

Introduction: Refugees, Agency and Social Transformation

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Refugees and the Transformation of Societies is about cultures and societies in change, in the process of producing, refusing or receiving refugees. It explores experiences, interpretations and practices of 'refugees', 'internally displaced' and 'returnees' in or emerging from societies in violent conflict. It also addresses ethics and politics of interventions by professionals and policy makers. Contributions elicit specific contexts, histories, conflicts and negotiations in which refugees take part in the course of their flight and resettlement. Authors highlight the extremely dynamic nature of situations where refugees, policy makers and practitioners interact in trying to construct new livelihoods in transforming societies.

The main aim of this volume is to present empirical realities and policy discourses, to challenge prevailing orthodoxies and to encourage new developments in refugee studies and practices. There is a need for reconceptualising notions of migration and refugees, presuppositions about actors and their identities, and the impact of migration on identities and practices of receiving societies. We have reason to believe that the notions of agency and social transformation, central to such an undertaking, contribute to a more adequate, strategic and dynamic understanding of how refugees succeed in remaking their livelihoods, or, for that matter, in surviving a camp environment.

Agency

The notion of agency centralises people, conceptualised as social actors who process their own experiences and those of others while acting upon these experiences. 'Agency implies both a certain knowledgeable ability, whereby experiences and desires are reflexively interpreted and internalised (consciously or otherwise), and the capability to command relevant skills, access to material and non-material resources and engage in particular organising practices' (Long 2001: 49). Moreover, agency forms a sharp contrast to the more established approaches where refugees are pictured as passive victims of violence and disaster, or as mere recipients of relief aid. Making agency central is helpful to avoid undue generalisations. There are regional, gender, age and other differences in experiences and there are differential responses to forced displacement. Some refugees do not recognise the (new) opportunities available to them, due to trauma and loss of resources. Others seem to fare better. Individual decisions, experiences and life courses have to be seen as part of a larger cultural, sociopolitical and environmental framework that holds advantages as well as constraints.

Agency does not only refer to refugees, however. In this volume we also highlight other social actors, notably politicians, bureaucrats, policy makers and practitioners. What they do or fail to do, in relation to refugees, does influence prevailing practices and discourses, and, hence, the actual life worlds of refugees. Our approach claims space for moral responsibility and accountability. Thereby, we are not only critical of things that have gone wrong, but we also highlight examples that address the need to rehumanise and transform existing structures and policies. How do policy makers and practitioners perceive of their work with respect to refugees and the internally displaced? What roles do they play in countries in conflict as well as in host societies? How do they relate to refugees and the internally displaced?

The concept of agency, as used in this volume, has four dimensions. Firstly, it allows for revisiting formal and legal concepts and categories of forced displacement used in the literature and in international conventions. Bureaucracies dealing with refugees are ill suited to accommodate the more dynamic and actor-focused image of reality that emerges from the case studies in this volume.

Secondly, the notion of agency is quite pertinent where issues of identity and social relationships are concerned. We want to draw attention to the fact that in the process of violent conflict and forced displacement existing relationships and identities are challenged and may be transformed as a result. Here, it is essential to understand agency in a gender-specific way, because perceptions of gender and gendered identities change in the process of being displaced or living in exile. Also age and religion, as some case studies elucidate, impact on the ways in which indi-

viduals and groups renegotiate and reconstruct notions of femininity and masculinity, of 'self' and 'other'.

A third dimension related to the notion of agency is the finding that flight and refugee camp life, apart from causing losses and traumas, can also have some gains. Case studies highlight the circumstances under which refugees and displaced people develop more sophisticated awareness of their social situation and grow assertive in negotiating social space. Escape from hegemonic political structures and the redefinition of gender identities in camp environments have, in a number of cases, demonstrably reinforced women's social, political and economic empowerment and emancipation. Often, these achievements become more permanent assets after return. One of the questions then is how one can give practical support to these and other transformations.

