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# *Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy*

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This article reviews the growth of the field of refugee studies, focusing on its links with, and impact on, refugee policy. The last fifty years, and especially the last two decades, have witnessed both a dramatic increase in academic work on refugees and significant institutional development in the field. It is argued that these institutions have developed strong links with policymakers, although this has often failed to translate into significant policy impacts. Areas in which future policy-orientated work might be developed are considered.

The field of 'refugee studies' has grown dramatically over the latter part of the twentieth century, in parallel with the significance of the phenomenon of forced migration itself. As the number of refugees and forced migrants in the world soared into the tens of millions, the study of its causes and consequences has acquired an institutional base in specialist research centers, academic journals and international research organizations. The situation of refugees has attracted research effort at pre- and post-doctoral levels, with funding both from policy organizations and the major research councils and foundations. What Zetter (1988) described as a research agenda based around a 'label' has arguably come of age as a legitimate, interdisciplinary field of enquiry. As refugee policies have been studied, 'lessons' have been 'learned.' Meanwhile, theoretical reflection has enriched both the field itself and many of the disciplines from which researchers of refugee issues have come.

Yet reflecting on the emergence of the field of 'refugee studies' remains a complex task. First, unlike the history of an organization such as UNHCR, it is not easy to put a starting date on a field of academic enquiry. That research effort in refugee studies has grown, especially in the last fifteen to twenty years is undeniable. Yet there is also a richness in earlier work on refugees that pre-dates the emergence of 'refugee studies' institutions. This includes voluminous studies of the refugee camps left after the displacements of the two World Wars (Kulischer, 1948; Proudfoot, 1957; Chandler, 1959; Kee, 1961), as well as work on the interwar International Refugee Organization (Holborn, 1956) and its post-war successor, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Holborn *et al.*, 1973). In addition, there is a

wide-ranging literature within a number of academic disciplines that does not explicitly identify itself as within ‘refugee studies,’ but which still deals substantively with refugees as its subject. In part, this reflects terminological debates about who is, and who is not, a refugee – and hence what is, and what is not, refugee studies. It also reflects the fact that the totality of research in refugee studies still remains, in many respects, less than the sum of its parts.

Bearing in mind these constraints, this article aims to consider some aspects of the state of refugee research after 50 years of the Refugee Convention, specifically the relationship of this research to evolving refugee policy. It will chart the rise of the field of refugee studies, focusing in particular on its definition, institutional context, and impact on policy. Naturally, this represents a partial view of the emergence of the field, since an academic discipline can and should seek justification and legitimacy well beyond the provision of an evidence base for public policy. Indeed, the dependence of refugee studies on policy definitions and concerns might be seen to be one of its principal weaknesses (Malkii, 1995). Nonetheless, such an assessment is of value, especially given the perceived importance of the problems of displacement and refugees within the world today and the claims of both academics and policymakers to be able to respond to these problems.

### *THE EMERGENCE OF A FIELD*

Despite its status as an academic field of study, the development of refugee studies has always been intimately connected with policy developments. The first international organization specifically orientated towards the study of refugees – the Association for the Study of the World Refugee Problem, established in Liechtenstein in 1950 – followed closely on the heels of the establishment of UNHCR itself, but even earlier work also took its cue largely from the policy field. For example, in a 1939 special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on refugees, nearly half of the 22 articles were devoted to exploring “possible ways out” of the “refugee problem.” These ranged from analyses of the actions of the League of Nations itself (Holborn, 1939) to consideration of the potential economic benefits a more liberal refugee policy might bring to the United States (Grattan, 1939; Ostrolenk, 1939). In turn, as new and expanding interest in refugee issues emerged after the exodus from Vietnam in the late 1970s, a special issue of *International Migration Review* similarly devoted much space to analysis of, and recommendations for, policy, although it is interesting to note that concern had by then shifted to more problematic aspects of the refugee experience, such as “psychological adaptation and dysfunction” (Cohon, 1981) or difficulties of linguistic (Klein-

mann and Daniel, 1981) or occupational (Finnan, 1981) adjustment. Neither volume provides much in the way of theoretical reflection, although the latter does include one article that has become a reference point for subsequent attempts at theory building (Kunz, 1981).

