



Trajectories of Displacement

Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute
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The Seminar explored various issues of displacement and the humanitarian responses to them, themed around “trajectories” and “encounters”; it proved a rich environment for sharing ideas about particular contexts and exploring broader, generalising themes.

The opening paper established an overview of the idea of trajectories as it applies to displaced people and discussed four components of this phenomenon– survival, reception regimes, return and memory. The emphasis was placed on the agency of the population in question and their status as “victims” was questioned.

As an example of the phenomenon of survival, the paper argued that the displaced are often seen as suffering from mental distress, commonly described as post traumatic stress disorder but unhappiness should not be equated with depression. A lot of people, especially women, must find strength for their family, they need to provide for, and this does not allow time to reflect on their situation or on the idea of loss or trauma.

In reference to reception, there is a difference in discourse between governments and inter-governmental and non-governmental actors. While UNHCR might ascribe the status of “refugee” to a given population, governments may consider the same people as illegal entrants, or economic migrants, people with no rights who entered the country with no papers. So even within “the reception regime” the status of groups or individuals remains contested.

With reference to the concept of “return”, the paper argued that, contrary to the belief of some, not everyone wishes to return back to their place of origin, the displaced have minds of their own, their need for survival and progression does not always fit within the frame of reference established by international agreements on the management of refugees.

The last point was dedicated to memory, here the paper argued that the memory project is a political one which tends to idealise the lost place and serves to mobilise the community (especially children) around the idea of identity. Nostalgia does not deprive refugees of memories of difficult times, but accounts of the past can be reprocessed, memories are undergoing constant re-workings as they respond to ideas and the demands of the reception regimes as well as the collective and individual needs of communities. The process of displacement is one of readjustment.

Defining the displaced: Forced Migration, Status and Labelling

Whilst the legal concept of “Convention Status” as defined in the 1952 Refugee Convention, is well known, there is also the phenomenon of a “Conventional Refugee”. This concept melds the issue of legal status and the bureaucracy of forced migration and recognises that the experience of obtaining status leads itself to a kind of “performance” that colours the behaviours, thoughts and identities of the displaced. This idea can be seen in theatre about refugee/asylum issues and in the discourse of refugees themselves.

The question of status and belonging was further explored with reference to Eritrean refugees living in Tel Aviv and internally displaced communities in Colombia. In Israel, the Eritreans are not treated as conventional refugees or asylum seekers, they are given short-term, renewable rights to remain. Though they do not have an official right to work many do, taking casual, low-paid positions. In this way their lived status is more akin to that of economic migrants, or rather transmigrants, as their position is insecure and they are, therefore, necessarily transient. This brings up questions about cosmopolitanism, the lived lives of these individuals perhaps have a closer relationship with the idea of the global, or cosmopolitan citizen than it does the conventional citizen.

In Colombia, displacement is said to end when one is resettled or when one returns. This view puts the emphasis on the meaning of ‘place’ as territory, undermining more social interpretations of place that include relationships, economic opportunity, culture and security. The nature of relations with the recipient community, the anxiety caused by continuing insecurity and the threat of further displacement all impinge on the process of home-making or “resettlement”.

Space

Several participants reflected on their encounters with refugees and discussed the physical, political and professional space that influences interactions between aid workers and refugees. One participant reflected on her encounters with the displaced in Calais, where conditions are desperate, people often sleep outside in open space and are often raided by police. Migrants in such situation suffer from deteriorating health, are categorised as vagrant or delinquent and, sometimes, criminalised. Their situation has important implications for the potential for integration both for them and their descendents. How will their story be told and how will this affect their future social being?

Participants also discussed the physical spaces of refugee camps compared to informal settlements. Spaces such as “drop-in” centres were cited as spaces where the narratives of belonging can be advanced. These discussions focused on how physical spaces and the “performances” that go on in them , especially between the refugee and supporter can work to create a sense of belonging, a sense of shared space and equality or a sense of separation, hierarchy and division. In addition individual professional roles impact on the types of interactions available between aid workers and beneficiaries. Sometimes the roles allow for a broad range of content, occasionally for a depth of contact, sometimes for the “gift of presence”, recognition of empathy, solidarity or support. However, it is rare that these interactions achieve a sense of equality, they are bounded by power relationships which are only sometimes consciously understood and are rarely discussed or accounted for in analyses of humanitarian interaction. The conceptualisations of dependence and vulnerability can easily be reinforced as can the impression that aid workers and beneficiaries have the same goals.

Economics of displacement

It should be remembered that also elites can be affected by displacement and not only the typical (conventional) refugee. The super rich displace their wealth, economic and financial relationships and resources outside the country, often using secrecy jurisdictions such as tax havens. The wealthy are therefore displaced from the upper echelons of their economies which they leave to join a privatised international space where money is situated and moved around in a regime of utmost secrecy. For many resource poor countries, this leads to what the presenter called the ‘development of underdevelopment’ as business people fearing acquisition, expropriation or deliberate industrial sabotage, and who will not ‘deal’ with the predatory regimes in their home states are forced to take the informal route and displace their assets to hidden virtual/ offshore havens.

Final Words

Participants summed up deliberations.

Workforce and volunteers: The seminar expressed a view that the power of volunteers should come under consideration. Many young volunteers, though well trained and full of goodwill find themselves in positions of power. This produces a social situation that needs to be studied. It is often too unilaterally dealt with but should be opened up to a wider debate.

The notion of borders: The expression 'without borders' is gradually becoming clichéd and is under threat of turning into a political programme rather than the allegory that was originally intended with *Medicine sans Frontier*. Borders are often viewed as something which makes the world less homogenous or less fluid and that is why they should be transcended. But if the concept is allowed to become a political programme which challenges sovereignty or the jurisdiction of countries, it has the potential to throw up complex moral and political questions.

Causes of displacement: Violence as the root of displacement is over-emphasised and there is an element of normativity in implying that without violence, everybody will remain in their places of origin, whereas clearly there are many forms of migration and migrations often represent aspects of both "forced" and "chosen" destinies. The participants also noted that emergency/state of emergency are problematic notions. Practical observation shows that many problems are branded as emergencies when they do not bear many of the critical elements that compel urgent and immediate concerted responses.

Local knowledge: The idea that local people have an intuitive or empirical knowledge of local situations by default should not be automatically adopted. Field experiences sometimes suggest that local people find local professionals (who are often urbanized) can be nasty and condescending and are not always trusted.