A fourth dimension of agency questions the way politicians, policy makers and practitioners in host societies react to state-imposed restrictions on the extent and nature of refugee support. Do they acknowledge and respect refugees as capable actors or are they operating on the basis of stereotyped images, and top-down procedures that lead to passivity and dependence? Policy makers and practitioners are often situated between, on the one hand, the realities and needs of the refugees and the attendant (inter) national agreements and conventions, and, on the other hand, bureaucratic regimes, reluctant and hostile environments, political restrictions, and shortages of material and personnel.

Social Transformation

Agency, in this volume concerning migrations and 'refugeeness', can be instrumental in forging social transformations. Since the beginning of human history, people have moved around searching for better or safer homes, sometimes willingly, but more often under pressure. Migration and flight have always formed part of sociopolitical and environmental change, and it is therefore crucial to acknowledge the historical dimensions of 'refugeeness' (cf. Lammers 1999: 16–18). This awareness helps us to do away with explicit and implicit images of 'displacement as an anomaly in the life of an otherwise "whole", stable, sedentary society' (Malkki 1995: 508). On the contrary, (forced) migration and social transformation throughout human history can be considered the 'normal' state of affairs. The notion of social transformation is therefore central to our analysis, and people's agency in our approach is directly linked to these processes of change and transformation.

There is not anything intrinsically new about the notion of social transformation. It is not unproblematic, however, as it can have very different meanings and connotations. In common usage it generally implies

notions of social and cultural changes in response to processes such as neoliberal policies, economic growth, political unrest, violent conflict and war. It can refer to the 'great transformation' in Western societies brought about by industrialisation and modernisation, or to more recent changes in connection with processes of decolonisation, nation-state formation, economic change and globalisation. However, the notion of social transformation can also be used to analyse processes and movements that run counter to the force of globalisation. It 'can be seen as the *antithesis of globalisation* in the dialectical sense that it is both an integral part of globalisation and a process that undermines its central ideologies' (Castles 2001: 15). Emphasising social transformation as a dialectical process is helpful, we feel, to understand the changing life worlds of refugees *as part of* the broader historical context in which the problems they face have been created. The present-day political construction of 'the refugee issue' tends to ignore this context, narrowing it down to simplistic cause-effect relations, thereby distorting the total problematic.

Although change and (forced) migration have always characterised human society, the global processes that have taken place during the last quarter of the twentieth century have brought about unprecedented change. Accompanied by major social transformations throughout the world in all areas of human life, globalisation has affected the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and interpersonal domains of an increasing number of people. Because of this process, old dichotomies such as 'modern and traditional', 'developed and less-underdeveloped', 'East and West', 'the South and the North' have become less extreme. It has become increasingly difficult to understand local situations and national levels as separate from their global context (Castles 2001). Although this has created enormous technical, economic and communicative possibilities for many, at the same time it has given rise to new forms of exclusion and polarisation. Violent conflict and civil war have become endemic in many societies. The number of intrastate conflicts has increased considerably. Many governments today are at war with their own civilians, who belong to ethnic or religious minorities that have taken up weapons to stand up against exclusion and discrimination. As a consequence, the nature of (forced) migration has changed. Never before have so many people in the whole world been forced to leave their homes and take refuge elsewhere, as 'internally displaced people' within their own countries or as 'refugees' or 'illegals' in other countries or continents.

All contributions to this volume explicitly or implicitly refer to fundamental social transformation processes within the various countries and regions that are discussed. Whether it concerns Colombia, Guatemala, Tanzania, Eritrea, the Horn of Africa, The Netherlands, Sri Lanka, Great Britain, Rwanda, the region of the Great Lakes, or the U.S.A., (forced) migration and resettlement are shown to be intrinsically part of historical process-

es and wider (inter)national political and economic power relations. These transformations have deeply affected established discourses and practices, in the countries of origin of the refugees as well as in their host societies.

