

Barbara Zeus

Exploring Paradoxes around Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations

The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
ABSTRACT	3
LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	4
CHAPTER 1 – HIGHER EDUCATION IN PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?	6
1.1. AIMS AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY.....	9
1.2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	10
1.3. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY.....	13
CHAPTER 2 – TOWARD RESOLVING THE PARADOXES.....	15
2.1. SETTING THE SCENE: EDUCATING REFUGEES.....	16
2.1.1. THE EMERGING FIELD OF EMERGENCY EDUCATION.....	16
2.1.2. ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION ‘ON THE BASIS OF MERIT’	17
2.1.3. THE TWO FACES OF EMERGENCY EDUCATION	20
2.2. AN EXPLORATION OF PARADOXES SURROUNDING HIGHER EDUCATION IN PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS.....	22
2.2.1. FROM RELIEF TO DEVELOPMENT.....	27
2.2.2. HIGHER EDUCATION WITHOUT A NATION-STATE.....	32
2.2.3. FROM VICTIMISATION TO EMPOWERMENT	37
CHAPTER 3 – MAKING IT WORK: HIGHER EDUCATION FOR BURMESE REFUGEES IN THAILAND	44
3.1. THE PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATION IN THAILAND.....	46
3.2. EDUCATION IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS ALONG THE BORDER	50
3.2.1. REASONS FOR GROWING DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION	53
3.3. HIGHER EDUCATION ALONG THE BORDER.....	57
3.3.1. FROM RELIEF TO DEVELOPMENT: MOVING TOWARDS ACCREDITATION.....	58
3.3.2. CREATING SPACES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSCENDING NATION-STATES.....	64
3.3.3. EMPOWERING REFUGEES TO BECOME AGENTS OF DEVELOPMENT	71
CHAPTER 4 – CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD	80
REFERENCES.....	88

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Abstract


This literature-based study explores three main paradoxes underlying Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations both theoretically as well as in relation to the case of Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Firstly, the study will explore the paradox of basic relief for refugees on the one hand and developmental efforts for higher education on the other. Secondly, the issue of higher education and the nation-state will be addressed in relation to refugees' perceived liminality in the national world order. The last paradox to resolve revolves around ways refugees are commonly perceived as victims of war and conflict who are unable to cope with the challenges of higher education.

Following a rights-based approach and adopting post-structural theories, this dissertation demonstrates how dominant educational discourse emphasises externalities and thereby neglects the individual's right to higher education from permeating into practice while powerful narratives of refugees as dependent victims have shaped reality in justifying mechanisms for international protection and incapacitating refugees. The study concludes that higher education could be both a means and an end to refugee empowerment.

List of Acronyms

CA	Capability Approach
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund
EE	Emergency Education
EFA	Education For All
GED	General Educational Development
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GMR	Global Monitoring Report
HE	Higher Education
HEPRS	Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations
INEE	Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
IRR	International Refugee Regime
KED	Karen Education Department
KNU	Karen National Union
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoE	Ministry of Education (Kingdom of Thailand)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRS	Protracted Refugee Situation
RTG	Royal Thai Government



Exploring Paradoxes around Higher Education in Prolonged Refugee Situations

The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand

1

Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations: A Contradiction in Terms?

We must not believe the many, who say that free persons only ought to be educated, but we should rather believe the philosophers, who say that the educated only are free.¹

Higher education in protracted refugee situations (HEPRS) might appear like a series of paradoxes, contradictions in terms, or situations which seem impossible or extremely difficult to achieve for they contain two opposite characteristics or social meanings. The most obvious might be that universities are generally associated with freedom, be it academic freedom or freedom of thought and speech more broadly. Refugees, however, are deemed to be ‘unfree’, for many spend much of their time in exile in camps where restrictions are placed on their basic rights and freedoms. Moreover, higher education institutes are considered long-term, sustainable institutions, whereas refugee camps, although having in many cases existed for several decades, still carry a connotation of temporariness. Higher education (HE), and schooling in general, are often believed to be dependent on the existence of a nation-state, and this assumption makes HEPRS an impossible endeavour as refugees are ‘nation-state-less’ people who find themselves in liminality: having left one nation-state, they are not (yet) accepted by another. The list of these alleged incompatibilities, or paradoxes, could go on.

¹ Epictetus (55-135AD): An ancient stoic Greek philosopher, quote from his work *The Discourses*, Book Two, Chapter One. Retrieved from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.2.two.html> (last accessed: 21/07/09).

On the other hand, what universities and refugee camps have in common is how they have become increasingly ubiquitous aspects of the modern world, albeit with wholly differing implications. The last century has seen a dramatic expansion of HE allowing more young people than ever before to access higher learning opportunities and foreshadowing the possibility of universal higher education. Over the last decade alone, protracted refugee situations (PRS) have increased as a total of all refugee situations from 45 to 90 percent so that they are now the norm. The average PRS lasts an estimated 17 years, up from only nine in 1993 (UNHCR, 2004:2). There are currently some ten million refugees trapped in protracted situations for whom there is limited hope of finding a solution in the near future (UNHCR, 2009). The vast majority of PRS are found in African and Asian countries which are struggling to meet the needs of their own citizens (Guterres, 2008).

One such situation has existed along the Thai-Burmese² border for about a quarter century. Having spent much or all of their lives in confinement, young people ambitiously progress through the basic camp education system only to find themselves with few opportunities to further their studies. Although HE has been made available to a select number of refugees through various modes, increased student demand exceeds current provision.

This dissertation deals generally with the question of whether the paradoxes can be resolved, that is, whether HE without a nation-state is possible at all and whether HE can be provided within the temporariness and restrictedness of a protracted refugee situation, and more particularly with the case of young Burmese camp refugees in Thailand.

² In 1989 Burma's official name was changed into 'Union of Myanmar'. The naming of the country has since become rather politicised. Without intending to participate in this debate, the better known name Burma is used throughout this paper. This is also how refugees refer to their home country.

1.1. Aims and Rationale of the Study

The last two decades have seen a tremendous increase in research and progress in policy and practice on refugee and emergency education. Education is now seen as one of the main pillars of humanitarian aid, beside food, shelter and healthcare. However, while much has been written about the need for education in short-term emergencies, there is dearth of research that analyses refugee camp education from a long-term perspective (Corrigan, 2005). Considering the increasing average length of refugee displacement globally, there is an urgent requirement for this type of research.

Essentially, research has focused on the provision of basic education in emergency situations. As anticipated, research efforts associated with this dissertation could not discern a particular body of literature on higher education in refugee and emergency situations. Undoubtedly, HEPRS is a new field in the academic world. According to the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), no researchers working on HE issues are listed so far in their Research Contacts Database.³ The reasons for this might be manifold: practical constraints due to lack of funding, political constraints related to host country policies or simply the belief that HE is not part of humanitarian relief provided in refugee situations.

Following a rights-based approach towards HE, this explorative study is built upon the rationale of there being a high level of demand for tertiary education on the part of young Burmese refugees who have been living in camps, often all their lives. This case in particular presents an interesting example, as it is, despite the ethnic conflict in Burma being one of the world's longest-running, comparably under-researched.

³ Email exchange with INEE, May-June 2009.

The bulk of literature on education and conflict focuses on a very small number of geographic areas that receive disproportionate amount of attention, such as Palestine, the Balkans, East Africa or Sri Lanka.

The combination of these three under-researched areas, protracted refugee situations in general, higher education in protracted refugee situations in particular and the case of Burmese refugees in Thailand, create the rationale for the study that aspires to contribute to the field of emergency education as well as refugee studies and to instigate further research into the issue of HEPRS. It is the aim of this dissertation to counter this imbalance in research and to explore the extent to which a series of political, economic and technical factors as well as social constructs hamper tertiary education programmes for refugees. Multiple underlying paradoxes shall be analysed both within a theoretical frame of reference as well as in regard to the case study.

1.2. Methodological Approach and Limitations of the Study

Although this study would have lent itself to extensive field research, no interviews have been conducted due to pragmatic reasons (restricted access to camps and limited means of communication) and time constraints. Instead, this is primarily a literature-based analysis largely informed by the author's personal experience of living and working among the Burmese refugee community in Thailand on a regular short-term basis since 2004, through which a greater depth of understanding of dominant discourses amongst refugees in the border area was enabled. In fact, the initial idea for this study was born during prior fieldwork along the Thai-Burmese border that dealt with ethnicity and refugeehood (Zeus, 2008). Many of the interviewees then were students who all showed a keen interest in furthering their education beyond

tenth standard, the last grade offered in camp schools. This fieldwork, while not a primary source, has been influential for the present study since interviews as well as non-formal discussions with refugees provided additional ethnographic information and anecdotal evidence which is incorporated into the analysis. Besides, to analyse issues surrounding higher education in light of resettlement, the author has established contact with young Burmese refugees who resettled to third countries and are eager to access universities in their new homes (Australia, Canada, UK, USA).

Moreover, this study draws on additional autobiographical evidence (Phan, 2009), NGO reports and supplementary information that was kindly shared in email exchange by staff of humanitarian/educational NGOs working along the border. Analysis of this material proved challenging as some of it is politicised and geared toward capturing the readers' emotional attention to establish sympathy for a particular 'cause', rather than presenting facts in an unbiased manner. This was aggravated by the author's own potential bias due to long-term involvement as a teacher and researcher. Every effort has been made to reach a degree of self-reflectivity necessary for carrying out this research in an objective way.

There are certainly further limitations to this study due to the lack of primary data from topic-specific field research since certain information cannot be up-to-date considering the swiftly changing and unstable environment of the refugee camp and taking into account apprehensive security concerns on the part of members of the camp education system that limit information sharing by email or phone with anyone from outside the camps.

As 'data' was thus already available in form of the case study whereas there was no established theory of HEPRS, it was found best to follow a simplified and modified

approach of grounded theory methodology as an inductive method of theory generation from (in this case secondary) data, rather than trying “to force data to fit with a predetermined theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:3). According to Stern, the “strongest case for the use of grounded theory is in investigations of relatively uncharted water” (1995:30) as is the case in this study. The qualitative, systematic literature review began with locating relevant work on HE and PRS in general and Emergency Education as the compound field. This involved researching on the purposes of HE and how it relates to society, exploring ways protracted encampment affects education and development but also studying legal frameworks within which HEPRS could take place. It was hoped that by discovering the “theory implicit in the data” (Dick, 2005), grounded theory would serve to build from multiple substantiated theories a flexible analytical framework that is valid and relevant in terms of the data and also allows to critically reflect on social reality and question dominant discourses. The theoretical frame of reference which has been developed is in large parts influenced by a critical history of modernity, post-structural and postcolonial theory and within it in particular the field of refugee studies, as well as Critical Pedagogy and Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach (1999). The major themes that were extrapolated from practice as well as the relevant literature have been expressed in the form of three hypotheses which build the foundation of the theoretical considerations and will also be transferred back to the case study within this analysis to ascertain whether empirical findings verify or falsify these hypotheses.

