Conclusion

Currently, the post-Mubarak era is one of economic uncertainty and rising unemployment in Egypt. Arguably, this situation has put more strain on refugees. Sudanese refugees admitted that rising prices and declining employment threatens the survival of the most vulnerable. Security has deteriorated: an increase in crime levels affects the wide community of refugees and illegal migrants in the country. Participants revealed episodes of sexual violence, harassment, and burglary perpetrated by Egyptians. In some previously safe neighborhoods, refugees now no longer walk at night if not in a group. According to many, the main security threat to refugees comes from the police itself due to weakening law and order and lack of accountability.

As of 2012, no sustainable income generation strategy was available to refugees, who not only were unable to plan for the future and solve their displacement situation, but also struggled to access basic services and retain their occupation. Evidence shows that these trends have not reverted as of 2014 – but may have actually worsened. The present findings resemble those of similar recent studies on refugees in Egypt in 2012-2014: in particular, they highlight the lack and/or instability of employment, the difficulty in obtaining work permits and the resulting employment's informality (Feinstein International Center 2012; Gozdziaik and Walter 2012; Jacobsen, Ayoub and Johnson 2014). This condition has deep negative effects psychologically and socially. The social discrimination to which refugees are subject to, their vulnerabilities and protection issues are reflected in all aspects of social and personal life. Therefore, a development approach to Sudanese refugees in Cairo (and not only Sudanese) is needed in light of the unviability of durable solutions: the prolonged stay of Sudanese refugees highlights the unlikelihood of return or resettlement, as well as the enormous legal and social obstacles to local integration. Thus, without development assistance, Sudanese refugees' vulnerability is likely to continue.

Benjamin Petrini (b_petrini@soas.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, with seven-year experience in policy-making and programs on conflict and development. He is a consultant with the World Bank and the European Investment Bank (EIB), where he completed assignments on post-conflict reconstruction, fragility analysis, and forced displacement, among others. His PhD research focuses on social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants in Colombia.

References Cited

AHMED, Y.M. (2008) 'The Prospects of Assisted Voluntary Return among the Sudanese Population in Greater Cairo' (online), Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo

AZZAM, F. (2006) 'A Tragedy of Failures and False Expectations' (online), Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS), The American University in Cairo

CHRISTENSEN, A. and **HARILD, N.** (2009) 'Forced Displacement: The Development Challenge' (online), Conflict, Crime and Violence Issue Note, The World Bank

DEROUEN JR, K. and **UK H.,** (eds.) (2007) *Civil Wars of the World: Major Conflicts Since World War II*, Santa Barbara CA, ABC-CLIO

FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER (2012) 'Refugee Livelihoods in Urban Areas: Identifying Program Opportunities. Case study Egypt' Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University

GOZDZIAK, E.M. and **WALTER, A.** (2012) 'Urban Refugees in Cairo' (online), Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University

GRABSKA, K. (2005) 'Living on the Margins: The Analysis of the Livelihood Strategies of Sudanese Refugees with Closed Files in Cairo' (online), Working Paper 6, Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS), The American University in Cairo

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT MONITORING CENTRE (IDMC) (2014) *Global Figures* (online). Available from: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-figures> (Accessed 27 April 2014)

JACOBSEN, K., AYOUB, M. and JOHNSON, A. (2014) 'Sudanese Refugees in Cairo: Remittances and Livelihoods', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27(1): 145-159

KAGAN, M. (2011) 'Shared Responsibility in a New Egypt: A Strategy for Refugee Protection' (online), Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo.

KAGAN, M. (2002) 'Assessment of Refugee Status Determination Procedure at UNHCR's Cairo Office, 2001–2002' (online), Working Paper 1, Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS), The American University in Cairo

SABRI, S. (2009) 'Poverty Lines in Greater Cairo: Underestimating and Misrepresenting Poverty', Working Paper 21, International Institute for Environment and Development, London

UNHCR (2014) *Populations Statistics* (online). Available from: <http://popstats.unhcr.org> (Accessed 27 April 2014)

ZOHRY, A. (2012) 'Estimating Number of Refugees and Migrants in Urban Areas: The Case of Sudanese in Cairo', Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo. Unpublished.