Seen in this broad context, social transformation in our volume has four concrete dimensions. In the first place, in line with our emphasis on social agency, it refers to the fundamental changes in the lives of refugees themselves, which are part and parcel of their displacement. Flight implies changes in the livelihoods, perceptions and identities, 'life projects' and futures, in short, all aspects of the refugees' existence. Secondly, the concept refers to the consequences and challenges for people in the communities and agencies that are receiving and dealing with refugees. The transformations that occur in recipient societies are not only an effect of the impact of the numbers of those seeking refuge, but also of the particular capacities and resources the refugees add to their host societies. Thirdly, transformations are shown to take place in perceptions and identities, with far-reaching consequences. As indicated above, the history of flight may impact on essential dimensions of identity, for instance the way people perceive gender-related notions and images of themselves and others. Fourthly, transformations occur after the return of peace – no matter how unstable this situation can often be. There is no way back to the status quo ex ante, to the 'certain certainties' of the past. The experience of war and displacement implies irretrievable changes, both painful and rewarding. These changes are likely to be perpetuated, if they have not already become permanent.

Reflections

The volume is organised to reflect four major themes. Part One, 'Refugeehood': Claiming Spaces and Responsibilities, contests taken-for-granted meanings attached to, and policies developed on the basis of such notions as 'refugee', 'migration' and 'illegal'. Likewise, prevailing assumptions are challenged, for instance that there is a clear distinction between political and economic refugees, or that repatriation is by definition a desirable outcome. Central to Part Two, Redefining Identities and Social Relationships, is showing that gender, ethnic, national, regional, and other relevant dimensions of identities are strategically renegotiated and changed in the process of recreating a sense of home and meaningful life in new environments. Discouraging Policies, Empowering Agency, Part Three, combines a critique of pacifying national aid programmes with counterexamples of empowering self-initiatives among refugees. Across locations and crisis situations, women in particular are noted for transgressing previous gender restrictions in claiming new spaces and responsibilities. Finally, Part Four, Challenging Dichotomies: Relief versus Development, addresses fundamental questions relating violence to the nature of

(modern) development and development interventions. Relief and development are not mutually exclusive approaches. Even in crisis situations relief-cum-development should be the aim.

Having categorised the articles in one particular order, we hasten to qualify this by saying that several of the articles speak to more than one of the above themes. In light of this, in introducing themes and authors below, we deviate from the more conventional way of providing chronological summaries of each of the four parts of the volume. When we discuss in more detail what the contributions are about, we highlight at the same time a number of crosscutting insights we want to call to readers' attention. The reflections are not meant to suggest completeness, but to identify crucial issues the contributors to this volume address.

Flight: One Variant of Migration

None of the authors would deny the exceptional nature and dramatic impact of flight and of refuge in a situation of crisis, but few if any would label refuge as inherently different from other migratory experiences. Flight, representing one variant of the more general phenomenon of migration, involves many of the considerations other migrants go through when physically disconnecting from home regions or countries. In one of the first articles in this volume, Oliver Bakewell challenges the widely accepted view that one should distinguish generically between migrants and refugees. His study concerns border crossing between Zambia and Angola, where settlement and repatriation must be placed in the wider socioeconomic context of the area with its long history of migration among the people of the upper Zambezi. Repatriating Angolan refugees in Zambia have similar motives and interests as others 'struggling to maintain their livelihoods'. Because these migrations take place for political, social and economic reasons, it is too narrow to define the situation as a refugee phenomenon only. The tenuous link between the state and the population, the low population density in the area, and the shared ethnic and historical patterns of movement between Zambians and Angolans have enabled the self-settled Angolan refugees to become fully integrated.

Bakewell is also critical of the prevailing mode to push for repatriation, where refugees are seen as constituting a humanitarian problem or even a threat to their host environments. If refuge is seen primarily as an aberration in a modern world of fixed nation states and nationalities, repatriation becomes the only available solution. In the case at hand, however, the labels of refugee and returnee are meaningless. Furthermore, for many Angolans and Zambians there is no such thing as a strong attachment to something called 'nationality'. As a result, one cannot speak of

one 'event of repatriation', but only of a process of continuous migration back and forth across the border.

Gaim Kibreab, whose study on Eritrean refugees and returnees is discussed further below, agrees that to adopt a one-sided focus on refugees as problematic and marginal is to 'telescope otherwise protracted processes of social change and transformation'. The problematisation of refugees is not only a South phenomenon. As will be seen in the article by Philomena Essed and Rianne Wesenbeek, European immigration discourses, setting against each other 'pure' refugees versus (fake) others, relegate increasing numbers of people to the status of 'illegality', a highly problematic and irresponsible situation.