An annotated bibliography of some 100 articles on refugee problems in the 1939 volume (Brown, 1939) also reflects a strong bias towards practical issues, with sections on the “absorptive capacity of land and colonization,” “the professional refugee” (*i.e.*, refugee professionals, such as doctors, scientists, etc.), the League of Nations and ‘private and governmental organizations.’ The bibliography included in the 1981 volume (Stein, 1981) reveals a similar level of pre-occupation with policy concerns, even if, with over 800 entries, it proved impossible to categorize and annotate this burgeoning field. In turn, this difficulty reflects a second major facet of the development of the field – its dramatic growth. By 2001, such a bibliography would be an almost impossible task, with UNHCR’s ‘Refworld’ database listing nearly 2,000 records on refugees, human rights and related literature in just the last three years. Already by the late 1980s, the publication of general bibliographies on refugee studies had been superseded by more specialist bibliographies, for example on refugee mental health (Williams, 1987; Petersen *et al.*, 1989), refugees in the United Kingdom (Joly, 1988), or Southeast Asian refugees, with the latter focused both on particular groups (Marston, 1987; Smith, 1988; Hammond and Hendricks, 1988) and receiving countries (Mignot, 1988; Indra, 1988). By the 1990s, specialized bibliographies had emerged on IDPs (REFLIT, 1995; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2000), international refugee law (Mason, 1996), Roma refugees (OSI, 1998), refugee women (Chowdhury, 1995) and even combinations of the above (Benjamin and Fancy, 1998; Mason, 1999).

In many respects, the 1981 volume of *International Migration Review* represents a starting point, rather than a milestone, for refugee studies as we know it today. In their introduction, Stein and Tomasi (1981:6) called for “a comprehensive, historical, interdisciplinary and comparative perspective which focuses on the consistencies and patterns in the refugee experience.” Since that time, the explosion in scholarly output on refugees has seen the establishment of a number of centers around the world working specifically on refugee issues (*see* Table 1), as well as over 250 centers working on related issues.<sup>1</sup> Many of

<sup>1</sup>Over 250 entries are recorded on UNHCR’s ‘Reflink’ database, which the organization intriguingly describes as going ‘beyond traditional refugee studies to include projects in the domain of human rights, refugee and asylum policy, security and conflict resolution, migration and demography, development and environment, emergency relief, psycho-social and community services.’ *See* <http://www.unhcr.ch/refworld/refworld/refpub/reflink.htm>

these now offer short courses, as well as mainstream academic courses and programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate level within the field of refugee studies. At one of a number of recent conferences providing a retrospective on this research, Barbara Harrell-Bond, founder of probably the most important of these centers, at Oxford University, described the Oxford Refugee Studies Program (RSP) as “an expanding network of individuals around the world” who had “collaborated in developing this new multi-disciplinary field of academic pursuit” (Harrell-Bond, 1998). RSP’s role, and that of major donors such as the Ford Foundation, has been crucial in developing the field, with the latter

