
ENCAMPMENT AND SELF-SETTLEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN we think about where refugees live, the stereotypical view often takes us to the 'camp'. However, when we look at practices on the ground the idea of the camp becomes much more variegated, with different spatial, economic, and political configurations; we may be considering anything from areas enclosed by barbed wire, akin to prisons, to open villages. The range of possibilities becomes even wider if we turn to the alternative of self-settlement. This is hardly surprising given that refugees can be found in almost every country of the world, moving for a complex mix of reasons and living in vastly different conditions. Even if we restrict our focus to the developing world (as this chapter does), the historical, social, economic, and political contexts in which refugees are forced to claim—and states are obliged to offer—asylum vary enormously.

The academic debates about camps and settlements have ebbed and flowed over the years (Chambers 1979; Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982; Van Damme 1995; Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995; Black 1998; Crisp and Jacobsen 1998; Bakewell 2000; Hovil 2007) but there seems to be consensus about their general direction: the encampment of refugees is undesirable. Nonetheless, when it comes to policy, practice, and research, we very often end up back at the camp.

This chapter looks at some of the reasons for the rise of encampment and compares it with self-settlement, pointing to some of the main issues, raising critical questions and suggesting some avenues for further exploration. It argues that the rather narrow policy focus on camps as opposed to self-settlement obscures the much more flexible ways in which refugees live.

DIFFERENT SPACES OF PROTECTION

The emergence of the international refugee regime begged the question of how states could respond to the need for international protection in practice (see Goodwin-Gill, this volume). For those claiming asylum as persecuted individuals, the focus of the protection has tended to be on ensuring *non-refoulement* and also that refugees were granted economic and social rights in the country of asylum. The space in which this protection has been offered is hardly considered—individual refugees can settle as they please. In contrast, when it comes to the mass movement of refugees, this question of where protection should be available becomes extremely important for three basic reasons.

First, there is the concern about how large numbers of refugees can be incorporated within the society of the country of asylum. In particular, if the refugees come with very few possessions, and possibly in extremely poor physical and mental health, their arrival can herald a range of social challenges for the host society. They may be seen as adding to the existing problems, increasing the welfare burden on a state that is struggling to support its own population. The local population can react with suspicion, resentment, and even violence. In order to manage such problems arising from the presence of refugees, the response of states is generally focused on controlling where refugees should be allowed to stay. Perhaps not surprisingly, states focus on the control of the ‘alien’ in their midst rather than addressing the responses of their citizens.

A second concern is about the practicalities of providing for the immediate basic needs of the refugee population. How can food, water, shelter, and medical assistance be provided to a large group of refugees, whose numbers may overwhelm local services—especially if they arrive in remote border areas, as half a million Rwandans did when they crossed into north-western Tanzania in 1994? Faced with the daunting logistics of distributing aid to people, ensuring that they are located in known and accessible locations greatly eases the task.

A third concern, which is often the most pressing from the perspective of states, is that of security. If refugees stay close to the border they may attract hostile attention from military forces in their country of origin, especially if they are associated with one side of the conflict. There is a danger that refugees may be attacked from across the border as happened to Syrian refugees in Turkey in 2012. Some refugees may also engage in military activity if they can easily cross back into their country of origin (‘warrior refugees’ as described by Zolberg, Suhrke, et al. 1989). Hence moving refugees away from border areas is often a major priority for host states. If it is a large influx of refugees, especially if they are short of basic resources, states may also be concerned about the potential threat they may pose to the local population.

As a result, in the face of mass influxes of refugees, the most common—and in the humanitarian aid sector often the default—response has been the establishment of refugee camps. Today the poor refugee in the camp, sheltered under blue plastic sheeting in

close proximity with others, provides one of the most prominent, stereotypical images associated with refugees. It is often forgotten that there are other possibilities, one of which provides the other theme of this chapter: self-settlement. Here the refugees make their own choices about where they reside and the state’s role can vary enormously.

