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Charting a Justice-Based Approach to Planned Climate Relocation for the World's Refugees

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As of this writing, there are 26 million refugees under UN mandate in 134 countries who have fled war and political persecution, with 10% living in UNHCR-managed refugee camps. The average stay in a refugee camp is more than ten years, and more than two-thirds of refugees live in a "protracted refugee scenario," defined by the UNHCR as a situation in which "basic rights and essential economic, social, and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile." Such conditions can exacerbate the potential for social exclusion, economic isolation, and climate vulnerability across generations. Refugees need special assistance to adapt to climate change impacts, but they are consistently excluded from national disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation planning. Further, the encampment of refugees and asylum seekers restricts their ability to migrate within host countries and limits their agency to implement certain adaptation strategies including planned relocation. Despite the widespread recognition that climate change threatens the long-term viability of refugee camps, discussions of planned relocation and climate adaptation strategies are in their infancy. This chapter provides a framework to consider dimensions of social justice (including distributive, procedural, and restorative justice) in crafting a climate-induced relocation approach that promotes the agency, dignity, and security of refugees and host communities alike.

Keywords: climate change; climate refugees; human rights; refugee camps; social justice

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1. Introduction

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan famously wrote that "place is security, space is freedom" (Tuan 1977). For the world's refugees, this axiom does not hold true. Violent conflict and political persecution often result in insecurity and social instability that compels individuals, families, and whole communities to leave their home country and seek asylum abroad in search for new spaces of safety. Yet, even after settling in a refugee camp in a new country, refugees may find neither freedom nor refuge. State policies often strip refugees of their agency and decision-making power over livelihoods and employment and confine refugees within the camp. Since current and expected future climate change impacts raise concerns over the viability of long-term human habitation in many of the world's refugee camps, the looming need for the relocation of refugee camps must be considered. This chapter addresses the pending collision of these two options of last resort: settlement in refugee camps and relocation due to climate change effects. We provide an overview of refugee displacement; anticipated climate change effects in refugee hosting regions; and the ways that climate change is already affecting refugee camps. We also discuss three dimensions of social justice relevant for refugee relocation and conclude by detailing a justice-based approach to camp relocation that supports refugee agency, dignity, and security.

2. Protracted temporariness

The world has never had more refugees than in the 21st century. As of mid-2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documented 26 million refugees globally (UNHCR 2020). Turkey, Pakistan, and Uganda collectively host 6.4 million refugees, populations primarily made up of those displaced by long-term armed conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan, respectively. The persistence of civil wars, persecution, and statelessness leaves refugees with few options to voluntarily repatriate, and once a person becomes a refugee, they usually remain in asylum for the rest of their life. In 2019, only 317,200 refugees returned to their countries of origin, while an additional 107,800 refugees were resettled in a third country. Countries that host refugees, meanwhile, are often impoverished, and their requests for financial support from UNHCR to provide basic services to refugees – water, food, shelter – are typically only partially met.