**TABLE 1**  
SIGNIFICANT DATES IN ‘REFUGEE STUDIES’

Date of establishment	Organizations/ Academic centers	Journals
1950	Association for the Study of the World Refugee Problem	
1958	United States Committee for Refugees	
1963		AWR Bulletin (AWR)
1980		Refugee Reports (USCR)
1981	Refugee Documentation Project, York University, Canada (since 1988: Centre for Refugee Studies)	Refugees (UNHCR) Refugee Review (University of Minnesota)
1982	Refugee Policy Group, Washington DC	Refugee Abstracts (UNHCR: since 1994:
1983	Refugee Studies Programme, University of Oxford, UK (since 2000: Refugee Studies Centre)	Refugee Survey Quarterly)
1985	Refugee Studies Programme, Juba University, Sudan (now defunct)	World Refugee Survey (USCR)
1988		Journal of Refugee Studies (OUP/RSP) Refugee Participation Network (RSP: since 1998: Forced Migration Review) World Refugee Report (US Bureau for Refugee Programs, Department of State) International Journal of Refugee Law (OUP)
1989		
1992	Moi University (Kenya) Centre for Refugee Studies	
1993	Makerere University (Uganda) Human Rights and Peace Centre	
1995	Palestine Diaspora and Refugee Center (Jerusalem); University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) Centre for Study of Forced Migration; International Association for the Study of Forced Migration	
1999	UNESCO/UNITWIN Network on Forced Migration links refugee studies centres at Oxford, An-Najah National University (Palestinian Authority), Yarmouk University (Jordan), Hassan II University (Morocco), and University of Western Cape (South Africa)	

providing funds both for some of the earliest interventions of UNHCR (Holborn *et al.*, 1973:352) and for some of the most important academic work that critically reflects on such giving (*see* Zolberg *et al.*, 1989).

One of the most important contributions of RSP to the field has been its role in the establishment of a major interdisciplinary journal, the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, which since its inception in 1988 has published over 250 scholarly articles on refugees by researchers from at least sixteen different disciplines. In turn, the *Journal of Refugee Studies* has spawned an international association, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration, which has sought to function as an independent community of scholars and practitioners working on refugee issues (Koser, 1996). Although other journals have devoted increasing attention to refugees – the *International Migration Review*, for example, has published some 27 articles on refugees in the last decade, compared to just seven in its first decade – the existence of such a specialist journal is of critical importance in providing a focus for scholarly output within the field.

Yet throughout this growth in scholarly output, and the development of centers and programs specializing in the study of refugees, there has remained a close and fundamental interaction with policymakers. For example, the RSP set about establishing a research relationship with UN bodies such as the World Food Program (if not with UNHCR), conducting a series of studies on food aid to refugees, which led both directly and indirectly to a number of important publications in this field (Reynell, 1986; Keen, 1992). Similarly, the Center for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada, grew out of a concern with the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees; it has been recognized as a “Center of Excellence” by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Such policy-orientated research within University settings has implied a constant battle to maintain academic independence and intellectual rigor, while simultaneously producing research of relevance to policy concerns, which is capable of attracting funding from major government and private donors.

It is important to remember that these institutional developments do not describe the totality of research that exists within the academic field of refugee studies. Many – perhaps most – researchers working on refugee issues have worked outside any institutional context that involves a specialization in refugee or even migration studies, while probably the majority of the scholarly literature on refugees remains in broadly disciplinary or policy studies journals, rather than in the more specialist journals noted above. For example, over the last decade, reviews of refugee studies have appeared in disciplinary journals in various social science disciplines, including geography (Black, 1991), sociology (Hein, 1993), and anthropology (Malkii, 1995), and these

**TABLE 2**  
**DISCIPLINARY BACKGROUNDS OF AUTHORS OF PAPERS PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL OF REFUGEE STUDIES**

Discipline	Number of papers
Political Science	26.2
Anthropology	22.5
Sociology	18
Psychology/mental health	14
Socio-legal studies	13.5
History	13.3
International Relations	10.5
Health Studies	10
Geography	10
Education	6
Gender studies	4
Economics	2
Philosophy	1
Linguistic Studies	1
Demography	1
Business Administration	1
Policy organizations	26
Interdisciplinary/discipline not specified	33

have not necessarily cross-referenced to provide an overview of the field. While this diversity of sites for publication makes a review of the 'state of the art' of refugee studies somewhat problematic, it nevertheless indicates how the study of refugees has avoided 'ghettoization,' instead forming part of and contributing to mainstream academic debate within both disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarly journals.

