

Ungoverned, Unfair, Unacceptable: A UN Solution to Refugee Distribution



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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the pressing issue of refugee and asylum seeker distribution, highlighting the flaws in current policies that rely on a limited number of countries to bear the burden of refugees. It proposes a globally unified approach coordinated by the United Nations, utilizing an algorithm based on GDP, population density, and habitable land size to ensure equitable distribution. The paper emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive strategy that includes incentive-based systems, long-term planning, and holistic assessments to create a fair and humane refugee distribution process.

KEYWORDS: refugee distribution, United Nations, global refugee crisis, equitable distribution, humanitarian aid strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the terms refugee and asylum seeker are often used synonymously, there are key differences between the two; both asylum seekers and refugees are those who have left their country seeking protection from persecution, yet the key difference is that an asylum seeker is awaiting to be legally recognised as a refugee which grants them with international protection (1). Awaiting a visa, these people are held in detention facilities both within and outside Australia for an average of 806 days (January 2023) (2) where they are forced to endure sparse and subpar access to healthcare, affecting them both mentally and physically.

In this article, we will suggest a range of policies dedicated to alleviating and bettering the abysmal situation of these already vulnerable groups. These policies are underpinned by the following principles; coordinating a globally unified approach to the refugee issue; and distributing refugees to countries based on important factors such as geographical proximity, and GDP amongst other factors.

The aforementioned principles will be used to address the issues of the current lack of regulation surrounding the intake of refugees requires a systematic level of governance and regulation which we posit should be overlooked by world organisations such as the United Nations; and when coordinating policies targeted at refugee relief and equitable distribution for countries, important factors such as GDP, population, habitable land mass and proximity to nearby countries with people seeking refuge must be considered.

2. DISCUSSION

I. The current ungoverned refugee distribution is unacceptable.

The current situation of refugees around the world shows uneven distribution amongst countries. Certain countries have significantly larger amounts of refugees than other countries, with trends such as geographical accessibility to refugees favouring a greater amount of refugees (4). Some countries have refugees exclusively from a certain group, such as a specific race or religion, and will actively turn away refugees who do not fall within this category. Ultimately, due to a lack of equity in distribution and potential favouritism and bias when selecting which refugees to take in, the current distribution of refugees is inherently flawed. The majority of the world's refugees reside in their neighbouring countries. Five countries alone (Turkiyë, Iran, Colombia, Germany and Pakistan) hold 38% of the world's refugees, while 70% of refugees are hosted in neighbouring countries (5). This suggests an unfair association with the number of refugees and proximity to their country of origin. This effectively means that nations that have the means of housing a multiplicity of refugees but are geographically inaccessible to refugees, will bear no role in housing said refugees. This association is not necessarily a rule since Canada, which is geographically distant from all the current refugee hotspots of the world, houses a large number of refugees (4). Compare this to Australia, which shares the financial prosperity of

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Canada but does not share in its number of refugees (6). If countries such as Australia, with the means of housing refugees, increased their intake then there would be fewer refugees in the countries that are currently housing them in large amounts. It is also important to consider the dangers of having too large amount of refugees in one country, such as overcrowding refugee camps, which present their problems such as health issues and violence towards women (7).

An interesting example of neighbouring countries housing the most refugees is Germany. Despite being geographically isolated from refugee hotspots such as Syria, Germany took in 1 million refugees using busses to carry the refugees across borders. Since this gargantuan influx of refugees, over half of them are now employed and 72% have been granted protection. This attests to the success of Germany's decision to take so many refugees from lands far from home, showing that geographical inaccessibility is not an excuse to not take in appropriate amounts of refugees. (5)

While each country reserves its right to autonomy to take refugees in, discrimination against certain groups of refugees over others should not be tolerated. Refugees come from all parts of the world, belonging to various races, ethnicities, languages, religions and other groups. There is the argument that integration is easier when the refugees share identities with the country they move to. For example, a refugee from a French-speaking country may find it significantly easier to integrate into France rather than Spain based on language alone. However, it can lead to certain groups being effectively "shunned" from certain countries. A prime example is Poland, which has opened its arms warmly to refugees from Ukraine while simultaneously demonstrating abuse and inhospitality towards Syrian refugees (8). Consequently, there must be a model that balances a country's autonomy to reject refugees with accountability for rejected refugees. Regardless of a country's decision on whether to take refugees, abuse should not be tolerated.

