Concept of Self-reliance with a View of Refugee Protection and Wellbeing

Introduction

The proverb "…. teach a man a fish and he will be fed for a lifetime" is one that is popularly used in refugee aid projects to encourage self-reliance and reduce dependence on the external body for livelihood sources especially over a protracted period. In this context, a refugee is defined as "someone unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, 1951). For someone to be classified as a refugee, they must have crossed international borders and be forced into migrating to another country because of war, conflict, persecution which puts their lives in danger.

The number of refugees worldwide has increased dramatically in recent years and thus, has become a cause of concern for policymakers and international bodies. UNHCR (2013) suggested that at the end of 2012, the number of refugees worldwide were 45.2 million persons and that number jumped to 70.8 million people at the end of 2018 (UNHCR, 2019) making it the highest ever record of displacement, with one person getting displaced every two seconds. The increased refugee population places stress on the government of the countries they flee to, and the international refugee organizations. Also, there is increased stress on the refugees who leave everything behind to another country where they have to become dependent for basic livelihood which they might have had no troubles providing for themselves, they lose social ties and the familiarity of the spaces where they have been and now are required to start all over. This exponential increase in the refugee population has fostered the start of self-reliance discourses in international development.

This paper aims to unpack the concept of self-reliance with a view of refugee protection and wellbeing. My main argument is that self-reliance is embedded in neoliberalism and using the case study of Liberian refugees in Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana, I hope to emphasize my argument. This paper begins with a critical look into the concept of self-reliance, then I will examine the workings of the main organization concerned with refugee welfare the UNHCR and then my case study.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UNHCR was created in 1950 after the world war II to assist people who have been forcefully displaced because of the War (UNHCR, 2017) and since then have been the main organization responsible for refugees' wellbeing and protection. In their Global appeal (2009), UNHCR stated their goal is to ensure that all refugees are protected in their host countries, develop an international protection regime, uphold social and economic wellbeing of refugees and optimize security arrangements and attain durable solutions. Dudfield (2016) states that their goal is "to ensure that all refugees can make a safe and sustainable living that meets their basic needs, contributes to their dignity and provides for full enjoyment of human rights". The goal of the UNHCR appears to be person-centered and places the refugees at the center of

their operations.

However, the extent to which the goals have been “achieved” and the mode of operation of the UNHCR especially in protracted refugee status appears to be questionable. UNHCR is majorly concerned with high-profile and seeming urgent refugee crises and so this focus leads to a reduction or total abruption of aid for protracted refugees (Crisp 2003). Due to the shortfalls of budgets and increased pressures from donors, UNHCR has sought to provide a solution for those trapped in long-term exiles and cannot return to their home countries and this situation has led to the promotion of self-reliance. It would seem that UNHCR is more concerned about donor interest than refugees’ protection as they would like us to believe. Although one of their responsibilities is to help uphold the rights and wellbeing of refugees, by promoting self-reliance with an active aid reduction, it seems to be compromising its standards while upholding the interest of donor organizations (Hyndman, 2000). This point was illustrated by (Kaiser, 2008) who asserts that refugees in Uganda were afraid of being seen as self-reliant as this will lead to the loss of legal and material protection. The continuous decision of UNHCR to choose economic viability and political interests over the protection and wellbeing of the people they ought to protect is a perfect recipe for a loss of faith in their activities.

The concept of self-reliance will now be discussed in detail.

Self-Reliance- A Deconstruction

UNHCR (2005) defines self-reliance as ‘the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs sustainably’. Self-reliance discourse is guided by the philosophy that refugees have the capacity and skills to provide for their needs without dependence on anyone (Jacobsen, 2005). The construct of self-reliance discourses hovers around the protection of refugees’ dignity by allowing them to fend for themselves. In cases of forced migration, international organizations and the host government may provide sustenance for refugees for a short period which is then replaced by vocational training subsequently to make them reliant on themselves. While the concept of self-reliance might have good intentions, there are several challenges refugees face in their host countries which makes self-reliance very difficult and even close to impossible. It is important for us to now examine the economic theories behind the concept of self-reliance to understand how that plays out in refugees’ experiences.

