

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Viewpoint*

## **Let Refugees Be Their Own Solution**

By Emily Arnold-Fernández with Brian Rawson

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## VIEWPOINT

# Let Refugees Be Their Own Solution

Better policies in host countries can enable refugees to rebuild their lives and contribute to host economies.

BY EMILY ARNOLD-FERNÁNDEZ WITH BRIAN RAWSON

**I** met Heba (not her real name) and a few other Syrian refugee women in Mafraq, Jordan, in January 2015. They were supposed to be in the Zaatari refugee camp six miles to the east but had escaped.

“We thought it would at least have roads,” Heba said about Zaatari. She instead found a dusty plain with temporary buildings made of metal or plastic that couldn’t stop the blowing sand. Heba had left behind an urban, middle-class lifestyle in Damascus; Heba’s husband was a lawyer. She spoke of courtyards where fountains and plants created lush havens from city life.

More than 22 million people today are refugees, having been forced to flee their countries due to war, violence, or persecution, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The average duration of a protracted refugee situation—defined as at least 5,000 people displaced for at least five years without a permanent home—is now 26 years. Refugees in camps may live for decades or generations behind barbed wire, often sharing communal bathrooms or kitchens and indefinitely dependent on aid. Our systems for temporary assistance have become warehouses, in effect, where refugees are kept in perpetual limbo.

Once Heba entered the camp, she—like the other 80,000 refugee residents—was not permitted to leave. So she and her husband took matters into their own hands. They cut through the barbed-wire fencing and paid a man to smuggle them across the desert sands in a 4×4 off-road vehicle.

Each of the Syrian women I spoke to in Mafraq had a similar story of escape. They had joined the ranks of the majority

of refugees who today live outside of camps. But I couldn’t help but wonder: What did they escape to?

Less than 1 percent of the world’s refugees each year are resettled to wealthy countries such as the United States, Germany, and Australia. A full 86 percent of refugees today make their “temporary” home in middle- and low-income countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Pakistan. Local contexts vary greatly, but most host countries make it difficult or impossible for refugees to participate safely and equitably in economic, social, and civic life. Work is illegal or unprotected, offering no way to contest exploitation such as wage theft by employers or workplace sexual assault. Refugee children are barred from enrolling in school, or doing so exposes their parents to arrest. Discriminatory laws and practices make local health care,

banking, and social welfare systems unavailable. Meanwhile, aid budgets cannot keep pace with even basic needs, pushing refugees further and further into poverty, desperation, and illicit activity.

The scale of crisis in the Middle East brought to the world’s attention a problem that had been long simmering. But even as the world scrambles to find better solutions, a central powerful idea too often is overlooked: *Refugees themselves are the solution.* Refugees like Heba have the drive, initiative, and vision to build a viable life in the countries that host them.

## THE BENEFITS OF ACCESS

My human rights nonprofit organization, Asylum Access, began in 2005 with the conviction that all refugees deserve a fair chance at a new life. Over the past decade, we’ve worked intensively in a range of countries that host large refugee populations—Ecuador, Mexico, Malaysia, Thailand, and Tanzania—and are now partnering with organizations in other countries, such as Lebanon, to expand our impact. As a group of lawyers, we started by helping refugees in these countries to navigate the legal processes to get documents and work permits, enroll children in school, and access services

such as health care and banking. But in too many places we saw that no integration processes existed. Refugees had no way to take the steps needed to build a stable life, even with a lawyer’s help.

Everywhere we brought our services, we faced skepticism that we could make change there. But in every country where we work, we’ve fought to create a more enabling environment. Asylum Access staff—who are local citizens advocating for change within their home country—have worked closely with refugees to help them rebuild



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their lives and identify where barriers exist. To date, we've won legal documentation, work permits, education access, and other rights for more than 100,000 refugees, and changed national laws and policies that affect more than two million.

An enabling environment is one that lets refugees enter, live safely, and move freely within the country; work lawfully without fear of exploitation or abuse; access education, health care, and financial services; and have recourse to justice when needed. Such rights cannot practically be guaranteed or enforced by international actors such as the United Nations, but rather become meaningful only when implemented and safeguarded by refugee-hosting governments through their national laws, policies, and practices—what we call the *national governance framework*.