Undoubtedly, the dearth of prior research on this topic has been limiting, and although every effort has been made to offer a comprehensive picture of the issue of HEPRS, this paper does not purport to be authoritative, but rather hopes to inspire future research and discussion.

1.3. Overview of the Study

The study begins by setting out a theoretical frame of reference (chapter 2) which provides a lens through which to examine issues surrounding HEPRS. This chapter also serves as a basic frame upon which the case study (chapter 3) is built. Chapter 4 will conclude and highlight areas for further research.

Chapter 2 starts by laying out the history, legal framework and issues surrounding emergency education of which refugee education is a part. This chapter is built upon three main paradoxes underlying HEPRS. Firstly, the study will explore the paradox of basic relief for refugees on the one hand and developmental efforts for higher education on the other. Secondly, the issue of higher education and the nation-state will be addressed in relation to refugees' perceived liminality in the national world order. Finally, it will be argued that the way refugees are generally perceived as victims of war and conflict and as dependent on external aid has incapacitated them, while HE could empower them, help increase their self-worthiness and have a positive impact on the development of their refugee as well as host communities.

Chapter 3 will take up these three paradoxes and draw out primary barriers and constraints, and critically discuss the strength of their impact on successfully providing HE in this particular refugee situation. In applying the theoretical frame, the analysis will take on the issue of accreditation and the creation of alternative spaces beyond existing nation-states as well as critically discuss policies regarding refugees registered for resettlement.

Guiding research questions permeating the study throughout are first of all, how protracted encampment affects education and development and what surrounding dynamics of international protection there are. Secondly, the question whether the provision of higher education in protracted refugee situations is generally seen as a right or rather a luxury will be addressed in both descriptive and normative terms. This includes a discussion of the role and purpose of HE in general, that is, whether HE is primarily perceived as an individual right or is principally meant to yield societal benefits, without claiming that these are mutually exclusive.

2

Toward Resolving the Paradoxes

2.1. *Setting the Scene: Educating Refugees*

2.1.1. The Emerging Field of Emergency Education

After the end of the Cold War, new types of crises emerged around the world which demanded different ways of humanitarian intervention and protection. The World Declaration on Education for All (WDEFA), adopted in 1990, helped move education back to the centre of the international development agenda and on the priority list of governments. It also paved the way for the field of Emergency Education (EE) to gain more prominence as it was later agreed upon for national EFA plans to include provision for education in emergency situations (UNESCO, 2000).⁴

Although education has been a fundamental operational aspect of the UN’s refugee agency UNHCR since the 1960s, the last two decades have seen a tremendous push in implementation partly due to its recognition as the ‘fourth pillar’ of humanitarian response alongside food, shelter and health as well as an increase in the body of literature on education in situations of emergency, conflict and crisis (Courtney, 2007).

This growing pool of research and a gradual re-orientation amongst donors and agencies have generated recognition for EE both as an academic discipline and as a priority in situations of crisis. Agencies have also shown a stronger commitment to working together and developing the EE sector. One initiative is the development of *Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction* (INEE, 2004) to “promote access to and completion of education of high quality for

⁴ Emergency Education has been defined to take place “in situations where children lack access to their national and community education systems due to occurrence of complex emergencies or natural disasters” which overwhelm the state’s capacities (Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003:2).

all persons affected by emergencies, crises or chronic instability” (Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003:13).

The provision of higher education in emergencies, however, is a field less researched and rarely supported as the sector is more geared toward primary and secondary education, which are also a priority of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). If tertiary education is supported, this is mostly through scholarships in third or host countries, rather than within the PRS itself.

Before proceeding any further in the analysis, it is essential to ascertain HE’s stand in international legal frameworks to find out whether HEPRS can be legally envisaged at all.

2.1.2. Access to Higher Education ‘on the Basis of Merit’

Everyone has the right to education. [...] higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (UN, 1948:Art.26(1))

This extract from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is supported by the 1989 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*: In what is part of an increasing focus on reinforcing the legal framework for the protection of the rights to education in conflict-affected societies (Machel, 2001), it sets out the overall framework for any discussion of education and conflict, and its Article 28 commits state parties to make HE equally “accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means” (UN, 1989). These are also the words of the *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (UNESCO, 1960:Art.4) as well as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (UNHCHR, 1966:Art.13).

Additionally, UNESCO in its ‘aspirational’ 1998 *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century* in Article 3 lays out:

Access to higher education for members of [...] disadvantaged groups [...] must be actively facilitated, since these groups as collectivities and as individuals may have both experience and talent that can be of great value for the development of societies and nations. Special material help and educational solutions can help overcome the obstacles that these groups face, both in accessing and in continuing higher education. (UNESCO, 1998)

This declaration places particular focus on broadening access and strengthening HE as a key factor of development and thus provides an international framework for action both at systems and institutional level (Burnett, 2007).

Education is not only part of international legal frameworks relating specifically to education or human rights, but also of the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Article 22 commits contracting states to “accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education” and “treatment as favourable as possible [...] with respect to education other than elementary education and [...] as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships” (UNHCR, 2007b:26)

More recently, refugees’ rights to opportunities of higher education have been highlighted by INEE’s *Minimum Standards* (2004) that extend the range of education strategies being catered for beyond basic education, from early childhood to special and higher education.

These international frameworks while highlighting merit, capacity, efforts and devotion, shown by those seeking access to HE, make no mention of prospective students' citizenship, nationality or appropriate socio-economic status as a prerequisite to access HE. This has huge implications for refugees seeking access to HE as people who are in no possession of citizenship.

And yet, states often only partially follow frameworks and agreements arguing that the "implementation is not 'rationally possible', given geopolitical realities" (Malkki, 2002:354). Despite evidence that secondary and higher education suffer a more rapid decline in emergency situations and a more gradual recovery from it, only minimal support to post-secondary education is offered (FMR, 2006). Considering however, that most protracted refugee situations exist in developing countries which generally struggle to provide basic necessities for their own populations, it becomes clear that HEPRS faces more complex challenges than a simple defiance of international frameworks.

Disregarding international legal frameworks, can education be the answer in conflict and why would it be worth investing in?

2.1.3. The Two Faces of Emergency Education

“Education is a right. In emergencies, it is still a right, and even more of a need” (Rognerud, 2005). Beside the recognition of education as an inalienable human right, a rationale for emergency education that is getting stronger within the international humanitarian community, is its important role in psychosocial, but also physical and cognitive protection (Smith and Vaux, 2003). Recognition is gradually being given to the fact that those caught in conflict rightfully demand more than the maintenance of physical welfare, and basic education, at least, is less commonly seen as a luxury after food and shelter. Surveys show that education is valued and prioritised by crisis-affected communities themselves for its stabilising effects (INEE, 20/06/09; Sinclair, 2002). Camp refugees have been found to have higher rates of mental and chronic diseases, and it is acknowledged that young people regain emotional balance by coming together for games and study (UNHCR, 1995). In long-term crises, education efforts can play a role in helping communities understand and cope with their fate and can be a critical part of providing meaning in life (Alzaroo and Hunt, 2003; Nicolai, 2003). Lack of education on the other hand can lead to further destabilisation (Davies, 2004) and makes young people more vulnerable to military recruiters and criminal activity (WCRWC, 2000).

Moreover, as long ago as 1983, Dodds and Inquai found strong pragmatic and economic reasons for making this provision. Only with education can refugees be expected to adapt themselves to their new surroundings, to integrate into their host society and to become self-reliant. “Without it they will inevitably remain outsiders and a permanent drain on the resources of the host community” (1983:12). This is in line with UNHCR’s rationale for investing in refugee tertiary education through its

DAFI⁵ scholarship programme: to “enhance the qualifications of individual refugees, thereby creating preconditions for the attainment of self-reliance, and to contribute to the overall assistance and solutions strategies aimed at overcoming a given refugee problem” (UNHCR, 2007a:2). It is believed that HE can contribute to the qualification of human resources needed in all three durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement).

And yet, Boyden and Ryder deliver a word of caution to those who consider education a panacea for young people in conflict situations, as it “delays participation in the world of adults and lengthens childhood dependence. This is bitterly resented by many youth. When it does not guarantee employment, education can also raise false expectations among young people” and lead to depression (1996:12).

Education’s political role may also have negative consequences: Bush and Saltarelli for example, demonstrate the susceptibility of education systems to the influence of political regimes as “in many conflicts around the world, education is part of the problem not the solution, because it serves to divide and antagonise groups both intentionally and unintentionally” (2000:33). This is particularly relevant for refugee students, whose flight from their country of origin may be part of a complex political story of persecution or inter-/intra-state conflict “in which the governments involved are not neutral” (Kirk, 2009:50). This points to the ‘two faces’ of education in emergencies and the fact that education is susceptible to manipulation for political ends as shall be illustrated by the case study.

⁵ DAFI stands for the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund and is UNHCR’s tertiary scholarship programme.

2.2. *An Exploration of Paradoxes Surrounding Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations*

While literature on incorporating refugees in Western (higher) education systems as part of resettlement processes is ample (Hamilton and Moore, 2004; Jones and Rutter, 1998; Rutter, 2001; Seabrook, 2008), there is no established body of literature on HEPRS as such, and relatively little is known about the role of higher education in situations of emergency and even less about HE in refugee camp situations. In fact, HE is rarely mentioned in Emergency Education guidelines. The lack of refugee access to HE is an important, but often overlooked problem.

What exactly is meant by *higher* education? Understandably, competing definitions are numerous and varied. Forster develops a noteworthy two-dimensional definition according to which HE more generally is that education which “involves the student in a rigorous exercise in his intellect, an exercise which teaches him as much about himself as about the subject he is studying and one which must inevitably lead to an exercise of value judgement” (1976:4). In more technical terms, HE, according to UNESCO, includes “all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent State authorities” (1998). This highlights how the existence of a state is seen as regulatory condition and thus contributes to various challenges in the absence of such, as further discussion shall depict.

The last century has seen a dramatic expansion of HE. In 1900, roughly 500,000 students were enrolled in HE institutions worldwide, representing a tiny fraction of one percent of college-age people. By 2005, this number had grown nearly three-hundredfold to approximately 138 million (UNESCO, 2007). The vast majority of new places in tertiary institutions were created in developing countries. However, only a relatively small share of the relevant age group has access to this level. The world tertiary gross enrolment ratio (GER) was around 24 percent in 2004, with participation varying substantially by region. The highest enrolment rates can be found in North America and Western Europe, with an average GER of around 70 percent while Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest rates at about five percent (UNESCO, 2006). Within Southeast Asia itself figures vary greatly between 46 percent in Thailand and five percent in Cambodia, which is highly dependent on household income; the latest figure for Burma is around twelve percent (UNESCAP, 2008:81).