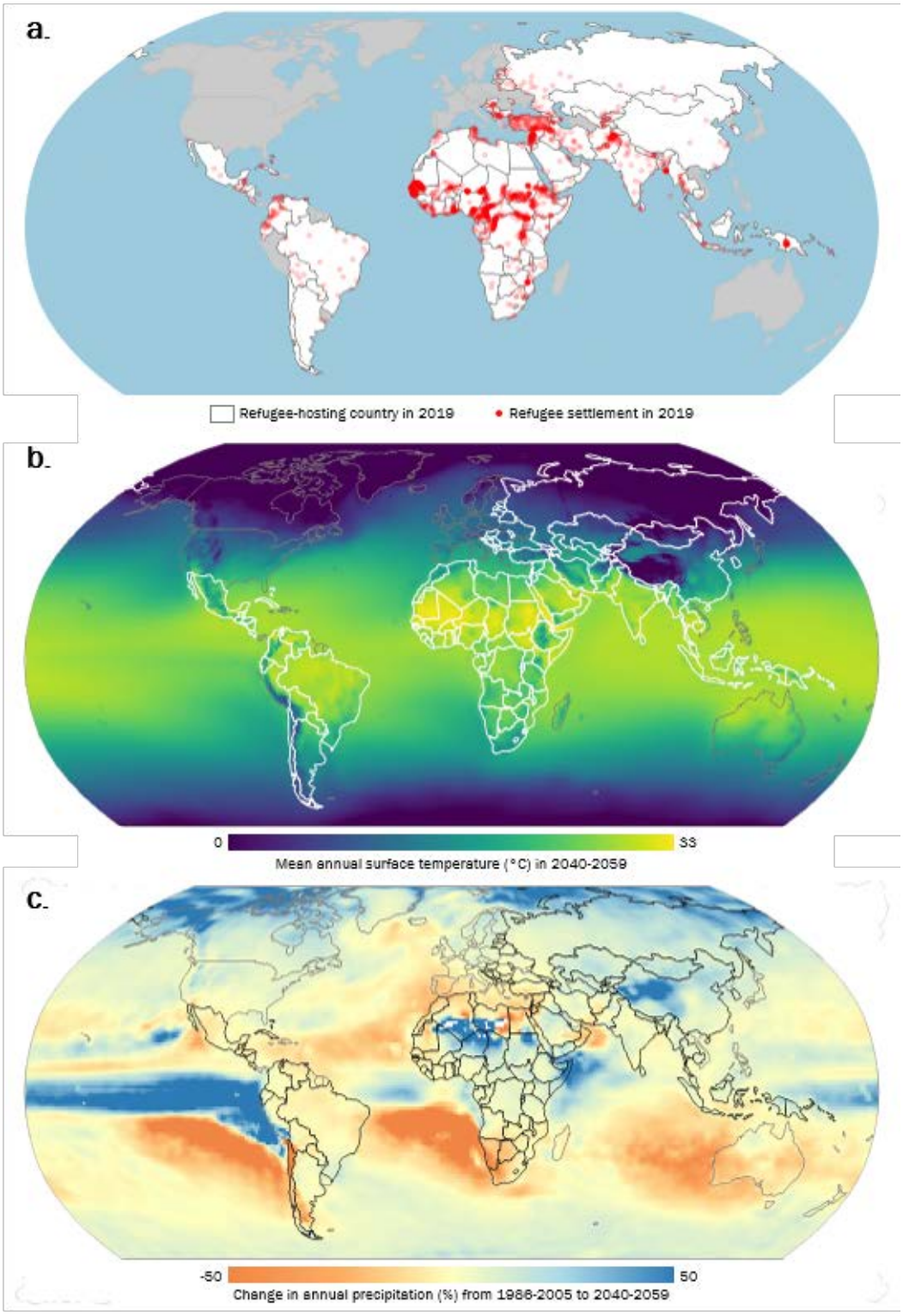
After being forcibly displaced from their home communities due to persecution and violence, refugees typically secure international protection and asylum across national borders (i.e., in countries where they do not have citizenship). With the attendant rights and protections afforded to refugees, some integrate into host communities (usually just over the national border), and others transit through to settle in a third country. Approximately 2.6 million (10%) of refugees settle in camps managed by UNHCR, even while camps are considered by UNHCR as a last resort (UNHCR n.d.). Refugee camps may be thought of as a temporary solution to forced displacement, yet the average stay in a refugee camp is more than 10 years (Devictor 2019). In 2019, nearly 16 million refugees (77%) were living in a "protracted refugee scenario" (PRS) in which over 25,000 refugees of the same nationality live in a camp for more than 5 years (UNHCR 2020). Common in PRS is the practice of "warehousing" that restricts refugee migration from

camps, effectively isolating refugees from neighboring communities, preventing settlement in urban areas or third countries, and broadly trapping refugees in a camp for an indefinite duration at the whim of the state (USCRI 2019). Together, PRS and warehousing turn what should be a temporary solution into a lasting reality for millions of people.

3. Edged out of the climate niche

In an ignominious conclusion to the hottest decade on record (2010-2019), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) measured 2019 as the second hottest year since modern record keeping began in 1880 (NOAA 2020). Rising temperatures are shifting the geography of the "climate niche" where mean annual temperatures lie between 11-15 °C (52-59 °F) and most of humanity has lived for the last six thousand years (Xu et al. 2020). With the next fifty years of business-as-usual carbon emissions, one to three billion people are expected to be left out of the climate niche as extreme temperatures push human physiology beyond the range of effective and safe functioning (Xu et al. 2020). Refugee hosting countries across sub-Saharan Africa through the Middle East to South Asia are broadly poised to see above average temperature increases and extreme variation in precipitation in the coming decades (Fig. 1).