In the context of the dramatic increase in volume and strong policy links of refugee research, the following sections go on to flesh out three key areas in which this new field of study might be assessed. First, and despite the wealth of material noted above, it is worth questioning whether a distinctive field of study has actually been carved out at all – and indeed whether that should be an academic goal. What is it that makes refugee studies distinct from migration studies, or indeed people studies? Has over 50 years of critical reflection, with nearly two decades of this going on at least partly within refugee studies institutions, succeeded in highlighting a separate field of enquiry that can stand alone within the social sciences? I will consider in more detail the fora within which this academic endeavor has been carried out. To use Barry Stein and Lydio Tomasi's language, if there have been at least "consistencies and patterns in the refugee experience," to what extent has the analysis of this experience become comprehensive, historical, interdisciplinary or comparative? Or has this research remained isolated, ahistorical, and largely "buried in the files of refugee agencies" as Stein (1981:331) lamented? Finally, I will consider the impact of this research on policy itself. If there is a strong link between the development of

research effort in this field and the concerns of policymakers, one might expect this research at least to have had some influence in the policy field, even if it has not been generalized into broader academic discourse. However, here, too, the record is not as good as might be expected.

### *Defining Refugee Studies as a Research Field*

From the outset, refugee studies has been dogged by terminological difficulties. As Zetter (1988) noted in an opening editorial for the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, the term ‘refugee’ is one that has found favor in popular discourse over the course of this century. Indicating uprootedness and exile, it often implies a dependence on humanitarian intervention and a rupture of ‘normal’ social, economic and cultural relations. The refugee is commonly distinguished from the economic migrant, as someone who is forced to migrate, rather than somebody who has moved more or less voluntarily. As such, a refugee is a person with particular experiences and needs, for whom special measures of public policy are justified. When refugees are explicitly defined at all, the 1951 Geneva Convention definition (as amended by the New York Protocol of 1969) is most commonly used, whereby a refugee is someone who is outside their own country due to a “well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Yet, at best, the term simply reflects the designation of refugee enshrined in a particular Convention at a particular time, within a particular international political and economic context. As such, it could be argued to be devoid of any deeper academic meaning or explanatory power – it is what Andrew Sayer would call a “chaotic conception” (Sayer, 1982). Worse, by conveying academic respectability, the uncritical use of the term in scholarly literature can contribute to the perception of the naturalness of the category of refugees and of differential policies towards those who do and those who do not qualify for the label. The simple acceptance by social scientists of a legal definition might have some justification were this definition legally uncontested; yet as the burgeoning field of refugee law amply demonstrates, this is far from the case.

In practice, the relatively uncritical use of a policy-based definition of refugees within academic writing has a long pedigree. For example, Simpson (1939), in a treatise on the refugee problem for the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, argued that:

the essential quality of a refugee ... [is] ... that he has left his country of regular residence, of which he may or may not be a national, as a result of political events in that country which



render his continued residence impossible or intolerable, and has taken refuge in another country, or if already absent from his home, is unwilling or unable to return, without danger to life or liberty, or as a direct consequence of the political conditions existing there.

In contrast, Simpson specifically rejected flood and earthquake victims, participants in purely temporary movements (such as Serbs and Belgians displaced during World War I) and stateless persons as refugees for the purposes of his enquiry because they were not offered protection by the League of Nations. More recent work on refugees has tended to adopt a rather broader interpretation of the term refugee than that defined by the actions of international organizations (*see* Ager, 1999). Yet, there is still far from a clear consensus on what the term – and more importantly the field of refugee studies – should or should not include and, indeed, criticism that the field as a whole has remained under-theorized (Hein, 1993).