A recurring example of successful integration of refugees is Germany, whose 1 million refugees reported an insignificant 1% already speaking German (9) at the time of entering Germany. Now this same group of refugees have over 44% speaking proficient German, with higher levels of education than other migrants (9). Ultimately, while there have been some examples of success such as Germany and Canada, the distribution and favouritism towards certain refugees is still apparent. The current system is inherently flawed if partial success rests entirely on a few successful countries carrying the global responsibility of supporting refugees.

II. A United Nations-organised refugee distribution system will ease global refugee burdens.

The principal notion that the refugee problem is a matter of concern requiring international cooperation and burden-sharing was first highlighted in the wake of the First World War. Due to the succeeding waves of European refugees fleeing the aggressor occupation, the League of Nations 1920 - 1946, also known as the 'predecessor' of the United Nations (UN) (10), was established to coordinate and manage humanitarian efforts (11, 12). This concept was further evident in the aftermath of the Second World War attributed to the millions of refugees requiring assistance. From this, the UN temporarily established a dedicated Refugee Agency expected to operate between 1950-1953 before its planned disbandment. However, due to new refugee crises unfolding globally requiring several service extensions, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) was given permanency in 2003 (13). Since then, the UNHCR has been at the forefront of the global refugee crisis steadily assembling a set of guidelines, laws and conventions aimed at protecting the basic human rights and treatment of people forced to flee conflict and persecution (11).

The Global Trends - Forced Displaced in 2022 (14) report details that the United Nations administrates 35.3 million refugees under two agency mandates, the UNHCR and the UNRWA. This figure represents a 35 per cent increase from the previous year and remains consistent with the climbing trends of the past decade. Unfortunately, as aforementioned, the global refugee burden appears concentrated in only a few of the 28 countries scribed as contributing stockholders in the United Nations Refugee Convention 1951 (15). Accredited to its now vast network of humanitarian infrastructure, its data and logistical capability, and its unique position of having contributory governments signed to obligation, the United Nations should be the universal controlling agency for the equitable distribution of refugees thus reducing the burdens of concentration.

To ensure a cohesive transition of the system, it is proposed that the United Nations be redefined as a paternalistic entity ensuring the responsibilities of the 28 signed governments are monitored and reprimanded if a 'breach of promise' has occurred or when the central dogma of basic human rights is conflicted. Concerningly, due to an apparent lack of universal authority, recent publications display such dogma conflict reporting on certain governments' considerations to send asylum seekers abroad for processing. Although in objection, the UN Refugee Agency has urged countries not to externalise their asylum and protection obligations and warns that such practices endanger the safety of those in need of international protection (16), at present the UNHCR has negligible capability to contest such considerations.

Following the formation of leadership, a Refugee Distribution System can be assembled to safely assess, process, and facilitate the voluntary relocation and integration of refugees to agreed countries in a manner both respectful and supportive of the individual whilst also just for the receiving country. Several humanitarian advantages can be present if one agency is coordinating

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the global effort such as allowing for appropriate data collection and tracking supporting familial aspects such as reunion. Additionally, it can allow for integration with other UN agencies such as those involving healthcare or education, and lastly, it can ensure the concept of equity remains paramount throughout the system whole. These ideologies are echoed by the UNHCR which remains firmly opposed to externalisation initiatives that forcibly transfer people to other countries as this practice simply shifts responsibilities elsewhere; evades the country's moral and international obligations; and seamlessly undermines the basic human rights of those seeking safety and protection (16).

In short, there is a well-illustrated need for a universal authority, organisation, or agency to outline, orchestrate, and enforce the moral and contractual obligations encompassing refugees and their perceived burden in the global scheme. Since the expansion of the humanitarian field, the United Nations has remained a well-defined presence with an explicit declaration of unity and equity for all. Stemming from this, it is simply clear that the United Nations is the credible entity for such tasking to ease global refugee burdens.

III. Recommendations for Action.

Different nations have differing capabilities to provide aid and protection to refugees which poses an ethical dilemma that warrants a systematic, fair and pragmatic solution. This argument puts forth a proposition that member states of the United Nations (UN) make a commitment to supporting refugees concordant with an algorithm that incorporates nations' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), population density, and habitable land size. Before discussing the importance of the aforementioned criteria in determining a nation's capacity to provide refuge, it is crucial to understand what requisites should be in place to ensure the basic human rights, physical, economic, and social security of refugees. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), refugees should, as a minimum, receive the "same rights and basic help" as any other foreign legal resident (17). This includes fundamental facets of life such as access to food and water, shelter, medical care, education and occupational opportunity.