First, self-reliance is deeply embedded in neoliberalism (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). Neoliberalism discourses champion the belief that an unregulated market will ensure growth and reduce dependence (26). Goodin (1985) argues that the idea of self-reliance is embedded in politics which tries to promote individualism- urging people to rely on themselves for support rather than on the government. This was reinforced by Godffery (2013) who argued that self-reliance encourages peoples that it is their responsibility and moral obligation to cater to their wellbeing. This discourse has hegemonic advantages as it has become the catchphrase in international development and refugee management subjects (Lal, 2012). This hegemonic discourse of self-reliance can be observed in refugees support practices; through the reduction of aid supplies and the promotion of entrepreneurial programs that are aimed at providing refugees with the necessary skills to make them valuable in the labor market (Crisp, 2003). Eston- Calabria, and Omata (2018) argue that this shift is a neoliberalist attempt in ignoring the structural causes of poverty and inequality to emphasizing an individual’s ability to face

challenges and survive alone. The reduction of aid supplies and the abandoning of refugees to fend for themselves compromises their protection and wellbeing. Self-reliance is closely linked with the reduction to the barest minimum of state intervention thus compromising the financial and legal protection otherwise offered.

The fostering of self-reliance by international organizations has been inconsistent depending on the aim. Stein (1981) suggests that humanitarian agencies and international organizations paint a picture of helplessness and vulnerability when describing refugees' predicament to attract benevolent donations and funds from empathetic donors. However, this description rapidly changes when promoting self-reliance; refugees are viewed as entrepreneurial individuals who should be responsible for their upkeep and their lives (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). Crisp (2000) suggests that the self-reliance discourse is used by the international community as a means to free itself of the burden of long-term aid provision to refugees. Easton-Calabria and Omata (2018) suggest that the self-reliance discourse as used in refugees' discussions is similar to those used by politicians; a neoliberal trick to shift state responsibilities and reduce state welfare by promoting citizen self-reliance.

Additionally, the self-reliance discourse is portrayed as an anti-dependency theory (Omata, 2018). Refugees who rely on the government or associated international organizations are seen as lazy and degenerated and irresponsible (Fineman, 2006). Stein (1981) further suggested that when refugees are not self-reliant, they are dependent and often depressed and that such dependency has social and psychological deteriorating consequences. Fineman (2006) counterargues that dependency is a natural part of humans and encompasses more than relationships and circumstances. Ferguson (2013) strongly supports this argument and states that dependency also affords humans protection and so, is desirable. When self-reliance and dependence are framed as an opposite relationship, there is a risk of aid organization reducing assistance to long term refugees without the structures truly a necessity for self-reliance (Easton and Omata). A close examination of the dependency of refugees as criticized by UNHCR and other international bodies presents paradoxical criticism. In her studies about Somali refugees, Lindley (2010) reports refugees constantly receive support from other refugees or relatives in diaspora. This form of dependency is not criticized but is often lauded by the previously stated actors and is seen as a form of positive community cohesion and resilience (Doron, 2005). However, depending on external aid from international organizations is suddenly criticized and framed as a dependency, laziness and other forms of new nomenclature that has been created in recent times (Easton and Omata). This might consolidate the opinions that the promotion of self-reliance discourse is just a scheme to disengage from supporting the refugees in the long term. However, this disengagement poses a threat to the protection and wellbeing of the refugees.

There are so many factors hindering refugee self-reliance. My case study introduces the condition of Liberian refugees in Ghana. This case study aims to critically examine the condition of the refugees to understand the implication of self-reliance on refugee protection and wellbeing.

Case study: Liberian Refugees in Buduburam Refugee Camp, Ghana.

The predicament of Liberian refugees started with the start of the civil war in 1989 between

resettled American slaves (Americo-Liberians) who viewed themselves as elites (Ellis, 2007) and the other “uncivilized natives”(Boas, 2015) who were relegated to be second class citizens with very minute access to any kind of power. This dynamic created socioeconomic inequality and a civil war that lasted for fourteen years (Omata,). The Buduburam refugee camp was set up in 1990 by the Ghanaian government and the refugees were welcomed with open hands; the villagers freely donated food, water, and clothing to them (Dick 2002b) before the response of UNHCR. The relief effort of UNHCR started in 1991 with the supply of cooked meals, mattresses, and other necessities and in 1993, UNHCR started the distribution of dry food (Essuman-Johnson, 2011). It is important to mention at this point that the basic needs of the refugees were met in the initial stage of the crisis (Esuman-Johnson, 2011). Consequently, in the late 1900s, there was an increased pressure on the refugees to be self-reliant.

