

# World view

## Give refugees dignity, wherever they are



By Serena Parekh

**Displaced children and adults can wait decades to return home or resettle – research and policy must catch up.**

**M**ore than four million people have fled Ukraine since Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion. Half the nation's children are displaced. It is crucial to study states' moral obligations around asylum and resettlement and to consider how these outcomes affect individual well-being, public health, economics and political stability. Yet in focusing on these end points too narrowly, researchers and policymakers can overlook another set of extremely important questions.

What happens to someone who has become a refugee while they wait to join a new country or to return home? On average, a person remains a refugee for more than a decade – 25 years for those fleeing war. Fewer than 1% of the world's 26.6 million refugees are resettled each year. In their book *Refuge* (2017), Alexander Betts and Paul Collier estimated that the world spends around US\$75 billion on the 10% who seek asylum in wealthy countries, and just \$5 billion on the remaining 90%. In this liminal state, the problems of how refugees live, how they are treated by host countries and their citizens, and whether they have access to basic human rights are, in my experience, insufficiently addressed by scholars, policymakers and concerned members of the public.

The solutions found for Ukrainians bear scrutiny. What was unthinkable two months ago – that Europe could feed, house and economically integrate a huge number of refugees quickly and with little animosity – has become a reality. What happens next and how such creativity might be replicated elsewhere are worthy of attention.

As I showed in my second book on the ethics of the global refugee crisis, *No Refuge* (2020), most displaced people face three options: camps; urban centres; or dangerous journeys in search of permanent residency or citizenship. None of these gives individuals a minimum level of dignity.

Most refugee camps are meant to be temporary. Consequently, when they become long-term structures, they often lack adequate food, health care, meaningful work or security (notably against gender-based violence). The Dadaab site in Kenya, for example, was built in 1991 to shelter 90,000 people fleeing civil war in Somalia, but housed half a million at its peak. Three decades on, generations have been born and raised there. In 2015, food rations were 30% less than the minimum recommended by the United Nations.

More than 60% of refugees thus prefer to live informally in towns and cities. Here, fewer than one in ten have access

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to aid. They live precariously, without schooling, health care or routes to citizenship.

Some try to reach Europe, the United States or Australia to apply for asylum. These regions have brutal deterrence policies. More than 20,000 migrants have died crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa and Turkey to Italy, Spain and Greece since 2014. People escaping war in Syria and Afghanistan, including women and children, have been beaten back from Europe with water cannons, tear gas, guard dogs and razor-wire fences.

Even after refugees apply for asylum, they often have to live in degrading conditions. The Moria refugee camp in Greece, Europe's largest until it burnt down in 2020, had been likened to an open-air prison: overcrowded, with appalling sanitary conditions, rampant infectious diseases, and violence. Children as young as ten had attempted suicide.

The suffering of the Ukrainian people is immense. The response – compassion, solidarity and bureaucratic efficiency – should serve as a model for how the world accommodates all refugees. Within the first week of the war, Poland and other neighbours of Ukraine ran free trains and built reception centres; locals greeted arrivals with bowls of borscht and teddy bears; systems were set up to connect refugees with citizens willing to house and feed them; and online job boards matched Ukrainians seeking work with employers across Europe.

The most heartening development came less than two weeks after Russia invaded: the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive. This protocol gives Ukrainian refugees access to important social goods without the long process of applying for asylum. They receive the ability to live and move freely in the EU, and the rights to work, education and health care. The status is granted for one year, renewable for up to three.

These rights are precisely what traumatized Ukrainians need and deserve, and precisely what the vast majority of the world's refugees lack. Such provisions are not sufficient for thriving. But they are necessary for dignity.

In short, the innovations giving assistance to displaced Ukrainians must continue, and must spread beyond cultural-affinity groups, to non-European refugees in Europe and elsewhere who have experienced similar trauma and violence. Nations' duties under international agreements extend beyond asylum, to the 90%: those living 'temporarily' in urban centres and camps. These people, too, need quality health care, education and ways to work and move freely.

Politicians and citizens have a moral obligation to provide all refugees with the basic conditions of dignity, without discrimination – no matter what their national origin or religious background.

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