Refugees in Diaspora: From Durable Solutions to Transnational Relations

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Abstract
When people flee conflict or persecution, a common pattern is for most to seek safety in other parts of their country, for a substantial number to look for refuge in a neighbouring country or countries, and for a smaller number to seek asylum in countries further afield, perhaps on other continents. If displacement persists and people consolidate themselves in their territories of refuge, complex relations will develop among these different domains of what we may call the “refugee diaspora”: that is, among those at home, those in neighbouring territories, and those spread further afield. Each of these domains corresponds to some extent to one of the sites associated with the three “durable solutions” that UNHCR is charged with pursuing for refugees: integration in the country of first asylum, resettlement in a third country, or return to the homeland. Taking its cue from the burgeoning literature on diasporas and transnationalism, this paper explores whether the notion of “durable solutions” can be squared with the transnational character of refugees. It offers a simple schema for considering diaspora and transnational relations, and suggests that transnationalism might be considered in itself as an “enduring” if not a “durable” solution to displacement.

Résumé
Lorsque des gens fuient les conflits ou la persécution, l’un des réflexes les plus courants est de chercher la sécurité dans d’autres parties de leur pays. Un nombre important de personnes cherchent plutôt refuge dans le ou les pays avoisinants et un nombre plus restreint cherche asile dans des pays plus éloignés, voire même dans d’autres continents. Si le déplacement persiste et que les personnes s’ancrent dans leurs terres d’accueil, des relations complexes se développent parmi les différents volets de ce que nous pourrions appeler la « diaspora de réfugiés » : ceux qui sont chez eux, ceux des territoires voisins et ceux disséminés plus loin. Chacun de ces volets correspond jusqu’à un certain point à l’un des lieux associés aux trois « solutions durables » que le Haut Commissaire des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés (HCR) est responsable d’appliquer : l’intégration des réfugiés dans le pays du premier asile, le rétablissement dans un pays tiers ou le retour au pays d’origine. À partir de l’abondante littérature sur les diasporas et le transnationalisme, l’article pose la question à savoir si la notion de « solutions durables » peut être mise en parallèle avec le caractère transnational des réfugiés. Il offre un schéma pour examiner les relations transnationales et de la diaspora, et suggère que le transnationalisme peut être considéré en soi comme une solution de déplacement « persistante », sinon « durable ».

Introduction
When people flee violent conflict or persecution, a common pattern is for most to seek safety in other parts of their country, for a substantial number to look for refuge in a neighbouring country or countries, and for a smaller number to seek asylum in countries further afield, perhaps on other continents. Some of those in neighbouring countries of first asylum may later be resettled further afield, joining those who have gone there directly. As time goes on, individuals and households, at home and abroad, examine their prospects to see what they can make of their situation, given the resources they can muster. Decisions need to be made about whether to stay put, move on, or go home; whether to keep someone at home to look after the family house, farm, or business; or whether to uproot the family members left at home and reunite the family in the country of refuge. Whichever opt-
tion is chosen, what began as forced migration may transmute into other forms of movement as individuals and households decide to go or to send members abroad for family reunion, or to earn money, seek education, or search for other forms of betterment. These new or mutated flows may merge with prior migratory streams of labour or trade. If exile persists and people consolidate themselves in their territories of refuge, complex relations will develop among these different domains of what we may call the “refugee diaspora”: that is, among those at home, those in neighbouring territories, and those spread further afield.

Each of these domains corresponds to some extent to one of the locations or sites associated with the three “durable solutions” that UNHCR is charged with pursuing for refugees: integration in the country of first asylum, resettlement in a third country, or return to the homeland. Conventionally, these domains have been seen as distinct, or sometimes as stages in a refugee “cycle.” Taking its cue from the burgeoning literature on diasporas and transnationalism, this paper will show that this conceptualization fails to capture adequately the transnational character of many refugee households: for example, it is conceivable that, either simultaneously or over time, a given household or family may have members at home, in a neighbouring country, in a country further afield, or moving between these locations. This must have implications for policy and practice in relation to integration, resettlement, repatriation, and efforts to resolve conflicts at home.

The paper looks at whether the notion of “durable solutions” can be squared with the transnational character of refugees. It offers a simple schema for considering refugee diaspora and transnational relations, and then explores how transnationalism might be considered in itself as an “enduring” if not a “durable” solution to displacement.