While the consequences of climate change-induced shifts in temperature and precipitation on refugee lives and livelihoods will vary region to region based on ecological sensitivity to climate perturbations (Conway et al. 2019; Nadeau et al. 2017) as well as by socioeconomic inequality (Füssel 2010; Islam & Winkel 2017), increased temperatures are expected to strain food production (Connolly-Boutin & Smit 2016; Schmidhuber & Tubiello 2007), and more erratic rainfall may alternately contribute to flash floods, landslides, and drought (Dai et al. 2018; Tabari 2020). We do not need to wait decades to see the effects of climate change on refugee camps given varied examples of climate-related hazards observed in many of the world's refugee hotspots (Khadka 2019) including heat stress in Pakistan (Buncombe & Waraich 2009), Jordan (Taylor 2015), Lebanon (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2015), and Iraq (George 2015); seasonal flooding in Bangladesh (Sengupta & Fountain 2018), Ethiopia (Al Jazeera 2014; Medecins Sans Frontieres 2014), and Kenya (Save the Children 2018); landslides in Thailand (Associated Press 2018) and Uganda (Atuyambe et al. 2011); and winter storms in Lebanon (Al-Arian & Sherlock 2019).



<FIGURE 1. HERE>

Figure 1. Maps of a) UNHCR-managed refugee settlements (red dots) and host countries (in white) as of mid-2019; b) mean annual surface temperature for 2040-2059 (with host countries outlined in white); and c) change in annual precipitation for 2040-2059 relative to mean annual precipitation from 1986-2005 (with host countries outlined in black). Both b) and c) are based on CMIP5 (Coupled Model Intercomparison Project 5) multi-model ensemble projections with the "business as usual" emissions

scenario (RCP8.5). UNHCR camp data available at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/geoservices/. Climate projection data available at https://esgf-node.llnl.gov/projects/cmip5/. Analysis and visualization by Van Den Hoek.

For refugee settlements facing extreme climate change effects, there are three potential options: the development of extensive on-site adaptation measures, migration to a third country or the origin country, or relocation within the host country. Building adaptive capacity is a challenge anywhere, but refugees are uniquely under-equipped to take actions to reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate change. The clearing of forests and disruption of root structures to establish new camps can magnify flood, landslide, and drought risk, for example; dwellings in refugee camps typically do not offer sufficient protection from extreme weather; and most settlements are reliant on external support to meet even their most basic survival needs. Further, refugees routinely lack the right to citizenship, employment, and land ownership, are not registered in national censuses, and are excluded from national planning processes on climate change adaptation (for example, Green Climate Fund 2019) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) (for example, Peters et al. 2019). Restrictions on refugee movement, especially for warehoused refugees, further limits the potential for resettlement in a third country, repatriation, or integration in an urban region. These imposed constraints on adaptation and migration makes planned climate relocation a crucial option of last resort for refugees in camps exposed to climate change.

4. Looming refugee camp relocation

While refugee camps are not permanent solutions, the purpose of refugee camps is to offer security and a basic standard quality of life prior to finding an alternative durable solution (i.e., voluntary repatriation, integration, or resettlement). Where refugee camps no longer safeguard the human rights of refugees, they are no longer habitable. Climate change combined with human actions and inactions has the potential to create insecure living conditions in refugee camps and may necessitate relocating refugee camps to safer locations.

The case of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh shows that climate relocation for refugee camps is not a thought experiment; it is an emergent reality. The Rohingya people were displaced due to gross human rights violations and extreme violence perpetrated by the Myanmar military, and approximately 750,000 people sought refuge in Bangladesh beginning in 2017 to join those previously displaced (International Rescue Committee 2019). More than one million Rohingya refugees now live in refugee camps outside the coastal border town of Cox's Bazar, where they face overcrowding and regular risks of flooding and landslides. The Government of Bangladesh unilaterally proposed to relocate 100,000 of these refugees to the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, and has invested $350 million to prepare the island for refugee settlement, including building concrete housing and flood mitigation infrastructure (Beech 2020). In December 2020, the government began transferring refugees to the island amidst concerns that at least some of the refugees were forced into relocation (Al Jazeera 2020).