There is certainly some academic work that has argued for an extension of the refugee definition to include other types of forced migrants, thus potentially enlarging the field of refugee studies as well. However, this work often appears to have an agenda based much more in the extension of policy definitions than in any deeper academic attempt to understand in a more comprehensive way the situation or distinctiveness of refugees as opposed to other kinds of migrants. For example, there are various terms in use that describe forced migrants of one kind or another. Some have a specific meaning in national or international policy, including the term refugee itself as well as others such as asylum-seeker, humanitarian refugee (in certain countries) and stateless person. Others denote more generalized categories such as exiles, expellees, transferees, and even economic refugees, as some term those forced to migrate by poverty, underdevelopment or social exclusion (Richmond, 1993). Yet the definitions of these terms are often vague, shifting or overlapping, and little evidence is presented to show that they are sociologically significant in the sense of describing a set of characteristics that are innate or defining features of a theoretically distinct population group.

Meanwhile, attempts to promote the use of other terms in academic literature seem to represent a struggle to ensure that these terms are also incorporated into concrete policy initiatives. Thus, the term internally-displaced person (IDP) has gained increasing attention as scholars have sought to highlight the similarities between forced migrants who have and have not been displaced across international frontiers (Davies, 1998; Lee, 1996). A recent landmark two-volume work by Deng and Cohen (1999) has put the most comprehensive case to date for consideration of IDPs alongside refugees as a marginalized, alienated and persecuted population. Yet this work is intimately tied to the

actions of specific parts of the UN – including a Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – which have a particular interest in the development of international humanitarian policy on IDPs. In this sense, the recommendations of its authors can hardly be seen as those of impartial observers, while when the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, takes a cue from such work to claim that “of course, there is no real difference between an ‘official refugee’ and an internally displaced person – especially to the victim,” we should not view this as a fully articulated theoretical position (Holbrooke, 2000).

The debate over IDPs represents the area in which perhaps most headway has been made in extending the boundaries of both refugee studies terminology and public policy on forced migration, but it is not unique. Since Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute first wrote about ecological refugees in the 1970s (Brown, 1976), the notion of environmental refugees has periodically appeared as an issue demanding the attention of academic researchers and policymakers (Myers and Kent, 1995; Jacobson, 1988), with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) playing an important role in attempting to popularize the term (El Hinnawi, 1985). Similarly, the notion of development-induced displacement has received a fair amount of attention both in edited volumes (Cernea and McDowell, 2000; Drèze *et al.*, 1997; Thukral, 1992; McDowell, 1996) and academic articles (Scudder, 1993; Parasuraman, 1995; Gany *et al.*, 1993), with a significant contribution coming from within the World Bank. What all three categories have in common, though, is the development of academic literature based less on theoretical reflection about what constitutes a refugee, or a conceptually coherent field of study, and more on the documentation of empirical examples of displacement, often led by researchers based within policy organizations that are directly concerned with responding to (or even causing) particular types of displacement.

It would be untrue to say that theoretical reflection, including consideration of terminology, is completely absent from the field of refugee studies, as contributions from authors such as Kunz (1981), Zolberg *et al.* (1989), Richmond (1988, 1993), Marx (1990) and others (Hein, 1993, for example) testify. Many of these authors offer typologies of different kinds of voluntary and involuntary migrations. However, there are problems with some of the new categories of forced migrant that have emerged in the literature, not least the term environmental refugee which has been the subject of stinging criticism from a number of authors (McGregor, 1993; Kibreab, 1997). Moreover, it may also be necessary to take more seriously the warning of Bascom (1998)

that there is no 'theory of refugees' and accept that, as such, there is not going to be. As Malkii (1995:496) argues:

The term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable "kind" or "type" of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of socio-economic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations.

If this point is accepted, our goal should not be to highlight the distinctiveness of refugees, or any other differently defined group of forced migrants; rather, the search for theoretical grounding of refugee studies may be better achieved by situating studies of particular refugee (and other forced migrant) groups in the theories of cognate areas (and major disciplines). Such an approach would provide an opportunity to use the particular circumstances of refugee situations to illuminate these more general theories and thus participate in the development of social science, rather than leading refugee studies into an intellectual cul-de-sac.