Tertiary expansion, in fact, considerably outpaced the rapid expansion of mass education during the period from 1950 to 1970 and global trends are so strong that developing countries now have higher enrolment rates than European countries did only a few decades ago (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). As enrolment ratios are rapidly climbing past 50 and even 80 percent in some industrialised countries, this is foreshadowing the possibility of universal HE (UNESCO, 2004). The challenge is that despite these forecasts and increasing pressure to ‘massification’, HE has recently not featured prominently on the global development agenda in view of a “need to give an absolute top priority to basic education” as reflected in EFA and the MDGs (UNESCO, 2003:23).

Similarly, protracted refugee situations, regardless of their growing significance, are an issue of concern that has been neglected on the international political agenda and finding solutions to these situations has proven to be elusive for humanitarian actors, including the United Nations. The vast majority of refugees in the world are trapped in PRS; mostly in developing nation host states (Loescher et al., 2007). The UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as “one in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five years or more in a given asylum country” with no prospect of a solution (UNHCR, 2009:7). The typical response is encampment where refugees are contained in isolated camps, mostly in border regions due to the host nation’s security concerns. Significant restrictions on movement, employment and education are placed upon them. According to Loescher, this “trend, recently termed the ‘warehousing’ of refugees, has significant human rights and economic implications” and prevents refugees from making a positive contribution to regional development and peacebuilding (2007:3).

‘Warehoused’ refugees face a difficult dilemma. Since they have lived in a host country for several years, many humanitarian organisations stop providing for their basic needs. When the ‘CNN-phase’ has run its course, refugees “tend to fall off the radar screen of international attention and into the Orwellian memory hole”, as even members of the “humanitarian community have a natural tendency to concentrate their attention on new refugee emergencies” (Smith, 2004). At the same time, host country governments remain unwilling to allow refugees to work, settle outside the camp, or receive citizenship. As a result, camp refugees have difficulty sustaining themselves economically or accessing important services outside of the camp – such as higher education (Bayham, 2008).

Despite a recurrent demand in refugee situations for HE, presently, refugee education programme delivery is highly geared to primary and secondary students with less than one percent of the one million beneficiaries of UNHCR-administered refugee student places being at the tertiary level, predominantly as scholarships in third countries (Sargent, n.d.).⁶ And yet, UNHCR describes the need for refugee education as the most critical element in bridging the gap between relief assistance and durable solutions. Bridging this gap becomes particularly crucial in long-term refugee situations.

Within the context of these protracted situations, however, refugees' access to HE is hampered by multiple conditions. A lack of resources is a primary reason as few HE stipends are available, but other barriers include lack of preparatory education, knowledge about university application processes or denial of recognition of previously attained educational levels and admittance by host country institutions (Bayham, 2008). These issues will be further dealt with in chapter 3 in regard to the case study.

⁶ It was not possible to obtain any figures from official sources to verify this claim.

Reflecting on these practical barriers as well as dominant discourses in the literature, three major paradoxes have been crystallised which are expressed in the following hypotheses:

1. *Refugee situations are of a temporary character and demand immediate and basic humanitarian relief whereas the provision of HE is a long-term developmental effort.*
2. *Higher Education cannot exist without a nation-state and therefore is impossible to provide for refugees who exist in a liminal non-state.*
3. *As traumatised victims of war and conflict, refugees are dependent on external aid and therefore do not have the capabilities to cope with the challenges of HE.*

Sections 2.2.1. to 2.2.3. below are an attempt to critically question, analyse and deconstruct each of these major paradoxes through a theoretical frame of reference informed by discourse and theories from different relevant fields, such as postcolonial and post-structural theories, refugee studies, HE discourse, and the Capability Approach. While the following discussion of these hypotheses aims to capture many of the underlying issues, this analysis cannot be exhaustive. Other relevant issues such as more practical funding concerns or more general policy issues regarding HE access deserve focus in a separate paper; attending to these issues would go beyond the scope of this dissertation.

2.2.1. From Relief to Development

Refugee situations are of a temporary character and demand immediate and basic humanitarian relief whereas the provision of HE is a long-term developmental effort.

Despite increased recognition for Emergency Education, some donors and humanitarian agencies still apply, in Sinclair's view, "the 'macho' philosophy that education is a luxury in emergencies, and not a humanitarian requirement" as it is, compared to food, water, shelter and health-care neither indispensable nor required for subsistence (2001:9). This popular view becomes intensified in relation to HE. Education in general has traditionally been seen as a development activity whereas refugee situations are regarded as temporary emergencies in need of *basic* humanitarian relief, in the context of which HE in particular has been considered a 'luxury'. Can the paradox then be resolved by shifting from relief to developmental efforts in PRS or by regarding HE more as an individual right available to all rather than a luxury?

A Luxury Leading to Elitism?

Writing in 1986 and before the era of 'massification', Pilkington found that refugees' access to university education was being denied on the grounds of it being "a luxury leading towards 'elitism'". Education in general carries a connotation of being a 'positional good'. HE in particular is believed to have been creating elites in professionalism, by elevating the educated ones while automatically downgrading the uneducated. A very distinctive idea arises from conflict and competition theories: as education becomes important in the attainment of social status, groups and individuals compete more intensively for success in education, producing inflationary credential expansion far beyond any original functional requirements (Bourdieu and Passeron,

1977). Throughout the last decades it has been argued by some that HE has a tendency to serve the elite, so that investment in basic education would not only be more egalitarian but also yield higher economic returns in developing countries (IIEP, 2007). There now seems to be increasing consent on the importance of HE extending far beyond elitism and performing an expanding range of tasks from teaching via research to extension. However, while more efforts for equal opportunities have been made, and HE, in moving “from elite to mass to universal systems of participation”, touches “upon the lives of increasing proportions of the population of each country” (UNESCO, 1992:12), the dilemma appears to be the dominance of EFA and the MDGs that make no direct mention of tertiary education.

This has led to calls for more explicit safeguards for HE, as the focus on EFA is unlikely to mean an increase in funds allocated to the education sector as a whole (e.g., through a transfer from military to educational expenditure as suggested in Article 9 of the WDEFA), but would rather imply shifting scarce resources from HE to basic education. UNESCO, while pointing out that expansion and financing of tertiary education does not adversely affect the financing of basic education (2005), barely refers to HE in its yearly Global Monitoring Reports (GMR) on EFA progress. The latest 2009 edition mentions HE only in relation to the health benefits to children of tertiary educated mothers (UNESCO, 2008), whereas GMR 2008 and 2007 mostly mention HE in relation to two other externalities: “as a component of the gender equality goal and as an important provider of teachers and administrators” (UNESCO, 2006:45). Contrary to the emphasis on each individual’s right to basic education, the tenor seems to be on portraying HE merely in terms of its externalities, the benefits accruing to immediate and wider society, rather than as an individual right.

Higher Education For All?

In this context, it is worth looking at the case of Venezuela where counter-hegemonic efforts to the prevalent EFA discourse are taking place. There, as elsewhere, HE is conceived as an undeniable, universal social right, and the constitutional right to free education includes the right to free HE. “Such promotion of ‘Higher Education For All’ (HEFA) is occurring exactly at a time when the commodification and privatisation of HE is pushed ahead on a global scale” (Muhr and Verger, 2006).

These are interesting developments. However, in opposition to Muhr and Verger’s (2006) claims, this is not exactly putting into effect a sense of meritocracy, or education by aptitude, as open HE would significantly affect the quality component in a negative way. For HE to live up to its name, a certain degree of selection is still needed. Therefore, HEFA unlike EFA cannot mean that *all* individuals should access HE, rather all capable individuals aspiring to a degree and showing the necessary commitment should be able to access HE, regardless of their physical ability, social background, ethnic or religious affiliation, citizenship or *lack* of such. The latter point seems to be the most often overlooked and yet most determinant barrier to accessing HE and is not reflected in recent equal opportunity efforts or ethnic diversity schemes.

Within the context of protracted refugee situations, this is the most substantial challenge to a vision of HEPRS, as section 2.2.2. will further highlight. Against this background, access to HE still remains a luxury catering for the privileged classes (Saint, 2009), rarely ‘touching upon’ the lives of forced migrants caught in long-term encampment and receiving only what is deemed necessary in responding to their basic needs and rights.

Solving the Relief-Development Dichotomy

The dilemma is that PRS are often not recognised as such as all actors involved seem to be relying on eventual voluntary repatriation. The focus therefore still is on relief (top-down care and maintenance functions ‘imposed’ on refugees as short-term life-saving measures) rather than developmental efforts that pay attention to saving livelihoods through a high degree of both participation and self-sufficiency.

Placing more emphasis on development-oriented support proves difficult precisely because refugee situations are characterised by instability and unpredictable flows of people, which complicates any effort to link refugee aid with on-going development planning, since the latter relies on greater predictability and stability in the population groups to be served over longer periods of time. “Also, moving towards the type of permanency that development initiatives suggest rarely finds favour with host governments” (Demusz, 1998:233) who regard this as a temporary ‘problem’ rather than trying to find durable solutions which could potentially create incentives for even more people to arrive as refugees. The role of education as an incentive to migrate has frequently been highlighted and presents a barrier to Emergency Education, although past experiences show that refugees will return to their country of origin at the first available opportunity, regardless of the presence of schools in the camps (Sinclair, 2002).

Development in refugee situations has been discussed since the 1960s (Betts, 1966) and has been a topic of interest to academics and practitioners ever since (Gorman, 1993). In reply to the growing challenge of protracted refugee situations, UNHCR (2001) has in fact advocated for more educational opportunities to bridge the gap between relief and development. In situations where refugees are barred from becoming economically self-sufficient and are thus resource dependent, the participa-

tory aspect would need to be emphasised. HE could be part of such developmental efforts in building the refugee population's capacity, an empowering process that could increase their ability to control and direct the resources which they receive, and have the power to initiate and manage projects which meet the needs of their communities to foster their self-reliance (Demusz, 1998). In the long-run, HE, while requiring significant financial jump-start and continuing commitment by donors, could contribute to breaking out of the relief-cycle in offering a way to development and self-sustainability.

While the need to move toward developmental approaches in PRS has been acknowledged, translating this into practice is still hampered by multiple factors as this discussion has shown. Protracted refugee situations are not, by definition, sustainable and are constantly in a state of flux, viewing refugees as temporarily displaced only, results in many of their rights being denied. Apart from facing up to these facts, HE would first of all need to be recognised as an inalienable right for all those aspiring to it in order to solve the paradox of relief versus development. Chapter 3 will show how this translates into the context of the case study.

2.2.2. Higher Education without a Nation-State

Higher Education cannot exist without a nation-state and therefore is impossible to provide for refugees who exist in a liminal non-state.

The second paradox to resolve revolves around refugees' statelessness and the question whether HE can only exist within the 'imagined' (Anderson, 2006) borders of a nation-state. It is argued here that the links between schooling and the nation-state are imagined yet present a powerful discourse and a challenging obstacle for higher education in protracted refugee situations.