In the late 1900s, UNHCR declared that the Buduburam camp was self-sufficient and restricted its aid to vulnerable individuals; children and disabled people (Dick, 2002). In 2003, the UNHCR withdrew all form of support (Porter, et al. 2008). This placed pressure on the refugees to provide for themselves. However, there were many constraints to their self-reliance. Firstly, the Ghanaian government appear to be bent on impeding refugees economic activities; refugees were mandated to get work permits from the government to secure formal employments, but this process took several months and was a major turnoff for local employers who do not want to go through this cumbersome process. Also, professional certifications obtained from Liberia was not recognized by the Ghanaian government (Omata, 2012). Hence, professionals such as doctors, teachers, and engineers had to retrain in Ghana to get official certificates valid for use in Ghana climes (Porter, et al 2008). For refugees who could barely afford food, it was virtually impossible to go through with this hence hindering their chances of getting into formal employment. Even worse, Omata (2012) asserts that certain employment types like taxi driving and hairdressing were barred for the refugees. These restrictions on formal employment made refugees seek employment in the informal sectors. In the informal sectors, refugees sold clothes, recharge card vouchers, sachet water, food, etc. Their business was described as easy start by Omata (2012) and was a result of a lack of availability of capital thus moving them to start businesses requiring little capital which were less profitable. The refugees faced economic barriers imposed by the natives; due to their extended stay in Ghana, the natives no longer saw the refugees as vulnerable people to be helped but as guests who have overstayed their welcome and as competitors (Agbloriti, 2011). This situation was aptly described as “Host fatigue” by Dick (2002) Liberians were required to pay entry fees to the Ghanaians before they can trade and even with that, the attitudes of the Ghanaians could be best described as xenophobic. There was a general perception that refugees were better off than the Ghanaians and so a refusal of the Ghanaians to patronize the refugees (Portal et al 2008).

In 2003, the Liberian war was described as “finished” and the refugees were asked to repatriate, and a cessation agreement was reached, ripping the refugees of any protection they have received. This cessation agreement led to the relinquishing of any basic service privileges they had, and refugees were mandated to pay for basic services such as water, electricity, medicine, and the usage of public latrine in a bid to promote self-reliance. This led to further impoverishment of the refugees who could not afford the fees, it cause disparity and socioeconomic strata amongst the refugees and left poorer refugees to rely on fellow refugees; leading to an erosion of the standard of wellbeing among the refugees, lack of protection and the superimposition of additional burden on other refugees while promoting UNHCR idea of “private dependency and social cohesion and reducing the reliance on UNHCR”. An overlooked fact is that an individual’s ability to be self-dependent is linked to their personality

and background such as gender, age and professional training received in the past (72). However, the idea of self-reliance actively overlooks individual weaknesses and vulnerabilities by viewing refugees' ability to be self-reliant as a group. The consideration is unfair, fosters socio-economic inequalities amongst refugees and leads to the erosion of protection for refugees who are unable to fend for themselves due to health, age, strength or skills constraint especially children, women, and physically disabled individuals.

Furthermore, UNHCR no longer provided micro-loans for refugees to start up new businesses, instead, there was a focus on vocational skills provision to enable repatriates to "contribute to Liberia reconstruction". UNHCR then proceeded to free itself from the refugee condition by insisting on local integration of the remaining Liberians in Ghana. However, this caused disparity among socioeconomic refugee classes and severe consequences for those of the lower class. Omata (2012) described conflict resulting from the non-affordability of these fees by the poorer refugee class. Those who could not afford latrine fees used a bushy area called "gulf". This gulf is regarded as a sacred place by the host community who saw it as an insult and huge disgrace against the spirit, so any refugee found excreting there was arrested and often punished severely. These conditions led to an increased dependence on remittance from relatives abroad and on other refugees (Dako-Gyeke and Adu, 2017). However, UNHCR framed this increased dependence on each other as social cohesion. It becomes increasingly glaring that refugees are allowed to depend on family members abroad and each other and that counted as self-reliance, however, depending on aid from refugee organizations was framed as laziness, dependence and a loss of dignity.

Despite this cessation, there remained about 11,0000 Liberians who refused to go back to Liberia who are in a state of limbo; no longer regarded as refugees nor got any of its benefits, neither were they integrated into the Ghana community due to the fear of the government that local integration would impose a burden on the government as well as lead to increased competition over limited employment opportunities with the natives. As a result, Dako-Gyeke and Adu (2017) report the present conditions in the camp. The refugees who were not repatriated currently have high levels of employment and inability to fend for themselves due to hostility from the host communities, withdrawal of security leading to increased criminal activities and very frequent clashes with the host communities.