

ADVANCING GOOD GOVERNANCE in International Development

Peace, Security, and Governance in Goal 16: How Do We Tackle This?

9 – 10 June 2016

Rhodes House, Oxford

Master Class: Oxford Department of International Development: Goal 16 and the Challenges of Long-term Displacement: How Refugees Can Contribute to Peace, Security and Governance

In this Master Class, Alexander Betts, Leopold Muller Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs at the University of Oxford, explored a number of issues involving refugees and displaced persons in the context of the major themes of Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals, including peace, security, and governance. He challenged the current dialog that considers refugees and displaced persons as merely a burden on the social, political and economic environments where they reside, calling for a reframed discourse that sees them as a contributor to development. Betts argued that refugees can be critical agents of development and that they can be important contributors to progress with Goal 16.

Key Points from the Session

- 1. The causes of displacement have created new challenges regarding the status of those crossing borders.** There is a new set of drivers of displacement today that have led to new challenges of categorization. First, there is the increasing number of fragile states, many of which fail to provide good governance, resulting in large numbers of people on the move. Second, there is increased fluidity and heightened opportunities to travel both legally and illegally through various channels. Both drivers lead to “survival migration,” and people who are neither refugees in the traditional legal sense nor voluntary economic migrants. Governments do not yet know how to respond to this new category of migration. The situation has led to confusion about how to think about the new phenomenon, and questions about which individuals have an entitlement to cross borders as a last resort.
- 2. The current systems we have in place for refugees are inadequate.** The humanitarian system as currently constructed is poorly adapted to respond to refugees. It was set up to provide emergency relief (food, clothing, shelter, and water) on a short term basis. The reality is that displaced persons now spend many years in contexts of displacement, often leading to a waste of human potential, and in some cases generating threats to security. There are three general responses to this context currently in effect: repatriation to the individual's country of origin, which is often impossible; resettlement to a third country, which is available only to a small percentage of individuals; and local integration, an approach to which many host countries are resistant. The result is that many displaced persons are left in intractable states of limbo. Today, most are not in camps, but in urban areas. Yet our assistance models are designed around the construct of camps, resulting in many urban displaced persons being denied access to assistance and other forms of support. A new model is required.
- 3. Five myths about refugees disproven through a Ugandan case study.** The self-reliance strategy used in Uganda allows refugees the right to work and a significant degree of movement, and provides a unique data set that challenges five myths about refugees. First, the idea that refugees are an inevitable burden. In Kampala, there are some 21% of refugee-run businesses that employ others, and 40% of those are Ugandans. Refugees in the country are actually providing real jobs for host nationals. Second, the idea that the economic lives of refugees are geographically isolated. In fact, refugees are part of international economic supply chains even in the camps, for example importing tuna fish from Thailand. Third, the idea that refugee economic lives are homogenous. Whereas most Ugandans cultivate agricultural plots, many refugees do

not want to be farmers, and instead sublet or build a shop. They are adding to commerce and starting businesses. Fourth, the idea that refugees are technologically illiterate. There is a great deal of internet usage on devices by refugees, who use it not just for social purposes, but for core primary activities like business livelihoods. Fifth, the idea that refugees are inevitably dependent. Less than one percent of refugee households have no source of independent income. They do not live on handouts, but invest remittances and use them to make more money. The Ugandan case provides an example of how to empower refugees to help themselves and to make refugees a part of development in their host countries.

- 4. Refugees are important political actors who should be taken seriously by the international community.** Although refugees often do not participate in the political process in their home countries, their engagement with that process continues when it shifts outside of the state. The way we treat refugees in exile has direct effects on home countries not only because they may return, but also because they engage around the world in diaspora communities, and often have significant political power. Unfortunately, the international community has made systematic errors by failing to understand these groups or take them seriously. Going forward, the international community should focus on cultivating understanding of this issue so as not to replicate mistakes of the past. In fact, there are historical but forgotten examples of successful linkages between refugees and development, peace, and security. The International Conference on Refugees in Central America (CIREFCA) of 1989 empowered grass roots initiatives for Guatemalan refugees to begin projects in Mexico, and were able to make them a part of the development and peace processes for the region in a way we have since struggled to emulate.

Emerging Questions

- 1.** How can we cultivate in local communities (and the politicians representing them) a more sophisticated understanding of the contributions to their societies refugees and displaced persons can make, and thereby work to avoid the dynamics of xenophobia that dominate this challenging issue?
- 2.** How can countries take proactive steps to prepare for future displaced persons, rather than following the purely reactive approach we have now?
- 3.** How can we focus on creating an enabling environment for refugees to help them find solutions to their own challenges on their own terms, rather than getting caught up in broad solutions that provide something for everyone but help no one specifically?
- 4.** How can we encourage governments and international organizations to develop a new skill set keyed in to this new environment that better enables us to diagnose problems and find solutions?