Refugees as members of a 'non-state'

This challenge derives from the way refugees are seen by the international community that has come to perceive the national world order as the norm. Refugees by definition⁷ do not belong to any nation-state, and have been termed 'non-communities of the excluded' (Hyndman, 2000) or 'invisible non-entities' (Napier-Moore, 2005). In Malkki's words, this derives from a sedentarist view which perceives refugees as 'uprooted' from the normal order, and thus 'abnormal' (1995a). With regard to education, there is "inherent uncertainty about in which society [refugees] should socialise their children as members" (Waters and Leblanc, 2005:130) when they are excluded from full participation in the activities of any national body politic. This has serious implications for curricular choices, as issues taken for granted in 'normal' societies such as language choice, history and religion become a focus for contention within the refugee community itself, host country education ministries, and the humanitarian relief community.

⁷ See UNHCR (2007b) for an official definition.

The nature of education, citizenship, and the nation-state thus presents a series of paradoxes in the case of refugees. In addition,

while there is general agreement that education in the modern world is a good thing, there is also recognition that education, particularly in refugee situations, is a threat to existing state elites because it encourages demands and is a focus for mobilising opposition to the nation-state. (Waters and Leblanc, 2005:132)

Taking this argument further and linking HE to the nation-state, the establishment of HE in a refugee context could thus even be viewed as a threat to existing nation-states. The presence of refugees alone in general is considered destabilising for a nation-state, so that the focus has been on refugee containment. “The painful irony is that it is this same world order with so-called sovereign nation-states that generates so many of the refugees in the world today”⁸ (Sai Soe Win Latt, 17/06/09).

To answer the complex question of whether HE can take place within the static nation-state system only, HE’s role within this system should be considered.

Higher Education and Nation-State Building

Within the nation-state, education is expected to fulfil a variety of key roles. Schools have a powerful function in that they create modern citizens and workers “who can imagine themselves as members of a political and economic community” (Waters and Leblanc, 2005:129). And yet it is argued here, that while primary and secondary education hold an influential role within the nation-state, it is HE that is most important during the process of nation-state building. In our knowledge economy, HE is unique in its “capacity to build capacity” (Saint, 2009:2).

⁸ There is ample discussion on whether refugees are a product of our present world order or particular political systems, see: Adelman (1991); Arendt (1951).

For several reasons, universities are considered to be of prime importance. Firstly, they are a symbolic asset in the process of nation-building and are seen as an important instrument for national development. Universities are creators, repositories and disseminators of knowledge, and are thus a precious resource for any nation-state. They are the locus of scientific research and the creation, for instance, of a national history legitimating the existence of the nation-state.

Secondly, universities are in a position to make this knowledge available to future politicians and teachers who in turn can disseminate this body of knowledge more widely to contribute to the creation of a national identity. On a more individual level, university education is considered to be an absolute necessity for vertical mobility and on a societal level for intellectual development of human capital. As graduates enter labour markets, they often become leaders and innovators throughout the economy, generating productivity, the benefits of which may accrue to the community at large as well as to them personally.

HE has been seminal in the history of national development with universities holding a key role in national liberation struggles from foreign dominance and control as they help “indigenise development by training nationals to manage the economies of newly-independent nation-states [...] gradually replacing expatriates with nationals in policy-making bodies” (Varghese, 2007:3). Building universities is a “symbol of self-reliance” (ibid.) and provides the young nation-state with a new local-specific knowledge base for policy decisions, by producing new knowledge as well as adopting knowledge produced elsewhere and thus lead the nation toward independence from colonial masters.

For existing nation-states, universities foster stimulation of economic and industrial growth. They are to provide future leaders in politics, the bureaucracy and the economy; to be involved in research of an academic nature as well as research into national and regional problems so that the application of new ideas may have a practical bearing on the economy or on the development and well-being of large numbers of people and their environment (Watson, 1981). In many countries universities help develop a national language, preserve cultural heritage and maintain national identities and traditions, even when challenged by globalisation.

HE has significance in holding nation-states together as it can equip students to live and work together as responsible citizens in complex societies by developing a person's ability to reason systematically, place facts in a broader context and be tolerant of opposing viewpoints (Saint, 2009). Essentially, HE has the potential to innovate in helping "adapt values and attitudes to the demands of development and change" (UNESCO, 1992:14). Last but not least, universities are key in shaping policy and serve as sounding boards for political and social reform. In some instances they serve as a haven of truth and balanced scholarship in the face of totalitarianism (Burnett, 2007).

Higher Education beyond the Nation-State

This discussion has tried to elucidate HE's immense significance for national society and the act of nation-building. The links between HE and the nation-state are imaginary as the latter itself is founded on a powerful, yet constructed, national discourse largely produced by institutes of HE. While the nation-state is thus basically dependent on HE and research, HE on the other hand, is not necessarily dependent on the

nation-state as the recent growth in private and for-profit business-like universities like Laureate or Apollo Group show (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Morey, 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). These universities operate relatively independently from the nation-state, and its nature is not seen as a primary prerequisite, yet, as they operate within its territory they are still indirectly dependent on its existence. In terms of funding, even public universities no longer rely entirely on the state (Varghese, 2007).

In the course of globalisation, the disintegration of the nation-state is a much debated issue as the world is still organised vertically by nation-states, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable and increasingly multiple system of interactions (Cohen, 1996; Dean, 1998; Guéhenno, 1995). This system creates communities not of place but of interest weakening nation-states' monopoly of power. A fear of this process could prove to be a challenging obstacle for HEPRS. As HE can help create and shape new nation-states, this might be where its 'dangerous' potential lies if members of a non-nation start demanding access to HE or even building their own universities. The case study shall take up this paradox and present opportunities for HE to link and transcend existing nation-states which, as will be argued, becomes possible through modern technology.

2.2.3. From Victimisation to Empowerment

As traumatised victims of war and conflict, refugees are dependent on external aid and therefore do not have the capabilities to cope with the challenges of HE.

The last contradiction stems from refugees being primarily regarded as victims in the international system of refugee relief, known as the International Refugee Regime (IRR). They are victims of war and conflict who had to flee their homes with only what they could carry on their backs and often find themselves in prolonged encampment. The ‘refugee experience’ is thought of as being generalisable, and all too often the entire global refugee population receives blanket characteristics in what has become a ‘refugee narrative’. This narrative allocates clear roles, not only to refugees as dependent, hungry, helpless and uprooted persons, but also to members of the regime which is to help refugees back to stability. Refugees have no action or agency of their own in this discourse and the IRR’s role is to feed, help, re-root, heal, and control (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Hyndman, 2000; Malkki, 1995b; Napier-Moore, 2005). This need for control is what leads to encampment. Imposing aid on refugees is justified by the view that refugees are ‘pathologically ill’ since they have been traumatised and displaced and are no longer rooted in normalcy, no longer part of the (natural) national order of things (Malkki, 1995a). Drawn into the power structures of international protection, refugees’ lives might not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile and it becomes all the more challenging to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance and from this powerful narrative. This structural limitation means that, irrespective of rhetoric to the contrary, educational planning is often done ‘for’ refugees by the IRR, rather than ‘with’ refugees (Waters and Leblanc, 2005). Before proceeding any further, it is essential to take a closer look at the IRR.

Constructing Dependency

The global refugee regime is based on a structure and philosophy that stems from the International Refugee Organisation, UNHCR's predecessor institution that provided its template. Crisp (2003) defines the IRR as constituted by three steps taken between the 1920s and 1970s: the establishment of international institutions, culminating in the foundation of the UNHCR; international legal instruments, such as the 1951 Convention on refugees; and the development of international norms relating to the treatment of refugees, for example the principle of voluntary repatriation. In this discussion, all humanitarian agencies and state actors directly or indirectly involved in a refugee situation are considered part of the IRR.

It has been argued that the current refugee system essentially serves states' interests rather than refugees' interests by confining refugees to camps for 'easier control' instead of granting them freedom and basic human rights (Sai Soe Win Latt, 17/06/09). Considering refugees' dependency on aid and additional services, refugee camps are sites of highly structured and power-laden relationships not only between refugees and agency staff. There are differing views on the nature of this dependency and the ways to end this.

Many theorists have found that refugee camps can present a creative space in which refugees actively negotiate and redefine their identity for instance (Agier, 2002; Kibreab, 1999; Malkki, 1995a). Kibreab (1993) refutes the 'dependency allegory' saying that if dependency equals a lack of initiative, then dependency is not the issue since he has seen overwhelming evidence of refugees' willingness to work when given the chance. Dependency is purely structural, and, he argues, not necessarily embedded in identity.

Leaning on Foucault (1977), Harrell-Bond sees dependency not as a myth but a powerful narrative that with rhetoric and time, becomes reality. This discursive view argues that refugees are assigned a supplicatory role, and eventually take on that assigned attitude of dependency and finally suffer from the ‘dependency syndrome’ imposed on them by relief agencies (Harrell-Bond, 1986). Just as Foucault’s prison turns inmates into criminals, Harrell-Bond’s camps turn forced migrants into ‘refugees’ – docile, helpless, dependent recipients of aid (Napier-Moore, 2005).

Revolving the Narrative

There are mainly two different theoretical approaches towards refugee independence and empowerment: the *institutional* and the *advocacy* approach.

The former assumes that refugees can be made agents by the IRR’s actions and interventions. Based on the supposition that refugees are powerless which legitimates humanitarian intervention of various forms, empowerment is made possible, in this account, *through* policies and processes the IRR implements *for* refugees. Once refugees re-own their agency, power relations do not have an impact and can be ignored in creating ‘empowerment’. In conceptualising empowerment based on a notion of agency as a resource that can be transferred to refugees through policy initiatives, this perspective “serves a political agenda that seeks to propose a bureaucratic solution to a structural problem, and create a shift in policy framework and outcome without any questioning of basic assumptions and structural constraints” (Meyer, 2006:30).

At the other end of the spectrum, the advocacy approach argues that refugees are potentially powerful social actors who have the capabilities and skills to attain inde-

pendence, integrate into host communities and establish livelihoods; their agency is however hampered by structural constraints. In contrast to the above, this determinist perspective of structure posits that refugees' capacities are often stripped *through* the actions and practices of the IRR and that refugee agency can be actualised only when the impact of such networks of power "are completely, or largely, absent" (Meyer, 2006:28).

It becomes clear that this latter view calls for a dilution of the IRR structure and encampment policy. While this would be the long-term goal, what is needed in the more immediate term is a new narrative regarding refugees as agents of their own development. In aiming to portray refugees as agents and intending to empower them, the advocacy approach still unintentionally reasserts a view of refugees as completely passive and powerless under the IRR's umbrella. Post-structural theories of refugees not being by definition helpless and passive victims who could not cope with the challenges of HE, but rather being made helpless and dependent through internalising a powerful, yet constructed, narrative, are seminal for this dissertation. And yet, just as the narrative of passive victims has been internalised by refugees and has incapacitated them, a new narrative of refugee agency could shape their identity and eventually form reality. Foucault's influential work has shown how prisons can be both limiting and enabling. This could be equally true for refugee camps.