However, the low-lying silt island of Bhasan Char is extremely vulnerable to climate-related disasters, including flooding, tidal waves, and tropical cyclones, and the majority of the land mass is underwater for the entirety of the monsoon season from June to September (Banerjee 2020). In fact, the free-flowing sedimentary island only formed in 2003 and may well disappear back into the ocean (Bremner 2020). Rohingya refugees have opposed relocation to Bhasan Char in part due to the lack of high ground on the island, and human rights advocates have expressed concerns about its habitability. Located 37 miles from the coast, Bhasan Char is far from large mainland Bangladeshi settlements, which makes the logistics of

humanitarian support even more challenging. The ongoing struggles faced by the Rohingya refugees makes it clear that swapping one set of risks for another during relocation does not provide safety and security and may trigger another humanitarian crisis for an already vulnerable population (Paul 2020).

5. Planned climate relocation of refugee camps needs special consideration

Planned climate relocation in non-refugee camp settings is typically driven by and negotiated between local communities and national authorities in terms of collectively deciding to relocate, marshalling the resources and political will to enable a move, and building a resilient community not only in terms of physical infrastructure but also linking new locations with cultural, livelihood, and basic service needs. Planned climate relocation for refugee camps is a last resort; we argue that it may be necessary when the following three criteria have been met:

1) The refugee camp is exposed to extreme effects of climate change (e.g., extreme weather conditions, extreme storms, and prolonged drought).
2) Mitigation efforts are not feasible or would not provide reasonable safeguarding for already vulnerable populations; the financial, ecological, and human costs of such efforts would outweigh those of relocation; or the political constraints prevent necessary measures (e.g., temporary shelters are not permitted to be made more "permanent" with durable materials and foundations).
3) It is not possible for refugees to leave the refugee camp by voluntarily returning to their countries of origin (due to protracted violence and/or home communities being rendered uninhabitable by climate change or other environmental processes); resettling in third countries in safer locations (due to political barriers in the international system); or integrating in urban regions in safer locations in the current host country (due to political barriers in the national system).

Even when these conditions are met, the already-complex processes of planned climate relocation become all the more challenging in refugee camps due to the demographic, social, institutional, and political barriers at play and the diverse stakeholders – including but not limited to refugees, host and other local communities, national authorities, and the international community – involved in decision making.

These additional layers of interests, needs, and stakeholders bring new challenges and advantages that must be navigated carefully with respect to the planned relocation of refugee camps (see Table 1). Refugee camps are embedded within multiple layers of conflicts even without considering relocation. For example, the influx of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has been accompanied by tensions between refugees and host communities largely over perceptions of unfairness in the distribution of resources (ACAPS 2018; ICRC 2019; Krehm & Shahan 2019), as well as tensions between the Government of Bangladesh and the international community over what Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina referred to as the "untenability" of Bangladesh managing the bulk of the refugee crisis and the world's single largest refugee camp population on its own (Associated Press 2019; Tharoor 2019). The topic of refugee camp relocation is likely to introduce new controversies that will need to be managed in order to meet the urgent as well as long-term needs of refugees living in increasingly uninhabitable camps.

Table 1. Refugee camp characteristics: challenges, and advantages linked to planned climate relocation.

	Theme	Refugee camp characteristics
Challenges	Demographic stability	Potentially unstable or growing population, with some refugees arriving and others leaving
	Social cohesion	Potentially lacking social cohesion due to refugees coming from different cultures, communities and/or countries and potentially speaking different languages
	Governance structure	May not be included in governance systems, or systems of governance may be evolving, and may not have the means to advocate for themselves
	Resources	Largely or fully dependent on external (international and national) aid to meet basic needs
	Security in transit	Process of transit to a new location may expose refugees to new violence and insecurity
	Political sensitivity surrounding protractedness	Long-term existence of refugee camp likely to be a source of political tension and social resentment, and it may be extremely politically sensitive to consider openly protracted refugee scenarios
Advantages	Attachment to place	Unlikely to be attached to a sense of place in the refugee camp and have greater willingness to move to safer locations
	Resources	May have international resources and advocacy to draw from
	Rights	The host country has an obligation to protect refugees as signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention

6. Refugee relocation guided by social justice

The clear goal of climate relocation for refugee camps must be to establish places of refuge from the extreme effects of climate change, violence, and political persecution. The relocation of refugee camps (i.e., a secondary displacement due to climate change) must respect refugee human rights by 1) acknowledging the conditions refugees face in camps; 2) reducing and not replacing or redistributing the risk of climate-related impacts and disasters and/or politically motivated violence or persecution; and 3) engaging with the full range of stakeholders to determine and pursue durable solutions.