**Durable Solutions or Transnational Relations?**

According to UNHCR’s Statute, the organization is mandated to “assume the function of providing international protection . . . and of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees” by facilitating “the voluntary repatriation of such refugees, or their assimilation within new national communities.” In the latter case there were two possibilities, usually termed “integration into the country of first asylum” and “resettlement in a third country.” The feasibility and attractiveness of these three “durable solutions,” as they came to be called, have varied over time, partly determined by geopolitical considerations: as many commentators have observed, during the Cold War, resettlement and integration were more the norm, because this suited the purposes of the Western powers, while since the end of the Cold War, new imperatives have prevailed and repatriation has become the most desirable durable solution.

In this thinking, displacement was represented as a temporary phenomenon. It might be manifested in the form of residence in refugee camps, often in neighbouring countries, or in the form of temporary residence, perhaps in territories further afield. Only if exile became permanent would there be local integration or resettlement: the refugee might become an established resident, and eventually a citizen of the country of asylum. Temporary status should not last long in this scheme of things: either the conditions that forced flight would be resolved and the displaced should go home, or the displaced should be incorporated permanently into their place of refuge. The three statuses or “solutions” were linked to distinct physical locations, and they were conceived, originally at least, as applying to individuals rather than families or households.

Needless to say, the real world is messier than this ideal scheme. First, as is well known, “resolution” of displacement often takes a long time, which the architects of the refugee regime did not anticipate. The displaced often find themselves in a state of protracted limbo, a condition highlighted by recent focus on protracted displacement and the “warehousing” of refugees. Citizenship may not be easily acquired or reacquired, and is often disputed. People in such circumstances develop ambiguous relationships towards the places in which they find themselves. In various ways, such has been the experience of the Afghan, Palestinian, Somali, Sri Lankan Tamil, and many other “refugee diasporas.”

Second, compartmentalizing these different categories and statuses risks obscuring connections between them. These categories tend to be regarded in conception, policy, and practice as discrete and even as part of a sequence or cycle comprising: displacement first asylum integration/resettlement/return. But there are links across time and space among these places and statuses. As scholars of transnationalism have been arguing for some time now, people at home and abroad may operate in a single social field, or at least in linked social fields. This applies as much in the context of forced migration as with other forms of migration. What was a single household in a conflict area may subsequently have members at “home” in the country of origin; in neighbouring countries of first asylum; and in the wider diaspora, in countries of asylum or resettlement: we might term this a transnational household. Among wider, extended families, those at home may provide financial or other support for those who go abroad to seek asylum, and those already abroad may help newcomers. Once established, those abroad may support those at home through remittances and other transfers. Refugees returning may get
help from people at home, or from those in neighbouring
countries while they are in transit: such people may facilit-
tate the return of those from further afield, either on visits,
or on a more permanent basis. These links obviously strad-
dle the domains outlined above.

Such links are even found in quite unpromising circum-
stances. For example, refugee camps are often rightly repre-
sented as sites of immobility or restricted mobility. But this
confine ment does not mean that links with the outside world are
absent. As Horst has shown, camps may also be sites of
connection and link. People in camps, or at least some
people in some camps, are plugged into transnational net-
works. Telecommunication centres near or sometimes
within camps are concrete manifestations of this. The inhabi-
tants of camps use them to maintain contact with household
members or kin at home or in the wider diaspora, and to
arrange visits, transfers of money, and other transactions.

Such transnational connections among refugee popula-
tions are attracting increasing attention from researchers. As
has been indicated above, schematically three domains of
a refugee diaspora may be distinguished—the homeland,
or place of origin; the neighbouring country or countries of
first asylum, which can be characterized as the “near dias-
pora”; and countries of asylum further afield, perhaps in
other continents, which can be termed the “wider dias-
pora.” At least three sets of relations may emerge among
these domains: between the “homeland” or territory of
origin and the neighbouring country or countries of
first asylum, which can be characterized as the “near dias-
pora”; and countries of asylum further afield, perhaps in
other continents, which can be termed the “wider dias-
pora.” There may also be connections among the various
locations in the wider diaspora. Each set of relations con-
sists of movements or exchanges of people, money, and
information. Relations may be strong or weak and vary over
time, and by type: they might be political, military, social,
economic, or cultural. Moreover, these relations may be
ambiguous: for example, transfers from abroad may at
different times and in different ways both assist those at
home and help to perpetuate conflict.