In Ecuador, we started work around the same time that the 2008 Constitution granted refugees equal work rights with Ecuadorian nationals. Gabriel, a Colombian refugee, came to us for help in understanding how he could hire other refugees in light of the new legal framework. He had started a small bakery selling pastries from a window, but a few years later, with our help, he was employing more than a dozen people, both refugees and citizens, in a large sit-down shop with multiple counters.

In Tanzania, Asylum Access identified an underused legal provision that enabled a few refugees to live and work in Dar es Salaam instead of remaining confined in rural camps. We also helped groups of refugees set up community savings and loan associations. One refugee borrower invested \$300 in mobile phones to sell around town; he eventually grew his enterprise into three shops and a motorcycle taxi service. Another has a line of clothing and accessories. Several run restaurants. Almost all employ Tanzanians alongside refugees.

We've seen that when a country creates an enabling environment for refugees to participate in the economic, social, and civic life of their communities on equal terms with other residents, everyone benefits. A growing body of research suggests that when refugees

can participate freely, they tend to start new businesses, grow existing markets, and create new jobs. For example, a 2016 European Commission study, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Labour Market Implications in Jordan and Lebanon," found that new Syrian-run businesses expanded the economy and saw little evidence that these businesses have displaced those run by nationals. And when refugees can safely and equitably participate in lawful formal-sector work, they're far less likely to choose illicit or exploitative options, thus decreasing crime, relieving downward pressure on wages and working conditions, and lessening security risks, among other benefits.

In the time since I met Heba, the Jordanian government has opened a few options for refugees to access lawful work. This is a significant step forward, but only a preliminary one. Jordan's work permits generally bind refugees to a single employer—a system that is considered exploitative in other contexts. Some of the work opportunities require refugees to leave their families and communities for a different part of the country where they lack a support system or protection against abuse. Some solutions haven't yet been considered, such as enabling refugees to easily obtain work permits for the work they are already doing under the table in the informal economy.

Jordan's experience and the concerns it raises underscore the importance of protections for refugee workers, free movement, workplace rights, access to banking, and other prerequisites of refugees' safe, fair participation in the economy and society of their new homes. Experiments such as those in Jordan should be seen as important first steps upon which advocates—including Asylum Access and its partners, as well as UN agencies, aid donors, and civil society organizations—can build and improve through advocacy and incentives.

#### A YEAR FOR ACTION

At the time I visited Jordan, the outflow of Syrian refugees had gripped the world's attention and brought the displacement crisis

to Europe's doorstep. In the last three years, the crises have continued—with one million South Sudanese fleeing to Uganda in the past year, and more recently 650,000 Rohingya fleeing Myanmar to Bangladesh. Tomorrow may well bring additional crises. The global community must act.

This year is particularly critical for global action. By the end of 2018, the United Nations and world leaders are expected to deliver on two major commitments: a new Global Compact on Refugees and a complementary Global Compact on Migration. We urge decision makers to seize this moment to prioritize refugee participation in the economic, social, and civic life of their host countries.

To promote refugee self-reliance, reform of national governance frameworks must be adopted as a necessary component alongside humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance. Host countries should be recognized and treated as having power and responsibility to pursue these reforms. But they cannot carry the responsibility alone. All nations, particularly wealthy nations and those hosting relatively smaller percentages of the world's refugees, must take far greater responsibility for ensuring effective solutions for refugees and the countries hosting the largest numbers.

Finally, we as globally engaged individuals all have a role to play. We can monitor governmental progress toward inclusive policies using sites such as our recently launched RefugeeWorkRights.org, which maps and scores access to safe, lawful work in nearly 30 countries. We can also promote access to existing opportunities. In Mexico, for example, the Ruta de Hospitalidad initiative (motto: #AquiNoHayMuros, or "No walls here") brings together community groups, organizations, the private sector, and local governments to direct refugees to locations where they can receive a warm welcome, basic services, and opportunities for work and education.

Through such actions, the international community can ensure enabling environments for refugees to rebuild their lives through exercising agency, participating in the economy, and contributing to society. ■