The question remains as to how refugees can rid themselves of this narrative. From a refugee perspective, empowerment here becomes the key word. In this context, Paulo Freire's ideas are particularly interesting and will be taken up in chapter 3. On a different level, it becomes first of all crucial for the IRR to recognise refugees' agency and potential. To this end it is worth incorporating some of Amartya Sen's ideas.

Turning Capabilities into Functionings and Empowering Refugees

Sen in a keynote address made a statement that can serve as a vision for refugees: “We need a vision of mankind not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things – both individually and jointly” (2000). In building a cross-disciplinary bridge between economics and human rights, his Capability Approach (CA) focuses on the ability of human beings to ‘lead lives they have reason to value’ and to enhance the substantive choices they have (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999; Unterhalter, 2003; Vaughan et al., 2007; Walker, 2006; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). The process of development, according to Sen, then has to be the expansion of human capability for people to lead freer and more worthwhile lives.

HE is an inalienable right for all those aspiring to it, and the CA reminds us that every effort has to be made to enact this right no matter where, as rights should not be constrained by current conditions that are beyond the individual’s power. The CA also reminds us that every effort has to be made to enable people to convert resources into capabilities and finally into achieved functionings. In Sen’s CA, the distinction between achieved functionings and capabilities is “between the realised and the effectively possible; in other words, between achievements on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable options from which one can choose on the other” (Robeyns, 2005:95). Only if the individual is equipped with freedom and the appropriate personal, social and environmental conversion factors can these capabilities be turned into achieved functionings. Social, political and economic arrangements have to be favourable for inputs to be translated into valuable outputs. The CA stresses that while resources are important, the opportunities each person has to convert their bundle of resources into valued doings and beings are what matters in the end. This

seems particularly important in the context of a resource scarce environment like the refugee camp.

In applying the CA, the paradoxes underlying HEPRS can partly be solved since this framework allows for recognition of refugees' inherent potential, their capabilities, and encourages to create circumstances for them to increase their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities "they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be" (Robeyns, 2005:95). Against this backdrop, HEPRS could be both a means and an end to empowerment and ultimately contribute to relaxing tight power structures as shall be further elucidated in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 has tried to offer ways toward deconstructing and resolving the paradoxes surrounding HEPRS within a theoretical framework. The following chapter shall look at these major paradoxes in regard to the particular case of Burmese refugees in Thailand. After a brief background to the refugee situation and a discussion of the reasons for a growing demand for HE, the case study will look at the preconditions for providing HE, existing opportunities and future possibilities as well as the practicalities and obstacles. In a refugee situation where efforts towards developmental approaches have been hampered by multiple factors, but endeavours to provide HE transcending nation-states have still been made, it will be interesting to see how the question of power manifests itself in this particular case. In challenging the institutional view, the ensuing case study shall critically examine the assumption that refugee empowerment can be achieved in a context where structural constraints on refugees' livelihoods are not recognised or addressed, arguing that self-reliance relies on a widening of spaces for the exercise of refugee agency. It will, however, also critically discuss the underlying conjecture of the advocacy approach which assumes refugees to be completely powerless under the IRR's umbrella.

3

Making it Work:

Higher Education for Burmese Refugees in Thailand

Many refugees who are trapped in protracted refugee situations around the world share with Burmese refugees in Thailand a lack of higher learning opportunities. This includes Bhutanese refugees in Nepal (Brown, 2001) and Tibetan refugees in India (Corrigan, 2005); the latter case in particular is known for comparatively ‘good practices’ in terms of refugee policies. For Liberian refugees in Ghana “higher education is crucial for preparing refugees for employment and civic leadership”, however the largest burden are high fees that cannot be borne by the refugees themselves (Bayham, 2008). Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Sudan, Hutu refugees in Tanzania (Malkki, 1995a), Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Kirk, 2009), or Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (Barakat, 2008; Corrigan, 2005) live with an uncertain future and few opportunities to further their education.

The case of Burmese refugees in Thailand is comparatively under-researched and largely focuses on health issues and the migrant population in towns (Beyrer, 1999; Caouette et al., 2000; Caouette, 2001; Eltom, 2000). Detailed academic research on camp refugees on the other hand is a little scarcer with a few exceptions being Brooten (2003), Dudley (2007), Lang (2002), Liepe (1995). More recently, a number of studies on education and livelihoods in the camps have been published by agencies working along the border (Brees, 2008a; b; Oh and Parkdeekhunthum, 2007; Oh and Stouwe, 2008b; Perlman-Robinson, 2008; Purnell, 2008; Purnell and Saussay, forthcoming; Sawade, 2007; 2008a; b; 2009).

3.1. The Protracted Refugee Situation in Thailand

The ethnic conflict in Burma is one of the world's longest-running (cf. Smith, 1999), its deep roots can be traced back to well before 1984 when larger numbers of refugees began trickling across the country's eastern border to neighbouring Thailand which led to the establishment of the first refugee camp, Mae La. What is by now a protracted refugee situation was then a group of around 10,000 ethnic Karen fleeing fighting between the ethnic armed opposition and government troops they had believed to recede with the onset of the next rainy season. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) has likewise understood their seeking for shelter as merely temporary in character, as under Thai law, there are no refugees. Instead Thailand, when faced with a large influx of refugees from Indochina, in its 1954 *Regulations Concerning Displaced Persons from Neighbouring Countries* defined a 'displaced person' as someone "who escapes from dangers due to an uprising, fighting, or war, and enters in breach of the Immigration Act" (Lang, 2002:92). Strictly speaking, refugees in Thailand are thus 'illegal immigrants'.⁹

⁹ Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* nor its 1967 Protocol.

Thai media commonly refer to refugees (ผู้ลี้ภัย [pôo léé pai]) as migrants (ผู้อพยพ [pôo òp-yóp]). This terminology has been transferred into everyday language, basically extinguishing the existence of refugees on Thai territory.

Map 1: Thai-Burmese Border with nine Refugee Camps



(Source: UNHCR, 2008b; map adapted)

In line with this logic, camps are termed ‘temporary shelters’, and this is the main reason why the approximately 140,000 Burmese camp refugees¹⁰ live in thatched bamboo huts in nine camps along the border (see map 1), since permanent materials like concrete and stone are not allowed as construction material. It is also in Thailand’s interest to contain the refugee situation to remote and invisible border areas in light of increased economic cooperation with the Burmese military government (HRW, 2004). This encampment policy further allows for easier control of refugees and alleviates Thailand from the financial responsibility for meeting refugees’ needs by shifting it to the international donor community.

The continued influx of refugees and the deteriorating environment along the border in the 1990s led to the recognition that the issue was becoming more difficult to deal with informally and that a voluntary imminent return of the refugees could no longer be contemplated. After an agreement between the RTG and UNHCR in 1998, the latter has become officially operational with field offices along the border and is accepted in an advisory function (Banki and Lang, 2008b). The ultimate decisive power, however, remains within the government’s hands allowing for greater flexibility and independence in response to its ‘refugee problem’.

Since 1994 education and health-related NGOs have assisted the refugee groups. However, the “protracted refugee situation and the restrictions on refugee movement have created a deadlock situation in which it is extremely difficult for the refugees to control the development of their own society” (Oh and Stouwe, 2008a:590). As a result, there is a whole generation who have been “born and raised in the artificial environment of a refugee camp” (Guterres, 2008) and have no knowledge of life be-

¹⁰ Figures are constantly in flux and depend on the definition of ‘refugees’, see: TBBC (2009); UNHCR (2008a); most recent figures on: www.tbtc.org.

yond the barbed wire surrounding them. Refugees' rights to settlement, travel or employment in Thailand are tightly restricted; they are thus fully dependent on external aid agencies for even the most basic forms of support such as food or other supplies for livelihood. As personal experience has shown, however, the ability of the camp population to obtain these rights and freedoms varies considerably depending on the current and swiftly changing political situation in Thailand, the particular camp authorities and the individual refugee.

With no other durable solution in sight, the RTG in 2005 approved the option of resettlement to third countries from all refugee camps. This large-scale multilateral resettlement programme has changed the situation in the camps dramatically, as tens of thousands of refugees, mostly the 'educated elite', apply for resettlement (Banki and Lang, 2008b). And yet, this does not present an end to the refugee situation in view of a continued influx of refugees from across the border. Due to renewed fighting, an estimated 4,000 refugees have crossed the border from Burma's Karen State into Thailand since June 2009 (BBC News, 10/06/09).

3.2. Education in the Refugee Camps along the Border

The structure of the education system used in the camps has been carried over from the structure used by the Karen before they fled to Thailand. Despite crowded classrooms inside the camps, the system strives to provide education for all children and young people. High enrolment rates are linked to good access to schools due to proximity and also a lack of employment opportunities which decreases the indirect and opportunity costs. While teaching conditions are harsh, teachers receive only low subsidies for their efforts as do community members who are involved in educational management. Compared to other emergency education situations, the general camp education system is relatively autonomous, standardised and comprehensive, however, it is not all encompassing as organisations and individuals may set up schools independently (Oh et al., 2006).

The Karen Education Department (KED) administers the education system in the seven southern refugee camps (see map 1) that are predominantly inhabited by refugees from the Karen ethnic group. From the “makeshift” curricula (Sawade, 2007:39) of the 1980s and early 1990s, the KED has developed its own curriculum with great community spirit. With the long-term hope for repatriation to Karen State, it is mainly based on the Burmese one but has adopted many components from other parts of the world, most importantly, it is taught in Skaw-Karen and conveys the ‘Karen version’ of Burma’s history (cf. Zeus, 2008).

The KED’s powerful stand within the camp education system grants them the monopoly on discourse production and, in light of a changing ethnic make-up of the camps, has been found to have negative implications for other ethnicities (Oh and Stouwe, 2008a). The positive result of this high level of self-organisation, however,

is a great degree of community ownership of the curriculum on the part of the Karen. As Corrigan (2005) found decreasing enrolment and participation rates in a Palestinian refugee education system that is lacking in ownership, this is certainly a significant component. Moreover, education is largely free and more materials are available than in some areas of Burma itself, a fact which is greatly valued by the camp community according to residents. Although not internationally recognised, education on the border is considered far superior to what is being taught in Burma and helps students develop important skills and promotes community spirit. Refugees often take pride in their education system, which is thought to be more valuable than university education from Burma despite the fact that camp education is not accredited but by the KED. Sawade cites one young refugee who feels “lucky to study in the camps” and now has a “good job with an NGO”, while some of her friends who went to university in Burma are “working as housemaids in Bangkok” (2007:53).