The extent to which these different approaches are adopted varies across the world. In Europe and North America, self-settlement is the norm: once a refugee’s status has been determined, he or she is free to settle where they please (although refugee welfare provision may be limited to a particular location).¹ Since the closure of the European refugee camps in the aftermath of the Second World War, they have been used as a policy on the continent only once: during the influxes of refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In contrast, in the poorer regions of the world, encampment is used much more widely and self-settlement tends to be resisted by states. In such contexts, self-settlement—initiated by the refugees—often stands in opposition to encampment—initiated by the state. The focus of the encampment versus self-settlement debate has therefore been on Africa and Asia, where the largest numbers of refugees seek asylum and encampment is much more prevalent.

In this chapter, *encampment* refers to a policy which requires refugees to live in a designated area set aside for the exclusive use of refugees, unless they have gained specific permission to live elsewhere. The host state is obliged to ensure that the human rights of the refugees are upheld, including the rights to shelter, food, water, sanitation and healthcare, and education, but how these are delivered varies enormously.

When a camp is first established during the emergency phase of an aid operation, refugees are likely to be housed in very crude shelters, perhaps little more than a piece of plastic sheeting stretched over some sticks. In some cases, shelter is initially provided in dormitories made from large tents (or rub halls), in which each family is allocated a small section. If the refugees are likely to have to stay in the camp for any length of time, these very temporary shelters are likely to take a more permanent form, with grass roofs replacing plastic sheets and more permanent walls replacing cloth sheets dividing families in dormitories. Where refugees remain in camps for many years, the buildings may come to resemble the permanent structures of the local area. Buduburam refugee camp housing Liberian refugees on the edge of Accra, Ghana, has come to resemble a city suburb, and the older sections of Meheba refugee settlement in north-western Zambia resemble a collection of villages.

When it comes to the other basic rights, basic services of water and sanitation are provided and if the refugees are in place for some time, some provision is likely to be made for primary and sometimes secondary level education—in Dadaab camp in northern Kenya, there are even plans to open a campus of Nairobi University. Immediately after their arrival, refugees are likely to be supplied with food. This is usually in the form of a ration which they take home to cook for themselves. The refugee camps for Kosovo Albanians established in Macedonia in 1999 were exceptional as they provided individual ready meals for their residents: as many observers noted at the time, an extremely expensive approach that begs many questions about how rights are interpreted across the world.²

The question is what happens when the camp remains in place for any length of time. Providing food rations is very expensive and also tends to undermine the ability of refugees to provide for themselves and regain any sense of control over their lives. However, if rations are not provided, the refugees have to have some other means of securing food. This means that they need to gain access to either the labour market or land and agricultural inputs to cultivate their own food. Given that one of the rationales for establishing refugee camps in the first place has been to ensure that refugees do not overwhelm the capacity of the local area—whether flooding the labour market displacing local people from employment or creating potentially violent competition for resources such as land, pasture, water, or fuel—states have tended strictly to control the economic opportunities of refugees in camps.

One approach adopted during the 1970s and 1980s, primarily in Africa, was the creation of agricultural settlements for refugees (Rogge 1981). This policy was taken up most enthusiastically in Tanzania, Zambia, Sudan, and Uganda, which had large tracts of relatively fertile land in remote areas with low populations. In these settlements, each refugee household was allocated a plot of land for subsistence cultivation. Two alternative models were also adopted by Sudan: first rural wage-earning settlements established alongside mechanized agricultural projects—most famously at Qala en Nahal in Eastern Sudan; second, suburban settlements in larger towns where refugees were expected to make their living through petty commodity production. While some hailed such approaches as offering a longer-term solution of integration for African refugees, all these approaches were associated with the rejection of integration and self-settlement by states, as Kibreab argues (1989). The refugees were required to reside within the bounds of the settlements and, therefore, they remain a form of encampment.

