

EXPERTS INITIATIVE ON THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

On October 2-3, 2017, the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility of The New School convened a meeting of experts on refugee law and policy to deliberate on, and to make concrete recommendations for, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The meeting was convened with support from the Open Society Policy Center and held at the offices of the Open Society Foundations in New York City.

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Access to information, education and culture during humanitarian crisis

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Humanitarian organisations rescue endangered populations in zones that have been devastated by natural disasters and violent conflict, on the paths of exodus and in camps for survivors, refugees and displaced people. Help is focused, as is necessary, on vital needs such as health care, food, drinking water, sanitary facilities and shelters. In the last few years however, humanitarian actors have become increasingly aware of the consequences of humanitarian crisis on individuals' and communities' mental and psychosocial health. When one's refugee status lasts, access to information, education and culture become a necessity.

What is a man, a woman or a child once his/her life is saved, his/her food and shelter is regained if he/she cannot read, write, draw or communicate? Access to literature, writing or information in emergency situations is critical to reconstructing beings and re-establishing the bonds between survivors, thus saving lives by giving them a meaning.

In order to gather the conditions amounting to sufficient well-being, survivors, displaced and refugees must find once again a secure and controllable environment. Access to relevant information plays a non-negligible role in the reconstruction of a predictable and reassuring day-to-day life.

However, nowadays none of the principles guiding the UN when taking care of the fate of displaced populations focus on the intellectual and cultural aspects of rescuing endangered human beings.

We will point out the necessity to recognise access to information, knowledge and culture as a fundamental right during humanitarian crisis. First, we will analyse the effects of devices such as the Ideas Box, which was created and developed with the support of the UNHCR in a humanitarian

context. Then, we will show why access to knowledge is an essential condition of our civilisation that must be legally recognised by international treaties.

The first effects of access to knowledge

A. INFORMATION IS CRITICAL TO REBUILD ONESELF

To be informed is one the very first necessities seen as vital. Information reconnects an isolated individual to the human community, thus contributing to making individuals feel that they are getting a better hold of their situation as well as reintroducing some kind of predictability of the future.

Thus, relevant information makes it possible to significantly reduce the state of stress and distress of populations affected by a critical accident. It is therefore essential to encourage maximum access to helpful information.

Information must really cater the needs of the targeted population, taking into account cultural sensitivity as well as special circumstances to which they are confronted. It must be comprehensive, varied and correct. Starting from this observation, some humanitarian actors have developed innovative tools. It is the case of Libraries Without Borders (LWB) with the Ideas Box.

B. A TOOL: THE IDEAS BOX

Since its creation, LWB argues for a new approach to intellectual cooperation and seeks to invent the libraries of the 21st century. A library is not just a simple collection of books. Indeed, it can have a transversal impact on society, from the struggle against social inequalities to the reinforcement of competences as well as the stimulation of entrepreneurship and social innovation.

Following the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, LWB is developing expertise on intervention in humanitarian situations. In partnership with designer Philippe Starck, it has created the Ideas Box, which is a media library in a deployable kit for difficult situations.

By providing access to the Internet, books, cinema, theatre and pedagogical resources through the Ideas Box, LWB tries to provide essential tools to help refugee populations rebuild themselves and to create solutions to problems that they are confronted to.

Initially designed to respond to humanitarian crisis, this device has also proved relevant in numerous other contexts to respond innovatively to the needs of populations led astray from culture and education, in particular in France.

1) On the field, the example of Burundi

A. BASED ON EVIDENCE-BASED ACTION: THE QUESTION OF THE MEASURE AND THE EVALUATION OF THE DEVICE

A follow-up and devaluation mechanism has been put in place to measure the effects of this instrument on local ecosystems of intervention. It falls within an international trend – the evidence-based policy – that promotes the necessity to create mechanisms based on evidences of their social utility (see for example for an introduction on the subject: NUTLEY S., SMITH P., DAVIES H., *What works? : evidence-based policy and practice in public services*, Bristol, The Policy Press, 2000).

Generally, establishing evidence follows three steps: describe a phenomenon, establish a causal link between interventions and results (through experimental evaluation, quasi-experimental and systematic literature review), understand the mechanisms (by participating observation).

An experimental protocol has been designed in the prospect of accounting for the mechanism and being transparent. Here are the first results.