At a basic level, relocation strategies would further benefit from social justice principles, which guide the fair and compassionate distribution of power and resources, "starting with the right of all human beings to benefit from a safe and pleasant environment" (UN 2006). The concept of social justice has been well-discussed by social scientists, theorists, and philosophers, though it is a far-from-unified field owing to the diversity of perspectives on what constitutes a just world. For example, *distributive* justice (e.g., Rawls 1971) raises questions about the fair distribution of benefits and costs; *procedural* justice (e.g., Thibaut & Walker 1975) is concerned with fair process to guarantee fair outcomes; and *restorative* justice (e.g., Eglash 1977; Zehr 1980) seeks to restore relationships and avoid stigmatization while fighting against injustice.

Drawing from these perspectives, a justice-based approach to relocation for refugee camps would include the following principles:

1) Refugees and local communities have equitable and fair opportunities to relocate and benefit from the outcome of planned climate relocation, while national and international bodies bear an equitable distribution of the costs through *distributive justice*;
2) Refugees and local communities meaningfully participate in the decision-making, implementation, and monitoring/evaluation processes associated with relocation in conjunction with national and international authorities through *procedural justice*; and
3) Refugees and local communities are provided with opportunities for improved relationships, building of trust, and social integration/inclusiveness through *restorative justice*.

Distributive justice recognizes that the costs of relocation are not only financial, but extend to environmental, political, and social domains. For example, the establishment and habitation of a refugee camp contributes to local landscape changes, particularly in the conversion of forests to agricultural land (Maystadt et al. 2020). Conversely, the abandonment of a refugee camp may reduce pressure on a local ecosystem. For this reason, a refugee camp may be seen as problematic or beneficial to local communities in terms of how it redirects resources to refugees or stimulates the local economy (Alix-Garcia et al. 2018). Where refugee camps are seen as undesirable by a host country for social, economic or political reasons, the host country may push for relocation to more marginal areas, which may not be in the best interest of refugees. Similarly, refugee needs for relocation should be considered within the broader context of local communities that may express similar needs and desire for relocation but may lack the resources and advocacy to do so. Relocation planning can capitalize on positive-sum solutions that result in greater benefits than costs for all parties.

Decisions about whether and where to move refugee camps must take into consideration such costs and benefits in terms of type (e.g., financial, environmental, etc.), institutional scale (e.g., local or international), temporal scale (e.g., short-term or long-term), and magnitude (e.g., a matter of convenience or survival). Where benefits or costs are distributed disproportionately among refugees, local communities, and national and international groups, effort must be made to redistribute the burden while still adhering to the international commitment to provide safety and security to refugees. If relocating a refugee camp brings more costs than benefits to the involved parties, the situation may act as an incentive to dissolve a national camp policy and pursue the preferred options of integration into urban centers or resettlement in a new, third country. The spirit of distributive justice is reflected in the Global Compact on Refugees (signed in December 2018; UNHCR 2018) that states that the broader international community should provide financial and other assistance so that the burden of hosting refugees does not fall unduly on host countries, which often lack the needed resources. The financing of relocation should draw from international resources as well.

Procedural justice requires that all stages of relocation are conducted through participatory processes with all relevant stakeholders. Of particular importance is the refugee community's full and informed consent for relocation and consultation and participation in relocation planning; solutions must not be imposed on refugees, host communities, or host countries. Participatory processes like these will help to prevent unilateral decision making that prioritizes political objectives of governments that deem refugee camps undesirable and seek to marginalize or isolate them from the general population, and also help to ensure

the equitable distribution of costs and benefits (i.e., distributive justice). Stakeholders, including refugees, host communities, and other local communities, must be provided with unbiased and transparent information that is easily accessible and distributed in local languages and appropriate channels. This includes information about immediate and anticipated climate hazards, impacts, costs and benefits of relocation, etc. In turn, the authentication and endorsement of this information by outside parties, such as UNHCR, refugee advocacy groups, and scientific bodies, would build trust in the process and outcomes and assure refugees that their human rights and basic needs will continue to be supported in accordance with international law.

It is essential for participatory processes to include diverse representatives from communities and make efforts to capture important cross sections of vulnerable and classically underrepresented groups (e.g., refugees living with disabilities, youth, women, etc.). Care must be taken to encourage the full participation of marginalized groups and to deliberately *even the playing field* in terms of power differences between them and other stakeholders. Bringing together diverse stakeholders in participatory processes can highlight tensions between priorities and interests, and conflicts can create new vulnerabilities. Hence, trusted mediators should carefully balance the interests and needs that emerge in participatory processes. Participatory processes should be understood as long-term dialogues rather than one-time events.