For example, emerging work on transnationalism and the development of transnational communities and social practices has been dominated by empirical examples that emphasize the experience of labor migrants (Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Portes *et al.*, 1999) or old diasporic groups (Cohen, 1997). Although there have been some examples of refugee groups being held up as transnational in their activities (Moberg, 1996; Landolt *et al.*, 1999; Faist 1999), the theorization of transnationalism has largely ignored the specific experiences of refugees, even though they are far from exceptional in either quantitative or qualitative terms. Examining the notion of transnationalism in the light of refugee experiences, however, presents an opportunity to refine and expand its conceptualization (Shami, 1996; Al-Ali *et al.*, 2001). Focusing on the role played by refugees in transnational activities could help to dispel some of the more idealistic notions of transnationalism from below as a people-led process, which takes advantage of processes of globalization and ease of travel in the modern world (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). In contrast, the mobilization of refugee communities for transnational activities can involve both opposition to and manipulation by states, and it almost by definition involves a group whose ease of physical travel is generally circumscribed in important ways.

### *Refugee Studies or Refugee Policy Studies?*

In spite of the possibilities that emerge from more theoretical reflection built out of a concern with refugee studies, the fact that empirical evidence and

policy organizations have been crucial in expanding the limits of the field of refugee studies is not necessarily a criticism of the field. Indeed, this problem-centered approach and openness to dialog with practitioners is in many respects a major strength of refugee studies, and the fact that IDPs at least are now receiving serious attention at the highest policy levels is an indication of how research can impact on policy. However, there do nonetheless appear to be a number of dangers in this relationship. At best, it may serve to marginalize refugee studies from mainstream social science as the field develops an agenda that is out of touch with the concerns of other social scientists and seen as lacking in theoretical perspective or grounding. More pessimistically, there is a risk of research being co-opted by organizations with particular political or bureaucratic interests. Such a risk is not purely hypothetical, as the growing literatures on IDPs, development-induced displacement and environmental refugees arguably provide examples of precisely such co-option.

There is also a danger that the dominance of policy concerns in refugee research will lead to work that is not only undertheorized and orientated towards particular bureaucratic interests, but also fundamentally unsuited even to the task of influencing the policy world in which it is mainly situated. First, given the fact that a large amount of policy-orientated research is commissioned by, or written in close collaboration with, operational agencies that have specific and detailed requirements for knowledge, there is a tendency for such research to be highly geographically, temporally and organizationally limited. Such work is often unpublished – indeed unpublishable – precisely because geographical or historical context, and wider relevance, is not explicitly considered. However, this limits its usefulness not only to scholars, but also to organizations other than the commissioning agency and, indeed, even to that same agency after a few years or in a different country.

Twenty years ago, the loss of such data and reports was a major concern to those establishing new programs and centers in refugee studies and also lamented in the academic literature (Stein, 1981). Now, the fruits of this concern are being seen: there is, for example, a large selection of such ‘grey’ literature accessible at the Oxford Refugee Studies Center and now being made available in digital format over the internet, and other institutions have also taken care to establish documentation centers with similar objectives. Meanwhile, policy organizations themselves have started to take better care of documentary records and often release these to the public. For example, one of the more important evaluations of an emergency operation – the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda – was published in full after an

extraordinary collaboration between a range of operational agencies and academic researchers, and despite serious misgivings on the part of some of the original donors (Steering Committee, 1996). More recently, UNHCR itself has sought to stand back from its practical day-to-day business, as High Commissioner Mrs. Ogata – not coincidentally a former academic herself – encouraged publication of the “State of the World’s Refugees,” a working paper series on “New Issues in Refugee Research,” and even internal UNHCR evaluations, through a Center for Documentation and Research and, since 1999, an Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit.