The governance of the refugee camps and settlements also varies enormously with the security situation, the resources available, and government policy. Where refugees are seen as offering some sort of threat either as potential targets of attacks from the country of origin, or as ‘warrior refugees’ (Zolberg, Suhrke, et al. 1989), the camps are likely to be subject to control by either the security forces of the host state, or possibly international forces (see Kiljunen 1983 for examples from the Thai-Cambodia border). Here the movement of refugees in and out may be tightly circumscribed by the fences, guards, and checkpoints. In other cases, where security concerns are less prominent, the barrier to movement may be distance and the cost involved. In many cases, there are no physical constraints to movement but refugees caught out of place without the required papers will be subject to arrest.

This very brief overview of the many different forms of encampment shows that when we use the term refugee camp, we may be referring to anything from a small, militarized fenced centre housing refugees in dormitories guarded by soldiers, to a huge agricultural settlement (for example, Meheba refugees settlement in north-western Zambia extends over 20 kilometres) consisting of villages deeply embedded into the local economy (Jacobsen 2005). For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to all these settlements as camps.

Of course, it would be futile to attempt to describe the different forms of self-settlement as they mirror the myriad forms of human settlement around the world. Even where policies of encampment are adopted, states often sanction self-settlement for those who gain the required permissions to live outside the camps. For example, this may be granted for those who need special medical attention in the capital city, for students winning scholarships, for those with sufficient resources to establish their own businesses, or for refugees with particular skills that are in short supply in the host country, such as qualified teachers and doctors. Hence, it is important not to equate self-settlement with illegal settlement. That said, in most countries, refugees who settle themselves outside the camps are for the most part in breach of the law. Many of them remain unregistered and largely out of view of the state. It is this form of self-settlement that is uncontrolled by the state, which is considered in this chapter.

THE SCALE OF ENCAMPMENT

Table 10.1 shows the latest data available on settlement forms from UNHCR’s published statistics. The figures clearly show that the policy of encampment is one that is adopted almost exclusively in the poorer regions of the world. Second, they suggest that in all continents the number of refugees outside formal camps and settlements exceeds those within. Given that almost by definition self-settled refugees tend to remain outside the formal system, it is likely that official statistics overstate the proportion of refugees in camps.

In 1993, about 30 per cent of the persons of concern in Africa and 65 per cent in Asia remained outside camps. The percentage of refugees in camps fell dramatically in the

Table 10.1 Population of concern to UNHCR by type of accommodation (000s), end 2011

	Camps / centres	Individual accommodation (private)	Settlement	Undefined/ unknown	Total	% in camps / centres
Africa	3,990	1,610	4,346	3,107	13,054	31
Asia	1,330	7,106	332	5,475	14,243	9
Europe	15	483	—	2,806	3,303	0
Latin America	0	276	—	4,039	4,316	0
North America	—	—	—	483	483	0
Oceania	2	2	5	31	40	6
Total	5,338	9,478	4,683	15,942	35,440	15

Source: Adapted from UNHCR 2012 Global Refugee Trends Statistical Annex—Table 16.

late 2000s, when UNHCR started to report on the number of refugees whose whereabouts are unknown. This shift in the refugee calculus makes it difficult to identify clear numerical trends. However, it does indicate the slow recognition of the scale of self-settlement, which is now being acknowledged in the statistical records. It also demonstrates that only a minority of the world's refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR stay in formal camps and settlement. Nonetheless, in developing regions of the world, policy, practice, and research all tend to remain focused on them.

SELF-SETTLEMENT: THE REFUGEES' CHOICE?

Why do so many refugees in developing countries stay away from camps, regardless of the host government policy and the law, spurning the offer of humanitarian aid and services such as health and education? There seems little doubt that self-settlement can leave refugees in a more precarious formal legal position. Their refugee status may remain unrecognized by the state and even, in practice, by UNHCR, who may be unable to extend their effective protection to the self-settled. In particular, if refugees have settled themselves without making themselves known to the authorities—a strategy they may have to adopt if they are to avoid removal to a camp—they remain invisible to UNHCR and any protection it may offer. Despite such problems, self-settlement is often the option that people select if they have any choice. In any different context, many reasons can be put forward to explain the refugees' preference for self-settlement. These vary enormously but there are some that have been seen to recur in a range of settings; here just three are discussed, relating to their aspirations for return, access to livelihoods, and maintaining autonomy.