B. ITS SOCIAL IMPACT: CHILD PROTECTION, REINFORCEMENT OF EDUCATION, AND RESILIENCE

With more than 24,000 visits in in the first 3 months and more than 3,300 registered users, the two first Ideas Box deployed in Kavumu and Musasa refugee camps in Burundi in 2014 attracted a significant number of users. It contributed to expand the Ideas Box project in Burundi and all over the world.

Its inclusion in the communities, its critical support in terms of education and child protection and its psychosocial aspect are to be highlighted:

Although the Ideas Box is not an alternative to school, it has created a work space for children outside of school which did not exist before. It enables them to do their homework (“safe learning environment”) and to access high quality educational material.

As for adults, the Ideas Box creates conditions helping refugees to start their resilience process. It enables them to overcome their post-trauma shock, stress and apprehension and turn to the future. The different qualitative observations made on the field have highlighted the fact that the Ideas Box is seen as a safe and attractive place by many people. The Ideas Box is therefore a safe space: a calm, secure and comforting space where people can have fun, express themselves and create freely. In camps where violence is part of daily life, it is critical to create and sustain places like this, in which people can feel safe.

- *AN INNOVATIVE PSYCHOSOCIAL TOOL IN HUMANITARIAN SITUATION*

Evaluation shows that the Ideas Box has three types of effect on refugee communities: first on the reinforcement of the resilience and struggle against trauma process, secondly on peace-building and reduction of tensions between communities and finally on security of information and prevention of rumour.

- *BEYOND THAT, IT IS A PLACE OF SOCIALISATION AND LIFE WITHIN CAMPS. REINFORCEMENT OF BONDS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES.*

Finally, there is a third significant effect of the program that has been recurrently appearing in the observations and interviews carried out: its essential role in catalysing and reinforcing bonds between communities within camps. Although the conjectural effect is of course to be taken into account – setting up Ideas Boxes has been a real event in every camp and has created high expectations – several elements point out to the adoption of the device by the community and to the community getting increasingly involved in the use of the device.

The same effects have been noticed in other countries where we intervene like Iraq and Colombia in relation to their peace-building process, as well as Jordan.

In the latter, we have noticed – and it has been confirmed by the HCR – that the Ideas Box has rapidly become a cultural space in refugee camps. It has enabled to limit internal violence, which is often linked to the lack of prospects and staying in camps for too long. It has helped refugees find meaning and activities to rebuild themselves.

2) Access to knowledge, a common good?

What is at stake here – and that is underlying the case cited as an example – is the question of the reinforcement of the foundations of human civilisation and how to live together. Access to knowledge and language through educational and cultural mechanisms constitutes a pillar of human communities and democratic regimes.

a. THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE TO FORM HUMANITY

The ability to create languages and to expand and modify them generation after generation is what constitutes the common heritage of the human species. Norbert Elias's significant input is that he wanted to create a theory of knowledge that was not based on the binary opposition topic-object anymore. Instead, he based it on a "tripartite constellation" associating individuals, the object of their shared and exchanged knowledge and the mode of transmission of their knowledge through language.

Based on Elias' work, we may argue that in contexts of humanitarian crisis, when everything is disrupted, working to give access to culture and education is fundamental and plays a significant part in turning people into human beings again and emancipating them.

b. A CONDITION OF DEMOCRACY: TO BUILD SOCIETIES OF INFORMATION, DIALOGUE AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is more than just a way of understanding reality. It enables us to set up a democratic space where people can live together. Indeed, our most significant collective issues seem to take root in both our lack of knowledge and political will – maybe even more in the former.

Economic prosperity, and more fundamentally the quality of democratic life, are what is at stake through the multiple dimensions that constitute knowledge and exchange.

Universal access to information is essential to peace building, sustainable economic development and intercultural dialogue.

In order to overcome humanitarian crisis and efficiently solve daily problems, individuals, communities and countries must gather critical competences to search information, analyse it critically and create new information and knowledge. New opportunities that enhance quality of life are created by possessing basic notions in relation to information.

Going even further in the common good logic (E. Ostrom, R. Petrella among others), one could argue that this dimension is a vital resource for men and that it must be protected.

It is by guarantying this in international treaties that we will be able to solve challenges arising both on emergency sites and in the North.

Towards a fundamental right?

Nowadays, there are no international texts that are coercive and binding enough on these matters. In the 1951 Convention governing the situation of refugees and the rights and obligations of the States, there is nothing relating to access to information, culture and education. The only article that raises the question of public education by demanding that primary education be guaranteed is article 22: “The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education.”

Based on these observations both practical and theoretical, we believe it is justified to include access to information, education and culture in international treaties governing humanitarian law.