Yet, in some respects, the problem now is more a surfeit than a lack of available information. For example, attempts at information-sharing during the recent Kosovo crisis by the UNHCR-funded Humanitarian Crisis Information Center (HCIC) have led to approximately 100 documents being made available through the ReliefWeb internet site and still more on a specially-produced CD-Rom. Meanwhile, even in the apparently forgotten crisis of Liberia, significant reviews of policy experience were conducted by many agencies, including the European Union (APT-Consult, 1998), UNICEF (1995), WFP (2000) and the British Government (Outram, 1998). However, despite this effort, there is still a tendency for too much of this output to be repetitive, overlapping, hastily compiled, and biased towards a focus on the agency that funded each particular piece of work. Moreover, the effort that has gone into the coordination and dissemination of such information in Kosovo still appears more the exception than the rule, with many operational agencies prepared to emasculate or suppress documents and reports that are even mildly critical.

### *Impacts on Policy*

Even if there is an emerging consensus on the need for critical reflection within refugee assistance programs and information-sharing and proper documentation of the situation and experience of refugees and asylum-seekers on the part of policy organizations, the question remains as to whether such activity has had any real impact on policy. A pessimistic view of the academic value and wider applicability of much of the policy research currently being produced should logically lead to the conclusion that the impact of this research has been minimal, and this is indeed a view that has been expressed. For example, with respect to refugee repatriation, Preston (1999:36) makes the point that “voluntary repatriations throughout the world have generated policy-orientated, operational and basic studies” and that these have started

to become comprehensive. Yet, she goes on to suggest “the extent to which the structures within which the research is embedded allow the direct or indirect transfer of knowledge and resources which is necessary to alleviate disadvantage is likely to be limited” (p. 36).

The capacity of organizations providing protection and assistance to refugee groups to respond to evidence-based policy is certainly a cause for serious concern. For example, emerging literature on the inadequacies of asylum-determination procedures in Western Europe has had virtually no positive impact on European states’ policies, with the trend if anything going in the opposite direction (Schuster *et al.*, 2000). Within this context, even specific proposals, relating to burden sharing (Noll, 1997) or the reformulation of refugee law (Hathaway, 1991, 1997; Harvey, 1999) have received only cursory attention from policymakers, at least in Western European governments, although their differential impact around the world, and potential for misinterpretation, have drawn criticism from some southern scholars (Chimni, 1998). Meanwhile, the inadequacies of the international humanitarian response to the crisis in Kosovo in 1999 have also revealed a failure to learn from existing experience, as documented in academic literature, whether on the part of international organizations operating within the region (Suhrke *et al.*, 2000) or on the part of governments of countries of asylum in Western Europe (Van-Selm, 2000).

Nonetheless, there are some areas in which academic researchers do appear to have made progress in seeing their insights and ideas adopted in public policymaking. For example, at the time when the refugee studies centers at Oxford and York were being set up in the early 1980s, participatory and gender-sensitive approaches to research and public policy were in their infancy (Chambers, 1983; Young *et al.*, 1981). However, they were firmly rejected by most agencies working with refugees as being too time consuming and unrealistic to be implemented in refugee emergency settings. Only a decade later, after considerable research and lobbying based on that research, such approaches have become fully accepted by UNHCR – at least in principle – such that the organization now has a people-orientated planning process, a full set of policies to engage with client groups and promote training in gender-awareness and participation, and a clear contractual expectation that all its implementing partners will also comply with such principles (Anderson, 1994). Similar progress has been made in the area of environmental awareness, with a clear concern to learn not only from internal experiences but also from research in the broader social and environmental sciences (Black, 1998).

