

Chapter 17

Conceptualizing a Win–Win in the Refugee and Higher Education Enigma: Insights From Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the subject of brain drain/brain gain in South Africa, the authors argue that as refugees flee their home countries, they possess, or have the opportunity to acquire, skills and knowledge necessary for individual and collective development through higher education. Consequently, such refugees may be seen to possess capabilities necessary for decent economic and social mobility in the host country. On the contrary, to their home country, they are viewed as lost assets as they leave with skills and knowledge. Drawing on the discourse of brain drain/brain gain, the argument in this chapter moves beyond focusing on the individuals as economic assets to focus on other valued dimensions as a result of higher education. The authors adopt the human development informed capability approach which focuses on the freedoms and opportunities that individuals have to pursue the lives they have reason to value.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa, which is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), hosts different migrants from within and beyond the African continent (Abebe, 2017). The migrants consist of business people, retirees, returning residents, refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, including women and children. Of primary interest are two categories, refugees and asylum seekers. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015) defines an asylum-seeker as a person who is a potential

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7283-2.ch017

Conceptualizing a Win-Win in the Refugee and Higher Education Enigma

refugee and seeks international protection from maltreatment or danger in the country of origin. Such an individual would ultimately become a refugee upon recognition of the claim. Therefore, an asylum seeker would have lodged a claim of threat to his or her human security, which does not guarantee international protection in the host country. On the other hand, a refugee has received international protection and is assured of human security. However, this is not always guaranteed (Ramoroka, 2014). According to the UNHCR (2009; 2010), South Africa is home to refugees from countries such as Somalia, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Verwimp and Maystadt (2015) identify wide-ranging reasons for migrating, ranging from fleeing political violence to forced movement due to natural disasters. Such movement has resulted in the challenge of migrant classifications, as most of them are economic migrants from within the African region (Segatti & Landau, 2011) rather than political refugees. In this chapter, the authors focus on those refugees defined by the 1951 Convention's definition of as:

Any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In 2016, UNHCR recorded 22.5 million refugees worldwide, the most significant number in the agency's history and unprecedented since the end of the Second World War (UNHCR, 2017). While the global refugee crisis was rising exponentially, critical lessons are drawn from refugees' experiences, as highlighted by the Arab Spring, which created spontaneous displacements in that region. It is estimated that more than 220 000 Syrians have been killed; almost 5 million of them have become refugees, mainly in North Africa and the Middle East, and above 1.1 million have since applied for asylum in the European Union (Craddock and Luo, 2016). Like Germany and Sweden, European countries have welcomed refugees from Syria and other parts of the world (Federal Office of Migration and Refugees, 2017; Loo et al., 2018). In the same vein, the United States of America processed 262 000 asylum applications, mainly from Central America. On the other hand, Canada recorded a record 300 000 immigrants, and 40 000 of these were from Syria (Government of Canada, 2017).

The lack of opportunities due to life threats can result in missed opportunities and violation of basic human rights, education being one of them. As refugees focus on dealing with socio-economic integration challenges in the host country (Smit, 2015), access to higher education is often seen as a farfetched possibility. Yet, higher education attainment is foundational to other life enhancing opportunities. Legal frameworks allow refugees to access services such as health and education; however, the reference to education for refugees is often associated with access to lower education levels (primary and secondary). As Zeus (2011) notes, education is often viewed as a luxury in most refugee contexts. In the South African context, higher education conversations are often reserved for the international student population that has been growing since the 1990s when international student migration intensified (see the section on Refugees and Higher Education). The authors argue that international students' classification also requires a comprehensive analytical approach as refugees do not enjoy the same freedoms enjoyed by international students.

Little remains known about the opportunities of refugee students from the countries mentioned earlier. Institutional and legislative arrangements in South Africa, that is, the Refugee Act 130 of 1998

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