The economic prosperity of a nation is inherently linked to its ability to provide humanitarian aid to refugees and thus it is important that nations should accept a proportional share of the refugee load depending on their GDP. Typically, a higher GDP reflects increased economic output and thus greater financial resources that can be allocated toward humanitarian aid such as funding for basic care of refugees and grants to increase accessibility to education, work and medical care. For example, the correlation between a country's GDP per capita and average years of schooling provides a clear sign that, in the presence of equal opportunity for education for refugees and legal residents, an increased GDP per capita reflects an increased average year of schooling (18). Furthermore, it was found that 38% of refugees were hosted in just five countries with Turkey and Iran taking approximately 7 million refugees between them (19). When comparing this to their rankings of 19 and 43 respectively (20), it shows that the distribution of refugees is inappropriately skewed and requires intervention to shift the load on to countries that are more economically prosperous.

The demographic dimensions of a country are also important in working towards a more balanced and fair distribution of refugees. Certain nations that are more populated possess an increased ability to integrate refugees, lessening the strain on countries with limited societal frameworks. However, countries that are too heavily populated may not be able to take too many refugees without experiencing a burden to their ability to allocate resources. Thus, there is a balance that must be accounted for when allocating refugees to countries based on population size. The availability of habitable land is closely linked to the population for the successful integration of refugees into society and for appropriate living conditions. The importance of this parameter is clearly seen in Australia, which has an extremely low population density of 3.4 people per square kilometre but approximately 90% of this population occupies just 0.22% of Australia's landmass (21). This is due to the large amount of uninhabitable land and is a key reason for why nations that boast larger areas of habitable terrain should embrace larger shares of the global refugee load.

In addition to this algorithm for distributing refugee loads, we recognize the critical importance of addressing various facets of the refugee crisis through a comprehensive approach. The UN's commitment should extend beyond just numerical allocation, and it must consider a range of factors to create a fair and effective distribution process.

An innovative strategy that should be used by the UN is the implementation of incentive-based systems. This can include offering trade benefits, concessions, or preferential agreements to host countries. By combining refugee acceptance with economic incentives, nations may be motivated to participate in a more equitable distribution of the refugee population. This approach acknowledges the multidimensional nature of the refugee crisis by seeking to appease the interests of host countries while also satisfying the goal of sharing the refugee burden.

To maintain a sustainable approach to refugee management, long-term planning is critical. We propose that the UN must develop comprehensive, forward-looking plans that account for more than just immediate placement. These plans should emphasise social integration, understanding that refugees are not numbers to be allocated, but people seeking a new life and they must be given a chance to contribute positively to their host countries.

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Lastly, we propose that the UN should use holistic assessments when distributing refugees, in line with its commitment to human rights. This means that refugee distribution must be based on a multifaceted evaluation that encompasses not only numerical considerations but also detailed consideration of the host country's human rights standards and geopolitical stability.

To summarise, we put forward that the UN's approach to refugee distribution must extend beyond the proposed algorithm, reflecting a comprehensive and empathetic strategy. By implementing incentive-based systems, long-term planning, and holistic assessments, we aim to create a more flexible, fair, and humane refugee distribution process that will uphold the dignity of refugees, create global cooperation, and ensure that the refugee burden is shared justly throughout the world.

3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, when looking at the evidence, it becomes apparent that the issue of refugee and asylum seeker help and distribution is an ongoing issue that requires the coordination of new and/or amended policies in order to address it. If more positive outcomes are to be achieved, the following changes must be considered.

I. Current policies are flawed because they rely on a select number of countries to take on the onus and bear the brunt of refugee distribution, irrespective of their financial, geographical means etc. This paper outlined the importance of a more globally unified effort which would allow for a more equitable distribution. Beyond this, it is reasonable to believe that a more spread-out delegation of refugees and asylum seekers would alleviate other issues such as overcrowding and violence targeted towards women, both of which have significant secondary health impacts.

II. This paper also outlined the importance of selecting an organisation with the global and legislative power to enforce the policies previously mentioned. Delegating this power to a global organisation would make countries accountable whilst also giving members within the committee to represent their individual nations and voice any concerns they may have. In accordance with the global and legislative necessities, we have deemed the United Nations a suitable organisation for this role.

III. Due to the magnitude and ongoing nature of these issues it is also imperative that policymakers take into account individual nation's long-term capacity for refugee hospitality. Financial factors (gauged by a nation's GDP), as well as geographical measures (habitable land mass), are two obvious factors that must be considered.

Overall, refugee and asylum seeker health has been inadequately addressed by current policies due to two main shortcomings: the first being a lack of a global and equitable effort and a lack of a governing authority. To ensure that future policies are more effective there must be an overseeing global organisation that fairly delegates refugee numbers after taking into consideration countries' financial and geographical means.

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