Oivind Fuglerud pushes the point even further. He states that it is misleading to focus only on the flight response to conflict. Both migration and nonmigration are part of the time-space strategies available to all social actors involved. Why should there be a need to explain reasons to the 'move away' from conflict when considerations to stay in spite of conflict are as relevant for understanding the way people concerned conceptualise space and their own communities within it? Fuglerud explores this question as applied to war-torn Sri Lanka, comparing responses among the Tamil population in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka to the Muslims in the Eastern Province. It appears that kinship and marriage, the prevailing political imagery of origin preserved through oral histories about the earliest Muslim settlements, tie them to their surroundings – even in the situation of war.

Empowering Agency versus Reductionist Labelling

To entertain stereotypical presuppositions about the way people and cultures relate to space and social environments is one thing. To act upon stereotypes, in particular in terms of (non)governmental aid interventions, can have disastrous consequences. Lynnette Kelly describes how, due to misconceptions about refugees, the British 'Bosnia Project' for the resettlement of Bosnian refugees ended up suppressing rather than encouraging refugee agency. Ironically, the programme intention was actually to empower refugees, but it was based on presuppositions about 'ethnic communities' that did not work for Bosnian refugees. The idea was to facilitate refugee settlement through their community organisations. But Bosnian refugees had neither a clear community identity nor a definite common 'political project' or future in the host society. The project promoted refugee access to housing and welfare, but ignored the need for employment. As a result, motivation and self-initiative among the refugees got undermined, while they became more dependent on aid. This increased their sense of powerlessness and isolation and further complicated the possibilities to create a constructive role for community

associations. This case study sadly confirms that it is necessary to remain critical of (even well-intended) policy interventions and of the underlying assumptions: 'It is not enough that the intention is to empower, the outcome must also be empowerment.'

Implicitly or explicitly nearly all of the chapters substantiate the fact that empowerment is foremost due to refugees' own agency, often against the grain of denigrating labels and stereotypes. Various studies point out that the concept of social agency is particularly central to understanding gender differences that emerge in the process of empowerment and in new environments. Refugee women, often more so than men, are able to transgress culture and tradition in asserting themselves. A case in point is the contribution by Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, who has done research among female inhabitants of the so-called Permanent Liability Camps in Bihar, India. These camps were set up to receive the Hindu migrants from East Pakistan. The authorities promised to 'rehabilitate' the inhabitants, but certain categories were designated as 'unrehabilitable', especially widows and female-headed households without a breadwinner or other male adult. Sinha-Kerkhoff's case studies and narratives reveal the dramatic life histories and struggles of the women, who managed to overcome many of the traditional social and ritual restrictions. They have become astutely aware of the unequal gender relations and treatment in the camps and gained self-confidence as a result. The label 'refugee' reduces them to only one part of their identity, supposedly overshadowing ethnic, class, gender and other dimensions. But they throw back that label at the authorities, claiming their very status as refugees in order to make demands as women. On the one hand, this means that they are successful in strategically maintaining and using their refugee status in negotiating their interests with authorities and local populations. On the other hand, the (artificial) primacy of refugee identity blurs common interests and identifications they share with millions of other widows and women heads of households in India.

It is true, as various of the studies point out that, in crises, women tend to overcome debilitating effects of disruptions in their lives by negotiating traditional gender expectations against new demands and responsibilities. As a result they have acquired stronger political, economic and social identities.

Anita Rapone and Charles Simpson illustrate the way in which Guatemalan women refugees in Mexico have managed to assert their autonomy and agency in the process of flight and reconstituting communities. But their goals and achievements were not restricted to themselves. They meant to serve the whole community, women, men and children. The case provides an example where refugees have successfully negotiated their own repatriation in a way that is liberating from hegemonic forces and oppressive state rules. Guatemalan refugees who fled the 'scorched-earth' campaign of the military in the early 1980s became settled in Mexican camps. They shared a community culture and common

narrative of the repression during the period of massacre and flight from Guatemala. This master narrative came to represent their identity and a framework to understand social reality. Shared identities and stories deepened their insight in political struggle and social development as a mode for securing their rights. They transformed camp life in such a way that it could become the basis for the reconstruction of a new Guatemala. Education was key to this project. Whilst sustaining their own culture, refugees managed to get Mexican certificates as teachers, health and human rights promoters and technicians. In the end, their autonomy, agency and the community-oriented nature of the population were important determinants of their successful repatriation. The returnees forged ties with broader segments of Guatemalan society as well as with international observers they invited in order to guarantee their rights.