The quality of education inside the camps is said to be higher than in surrounding Thai villages even, so that Thai parents sometimes send their children to the camp schools as was reported to the author during research in 2008. This however is in contradiction to findings of a recent small-scale study by CP (2007) and thus opens up the question of whether this rhetoric merely is a product of dominant camp discourse to ascribe validity to the camp education system or can be supported by evidence. This would require further research on a larger scale. The question of local Thai communities’ needs has been discussed elsewhere (Kānchai, 2003). Their access to educational opportunities in relation to camp refugees certainly merits further attention that would go beyond the scope of the present study.

With students progressing through the camp education system, there was a need to provide them with the chance to access higher learning opportunities (KED, 2009). This led to the establishment of community initiated Post-Ten programmes, the number of which has expanded rapidly since 1995. The role of the Post-Ten sector has been noted to be one of “providing schools with teachers, community based organisations with junior staff, adding to the human resource pool within Karen State and preparing students for higher level academic programmes” (Purnell, 2008:17). The very presence of such high numbers of opportunities being developed at Post-Ten level automatically indicates the strong desire amongst refugees to learn and to develop their skills base. And yet, compared to the number of high school graduates, places at Post-Ten programmes are very limited and there is keen competition. For those who successfully progress through these courses, there are few career routes, and this has led to topping up the education system with yet another level. These programmes that are now referred to as Post-Post-Ten are either academic foundation programmes leading to tertiary scholarships, advanced English language academies or professional training courses in fields such as journalism, law, diplomacy and advocacy (CP, 2007).¹¹

Clearly the education sector in the camp is expanding and aiming for ever higher levels of education. With few employment opportunities, what might be the underlying reasons for this growing demand for higher education?

¹¹ As of 2009, there are two camp-based Post-Post-Ten programmes, and eleven more in surrounding Thai towns: CP (2009).

3.2.1. Reasons for Growing Demand for Higher Education

I had a dream of going to university after completing my Karen education, which could go no further than secondary school. That dream was inspired in part by my father, for I knew that he had studied for a degree in Rangoon. [...] Many of my school friends shared this dream of education and a bright future. But the gulf between our situation and where we hoped to end up was so enormous. (Phan, 2009:110)

Despite the challenges and few viable employment opportunities after finishing school, young people are eager to continue their studies and many dream of leaving the camps to attend university. There might be two main reasons for this growing demand beside the obvious that it is only natural for young ambitious people to aspire to HE. First of all, there might be a historical reason, for in Burma universities have been the locus of political resistance and student leaders are revered as heroes. Students, as the above quotation shows, are inspired by elders who might tell them stories about their times at university or as student leaders. Secondly, there might be a situation-specific reason related to encampment, where the pace of life is slow, there are not many facilities around for entertainment, and thus education serves as a means to keep oneself occupied. HE in particular brings the connotation of a 'bright future', one not associated with camp-life. The idea of pursuing HE might well be thought of as a way out of the camps and terminating life as a refugee.

Following in the Footsteps of Student Leaders

Although Southeast Asia has not traditionally been a leader in research or innovation, HE has always played an important role in the region. Traditionally, Buddhist monasteries have been the source of knowledge. The establishment of Western-style universities was introduced with colonialism. Thailand's renowned Chulalongkorn University was founded in 1915, and Burma's first university, Rangoon University, five

years later. Unlike Burma, Thailand has a long history of interaction with different Western academic models in the context of independent development (Altbach, 1989).¹²

Despite the government's promising figures (GoM, 2007), Burma's education system is rather infamous for its low quality. The HE sector has been particularly neglected in the past few decades. While in former times, HE in Burma was meant to satisfy the needs of the colonial bureaucracy and commercial trade rather than the social and intellectual betterment of the people, at present, HE is fully controlled by the military government. University students have played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence as well as in the struggle to topple successive military governments so that universities have repeatedly been closed for longer periods not only after the largest student-led demonstrations in 1988 (Hickey, 2007). Many analysts attribute the decentralisation and fragmentation of HE to the government's fear of organised student protests (Steinberg, 1989). This has had a profound additional impact on the decline of HE quality. Chutintaranond and Cooperat remark how student unrest in Burma and Thailand has had different effects than in Europe and the US, as students risked their lives, in addition to threats to their families, exile, conflict with the police and loss of education opportunities (1995:63). Student leaders are revered as heroes, and their pictures can be found in many refugees' homes along the border. In their plight to 'fight' the government, young camp refugees are eager to follow in their footsteps as personal experience has shown.

¹² For an overview of the HE system in Thailand, see: Prangpatanpon (1996); Sinlarat (2004); Watson (1981).

Escaping to the Realms of Higher Education

It would be conceivable for young students to feel they will have no option but to continue to live in the camp where there are no opportunities to build their own future and might perceive that their studies will have no payoff in the outside world they are forbidden from entering. However, the realisation of the dependence and “stigma” that comes with being a refugee (Phan, 2009:166) for many is motivation enough to strive for HE and try to make a difference for their own lives and their communities. This desire is linked to the Karen’s mythico-history (cf. Zeus, 2008) and how the homeland had in the past been lost to a more sophisticated enemy. Education would lead the Karen out of dependence and would be “needed to win the homeland back” as Barakat states in a similar note on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (2008:12). Many young students seem to eagerly strive to help their communities and the belief that this would best be possible with a degree is widespread in the camps. Although the understanding of what HE actually is and entails varies a lot, according to one educational NGO worker, this is mostly conceived of as Western-style university education.

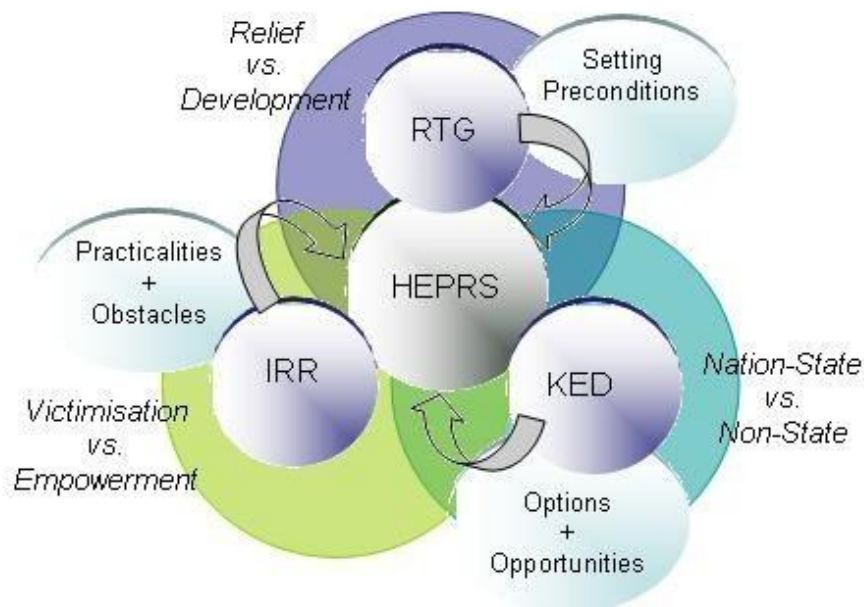
Forster in a study of HE in prisons finds that the “initial impetus to join in an educational activity in prison is inescapably tied up with a variety of institutional considerations which only rarely apply outside”, such as motivation due to students’ boredom. As “[a]nything is better than being banged up in your cell with nothing to do but stare at the ceiling”, education can mean “an escape from prison routine” and the enjoyment of meeting teachers from outside the establishment (1976:15). This can be equally true for the closed camp environment where HE can simply be the “pursuit of variety within an essentially monotonous environment” (1976:15). A final point Forster made writing in a Western context more than three decades ago seems to

have validity for camp students aspiring to HE as well: “there was always the feeling that a degree might allow the inmate to emerge as a free man at a point not too far away from his original position” (1976:18). The common association of universities with freedom might be very appealing for young people living within the cramped confines of a refugee camp and examinations offer milestones to see time through and an opportunity to succeed, while learning offers indirect and direct connections with the largely unknown outside world.

3.3. Higher Education along the Border

The following sections pursue a three dimensional approach as illustrated by figure 1 below. First of all, the paradoxes addressed in chapter 2 will be taken up to see how the case study relates to each of them. Secondly, each of the sections will deal with the technicalities of setting up HE programmes in the border camps, whereby section 3.3.1. will look at creating the preconditions for providing HE in this PRS, while section 3.3.2. will be concerned with existing HE opportunities and future possibilities and the final section 3.3.3. will address the practicalities and obstacles in the current climate. On a last dimension, the interplay of the three major actors (RTG, KNU/KED and IRR) with both the paradoxes and technicalities will be explored.

Figure 1: Three dimensional Approach



3.3.1. From Relief to Development: Moving towards Accreditation

The prolongation of the refugee situation along the Thai-Burmese border is now prompting educational NGOs to a significant shift in policy and planning: from operational and reactive to strategic and proactive (Oh and Stouwe, 2008b).

In concurrence with approving resettlement (see above), the RTG's policy regarding refugee education has likewise undergone fairly dramatic changes within only a very short period of time. Part of this shift in policy away from a 'care and maintenance' model on the part of the RTG is the in-principle green light in terms of granting opportunities and skills to refugees in vocational training and greater access to further education and work opportunities for those not opting for resettlement (UNHCR, 2005).

In gradually recognising Burmese refugees as being part of a protracted refugee situation, the RTG has permitted these policy changes that were prompted firstly by the deteriorating political situation in Burma (Martin, 2005) but also conflict in Thailand's south. The latter events eventually led Thailand's Ministry of Education (MoE) to take up discussions with NGOs on refugee education as well. Thailand's MoE itself explains increased interest and involvement in refugee education as part of its commitment to EFA. Through this discourse, budgets have been made available to border provinces to enable them to give greater support to migrant schools (Kirk, 2009:76).

The first step by the MoE in support of refugee education has been sending Thai teachers to the refugee camps. From 2007, accreditation of refugee learning programmes appeared prominently on the MoE's agenda.

Setting the Preconditions

Lack of accreditation and future employment opportunities are largely a result of legal constraints imposed by the RTG but also due to the non-legal status of the KED, thus undermining the external efficiency of the camp education system. Not being internationally recognised, the KED as well as Community-Based Organisations do award school leaving certificates and training certificates, however, they are worth little outside the refugee camp as none are recognised by nation-states including Thailand and Burma (Sawade, 2009). However valued the camp education system might be within the refugee community, the lack of accredited qualifications that can be used to demonstrate the content and level of any prior learning is a huge obstacle to accessing HE opportunities. Unable to show an internationally recognised exam result (such as GED¹³) or certificate, camp students are not eligible to apply for Thai universities.

In a PRS, it is essential to prepare students for a wide range of possible futures and arrange for curricula to face multiple ways. The realities of this remain problematic, as accreditation by the RTG would not ensure a similar move by the Burmese government and thus restrictions would remain regarding eventual repatriation – a dream some of the refugee community still cling to. The situation is reminiscent of that of Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Kirk, 2009).