Research that has compared refugees in camps and the self-settled has noted that refugees may adopt very different strategies to achieve similar ends. Many refugees may share the asylum state's desire for their return. From the refugees' perspective, it may be much better to maintain as close a connection as possible to their homeland, sustaining regular contact and even being able to visit. Hence, they may prefer self-settlement close to the border in easy reach of their country of origin, as thousands of Afghan refugees have done in Pakistan, rather than being corralled into a distant camp.

Although states and aid agencies may suggest that the basic needs of refugees may be best met through encampment, the restrictions placed on refugees' movement, access to resources (in particular land), ownership of assets (such as livestock and vehicles), and limitations on business activities may act as a considerable brake on refugees' enterprise. Many refugees seem to weigh up the benefits of aid supplies and services in camps against these restrictions and find them wanting. Hence, they seek opportunities to settle in an area where they can make a better living for themselves.

Associated with such rationales that may be seen as political and socio-economic, there is a more psychological rationale: the desire of refugees to maintain their autonomy. One of the concerns about refugee camps is the extent to which the provision of

humanitarian aid and free services to refugees in camps, especially over extended periods, instils a sense of 'dependency,' where refugees become reliant on the aid agencies. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that refugees have always seized whatever options they can to improve their lives, incorporating aid where it is available (Kibreab 1993; Jacobsen 2005). By staying outside the camps, one may sacrifice the access to these resources but gain autonomy and other opportunities. For example, among self-settled Angolans in Zambia, staying outside the 'fence'—as they called the formal refugees settlement—opened up many more options for their livelihoods, repatriation, and integration into Zambia (Bakewell 2000). In practice things are rarely so clear cut and there may be strong social and economic links between self-settled refugees and those in camps.

Self-settlement is still sometimes referred to as 'spontaneous settlement,' but this is a complete misnomer. Refugees cannot simply appear in another country and take over 'empty' space; they can only live in areas where they are able successfully to negotiate access with the local residents. In rural areas this may involve gaining the support of the village heads and traditional rulers. In urban areas, it is more likely to involve discussion with local community groups, gangs, or even local authorities. In practice, such negotiations require a good understanding of the language, the structure of the local society, and usually some pre-existing relationship. These conditions are most likely to be found when refugees flee across the border into the neighbouring country, especially when the border cuts across traditional lineages and chiefdoms—as they do across much of Africa. Such links facilitated the self-settlement of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone in the forest region of Guinea during the 1990s (Van Damme 1999).

The fact that refugees are able to negotiate their self-settlement also raises important questions about the extent to which staying outside the camps necessarily makes refugees' lives any more precarious in practice. While states may be very concerned about legal status, this may have very little impact on people's day-to-day lives. In poor countries where the reach of the state may be rather limited, those who live in remote rural areas may have very little contact with agents of the state. Moreover, in conditions where the local people are happy to receive refugees—perhaps because of shared language and culture or the expansion of local economy—they may collude with refugees to ensure they get access to basic services such as education and healthcare, or even citizenship papers for children. In this sense, those who are self-settled may gain a form of protection in practice that is stronger in everyday life than any protection in law that can be offered by the state.

Moreover, lives in camps may also be extremely precarious especially if the refugees are expected to be reliant on international aid for food, agricultural inputs, or other essential items. The aid pipeline is often vulnerable to problems with funding and logistics that mean goods are delivered in reduced volumes, late, or not at all. Refugees in camps may take every opportunity to supplement this international aid, but their initiatives may be very constrained by the rules of the camp, such as those that restrict mobility or prevent refugees keeping livestock.