It is difficult to demonstrate a causal link between research effort and such changes in policy, and it is relatively easy to denigrate the practice of gender and environmental awareness or public participation in policy on the ground as involving more rhetoric than substance. Nonetheless, these changes do represent a real advance in terms of the practice of many international organizations and at least some governments. They also raise questions as to how such positive – albeit limited – impacts of research on policy might be stimulated in the future. One could argue that, because participation has failed in refugee situations despite the good faith efforts of UNHCR to implement a policy that had worked elsewhere, the uniqueness of such situations means that participation cannot work for refugees. However, such a conclusion is not helpful. Rather, it would appear more appropriate to develop critical academic work on participation, with the cooperation of agencies working on the ground, which will help to find ways of making a participatory approach work in refugee situations. Indeed, such critical academic reflection on the practice of participatory approaches in emergencies could be used to improve participation elsewhere.

There are a number of other areas in which such critical reflection would be helpful. For example, work on the negative impacts of forced geographical dispersal of refugees in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and 1980s (Robinson and Hale, 1989; Robinson, 1993) helped to move U.K. policy away from dispersal for at least a decade. Yet an opportunity was missed to extend such work to other European countries, such as Germany and Sweden, where dispersal continued to be a cornerstone of policy towards refugees and asylum-seekers; nor was this research fully mobilized in attempts to resist the new U.K. government policy of dispersal encapsulated in the National Asylum Support System (NASS) introduced in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

Turning to the south, there are further areas in which research findings could be extended. One example involves work on the causes of excess morbidity and mortality in refugee and other emergency situations, which has led, among other things, to an acceptance of the need to prioritize vaccinations against measles (Porter *et al.*, 1990), an acceptance of the need to ensure a range of micronutrients in diets based on rations (Keen, 1992); and an acceptance of the importance of entitlements to food, rather than food supply (Drèze and Sen, 1989). Yet new evidence on the negative impact on health of refugee camps themselves (as opposed to self-settlement of refugees) has not had the same impact (*see* Crisp and Jacobson, 1998), despite reports of high levels of excess mortality in camp settings like those in the Great Lakes (Paquet and Van Soest, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

In a relatively short article, it is not possible to cover the whole history of the evolution of thought in refugee studies, nor would attempting such a review serve a very useful purpose. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to reflect on past and current research in a field that is both expanding and vibrant. What sets this field apart is the way it has developed, not in a sterile or inward-looking academic environment, but in relation to a crucial area of policy that directly affects the lives of millions of people. This high level of policy relevance does not obviate the need for critical theoretical reflection, but it does create a separate set of criteria with which to consider the development of the discipline. This article has suggested that success in terms of setting out a field of study, ensuring open, critical enquiry, and disseminating its findings, has been mixed. Ensuring that all of the fruits of such policy-orientated research are actually translated into improved policy remains a formidable task.

In thinking about the future, there are a variety of routes that such policy-relevant research could take and no clear maps to guide it. Although there is a danger that policy organizations will set too limited an agenda in terms of definitions, terminology, or the detailed issues to be investigated, it is clear that policy-relevant research cannot advance without the active involvement of such organizations. In this sense, open and genuinely independent academic reviews of particular policies or humanitarian operations can play an important role in advancing knowledge, especially when the collaborative effort of different agencies with a range of experiences and responsibilities is involved. This is an area in which an international professional association could play a role in stimulating research, or at least in agreeing benchmarks for research, in a manner similar to the way the Sphere project has generated standards for the provision of humanitarian relief itself (Sphere Project, 2000).

It is also worth recognizing, however, that just as there could be greater academic involvement in the policy field, in terms of independent policy reviews, there could also be a greater willingness on the part of policymakers to engage with, and stimulate, more basic research and reflection. For example, commitments by operation agencies to train their staffs are usually limited to short courses, even though masters and even doctoral training might provide internal critical reflection on policy that would be highly beneficial to the organization concerned. Meanwhile, just as agencies themselves often resent the extent to which they are forced to become more and more project-driven in their activities, so too such arrangements pose problems for acade-



mic institutions, particularly those in the south that could provide a pool of knowledge and skills of use in future refugee emergencies.

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