Let them work

Refugees need not be a burden, if they are allowed to work

The successes and failures of Uganda's liberal refugee policy have lessons for elsewhere

TWO years ago, a group of elders in this village in north-western Uganda agreed to lend their land to refugees from South Sudan. About 120,000 are now in the surrounding area. Here they live in tarpaulin shelters and mud-brick huts on a patch of scrub where cows once grazed. Kemis Butele, a gravel-voiced Ugandan elder, explains that hosting refugees is a way for a remote place, long neglected by the central government, to get noticed. He hopes for new schools, clinics and a decent road—and “that our children can get jobs”.

There are more than 20m refugees in the world today, more than at any time since the end of the second world war. Nearly 90% reside in poor countries. In many, to preserve jobs for natives, governments bar refugees from working in the formal economy. Uganda has shown how a different approach can reap dividends. The
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The government gives refugees land plots and lets them work. In some places, the refugees boost local businesses and act as a magnet for foreign aid. Mr Butele and many other Ugandans see their new neighbours as a benefit, not a burden. Sadly, such attitudes are still the exception.

Uganda hosts more than 1m South Sudanese refugees, in unfenced “settlements” across hundreds of square miles in the north. Most came after the collapse of a peace deal in July 2016. Hilda walked for two weeks, carrying her four-year-old son. “If those Dinkas get you on the road, they will kill you,” she says, referring to the president’s ethnic group. This is the third time she has found refuge in Uganda.

Refugees are “brothers and sisters”, say many Ugandans. Mr Butele was once one himself. But the welcome is also a pragmatic one. Northern Uganda is so poor that some locals pose as refugees to receive food aid. Others see refugees as buyers for local goods. Elsewhere in Uganda has indeed seen such positive spillovers. One study from 2016 found that the presence of Congolese refugees in western Uganda had increased consumption per household. Another estimates that each new
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refugee household boosts total local income, including that of refugees, by $320-430 more than the cost of the aid the household is given. That rises to $560-670 when refugees are given cash instead of rations.

Uganda's generous refugee policy also opens possibilities for skulduggery. In February the government suspended its senior refugee official and three colleagues, after the UN passed on reports of fraud. Allegations include extortion, the trafficking of women and girls, and the systematic inflation of refugee numbers, to skim off aid money for non-existent beneficiaries.

Such failures hold lessons for other countries, but so do Uganda's successes, say some economists. Paul Collier and Alexander Betts, of Oxford University, argue that rich countries should pay other "havens" to open their labour markets, as Uganda has. The result, they say, is a triple win: for refugees; for host economies; and for rich countries to which the refugees otherwise might swarm chaotically.

But security and cultural concerns often trump potential economic benefits. In Jordan refugees make up 20% of the population. Only since 2016 has the government allowed them to work, in exchange for help from Britain, the World Bank and the European Union. The "Jordan Compact" has had mixed results. The government handed out work permits, but only for certain sectors. Some refugees found construction work, but many shunned low-paying factory jobs.

They will go far

Sending aid to the countries from which refugees come may actually encourage migration, as potential migrants gain the means to pay smugglers. This suggests that rather than sending aid, rich countries should lead by example and open their own labour markets (see article (https://www.economist.com/news/international/21740726-it-eases-fiscal-burden-without-hurting-locals-prospects-european-countries-should-make)). In the short term, as Mr Collier and Mr Betts argue, it may be easier for refugees to find employment in nearby countries similar to their own. But in the long term, they will make more money in richer countries, and so send more remittances home.

Refugee influxes produce both winners and losers. In Tanzania, a surge of Burundian and Rwandan refugees from 1993 caused a sharp rise in food prices, helping local farmers but hurting town-dwellers. Even in northern Uganda, protesting locals blocked a road last year, complaining that their hopes for improved living conditions and abundant jobs had not been met.
Many refugees in the latest influx are also struggling. Settlements have restaurants, billiard halls, pharmacies and vegetable stalls, but business is sluggish. In one, Imvepi, Jeff Mambo, a refugee, recently opened the “Exile Salon”, offering “cute styles for mens” at 1,500 shillings ($0.41) per trim. But few refugees come for haircuts; they have little cash to spare. Next door, women sell their bland UN food rations for salt and soap.