The Thai MoE made clear that accreditation would require aligning the camp curriculum with the official Thai curriculum. This has become a highly politicised process given the resistance by some sectors of the refugee community who fear losing their cultural identity despite the Thai curriculum's provision for local content. The

¹³ The General Educational Development is an internationally accepted test certifying American high school-level academic skills.

issue of ownership here comes into question in regard to a curriculum that has been developed by and for the (Karen) refugee community.

Oh and Stouwe (2009) envision the certification process as part of developmental efforts to shape the broader agenda on refugee policy and the ‘opening up of the camps’ and forming links with the outside world and creating opportunities for income generation outside the camps. These debates are crucial in moving towards the provision of HE, although it will take a substantial amount of time before reforms are institutionalised and political sensitivities overcome. While access to certification of a Thai-recognised curriculum is a significant step forward, the question remains as to whether this will be accompanied by more acquiescent policies and expanded legal rights for Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Thailand’s Encampment Policy

However welcome these developments are, the RTG’s interests are not altruistic, as primary concerns are seen to be national security and establishing control over refugee schools on Thai territory. The commitment to EFA was made much earlier in 1990, while efforts for refugee education emerged only recently, more than 20 years after the refugee situation originated. The past years have once again shown how unstable the political situation in Thailand is, while cooperation between NGOs committed to refugee education and the RTG largely depends on personal commitment of MoE staff as well as current RTG policy. The body of NGO publications has recently adopted a rather soft and reconciliatory tone towards the RTG in what are believed to be efforts to sustain the present enabling climate. Against this backdrop, it might be easy to forget the reality along the border, where refugees are still horded

behind barbed wire in invisible and remote areas where the odd tourist passing through deems the camps to be very large, poor villages (Phan, 2009).

The RTG's assistance policies have encouraged the confinement of refugees in camps, rendering them dependent on relief. Contrary to popular understandings of refugee situations, the potential for refugees to present a 'burden' is often due to host government restrictions on livelihood opportunities (Meyer, 2006). Where governments have been able to provide sufficient land to sustain a population and where they have not imposed restrictions on movement or their employment within the wider economy, refugees have proven to be an economic asset (Harrell-Bond, 1998).

While Thai authorities have loosened restrictions on education and vocational training in the camps, persisting restrictions on freedom of movement, work, and commerce limit the potential benefits of HE programmes. Participants might gain valuable skills and knowledge, but the opportunities for refugees to earn a livelihood with these skills are sorely lacking as the camp economy is too small to absorb the increased student output. Graduates find themselves competing for a limited number of NGO, educational and health-related jobs resulting in a degree of frustration and disillusionment. Psychosocial stress due to anxiety and uncertainty of life in a refugee camp is thus exacerbated by few opportunities to put into practice what one has learned and find recognition and self-fulfilment in a paid job. The Karen Refugee Committee estimates that 1,000 Karen graduates are left idle every year (Martin, 2005:19).

Beyond Relief *Or* Development: Widening Spaces for Refugee Agency

This discussion has shown that for HE programmes to be developed successfully, efforts have to be made not only in terms of accreditation but also to further relax the RTG's encampment policy to develop income-generating opportunities with the aim of producing a comprehensive strategy for facilitating refugee self-reliance while maximising the benefits to Thai society. With few open career pathways, the question of the economic value of education arises and education runs the risk of becoming an end in itself as instead of using their skills in paid jobs after graduation, refugees opt to attend courses in different fields. This does not imply that refugees should not be entitled to HE nor that HE does not have an intrinsic value apart from its economic value; rather, education in this situation has to be seen in a different light: as a human right which refugees should not be denied. This right, however, has to be linked to their right to work and be self-reliant.

This would lead on to a debate about the usefulness of the refugee camp as an institution within the politics of international protection which would go beyond the scope of this paper (Black, 1998; Bowles, 1998; Harrell-Bond, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2002; Van Damme, 1995). The complete dissolution of refugee camps might be an obvious but unrealistic solution in immediate terms (Crisp, 1999). What is needed in terms of creating the preconditions for HE are stronger links with the local host community and the dissolution of parallel service systems to create educational opportunities for refugees and host communities alike.

More than moving towards developmental efforts, the long-term nature of the refugee situation demands approaches that break out of the relief-development dichotomy and reinforce a holistic developmental approach by “looking at the immediate in terms of the longer term” (Pigozzi, 1999:19) which may require contingency planning. In a move from basic relief to developmental efforts that will allow refugees to become more self-reliant and make a positive impact on their own as well as their host community, the challenge remains to keep a focus on immediate needs. It was argued that while efforts to set the precondition to providing refugee HE (accreditation and curriculum alignment) have already come a long way, the RTG’s still rigid encampment policy undermines potential benefits of HE programmes.

3.3.2. Creating Spaces for Higher Education transcending Nation-States

In identifying existing HE opportunities and depicting future possibilities, this section will challenge the notion that HE is bound to the existence of a nation-state and show how spaces for HE can be created transcending and linking existing nation-states through modern technology.

The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand in its 2007 *Comprehensive Plan Addressing the Needs of Displaced Persons on the Border* pointed to the need for HE opportunities and decided to hire a consultant “to review the lack of access to higher education, the impediments and suggested approaches and actions” (CCSDPT/UNHCR, 2007). In his 2008 research, Purnell then presents three options for refugee HE to be further developed alongside each other.

A first but costly option is that of access to English language programmes at Thai universities. There are several scholarship opportunities that provide full or partial funding, but usually camp students will not meet certain criteria due to their lack of citizenship, travel documents or they simply cannot access relevant information. While refugees themselves view this option to be the most suitable, agencies have expressed fears that university life in a big city would culturally alienate camp students and they would no longer be willing or able to return to their local communities (Purnell, 2008).

A second and more long-term solution is access to Thai-language programmes at universities in Thailand. At present, this option is restrained by students’ lack of Thai language proficiency, but would become more viable once student cohorts progress through the above outlined aligned camp curriculum.

Finally, in Purnell's study, 25 percent of responses argued for distance or online courses but also indicated that the "option of a camp-based community university offering courses at tertiary level but in Karen language were more appropriate" (2008:25). These two options shall be discussed below.

Distance Education as a Solution?

While distance education is currently the most accessible option for camp students, this still is a complex matter, as more players are involved and RTG approval for internet access is required which is a politically sensitive issue. Since 2003, several cohorts of young refugees have had the chance to study for Australian university degrees via distance education from a base just outside the camp, where internet access is possible. Concerns have been raised, however, about the relevance of course content for camp students if the material is taken out of the Australian context without prior modification and adjustments to the socio-cultural context of refugee camps. Moreover, a lack of integration of practical skills into the course further aggravates the learning experience for students who are largely unfamiliar with Western cultural concepts and learning techniques (Purnell, 2006). Further challenges include providing students with relevant and high quality face-to-face tutorial support. In his evaluation study, Purnell (2006) found a high degree of student motivation, a necessary component of a successful distance education course.

Distance learning can take on a powerful role, as these 'remote' degrees present a way towards ensuring equal opportunities for camp students in accessing HE and could therefore be a feasible, low-cost education option for refugees (Bayham, 2008; Saint, 2003). However, distance education cannot be a "quick and inexpensive fix"

for widening gaps between supply and demand in HE (Dhanarajan, 2008). Courses would need to be tailored to the specific context so students can actually gain from their learning experience. The quality component in refugee situations is as important as in other contexts and maybe, as has been argued elsewhere, even more so (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007).

The Refugee Camp as Campus?

As opposed to distance courses, the camp community's desire for the establishment of a university inside the camp has not resounded with much enthusiasm on the donors' side. The main arguments are lack of resources and isolation from practical learning experiences in the closed environment of the refugee camp. Despite discouragement, the KED's Institute of Higher Education operating since June 2008 aspires to be a university-like system eventually offering four-year Bachelor's degrees in various subjects at six campuses in five of the Karen camps (KED, 2009). Currently one Post-Post-Ten school offers two streams of a two year syllabus leading to a Bachelor of Arts and Science in one of the camps; the first cohorts graduated in 2008. Again these efforts are welcome, and yet, students' achievements and their KED endorsed certificates are not recognised outside the camp. In fact, email communication with KED in August 2009 brought to light that accreditation for these programmes has not yet been considered as the KED's aim is first and foremost to enrol the "maximum number of students and prepare them to serve the community in specific specialised fields".

While these courses might be of high quality, the impression that the KED's ambitions to open their own 'camp campuses' to make HE accessible to a 'maximum number of students' are privily being ridiculed by some of the larger NGOs along the border persisted throughout this research. This leads back to the question of how to define HE and clarifies how confining UNESCO's definition is in the absence of 'competent state authorities'.

The predicament for education in this protracted refugee context is that it exists in limbo, neither being part of the country of origin's nor the host country's national education system. Considering the ways HE is imagined to be connected to the nation-state and that in many countries, building universities is "a symbol of self-reliance" (Varghese, 2007), the KED's ambitions could be interpreted as a threat to the current nation-state system. As a university with an intellectually able student body emerges, calls for an independent Karen nation-state could become ever louder. This would not be in the interest of the RTG, nor the international community, and least the Burmese government. Considering the emphasis on Karen language teaching in the camps and how language of instruction, often "has political implications" for how "refugees imagine their future" (Waters and Leblanc, 2005:139), this could be an indication for the Karen National Union (KNU) educating the young generation to 'imagine' themselves as part of a yet imaginary Karen nation-state.

In light of recent military losses to the Burmese government and a changing ethnic make-up of the camp population steadily decreasing Karen majority, it might be in the KNU's interest to establish a university as a locus of knowledge-generation and dissemination to ascribe renewed 'validity' to the ethnic/national category 'Karen'. In their own words, the KED, perceiving itself as a Ministry of Education of a Karen

government-in-exile (Sawade, 2009), aims for HE to “build up a true and lasting peace and justice by producing graduates who are critical and creative thinkers, leaders, good citizens and proud of their ethnicity” (KED, 2007 in: Sawade, 2008a). Like any nation-state, the KNU has a vested political and social interest in HE, but this might sound worrisome to the existing family of nation-states.

On the other hand, the ‘camp as campus’ idea could facilitate the process of opening-up the camps and foster exchange with the outside world. Leaving technical and resource constraints aside, such a project would transcend and link existing nation-states, and serve as a model for a new archetype of higher learning institutions that would stand for more equality in opportunities to access HE, academic exchange and could even attract human capital from outside the camps. Indigenous universities and institutes of higher learning are of the greatest importance if the developing world is to build up its own counter-expertise capable of evaluating and criticising aid packages being offered and capable of creating their own technology using local sources based on local traditions, capable of questioning historiography and building on indigenous knowledge (Brock-Utne, 1996).