THE ENCAMPMENT TURN

Such arguments drawing on the experience from many different settings suggest that self-settlement can and does play a very important role in the response to refugee crises. Where it is supported by the local population and it does not present a significant security threat, self-settlement has the potential to satisfy the concerns outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Moreover, the statistics suggests that many thousands of refugees are self-settled and it is only a minority that are housed in camps. Nonetheless, encampment remains fixed as the central pillar of refugee policy for states and aid agencies across Africa and Asia. This raises the question of why it has become so embedded in the mind-sets of those involved in refugee aid policy. A common rationale for the use of camps is to refer to the concerns about finding the best of providing protection for refugees without undermining the rights to security and livelihoods of the host population. However, as I have shown, in some contexts self-settlement may address these as well as, or better than, encampment. This suggests that other factors must also be at work.

Where did the idea of putting refugees in camps come from? It may have become standard practice today, but refugee camps have a pedigree that is far removed from the humanitarian sphere. The response of encampment can be clearly identified with techniques of control and oppression used by various states throughout the twentieth century. The camp as a form of control has a much longer history in military use. The encampment of civilians was notoriously adopted as a tactic by the British in the Anglo-Boer War 1900–2 (Krebs 1992). The term ‘concentration camp’ was later adopted by the Nazi regime in Germany as part of its strategy of genocide in the Second World War. The idea of the *camp* as a controlled space housing people in wartime continues: whether for enemies (prisoner of war camps, internment camps, Guantanamo Bay, re-education camps in Vietnam and Cambodia) or civilians affected by war (refugee camps, ‘protected villages’).

For all these horrors associated with encampment, it has become established as part of the state’s bureaucratic response to dealing with temporary crises where people are seen to be out of place, either in a place of danger or creating danger for others. The camp perhaps fills the imagination of the official faced with such problems. At the same time, this history also warns that the technology of the camp—the array of systems to manage and organize the space and those living within it—is fundamentally flawed with respect to human rights. It seems impossible to require people to live in such a space, withdraw their right to exit, and not create an environment for the abuse of rights; many have argued that this ‘warehousing’ of refugees is inimical to upholding their human rights (Smith 2004).

A second consideration that ensures encampment is favoured by states—in particular by host states—is the politics of aid. In many developing countries, and especially the least developed, the arrival of large numbers of refugees is accompanied by an international humanitarian response that sets out to provide for the basic needs of water, food,

sanitation, shelter, and so forth. Such humanitarian aid for refugees involves a considerable transfer of resources. It also introduces a set of actors who have been immersed in the history of practice centred on camps. Refugee camps become a recognizable and familiar world for aid agencies and their creation enables a set of routines and systems to be established that facilitates smooth operations. For host governments who request international assistance in responding to refugees, the expectation that that there will be camps may be irresistible: Zetter (1995) recounts how international aid brought refugee camps to Malawi.

Moreover, aid that is focused on refugees will only flow as long as refugees are visible. Once refugees are in camps, for host states there are few incentives to allow them to move outside, where they may become integrated into the local host population. In due course the rationale for providing special refugee aid—rather than aid to the wider population—may disappear. In contrast, a refugee camp can be presented as a problem that requires ongoing funds for support that generates jobs, contracts, and overheads. For aid agencies that have received funds for helping refugees, working in a refugee camp makes it much easier for them to account for their work.

Donors, aid agencies, and host states have performed a long-standing dialogue about the problems of refugees caught in camps for long periods—so-called protracted refugee situations (see Milner, this volume). Much of this has been concerned with enhancing refugee rights in camps, enabling them more freedom to develop livelihoods and reducing their reliance on aid. In an initiative launched over 30 years ago, the 1981 International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA) and its successor ICARA II in 1984 debated self-reliance and introduced the idea of incorporating refugees in national development projects. Such ideas have resurfaced in the last decade with UNHCR’s Convention Plus initiative, again with a strong focus on self-reliance. Throughout such discussions, there has been no suggestion that refugees should be allowed to leave camps and most host states, especially in Africa, have been adamantly against the integration of refugees.