One problem is that donors have given only a third of the funding needed in 2017—a shortfall of $443m. Health and education services are expanding too slowly: one school has 4,200 students and just 16 teachers. In the past, refugees in Uganda got one-hectare parcels of land. New arrivals get smaller, stony plots, big enough to grow household greens, but not a surplus. During a food shortage last year, some refugees ventured homeward to recover abandoned crops; a few got killed. The World Food Programme gave others half their rations in cash. But as yet the markets to supply grain quickly and in sufficient quantities did not exist—as hungry refugees were well aware.

Refugees are more likely to thrive and integrate if allowed to move freely and work legally. It helps, too, if they receive aid in cash rather than kind. However, in Uganda, which is also coping with a new influx from Congo, the welcome for refugees is wearing thin. And in South Sudan, the killing continues. Having returned and fled twice before, Hilda is not hopeful. “I will not go back,” she says.

See also: “European countries should make it easier for refugees to work (https://www.economist.com/news/international/21740726-it-eases-fiscal-burden-without-hurting-locals-prospects-european-countries-should-make)”

Sources


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This article appeared in the International section of the print edition under the headline "Making them welcome"
When Andreas Schleicher first proposed a global test to compare the performance of different education systems in 1995, officials said it could not or should not be done.

Previous analyses including by his employer, the OECD, the Paris-based club of mostly rich nations, focused on the number of years of schooling rather than tracking the skills that students learnt.

By persuading states to try a pilot scheme with standard tests, he began what became the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) in 2000. The latest iteration is currently being given to millions of children around the world.

In a clear and readable new book, Schleicher offers a guide to the findings over the years of Pisa and related surveys, which have often sparked debate with findings that run counter to received wisdom.

Despite stereotypes about rote learning in Asia, for example, China and Vietnam perform extremely well on maths and literacy, and Singapore ranks very highly for creative problem solving.

An Asian emphasis on success through hard work translates into more equitable outcomes by striving for all students to master key concepts. But some western systems believe educational performance is linked to inherent intelligence and that weaker students will never master the ideas taught in schools.
Estonian and Finnish children perform extremely well, even though they start school older and spend fewer hours a year in the classroom than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Canada’s success in fostering tolerance and integration shows immigrant children perform just as well as native-born ones.

There are other fascinating findings: despite a western trend towards smaller class size, some of the stronger performing systems have larger classes. Students help each other to learn in small teams while teachers focus support where it is needed.

Schleicher argues that school systems remain the product of the industrial era, focused on standardisation and compliance. Yet the pace of change in modern society requires students equipped with cognitive, emotional and social skills. They need fewer facts and more skills to apply knowledge in novel situations: a move from memorisation to elaboration.

After the 2008 crisis, Schleicher says there was pressure to add more financial education to curricula in an effort to improve students’ financial literacy. But it may have been misplaced. Shanghai schools, for example, added little such material but its pupils scored best on financial literacy in the next Pisa round, since they had a deeper understanding through maths of relevant concepts such as probability, change and risk.

Schleicher argues that the fad for coding risks using “today’s techniques for today’s problems”. OECD survey data show that while moderate use of technology can enhance learning, students in systems which use it extensively perform badly.

Pisa has long been criticised, not least by compilers of rival tests and officials in countries whose school systems rank poorly. Survey data certainly have their limitations. For instance, the UK emerges on paper as having very high teacher autonomy, which does not tally with their frequent complaints of having to “teach to the test”.

Andreas Schleicher
The author’s descriptions of exemplary pilot programmes sometimes seem too perfect, with little counterbalancing analysis of underperforming schools. The explanations for why some countries perform better than others — or change over time — are also limited.

Yet many of his recommendations ring true: do not compromise on standards but be flexible in how they are achieved; raise teachers’ status and give them time for research and innovation; invest in schools; and embrace life-long learning for human fulfilment and economic growth.

Schleicher rightly stresses that Pisa results should not be “about copying prefabricated solutions from other countries”, but rather exploring good practices domestically and abroad. While the debate on reform is far from settled, his effort to bring figures and comparisons to the discussion is extremely useful.

*The reviewer is the FT’s global education editor*

**World Class: how to build a 21st century school system**, by Andreas Schleicher, *OECD*