Research has elucidated how some of these sets of rela-
tions work, but less attention ha been paid to others. For
example, the movement of people from the inner to the
dother domains as refugees or migrants has been well studied;
so has the return of such refugees and migrants. Move-
ments of money and information have been studied rather
less, but have attracted more attention recently. Nevertheless,
such research as has been done usually presents a
partial picture; few studies have elaborated the whole or
offered an integrated approach. Yet a grasp of the “whole”
is needed, both to understand the societies concerned and
to help devise appropriate policy interventions.

To give some empirical substance to this schema, the
Somali, Afghan, and Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas each fea-
tures the tripartite scheme outlined above. There is a home-
land or place of origin, with a substantial population of
internally displaced people: Somalia and Somaliland, Af-
ghanistan, and North and East Sri Lanka. Substantial num-
bers of refugees have sought safety in neighbouring
countries—Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen in the case of So-
malis; Pakistan and Iran in the case of Afghans; and south
India in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils. Finally there is a wider
set of territories into which people seek entry, either directly
from the homeland, or via the neighbouring countries:
Europe, North America, and Australasia are home to the
wider diasporas of refugees and other migrants from So-
malia, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. Over time complex and
enduring relations have developed among these different
domains of the diaspora emerging from a combination of
migration compelled by circumstance or pursued by choice,
as refugee migration transmutes into economic migration.

These three cases also show that political, economic, and
other relations are highly volatile, as the importance of
particular domains of the diaspora shifts over time. In all
three cases cited above, there has been substantial migra-
tion to the Persian Gulf states, but this has proved vulner-
able to historical contingency, most notably the Gulf crisis
in the early 1990s, when many migrants were forced to leave
the region. These shifts over time occur both at the macro
level of national and international political economy, and
at the micro level of the household and individual life and
livelihoods; needless to say, there is interaction between
these levels. At times, the near diaspora is an important
d conduit of resources—economic, social, political, cultural
– while at other times this domain may be bypassed.

There are significant cleavages within and among differ-
ent domains of the diaspora. Very broadly speaking, spatial
distribution also reflects class distribution, for it is largely
(though not exclusively) the better-off who reach the more
distant and more affluent destinations, because so much is
now needed by way of economic resources and, increas-
ingly, social capital. The less well-resourced may have
sufficient resources to find refuge in neighbouring coun-
tries or to invest in labour migration; and the least well-off
stay within their country of origin. For those remaining
behind in the society in conflict, the scale of resource in-
flows from abroad obviously depends on the socio-econo-
mic standing and resources of those abroad. The Somali,
Afghan, and Tamil cases all illustrate this.

Finally, the three cases show how transnational connec-
tions can help to fuel conflicts as well as ameliorate their
effects: for good or ill, Somali, Afghan, and Sri Lankan
Tamil exile communities have been essential bases of sup-
port for those contesting power in the homeland. Whatever
their effects, however, the deployment of transnational net-
tworks as a resource is predicated on reasonably secure
attachment to the place of exile, for it is from such attach-
ment that resources and entitlements come: it is hard to
imagine how resources can be raised—whether for a house-
hold in distress at home, or to procure arms for a guerrilla
group — from a footloose, transient population without
such attachment to place.

Transnationalism as a Durable Solution?
If transnational activities across locations at home and in exile
are as pervasive as the experience of refugee diasporas suggests,
does the continued use of the categories “home,” “country of
first asylum,” and “resettlement country,” which accompany
the notion of “durable solutions,” make sense? Can durable
solutions be squared with transnational relations?

The notion of durable solutions has recently staged a
resurgence in the context of the development of UNHCR’s
Convention Plus and related initiatives. In an effort to
strengthen the international protection regime and reaffirm commitment to the 1951 Refugee Convention,
UNHCR launched the Global Consultations on Interna-
tional Protection in 2000. The outcome was the Agenda for
Protection, one of whose six goals was to “redouble the
search for durable solutions,” as part of reinvigorating
protection efforts.11 Convention Plus, announced in late
2002, was seen as a means to these ends. It had three
interlinked strands:

