
Cross-cultural Co-operation among Displaced Persons: a democratic potential for self-reliant integration in the host society

by Geza Tessenyi

Introduction

In the Western European setting, a serious reflection is needed to analyze whether there is any effective insider way to intervene on behalf of the protection of human rights and dignity of displaced people, without banging our heads against a brick wall of locally defined national interests.

While academics and international human rights and humanitarian organizations may afford to exercise criticism against governments, this is certainly not the case with most refugees. Without a reassuring legal status and economic background, and without a social community which they would belong to, these people hardly dare criticize those institutions' policies, upon which they are completely dependant. Refugees are individual cases with individual files at immigration offices and various ministerial bodies, and they have daily fears of individual expulsion. So, criticism may be an instrument of established local citizens and their organizations sympathetic to the "case" of displaced people, but it is by no means the adequate instrument of displaced people themselves.

There certainly is an individual escape route — for the "nice guys". They show complete loyalty, learn the local language rapidly and successfully, and are absorbed in the host society by finding a job. These nice guys are mostly of high education, of white skin, of European appearance and, overwhelmingly, of the male sex.

What about the rest? Our point of departure when drafting the Displaced Citizenship Programme was that the huge human potential of displaced persons, which is largely wasted today, should be

turned directly into a driving instrument of refugee integration at both the local and the international level. This primarily means *communication* between displaced individuals, and between these individuals and ethnic or multicultural refugee or migrant groups. This insiders' communication is probably the most responsible and most sensitive way to identify common needs and interests. Such an identification is the very basis for future formulation, expression and representation of these needs and interests. Communication creates the chance for these identified common interests also to draw on the skills and capacities of displaced people, particularly of the more talented and highly educated in supporting the less educated and the "newcomers". Both local and world-wide insiders' communication makes possible a feeling of community, of a new, multicultural identity, which does not ignore in any way the ethnic identity of these people, nor their integration process in the recipient (host) society.

The Displaced Citizenship Programme: Main Features

The UNHCR Technical Support Service publishes a newsletter called *Rapport*. In its second number (Spring 1988) it argues: "Little progress has been made so far in developing approaches and organizational structures which are designed to bring about participation in a tangible way. One reason for this is that there has been a polarization between the "outside actors" such as UNHCR and voluntary organizations, and the "inside actors", that is, the refugee population itself. If genuine refugee participation is to be achieved, then the strong tendency

towards a paternalistic attitude and the one-way downward flow of values and instructions has to be changed."

This approach *exactly* corresponds to those objectives which are at the centre of the concept and the strategy of the Displaced Citizenship Programme. In recognizing, that the international refugee crisis is clearly one of the major development problems of our age, we, the founders of the Programme, did not see any better chance to face this world-wide challenge, than by providing an infrastructure of self-reliant involvement and participation for the *insiders* of the crisis. *Not telling them what to do, but simply giving them a truly democratic chance to decide for themselves what to do.* (This approach to development problems is certainly now new. One can easily recall the concept of "another development", elaborated by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in 1975 in its report "What Now") Therefore, understanding also the major relevance and positiveness of the already existing institutional framework of international and national refugee care, we decided to make a parallel, complementary attempt to involve the great human potential of displaced people.

So, last May the Programme was developed by six young people from four continents, at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. It is carried out by *insiders* from the displaced population. Affected *outsiders* such as host (recipient) governments, related intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations are invited and requested to assist our development process. We need their expertise, technical facilities, working experience, data-banks and networks. But the essential development process, that is, to understand and identify ourselves in our new social position, to understand our

special relationship to the host communities and their administrative institutions, and to find our various ways to cooperate with host communities and with each other, cannot be successfully carried out by others than ourselves.

