

SCIAF factsheets

refugees...

HOW DO YOU DEFINE A REFUGEE?

In 1951, the United Nations defined a refugee as:

"A person who, owing to a 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/her origin, and is unwilling or ... unable to return to it."

This international agreement has been signed by 107 countries around the world, including the United Kingdom. But it excludes many other people who have been forced from their homes. Millions of people escape from persecution but do not leave their own country. Others are forced to leave because of environmental degradation and may be just as in need of support as those who fall under the UN definition. In a sense, anyone who has been forced to flee is a refugee.

WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME REFUGEES?

WAR:

Conflict between two countries, or between different groups in the same country, may drive people from their homes. Seventeen years of civil war in Mozambique between 1975 and 1992 forced 1.5 million people to flee to safety in neighbouring countries.

ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS:

Drought, flooding, and deforestation force people to abandon their homes. Global warming has turned farming land into desert in many parts of the world, leaving people with no choice but to migrate to a new region. In 1980 alone 200,00 sq kms of arable land were lost in Africa to the advance of the Sahara desert.

REPRESSION:

Some governments crush any opposition in order to keep their hold on power. This results in people fleeing from persecution, fear of death and torture. Kurdish people have suffered terrible repression in Iraq, forcing them to seek refuge in nearby countries like Turkey and Iran.

MASSIVE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS:

Building things like dams and mines involves evicting people from their homes and land. The World Bank estimates that projects underway in 1993 will displace 1.64 million people around the world. WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF REFUGEES?

ASYLUM: Refugees need protection and a safe place to live, which means that they need to be offered asylum. They also need basic provisions such as food, clothing and medical care. After that, it is important that refugees are encouraged to regain their independence and their confidence in a new situation.

Long-term solutions are not quite so simple. There are three main options:

REPATRIATION: Some refugees are soon able to return to their own country when the conflicts there have been resolved. However, under international law they should not be forced to return if there is any further danger.

LOCAL INTEGRATION into refugee camps is a temporary solution until either the situation in their own country improves or they are given permanent status and can settle down in the new country. But spending several years in a camp can be very demoralising for refugees, who may be forced to become dependent on welfare and lose their self-confidence and self-respect.

FULL INTEGRATION into another country, with the rights of full citizenship, brings some kind of long-term answer to the dilemmas of a person forced to flee from their homeland. Help in adjusting to the new culture is vital along with education, literacy and language classes, counselling and advice.

Karma was born in Sri Lanka. When civil war broke out the village where she lived was attacked and her home was destroyed. She and her mother escaped. They paid an agent to arrange airline tickets and travel documents, and a short time later they left for Britain. In London, they were taken to a Detention Centre but a refugee action group was able to secure 'temporary admission' for them into the UK. Karma and her mum are now applying for asylum. They have very little, but at least they should be safe now.

INTERNATIONAL AID

The UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES was set up in 1951 by the United Nations and is the biggest organisation working to protect refugees and asylum seekers. It has three main aims: first, to make sure that governments follow the rules of international law which relate to refugees; second, to work with other organisations to ensure that aid reaches refugees; third, to try to find long-term solutions for refugees, helping them to return home if possible and if not to settle in a new Country.

Albert Einstein came to the United States as a refugee and became one of the most famous scientists in the world.

CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIETY

Throughout history, refugees have enriched the culture, society and economy of the countries where they have found safety. Newspaper stories have sometimes suggested that refugees are really nothing more than bogus asylum-seekers trying to benefit from social security payments. In fact, refugees contribute as much as they receive from their new home. They bring new expertise and great resourcefulness, as well as a breadth of experience which most people never acquire. They also develop the host country's culture through their involvement in its music, art, drama and cuisine.

"The fact that 15 Nobel Prizes have been won by refugees who found asylum in Britain is a dramatic illustration of refugees' potential to enrich and contribute to act"

(A. Philips: Employment as a key to settlement.)

WHAT SCIAF IS DOING...

SCIAF works with refugees and displaced people in many parts of the world. Programmes cover a wide range of needs, from the provision of immediate relief to skills training and lobbying. Working through Church partners, SCIAF is able to strengthen local communities receiving new numbers of refugees. For those who have little hope of returning home, the agency supports programmes which help them to become self-sufficient in their new country. In the UK, SCIAF works through education programmes in schools and parishes to encourage people to take action in their local community in response to global issues like this.

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