- strategic use of resettlement as a tool of protection, a
durable solution, and a tangible form of burden sharing;
- targeting development assistance to support durable
solutions for refugees, whether in countries of asylum
or upon return home; and
- clarification of the responsibilities of states in the
event of irregular secondary movements of refugees
and asylum seekers.12

Targeting development assistance was the strand that sub-
sequently made most headway, and in 2003 UNHCR
launched its Framework for Durable Solutions, aimed pri-
marily at promoting local integration in the country of asy-
lum or repatriation to the homeland through making
refugees’ or returnees’ livelihoods sustainable.13 The revitali-
ization of the notion of durable solutions struck a chord in
wider policy circles. Shortly after the introduction of Con-
vention Plus and the Framework for Durable Solutions, the
European Commission issued a communication, Improving
Access to Durable Solutions, which set out policy intent echo-
ing some of the themes of UNHCR’s Framework.14 These
initiatives were at the more benevolent end of the policy
spectrum in this area. Far less positive have been other ele-
ments of the containment agenda seen in much current
migration and refugee policy, characterized as the “interna-
tionalisation” of European asylum policy in a recent report.15

The resurgence of the notion of durable solutions has thus been a significant feature of policy developments in the
refugee field. But while there is much positive about some
aspects of the recent initiatives, acknowledgement of tran-
snational dimensions across the sites represented in the
three durable solutions is weak in this resurgent policy.

As has been suggested, in areas experiencing conflict or
other severe strain, extended families often disperse to take
advantage of different resources at different sites. Some stay
at home, or become internally displaced, seeking refuge in
other parts of their country. Of those who flee the country,
the more vulnerable (perhaps the elderly, some women,
and children) may stay in camps where they have access to
health and education services. Other members of the ex-
tended family may go to cities in search of employment or
seek seasonal agricultural work; they may negotiate access
to land or livestock in the host country, or find ways of
maintaining control of their assets still in the homeland; or
they may find trading niches between town and country or
across international borders. Still other extended family
members may go abroad as labour migrants, asylum seek-
ers, undocumented workers, or through other migratory
channels to find work and incomes for themselves and the
family. Such “strategies,” if they may be called this, may well
be in place before displacement, but the portfolio of strat-
egies is likely to be broader after displacement, sometimes of
necessity, sometimes by new opportunities opening up.
Access to social networks and mobility can be among refu-
gees’ most important assets.16

From this perspective, the objective of discouraging “sec-
ondary movements” from first asylum countries to western
states, which is one of the imperatives driving Convention
Plus and other recent initiatives, may be counterproduc-
tive, since they curtail what may be an important element
within families’ livelihood portfolios. Likewise concerns to
prevent “backflows” after repatriation may militate against
cross-border networks that have been built up while in
exile. Refugees may not want to go back permanently to
their places of origin, but to re-establish their entitlements
and to integrate these assets into their networks of cross-
border livelihood activities.17

The lack of attention paid to transnational dimensions in
recent policy initiatives on durable solutions is somewhat
surprising given the prominence given to them in
UNHCR’s thinking, as evidenced in the research publica-
tions of its Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit. It is also
perhaps at odds with conceptual shifts within UNHCR in
the 1990s, when the organization was said to have moved from being "reactive, exile-oriented and refugee specific" to being "proactive, homeland-oriented and holistic".18

In contrast to the refugee-centric focus of earlier years, it has now been recognized that if UNHCR is to discharge its mandate of 'seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees', then the organization must address the situation of people who have been displaced within their own country, exiled populations who have returned to their homeland, and those communities which are at risk of being uprooted.19

Accompanying the shift to a "holistic" approach, the relevance of transnationalism has also been recognized for some time by UNHCR: "Refugee problems are by definition transnational problems, which cannot be resolved by means of uncoordinated activities in separate countries."20

This recognition of the importance of transnational links is implicit in some policy interventions. For example, a number of countries (such as the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and Denmark) have instituted "look and see" schemes, under which refugees may go to look at the homeland without jeopardizing their refugee status: Bosnian and Somali refugees are among those who have participated in such schemes. In some cases these initiatives have been government-organized; in other cases non-governmental organizations have set them in motion.21 While such schemes are not without problems, they partly overcome the compartmentalization of locations, and recognize and acknowledge the interrelations between exile and home.

