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Gaps in Policies, Chasms for Refugees

Background

An open-door policy, free primary education, health care, monthly rations and cash. Sounds like a perfect policy recipe for integration of refugees with their local communities. However, for more than twenty years since Kebri Beyah camp was established, refugees living there are still financially unstable and far from integration. Why are the steps taken by various governmental and non-governmental organizations still proving ineffective? This essay attempts to answer this question by diving into the chasm between policy making and policy implementation for the case of the Somali region in Ethiopia.

We will analyze which policies, programs, and initiatives have worked, which have not, and why.

Analysis

UNHCR Ration Cards

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) distributes monthly rations to each refugee household in the camp. According to the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) officials, the ration includes:

- Vegetable Oil – 0.9 kg/person/month
- Pulses – 1.5 kg/person/month
- Salt – 0.15 kg/person/month

This ration is a big support system for all refugees in the camp.

However, despite the claims made by ARRA, refugees complained of receiving different rations in different months from UNHCR. Sometimes they would receive oats, sometimes wheat, sometimes rice, and rarely oil, making it difficult for them to plan their monthly budget. Not only is the quality unpredictable, but also the quantity. Sometimes, one food item is provided in a quantity barely sufficient for a family. Other times, massive quantities are provided, leading to a black market where refu-

gees sell extra rations. Many refugee women admitted to selling rations frequently.

Also, many households complained about the erratic system of acquiring a new UNHCR ration card, or adding a new family member to the card. This becomes especially complicated for new marriages. Adding a family member to the card and removing her name from the ID of her previous family takes months. During this time, she becomes a burden on the new household, as she cannot receive her ration and has to survive on the limited rations of the already existing family.

UNHCR could ensure that there are no delays in adding family members after a marriage, birth, or death. If it were a hassle-free and fast process, then it could allow UNHCR to ensure that each member of the family has access to a basic food basket at all times. There could also be a mechanism for ensuring consistency in ration distribution. In the case of shortage of supplies, the refugees could be informed ahead of time.

Location: No Jobs Land

Despite that fact that the Kebri Beyah camp is more than twenty years old, its physical link to the nearest major city (Jijiga) is weak.

While there are a few small villages in the immediate vicinity of the camp, there are no towns or villages in between Kebri Beyah and Jijiga. The area in between is either barren, grassland, or mountains. Also, the road connecting these camps to the main city is poorly constructed, making for a difficult passage even in daylight and restricting movement after sunset. The rainy season further disrupts travel.

The problem becomes exaggerated when the few, small villages surrounding the camps have very limited opportunities themselves. This has led to tension between host populations and refugees. This competition for jobs in areas nearby forces locals to make the long journey to reach Jijiga city to try their luck there.

An all season-road is urgently needed to connect these camps to Jijiga for jobs as well as for emergency services. Refugees are regularly employed in local ARRA and UNHCR offices as construction workers. Willing refugees could help construct a better road. This will give them additional employment and reduce the burden on the government to gather human capital from other cities.

Frequent Electricity Failures

The only way electricity reaches these regions is through the national grid, which keeps failing. This makes the lives and livelihoods of refugees, host communities, and serving organisations very difficult.

Limited Water Supply

According to ARRA, the closest water supply near the Kebri Beyah camp is 22 Km away. The water supply is also dependent on the national electricity grid, so power failures also limit water access.

Understanding the Complex Demography of Somali Region

The Somali region of Ethiopia comes with its own difficult history and present security risks.

As per a report by *The Economist*, before August 2018, the Somali region was the most ill-treated place in all of Ethiopia, “tyrannised by its then state president, Abdi Mohamed Omar, who had waged a scorched-earth campaign against secessionist rebels for more than a decade.” The reason for these rebellions was explained in our interviews with refugees and locals alike; as ethnic Somalis, they still find their identities more strongly tied to Somalia than to Ethiopia.¹

According to the Census of Ethiopia, more than 97% of the population in the Somali region has Somali ethnicity. Most of the refugees in Kebri Beyah are from Somalia, which means the two groups speak the same language and represent the same clans. This generates a dynamic between refugees and the local population, which is distinct from most host community-refugee relationships.

¹ Ethiopia's most repressive state is reforming; Oct 3rd 2019 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/10/03/ethiopias-most-repressive-state-is-reforming>

A few respondents spoke about marriages made between local communities and refugees for the purposes of receiving the benefits issued by organizations like ARRA and UNHCR, as well as international NGOs. These marriages are socially acceptable when the locals and refugees belong to the same clan.

However, this has given rise to an unexpected problem for organisations working to help refugees. In order to receive benefits from UNHCR and ARRA, locals often fake their identification documents so they can pass as refugees. Since it is hard to prove otherwise, they receive the ID cards, creating competition for limited resources.

Conclusion

While strong policies, programs and institutions are in place, it important to continuously check their effectiveness and efficiency. Catering to basic needs like food, water, electricity and health care is important, but creating accessible jobs is a priority. Processes around food security and identity need to be streamlined to see a robust relationship between host populations and refugees, which is a first step toward integration.



The author would like to thank the International Rescue Committee and Open Society Foundations for supporting and funding this research. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.