The redistribution of resources (i.e., distributive justice) through participatory processes (i.e., procedural justice) helps to break down social divisions and build meaningful relationships, leading to restorative justice. Restorative justice has typically been applied in alternative legal settings with perpetrators and victims of minor crimes, but it has also been used in cases involving genocide (e.g., the Gacaca courts in the wake of the Rwandan Genocide) and apartheid (e.g., the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the end of the South African apartheid). Restorative justice is relevant to planned climate relocation through its values of non-domination, empowerment, respectful listening, equal concern for all stakeholders, accountability, and respect for fundamental human rights (Braithwaite 2003). Restorative justice encourages opportunities for stakeholders to identify positive-sum solutions that support the empowerment and dignity of refugees and local communities, groups that are often pitted against each other through the inequitable distribution of resources and lack of representation in decision-making processes. Critically, refugee camps most often isolate refugee and local communities from each other, but contact and communication are needed to build relationships. These relationships can lead not only to positive social effects related to a reduction in local episodes of conflict, but they can also lead to superior collaborative strategies to address broader disaster risk and climate change. It is not just within-group (i.e., bonding) but also across-group (i.e., bridging) relationships that contribute to resilience (Islam & Walkerden 2014). Restorative justice allows us to reimagine refugee camps as living structures that empower and connect the people who reside in them and the communities that host them. This approach may also dissolve the social and political barriers that divide refugee camps and host communities that are often codified into national policies, effectively transforming refugee camps into hybrid camp-integration experiments that forge pathways to truly durable solutions.

7. In conclusion

The planet is changing, and so must we. In fulfilling international obligations to protect the human rights of refugees, we must forge new pathways to address the unprecedented challenges associated with climate

change. Refugees are vulnerable, but they are also resilient in part owing to the hardships they have surmounted (Uekusa & Matthewman 2017) and must be considered a vital part of the solutions that affect them, including those related to planned climate relocation. The planned climate relocation of refugee camps may be a particularly difficult challenge, but it also presents an important step towards restoring the security and freedom for refugees that Tuan (1977) identified as being essential for any lived-in place. Refugee camps—as any human settlement—are more than physical infrastructure but represent spaces of relative stability, habitation, and hope for people; their long-term durability matters to achieving security from socially-induced violence and climate-related risks. Where short- and long-term durability cannot be achieved in original refugee camp sites, planned climate relocation may be a necessary solution to avert a cascading humanitarian crisis where refugees are forcibly displaced from violence only to be forcibly displaced – or trapped – by the extreme effects of climate change in places of supposed refuge.
An approach to the planned climate relocation of refugee camps that leverages distributive, procedural, and restorative justice is likely to yield solutions that are durable from the perspective of refugees, host communities, and national and international policy communities, alike.

In planned climate relocation – regardless of the type of community to be relocated – the goal should be to "build back better" or "build back safer" and in ways that support community wellbeing and revival under current and projected climate impacts. The habitability of refugee camps must be judged by how well they protect refugees from the deleterious effects of climate change, violence, and political persecution as well as how they support the dignity and human rights of refugees and host communities. Human beings are not only defined by their vulnerabilities and victimizations but also their capacities and agency. The relocation of refugee camps – in terms of the re-siting and implementation process – can and must holistically engage with these intersectional vulnerabilities and capacities. Disasters – including those influenced by climate change – are socially constructed through vulnerabilities (Hewitt 1983; Lewis 1999; Wisner et al. 2004), so it is within our power to socially deconstruct them as well. Refugee camps should be built through risk-informed, conflict-sensitive, and justice-infused sustainable development strategies, and through their design, they can contribute to the creation of an inclusive, synthetic culture that mitigates the risks of climate-related hazards and disasters.

8. Recommendations

- Restrictions on voluntary migration of refugees from camps should be recognized as being detrimental to climate change mitigation and adaptation, and refugees should be granted explicit international assistance and protections from the effects of climate change.
- Planning for climate relocation of refugees living within camps should be undertaken in refugee-hosting regions that are expected to become unlivable due to climate change.
- The process of climate relocation for refugee camps, from conceptualization to implementation, should take on a social justice orientation – including distributive, procedural, and restorative justice – in order to safeguard and restore the human rights and dignity of refugees.
- Further studies should be undertaken on the planned climate relocation of refugee camps, including the extent to which this adaptation strategy can mutually benefit refugees and host communities.

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