In the same vein, Gaim Kibreab, who writes about initiatives and competences of Eritrean refugees in Sudan, finds that displacement, though taxing, can be a rewarding experience as well. After repatriation there can be no return to the status quo ex ante, simply because the losses and transformations refugees have undergone in exile are irretrievable. But returnees bring resources, skills, networks and knowledge, which can constitute an asset rather than a liability under conditions of restored peace and in a constructive policy environment. In focusing on the relationship between refugee experience and social change Kibreab examines whether refuge constitutes stimuli or constraints on development. He points out that risk-taking behaviour others have found among Punjabi and Sikh refugees is also prevalent among Eritrean refugees on the Sudanese border. They have developed new and broader networks, occupations, skills and relationships, and added to the diversification of economic activities. Many of these outcomes are positive and beneficial in the long term, too. These changes and transformations, in fact brought about by the experience of earlier unsettlement, refuge and survival in dire circumstances, provide necessary development stimuli in the reconstitution of the country. But neither aid agencies nor planners tend to recognise this crucial link between displacement and renewal. They fail to see refugees as people with initiative and talent. Instead they assume a generalised inability of refugees to help themselves.

Halleh Ghorashi, quoting from poignant 'auto-narratives' by Iranian women in exile, illustrates in more detail how the self-confidence and agency of refugees gets to be undermined when they are not recognised as individuals with talents or professions, but labelled as 'others' who do not belong. In her cross-location comparative study she describes the formation of identity among Iranian women activists in exile in the Netherlands and in the United States. The 'myth of return' dominates the host society's view of the migrants in the Netherlands, who continue to be perceived as guests and, therefore, others. This process of 'othering' rein-

forces dominant stereotypical (ethnic and gender) perceptions of Iranian women as traditional, dependent and passive victims. In contrast, the large numbers of Iranians in Los Angeles have made it possible to recreate a 'little Iran', forging a sense of belonging. In fact, the Iranian women in Los Angeles feel part of American society and have been able to construct a hybrid identity productively bridging space and time. This has not happened to the same degree in the Netherlands due to rejection and ethnic discrimination.

Last but not least, the tendency in critical studies to prioritise the agency of refugees is highly relevant and understandable given the overwhelming evidence of situations where refugees are silenced and dehumanised. At the same time, as Essed and Wesenbeek point out, it is crucial to see that critical members of host societies too can claim counteragency in defying unfair government policies. In their article they discuss civil disobedience among health workers who refuse to turn down refugees in need who have no legal status.

Redefining Gender and Other Identities

Various contributions indicate that social identities change due to threats to one's life, the disruptions of flight and the insecurities of resettlement. But certain identities are more adaptive than others. The Colombian and Burundian case studies in this volume bring into focus the pressures displacement puts on erstwhile gender and age configurations and identities. Whereas both men and women experience flight as a serious disruption in their lives, as a result of which familiar securities crumble, women tend to show more resilience in adapting to new environments. Donny Meertens' contribution about internal refugees in Colombia indicates that violence and destruction have disfigured rural women's access to informal networks of close kin and neighbours. On the other hand displacement has hurt men especially in their political identity, the loss of formal power networks they had access to and their institutionalised participation in society. Both men and women suffer under the lack of dignity and housing, but women are more successful than men in developing what the author calls alternative 'life projects', in the urban environments of their refuge. She concludes that it is exactly because of their gender identities that women get rooted sooner in the new surroundings. The fact that they were less invested in formal institutional and political power structures enables women to show more resilience than men, to take up familiar family responsibilities, no matter how difficult the circumstances, and to look forward rather than only backwards.

