Viewpoint
Let Refugees Be Their Own Solution
By Emily Arnold-Fernández with Brian Rawson
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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). 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
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.