This history of practice and the politics of aid contribute to make encampment as the default policy response. Above all, refugee camps segregate refugees from citizens, thereby upholding the primacy of the nation state as the arbiter of refugees’ fate and ensuring that they are maintained as people amenable to management. ‘The function of modern international organisations is to manage refugee populations in a manner that does not radically undermine the framework on which the nation-state rests’ (Owens 2009: 571). The camp therefore plays a critical role, not only in upholding the symbolic power of the state³ but also in constructing the idea of the ‘refugee’ that is reproduced by institutional practice and discourse.

This idea of the camp as a locus of power and abuse of power has been reinforced through academic discourse, where it constantly appears as a trope in literature drawing on the work of Foucault (1979), Arendt (1958), and Agamben (1998, 2005). Agamben has become particularly influential in making commonplace the idea of the camps as a ‘place of exception’, where refugees are reduced to ‘bare life’ to be subject to control as bodies without any regard for their humanity. Although such research has cast

extremely valuable light on abuses and contradictions embedded in humanitarian aid, it has resulted in forced migration scholars working in poorer regions of the world focusing almost exclusively on camps. Hence, camps are deplored but the alternatives are little known or considered.

CONCLUSION

Academic arguments turn around the extent to which it is ever necessary to use refugee camps and who bears the main responsibility for their continued widespread adoption, whether it is host states, aid agencies, or donors. What is clear is that the responsibility for so many refugees remaining outside camps and settling themselves usually seems to lie with the refugees and the local society in which they settle. Given that the violations of people's rights observed in camps are so widespread, the fact that the majority manage to stay outside is something to be celebrated.

At the same time, it is important to remember that self-settlement is not readily available to all refugees. Even where self-settlement may be open to some, others may prefer to sacrifice some of their autonomy for the institutional support they can receive from aid agencies in camps. Many refugees arrive with very little having had to abandon their wealth as they fled. In addition, their social networks are likely to have been fractured as they fled and they may find themselves separated from family and friends who may have offered critical support at home. For example, elderly, disabled, or chronically sick people may struggle to re-establish new lives by themselves. Even if they do manage to stay together, their family may find it impossible to offer the required support in the face of the additional stresses caused by flight. For such people, some centralized aid provision, perhaps delivered in a refugee camp may provide an essential safety net.

One problem is that these discussions tend to revolve around these two approaches—encampment and self-settlement—as if they are mutually exclusive and represent the only conceivable possibilities. Where some refugees from a group settle themselves while others reside in camps, there is evidence (Van Damme 1999; Kaiser 2006) that critical interrelationships can develop between the two spaces with the continuous transfer of people and resources between them. The camp may offer a welfare safety net to some degree, while self-settlement opens up the door to much stronger livelihoods. Individual refugees may move between the camp and a settlement at different points in their lives. Hence, camp and settlement are not so separate, and perhaps there is plenty of room for new approaches that cover the space in between.

It is not difficult to envisage different models for delivering humanitarian assistance that enable refugees to live within the wider community. This may not entail delivering aid to individual refugees so much as ensuring that assistance is given that offsets any additional costs created by the added population. This may be particularly focused on expanding services such as education and healthcare and reduce the requirement for

food aid. At the same time, where there is a need for refugees to be housed separately, it must be feasible to ensure their rights are upheld—and if it is impossible, there can be no justification for camps.

When it comes to developing a settlement policy for refugees, neither encampment nor self-settlement can be seen as good in themselves. The main concern is not about the settlement form so much as the freedom of refugees to choose how they live—exercising the same freedoms available to other citizens and immigrants. For now, the narrow focus on camps and limited work on self-settlement means that valuable lessons on how refugees are being received and settled to find temporary and perhaps even durable solutions—potentially outside any state interventions—are being lost.

NOTES

1. Here I am concerned with the treatment of refugees, whose claim to asylum is acknowledged by the state, rather than asylum seekers in wealthy states, who are often subject to severe constraints, including detention.
2. Miller and Simmons (1999).
3. This symbolic power—to demand that refugees stay in camps—may not directly relate to the actual power over refugees' actions, i.e. to make them stay in the camps.

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