The theme of displacement and subsequent deprivation of power attached to masculine positioning and identities is elaborated upon elo-

quently in the contribution about camp life in Tanzania. Simon Turner describes how life in a refugee camp affects gender and age relations among Burundian refugees in Tanzania and how relief operations challenge older hierarchies of authority. Men especially are affected in their role as fathers, husbands, protectors and providers. Women no longer respect men for their capacities to provide economic and social security as partners and heads of the family. Now that international relief is available, the UNHCR seems like a 'better husband', a metaphor frequently referred to. For young men the suspension of traditional structures is not only a matter of deprivation. It may also facilitate positive change. Mobile and educated, some of them have taken up leadership roles in the camp and have learned 'not to be shy'. Others managed to get jobs with relief agencies and are now strategic intermediaries. Yet others get involved in politics or start a business. Young men have thus created new spaces for themselves, thereby adding new dimensions to their identities. These changes may well turn out to be persistent after return. Turner concludes that these young men in fact reassert the male identities the UNHCR had taken away from them.

Gender ideologies and practices are being transformed as new spaces and discourses for agency emerge as a consequence of conflict. For women who have lost husbands and sons to the violence of war there is no way back to the (gender) status quo of familiar, older ways of life. Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake describes how conflict and displacement in Sri Lanka transform gender ideologies and practices by exploring emergent spaces and discourses for women's agency and leadership. Violence affects both men and women differently according to religion, class and caste, but women also face certain common experiences, such as gendered forms of violence through rape, sexual violence and body searches. Yet, the 'victim discourse' of women's double burden in wartime, of restrictive caste ideology or of patriarchy obscures other realities and transformations, and the complexity of women's agency. Women, in fact, have taken up many new, nontraditional roles and responsibilities in situations of crisis. Female heads of households in refugee camps have managed to get employment and are in control of their situation. Young Tamil widows recast widowhood by refusing to accept the prescribed role of widow as a polluting and inauspicious state of being. Camp life and poverty, moreover, has eroded caste hierarchies by the difficulty observing caste inhibitions and maintaining spatial segregation. As these changes are not recognised in the settlement and land distribution schemes for the displaced, women struggle to legitimise and sustain these new roles beyond the victim ideology pervading relief and health interventions, in order to prevent a return to the prewar gender status quo. For these women there can be no simple return to the past, Rajasingham-Senanayake argues: peace constitutes a 'creative remaking of cultural meanings and agency – a third space between a familiar, often romanticised past and the traumatic present where conflict has

remade culture'. She suggests this to be a situation of 'ambivalent empowerment'.

As we have pointed out, war and displacement have also led to growing political and social awareness and assertiveness in the Guatemala case. Likewise, Kibreab has shown that unsettlement and poverty provide a stimulus for creativity and adaptation. All these studies imply that identities evolve and transform in response to the experience of displacement and resettlement and that these changes may very well be maintained after return or in the process of peace. Gender and age characteristics are important determinants of traditional patterns and hierarchies, but they are also constitutive of innovations in the new environment. Women and young people, in particular, welcome those changes that liberate them from previous subordinations. But some caution is needed here. One should be careful not to celebrate too uncritically the transformative potential of flight and displacement. New identities, increased capacities, awareness and assertiveness come with a price: these changes are born in trauma, bereavement, loss, exclusion, and the pain of not belonging, due to attributed 'otherness'.

Addressing Moral Dilemmas

Dealing with issues of migration, and in particular with refuge, means operating in politically charged contexts with mutually contradictory interests, modes of operation and policy discourses. As Schrijvers indicates this type of work is not innocent and unavoidably implies 'dirtying your hands' and 'dining with the devil'. Yet, these moral dilemmas have to be faced and brought in to the open, which is also the position Philomena Essed and Rianne Wesenbeek urge when they discuss the negative impact of Dutch immigration policy on the human rights of refugees. The state bureaucracy has created criteria to distinguish 'genuine' refugees from the rest, considered fakes, thus administratively manufacturing the status of 'illegality'. Dutch policies exclude illegal immigrants from access to social and health care benefits except in a number of narrowly defined serious conditions. These policies deny those rendered 'illegal' their human rights, while shifting responsibility to deal with the health consequences to individual professionals. Health practitioners face an unhealthy choice: do they look the other way, or do they violate the law, thus engaging in civil disobedience? The authors present cases, illustrating how organisations and individual professionals struggle with the tensions between political pressures from the government, insufficient budgets and peer group loyalty on the one hand, and, on the other, their desire to be inclusive to all patients based on professional ethics and personal conscience.