The name Displaced Citizenship Programme might be considered as complete nonsense. Displaced persons do not have *de facto* citizenship, and *de facto* citizens cannot be regarded as displaced persons. This name of the Programme, however, intends to show and to catalyze flexible, alternative transitions from the poor, dependant and uncertain status of displacement towards the full moral, economic, cultural and, finally, legal status of citizenship. It is easy to find the justification and legal foundation of this intention in generally accepted legal instruments of international law, such as various articles of the Charter of the United Nations, and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Referring to these instruments is not only the legal point of departure of the Programme but also the expression of our project's deep commitment to those general values which were laid down in these basic documents of the United Nations four decades ago.

The Programme is not one-sided in terms of claiming rights without taking responsibilities and duties towards the host community. These responsibilities and duties are indicated in Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also.

The Programme does not take any specific political standpoint; it is, rather, a neutral infrastructure of interpersonal communication. It does not work therefore to support any particular political ideology, nor specific party, nor group to the exclusion of others.

By contrast with host governments or with UNHCR, it is not the mandate of our Programme to question displaced persons about past events as far as those circumstances are concerned which have led to their present status. The Programme focuses only on the present and future situation of displaced persons, namely people who have been forced by any fact to leave their country of origin. We do not have any intention, capacity or reason to deal with questions as how "genuine" a refugee may be. Our emphasis is one-hundred percent on our common concerns in the host society. There are too many situations anyway, in which refugees and other displaced people are at the bottom of a hierarchy.

Inforum

The Interpersonal Forum on Social Issues (Inforum) is an independent, non-institutional, informal interaction of students and alumni of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague (ISS). Inforum attempts to exploit the academic and practical potential of multicultural and interdisciplinary co-operation emerging from the co-existence of participants at ISS coming from all over the world.

Its founding principles have been developed by an international team of four in early 1988. The motto of Inforum ("Let me understand your view") expresses the intention of its participants to collaborate on the basis of a true understanding of each other's attitude, providing mutual help with non-institutional means for a more efficient, inter-

dependent and just social and individual development. Inforum, therefore, is an experimental organization without any formal hierarchy, a "non-aligned" forum of practice-oriented social discussions and collaboration. Inforum is open to any individual or group-initiatives of ISS students and alumni, as a think-tank in the field of development studies.

It introduces and discusses academic papers and development proposals of ISS-participants, and initiates teamwork among them for creating joint development studies, for their eventual publication and for finding professional and financial support to the implementation of action-project proposals. The Institute of Social Studies has provided the appropriate technical facilities for Inforum's start-up projects (Inforum desk).

Insiders' communication is probably the most responsible and most sensitive way to identify common needs and interests; and this identification is followed by formulation, expression and representation of these common needs and interests. Therefore, the Displaced Citizenship Programme offers a neutral infrastructure of interpersonal communication on two levels. These levels are: 1) an intercity communication network, and 2) local multicultural groups.

1) Intercity communication network: A special type of catalyst publication, starting from newsheet and growing through a newsletter to a newsmagazine; it links up already existing refugee and migrant insider self-organizations, and operates in cities of major concern. The publication will rely to a large extent on the friendly partnership of co-operative outsider intergovernmental, governmental, inter-nongovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including mixed NGOs of local volunteers working together with displaced people.

2) Local multicultural groups: Wherever a sufficient degree of interest on behalf of displaced persons makes it feasible and worthwhile, autonomous local societies will be organized on a multicultural basis (regardless of the ethnic origin of their members) in cities of major concern. They will deal with the same problems as the publication but in a concrete every-day way. They will gain from geo-

graphic closeness and administrative unity and gather to identify common needs and to draw on their own skills and capacities. These self-help societies will work together with other, ethnic-based local groups of displaced persons, with municipal authorities or agencies, and with local NGOs. This collaboration will promote not only a more self-reliant integration for local displaced people but will also create a better understanding by displaced persons of local authorities' actions; it will build, as well, a higher degree of respect for displaced persons by local (host) communities and individuals. These local multicultural groups will be major resources for the intercity communication network and for its publication as well.

International Implications

If the international refugee crisis is a development problem, then, it is one of those which increase even more global interdependence. People are migrating around the world because of other problems of uneven development: wars, political oppression, environmental disasters, lack of food security, of health care, of adequate education, or lack of work opportunities.