UNHCR and other components of the "refugee regime" have then to some extent recognized the unavoidably transnational character of refugee issues, the need to reconsider conventional distinctions and categories, and the imperative to recognize the links among different domains, including those outlined schematically earlier in this paper. "Look and see" schemes are one practical manifestation of this. Perhaps it is time to go one step further and acknowledge that transnationalism may in itself be a "durable solution" for conditions of displacement—or at least an "enduring" solution. This might mean considering the encouragement or promotion of transnationalism. The cases presented above suggest a number of arguments in support of such an approach. First, "transnationalism" is arguably a "solution" favoured by the displaced, since it is the practice often pursued by them in everyday life. Policy approaches that resonate with what refugees and migrants actually practice make sense. Second, it is increasingly acknowledged that remittances and other transnational flows tend to be an effective means of reaching people in need, since they are often one-to-one flows, rather than the more generalized distributions implemented through aid or welfare — although there are obvious issues of equity here, not least between those households with migrants abroad and those without. Third, as is increasingly recognized, diaspora connections may be vital in sustaining societies in upheaval or conflict and have the potential for assisting such societies once conflict lessens. Building on such potential involves understanding that the return of some members of a household or community to a "post-conflict" society may be predicated on others staying abroad. That way the viability or durability of the return would be enhanced: by sending money home, for example, those abroad may help to set up or sustain livelihoods established by returnees during start-up periods or during hard times. A sustainable livelihood may then be established as the basis for subsequent returns of the displaced. At the same time, as has been suggested above, the deployment of transnational connections in such ways is predicated on some elements of the diaspora attaining reasonably secure residence in the place of exile.

There are, of course, problems with such an approach. Not least of these are questions of equity, already referred to, for it tends to be those who are already better off who take prime positions in the transnational arena; encouragement of transnationalism may therefore reinforce inequalities. Another issue is commitment to place, also just referred to, for if people are really as footloose as some proponents of transnationalism imply, why should they contribute to the places they find themselves in? This may indeed be problematic for host countries where migrants’ or newcomers’ loyalties lie elsewhere. A third issue is the ambiguity of transnational connections, since they can contribute to conflicts as well as ameliorating their effects, as is indicated by the cases considered above. Can (or should) policies be devised which enhance the positive outcomes of transnational networks, while discouraging transnational activities which fuel or sustain conflicts?

These problematic areas notwithstanding, the implications of transnationalism are gaining greater attention among policy makers and practitioners concerned with displacement and its resolution. Indeed there has recently been an explosion of interest in the development potential of migration, remittances and diasporas, including refugees.22 This burgeoning interest in transnational dimensions is ostensibly somewhat at odds with the resurgence of the pursuit of durable solutions associated with particular sites — repatriation to the homeland, local integration in the asylum country, or resettlement in a third country. It is even more at odds with the containment thrust of much current "migration management" policy.
The resurgence of the search for “durable solutions” involving repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in a third country is welcome, so long as we do not lose sight of the links between the geographical locations and social statuses that each is associated with, both to understand how refugees and their networks function and the policy implications of that understanding. One real-world manifestation of this is that interventions in one sphere may reverberate in other connected spheres: for example, curtailment of immigration or repatriation may lead to a decline in remittances, which may in turn lead to hardship and instability at home, and possibly renewed conflict and forced displacement.

The challenge is to reconcile the quest for durable solutions associated with particular sites with recognition that transnational connections and practices provide important means for sustaining people caught up in conflict, displacement, and its aftermath. “Reconstruction” after conflict will not only involve the homeland or the actual arena of conflict; transnational links and diaspora connections that develop to sustain societies in conflict are likely to be irrevocably integral parts of the “post-conflict” society to be reconstructed. Taking advantage of transnational connections and practices requires taking account of the links among different domains of diaspora: this paper has offered the beginnings of a simple framework for considering the relations among these different domains, and has argued that policies seeking durable solutions for refugees should embrace these linkages.

Notes
8. See, for example, Horst, Transnational Nomads; Stephanie Riak Akuei, “Remittances as Unforeseen Burdens: The Livelihoods and Social Obligations of Sudanese Refugees” (Global Migration Perspectives Paper 18, Global Commission on Migration, Geneva, 2005); Anna Lindley, “Migration and Financial Transfers: UK-Somalia,” Refugee 23, no. 2 (forthcoming).
9. Horst; Riak Akuei; Lindley.
19. Ibid. at 49.
20. Ibid. at 49.