It is common among international agencies to disconnect relief, that is interventions in case of emergency, from development, that is the human right to live under humane circumstances. Joke Schrijvers, who discusses dilemmas of humanitarian aid in relation to internal refugees in Sri Lanka, is clear about the need to link relief and development. Too often resettlement programmes boil down to settling refugees in areas where they are most likely to be killed or forced to flee, while the alternative offer is pure relief – i.e. semidetention camps controlled by army and government bureaucrats. Morally speaking, those options are equally reprehensible. The author suggests a less top-down and more participatory approach towards people where listening to their stories has central focus. The listener, however, can never be innocent, as sooner or later politics come in explicitly. Claims to neutrality are naive in the context of war and violent conflict and may very well support the powerful, rather than the needs of politically vulnerable groups. Neutrality is morally problematic because it tends to be tolerant of violations of the basic human right to development – participation, self-reliance and equity.

The Need to Bridge the Gap between Relief and Development

The problems arising when relief and development are seen as separate approaches are also exemplified in the case of the Rwandan government *Imidugudu* villagisation project. According to Dorothea Hilhorst and Mathijs van Leeuwen, this project started at first as a settlement plan for returning refugees. Later it came to cover the whole rural population in addressing issues of land use, service delivery, settlement, integration and security. There were questions and doubts about the programme, but many international donors came forward in support of a long-term compulsory development and housing programme, more than four years after the war. Their claim that the country was still in an ‘emergency’ situation eventually enabled relief organisations to continue their presence and to accept a blueprint approach for the whole country, apparently without bothering about the political implications. The question remains why such a top-down, authoritarian and generalised programme was internationally supported despite the well-known limitations of such planned development interventions? The authors suggest that the straightforward narrative and line of action fitted the ambiguities of the situation and the pressure to act. At the same time, the political dimensions of the programme remained hidden behind the technical terminology of planned development, only to be exposed when they surfaced locally.

Several authors show convincingly that there are serious limitations to pure relief aid. Kelly and Schrijvers discuss the ‘disempowering’ effects of

philanthropic philosophies and welfare orientations. Rajasingham-Senanayake observes that relief might extend the trauma of the very people it is supposed to assist. She recommends cultural empowerment beyond 'the victim ideology that pervades relief and rehabilitation as well as health and trauma interventions'. Georg Frerks questions why the idea of linking relief and development has been implemented so scarcely and why there are so few salient results so far. He reviews the debate on 'linking relief and development' and evaluates the pro and contra arguments. Recently the simplistic notion of a 'continuum' between relief and development has been discarded and more complex modes of linking have come to the forefront. But it seems that similar conceptual, political and institutional problems emerge. Apparently, linking relief and development can only take place within a concrete time- and place-bound setting characterised by specific economic, social and cultural relationships. And this is exactly what refugees are lacking! Due to the specific situation and legal status they find themselves in there are a whole series of discontinuities that enormously complicate the possibility of linking relief and development. As most agencies tend to limit their discussions to the policy level, it is easy to underrate the practical difficulties that are involved in the linking exercise. The author argues that these situations can be beneficially analysed from the perspective of an actor-oriented approach, especially by limiting focus to those interfaces that normally constitute the most crucial interactions in interventions.

Critical Deconstructions of Policy Discourses

Lived experiences are often difficult to reconcile with predefined and sometimes stereotyped notions used in the international refugee regime and within the bureaucracies and aid agencies dealing with refugees. The case studies focusing on refugees in respectively Zambia, Sri Lanka and India, for example, are situated in widely differing geographical contexts and conflict histories, but each of these studies questions such taken-for-granted notions as 'refugee', 'displaced person', 'migration' and 'repatriation'. The specific connotations attached to these words and concepts are contextualised, determined not only by immediate events triggering decisions about flight, but, more fundamentally, by wider historical and socioeconomic patterns and deep-seated perceptions, meanings and discourses that structure actors' understandings of their life worlds.