This international refugee crisis, which is a crisis in basic human needs, and of the lack of basic human rights,

exerts greater and greater pressure on various societies and individuals. It happens in an age in which the more developed part of the world is already leaving the so-called industrial age and entering the post-industrial; or, in other words, information society. "The information age is not going to be hierarchical", according to the deputy editor of the *Economist* magazine. The microchip era creates new opportunities of human interaction, be they economic, cultural, even political. If so, institutions, willing to cope successfully with the changing circumstances, have to adopt their structures and modes of operation.

In this new setting, the appropriate form of a full and democratic involvement for displaced people must seriously be considered. James Ingram, the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme, delivered a lecture at Oxford University on November 30th last year. Speaking of the politicization of the refugee problem, he stated: "There is really no alternative to the involvement of relatively large, hierarchical organizations of

some kind or another". As far as refugee aid and assistance (carried out by outside actors) is concerned, one should fully agree with Mr. Ingram's view.

But we certainly need an absolutely different approach to international institutional forms in case of insider self-reliance, that is, in case of democratic refugee participation. If the coming information age is not to be hierarchical, this is just the best possible political message for us. In a democratic refugee participatory system we need decentralized, horizontal networks, direct access to each other, and direct access to information of all relevant kinds. We have no historical nor cultural reasons to build up hierarchies in our relations.

This is a dispersed international and truly multicultural community, even if members of this community so far have hardly realized that they belong to it.

First, we must make ourselves aware of this new community, of its assets and its potentials. Second, we must closely cooperate with each other, and with everyone who supports us, for ourselves, for

other members of the community, and — not less important — for the international understanding and co-operation of people outside our community.

Therefore, we must take an adult responsibility for our social situation; we must understand the social realities which surround us; and in this light, we must exercise the whole set of human rights which we are entitled to. Doing so, we can create a firm interpersonal community, whose creativity will contribute astonishingly to a more integrated human society.

Horizontal communication networks, responsible interpersonal cooperation, multicultural direct democracy. This is the message of the Displaced Citizenship Programme.

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Refuge for Refugees Sweatshirts

The "Refuge for Refugees" sweatshirt, displaying the artwork by Andrew Tomcik originally created for The Third Seder Refuge for Refugees celebrated on April 15, 1987 at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, was produced to help raise funds to defray the legal costs of the Court Action for Rights of Refugees filed on January 3, 1989 in the Federal Court of Canada by the Canadian Council of Churches. The Churches have filed this Court Action in a desire to continue to affirm that each person who claims to be a refugee in Canada should have a full hearing before independent and impartial decision-makers and a meaningful appeal on the matter of refugee status.

Order Form

"Refuge for Refugees"
c/o 255 Stafford Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 2X2

Please send me ____ "Refuge for Refugees" fleece sweatshirts (adult, 50% poly, 50% cotton medium weight, white with black print ____ or black with white print ____)

(Please print clearly)

Quantity _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Prov. _____

Postal Code _____ Tel. _____

Sizes: **Medium** _____
Large _____
Extra Large _____

Total (@ \$20.00 ea.) \$ _____
Shipping Charges 3.00

Amount Enclosed \$ _____

N.B. Cost of shirt is \$12.00 + tax;
balance is donation for the Court Action.

(Cheque or money order
payable to "Refuge for Refugees")

Notices

- Human Rights and the Disappeared: A Canada-Latin American Consultation will be held at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia on April 26-28, 1989. The Consultation will bring together representatives from Latin American countries with Canadian government officials, human rights groups and women's organizations to discuss the persistent use of forcible detentions and disappearances as an instrument of political repression. The three-day programme will feature the testimony of speakers from many Latin American countries, including 1980 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel; María Moriale, representing the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo; Honduran activist Zenaida Velásquez; Americas Watch legal counsel Juan Méndez; and Diego García Sayán from the United Nations. For further information contact Simon Fraser University, Conference Services at (604) 291-3649 or 291-3854.