Several contributions in this book are critical of dominant policy discourses. Discourses are defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996: 2). In reality there is always a complex interplay between multiple discourses. Some may achieve dominance while others function

as counterdiscourses, such as the debates referred to by Schrijvers on neutral emergency relief versus the integration of relief and development indicate (see also Schrijvers 1999 on the interplay of established and new discourses on masculinity and femininity in the context of violent conflict in Sri Lanka). The study of policy discourses may be rewarding, as such discourses tend to inform, and thus explain, the practices of governments and international agencies. Stereotypical references depicting refugees as passive and dependent do not reflect the way most refugees experience their situation. Often, bureaucratic categories and notions employed by refugee regimes hardly correspond to the experienced reality, as indicated, among others, by Bakewell. Indeed, relief workers, international agencies and host governments still evince top-down and patronising attitudes. Often they operate on the basis of dubious assumptions and questionable labels inducing passivity and dependency instead of promoting empowerment. Kelly shows how the 'Bosnia Project' was premised on the basis of a wrong perception of 'community'. Essed and Wesenbeek expose the arbitrary nature and unrealistic idea that one can totally exclude those labelled as 'illegal' from even the most basic human rights. Hillhorst and van Leeuwen describe how a top-down, authoritarian and blueprint programme received international support even when the limitations of such interventions were quite obvious. But certain narratives, the use of particular technical parlance, overemphasis on the urgency of the emergency situation can be quite convincing to donors. Schrijvers shows the dangers involved in a position where the concept of 'neutrality' has obtained positive value among those engaged in emergency relief. Frerks mentions how linear, 'developmentalist' approaches fail to come to terms with complex political emergencies. These examples all point to the need to critically unravel policy discourses and to study how particular discourses have become powerful in framing those actors' notions (Hillhorst 2000: 20).

Agendas and Approaches for Future Research

The above conclusions and insights have implications for future research approaches to be adopted. First of all, existing concepts and notions may not represent a lived-through reality and definitely should not be taken for granted. Moreover experiences of refuge, displacement and repatriation have to be understood in the contexts of constructed identities and discourses and with reference to the wider socioeconomic environments. Decisions and considerations of refugees may not be very dissimilar to those of other (migrant) groups in society. This implies that such decisions cannot be explained only with reference to traumatic experiences in the immediate past or with simplistic choice models. There is a need for longer-term historical approaches to account for social and political

frameworks of perceptions and life worlds. In a spatial sense research needs to cover both rural and urban settings in view of the fact that most displaced peoples end up in urban conglomerations. All these arguments highlight the need for contextualised analysis. The prevailing multiplicity of experiences and differential responses must be grasped conceptually. This requires more emphasis on agency, in particular the agency of refugees and of other critical actors – an actor-oriented approach. It is relevant to perceive experiences of flight and repatriation in terms of individual and group characteristics, material as well as immaterial, and to identify differential patterns of knowledge and power. The emphasis on agency also calls for participatory research approaches in order to support those involved who want to voice their insights and needs regarding their own situations.

The contributions to this volume make a strong case for gender-specific analyses of the nature of violence and the responses to it. Making agency central opens up ways to qualify local transformations, as it becomes possible to identify the consequences of lost resources, and to seek the relevant conditions to create and benefit from new opportunities.

There is ample evidence in this volume to show the advantages of holistic and interdisciplinary approaches and of historical and comparative analysis. There is a need to account for one's own values and for political and moral dilemmas encountered while doing research or in the course of day-to-day engagement with refugees. Contributions have criticised policies, agencies and bureaucrats for lacking sufficient understanding of the real life worlds and experiences of refugees, and for reinforcing distorted images of refugees as passive, helpless or cunning. It has been shown that the implementation of ill-designed policies leaves researchers and practitioners with moral dilemmas. We see it as a challenging task for researchers to remain vigilant and critical, while deconstructing dominant policy discourses and thinking through their implications for the livelihoods, identities and rights of refugees and displaced people.