Breaking Down Ethnic Divisions beyond Nation-States

However, the ‘camp campus’ cannot be a mono-ethnic endeavour as this would aggravate tensions and exacerbate intergroup hostility. The challenge then lies within the KNU/KED who have shown to be more inclined to reinforce traditional power structures, dominated by Christian Skaw-Karen-speaking elites, and to promote a certain version of Karen culture rather than to embrace and endorse the concept of diversity (Oh and Stouwe, 2008a). While Kirk (2009) sees this pull to traditions as an

antidote to globalisation, there are also more politico-structural reasons. A traditionally excluded group, the Karen, have become the majority in the camp, and, in imitation of the Burmese system, they tend to dominate and exclude other groups (Oh et al., 2007). This practice leads some parents of other ethnicities to prefer to keep their children at home rather than sending them to Karen medium schools in which they do not see any purpose for their children's future (cf. Zeus, 2008). In light of the camp's increasingly multi-ethnic environment, it would be problematic if this was a 'purely' Karen institution. Instead, efforts would have to be inclusive of all ethnic groups represented in the camp community offering the young generation unbiased good quality learning and an alternative outlook from dominant – and politicised – camp rhetoric on issues affecting their immediate environment as well as the wider world.

More than a multi-ethnic refugee institution, this could be a multi-national one as undeniably, experiences of persecution, flight and displacement might create politicised memories of exile amongst refugee teachers who are often also political leaders. These will be conveyed to the next generation, who still in their formative years and unable to leave the camps to broaden their intellectual horizon, will have no option but to incorporate these subjectivities into their base of knowledge. This will affect construction of identity and the self, and lead to building artificial boundaries with the country of origin and the host population (Fresia, 2006). This designation of enemies makes it more difficult for children to integrate into either the host country or their parents' country.

If developed with combined and inclusive efforts, interlinked with the existing local structure of HE in the host country, the camp as campus idea could be an interesting – yet still distant – future possibility and could open up new spaces for HE to exist not within but in-between nation-states offering HE to young students regardless of ethnicity, nationality or citizenship. Distance learning is an example of how modern technology gradually helps render many goods and services such as HE less exclusive and thus presents a further option for offering higher education in protracted refugee situations. The KNU's ethnic policy and strong political ideology are here seen as the major obstacle, making the concept of a camp university appear threatening to the existing nation-state system.

3.3.3. Empowering Refugees to Become Agents of Development

In popular eyes, people forced to seek refuge in countries other than those in which they would normally expect to reside are victims of circumstances, powerless to look after themselves and grateful for whatever help is given. The provision of assistance often through channels other than those used to bring similar services to other residents in the host country (for example, specially created refugee offices, emergency and relief agencies) serves to create an impression that refugee needs are somehow special, different from those of other groups. (Preston, 1995:34)

This parallel service system not only conveys the impression that ‘refugee needs are somehow special’, but also contributes to refugees’ dependency on outside aid. Whether these ‘powerless victims’ are indeed ‘grateful for *whatever* help is given’ is a more complex question, as they rather have no choice but to accept *whatever* help comes into the camps from the outside since presently, IRR’s power structures are sorely lacking in participatory approaches for refugees to become actively involved and shape policy and planning processes concerning their own situation as section 2.2.3. has shown. Refugees are still looked after rather than engaged with. The following sections will illustrate the practicalities of the IRR’s manifestations of power by means of two examples that will both demonstrate common perceptions of refugees but also of the purpose of HE. It will be argued that HE can serve as both a means and an end to reversing powerful discursive narratives of refugees as passive victims.

Diverging Interests

Pointing towards a “lack of understanding about students’ inherent aptitude” inside the camps (Purnell, 2008:78) and “lower levels of maturity” of camp students due to “lack of exposure to the outside world” (ibid.:49), educational agencies provide what is, in their understanding, best and most suitable for refugees. This has prompted

some scholarship providers to offer increased guidance on subject choice. Naturally, there are diverging interests in this regard as Purnell found that agency and RTG staff members viewed courses in fields such as education, health and medicine or engineering as appropriate (this is also reflected by UNHCR's field-guidelines (2003)), while the most popular choice amongst the refugee community was politics and political science. Purnell comments how this "response indicates that there may not be sufficient information available to refugees as to the nature and content of certain courses of study" (2008:26). While this certainly is an issue, the agency view in purporting to know what is 'best' for young camp refugees to study, still appears rather paternalistic. As personal experience has shown, students have a great desire to study politics in order to 'help their country'. Politics play an important role along the border and in the camps, and it is therefore not surprising that young people are attracted by a degree of that name.

Courses that – in the agencies' view – serve community needs more immediately have been discussed to be made more easily accessible and heavily subsidised than others. This sounds like a reverse tuition fee scheme: a subsidisation of – the usually – higher paying and more sought-after jobs. The agencies' endeavours are reminiscent of past manpower planning, the failure of which is well-known. History has shown that linking tertiary education with manpower requirements in various parts of the economy does not always yield the anticipated results (Samoff and Carrol, 2003).

While it could be argued that these developments verge on neo-colonialism, the serviceability and efficiency of humanitarian aid certainly comes into question. Are HE opportunities offered to refugees meant to be for the good of the individual who will

undertake the course of study, or are they meant to satisfy donor interests?¹⁴ When aid organisations design their field strategies based on the programmes that donors currently consider attractive, they can do more harm than good (Duffield, 1993).

This question also leads back to the debate on social versus individual benefits. HE in this context undeniably has greater immediate, tangible private benefits. However, persuading students into subjects deemed best for them constrains their potential to innovate and thus hinders the development process of their communities as well. HE therefore needs to be offered through a demand-driven strategy since only individual self-fulfilment can in the long run yield any anticipated social returns and lead to sustainable development of whole communities. Denying individual self-realisation by restricting students' freedom to make their *own* informed choices will not enable them to turn their capabilities into valued functionings.

Countering Brain-Drain and Reducing Developmental Efforts

A second example results from large-scale resettlement that has introduced a further element of uncertainty and destabilisation in the camps, as disproportionately the better educated and more skilled, including teachers, leave for third countries. The impact of resettlement on camp education is currently the most debated issue along the border and is perceived as a risk with adverse effects on the pool of human resources and quality of education (Banki and Lang, 2007; 2008a). Against this backdrop, HE provision is seen as hardly possible, and many agencies are significantly reducing their camp commitments (Julian, 2009). As efforts for capacity building

¹⁴ See Cho (10/07/07) for a discussion of another such instance of diverging interests.

seem to be backfiring, there is thus a very real risk of agencies breaking with developmental approaches in light of resettlement.

Implications for HE are enormous especially since HE is seen to put students in a better position to access information on resettlement opportunities. Agencies are keen on undertaking research on how graduates use their qualifications, “especially for the common good” and every effort is made to seek out those students “committed to serve the refugee community”¹⁵. Sponsoring students who will eventually choose to resettle is seen as ‘wastage’. This yet again highlights how HE is seen primarily in terms of its externalities rather than as an individual right.

UNHCR seems to view brain drain as a valid argument against the provision of HE which further increases the ‘inefficiency’ and ‘social inequity’ of financing HE (Bor and Shute, 1991). While HE is seen as a “prerequisite for smooth integration and good employment chances in the resettlement country”, it is stressed that “provision of scholarships to refugees likely to be resettled is the least preferable option” (UNHCR, 2007a). This seems also UNHCR’s justification for significantly reducing the number of scholarships for Burmese refugees in Thailand, despite additional funding for DAFI (UNHCR, 2008c). And yet, their view appears inconsistent as the High Commissioner himself considers it “intolerable that the human potential of so many people is being wasted during their time in exile” (Guterres, 2008), while in Thailand UNHCR tries “to avoid ‘investing’ in students who would most likely go for resettlement to a country, which offers them a full range of education opportunities”¹⁶.

¹⁵ Email exchange with educational agency, June 2009.

¹⁶ Email exchange with UNHCR, June 2009.

Is it justifiable to deny HE to young persons because their future is uncertain and they might resettle to a third country eventually? The resettlement process is long and arduous and often takes several years. Young people linger in camps, never knowing for how much longer, until they can finally board a plane that takes them to a strange culture and an unfamiliar environment. Once arrived, they usually find themselves first having to cope with these drastic changes while having to earn money to sustain their families. With superior language skills the younger generation is most likely to get access to the labour market. This will again postpone young refugees' education. Had they been able to develop to their fullest potential and receive an internationally accepted certificate in the country of first-asylum, they would be more equipped for this new and challenging life and would be able to find jobs to better support their families.

Agencies' claim of resettlement countries offering them a 'full range of education opportunities' seems unsubstantiated. Unless refugees possess acceptable academic track records or GED results, and are lucky enough to slide into special admission schemes or a scholarship programme to enrich a university's ethnic diversity¹⁷, they will find it almost impossible to make their way to university amidst debts and work commitments. In any case, it will be easier for refugees to adapt to Western university systems if they have already had the chance to gain some university experience elsewhere, rather than none. Jumping from the dullness of camp life to busy student life in a strange environment can be considered too great a leap for anyone to cope with.

¹⁷ Such a case was depicted by a former camp student now studying in Australia in personal email conversation, June 2009.

Against the backdrop of a renewed influx of refugees countervailing the world's largest resettlement programme, agencies' reduced efforts seem further unsubstantiated (JRS, 17/07/09; Stauffer, 07/07/09). Besides, rate of return analysis has little value in a refugee camp context where economic activity is restricted, as it does not capture non-economic benefits. 'Investing' in young people due to resettle, cannot be termed 'wastage'. Disuse of human capital lingering in camps rather is a waste of potential resources. Opportunities have to be developed to cater for these groups of young people as well. In light of resettlement, the option of distance education could for instance gain more relevance in that it would enable students theoretically, without denying practical challenges, to complete courses elsewhere.

In an interlinked globalised world, places might become less important as there are virtual spaces connecting them. As diaspora groups are growing and dispersing, even if graduates choose not to return to their local communities/the refugee camp, human capital will not be wasted as they will use their skills to the good of some other community and might help their home-community through remittances, advocacy or policy work, the impact of which is not to be underestimated. Remittances constitute an overwhelming source of financial aid and have long surpassed Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Ratha et al., 2009; Sander, 2003). Little research has been done on the applicability of these new funding opportunities to educational financing (Bayham, 2008; Newland and Patrick, 2004). Considering the strong family, ethnic and community bonds within the camp structure, it is highly unlikely that graduates will fully break ties with their home community.

Putting aside the technical challenges that remain, the question to be answered is still how refugees can break out of dominant discourses and the relief cycle to empower themselves.

Toward an Alternative Discourse of Empowered Refugees

The paradox here is that while refugees are perceived as a ‘problem’ or a ‘burden’ for the international community and host states, the power structures of the IRR do not allow them to become self-reliant, contribute to and have a positive impact upon their own and their host communities’ development. Encampment creates dependency by disempowering refugees and marginalising them from their hosts, and yet camps hold considerable human potential that deserves to be unlocked.

HEPRS could contribute to empowerment and fostering refugees’ self-reliance in several ways and thus transform them from being a ‘burden’ to a ‘benefit’. Nonetheless, HEPRS cannot be a panacea and would need to be accompanied by serious transformation of power dynamics. While dilution of the IRR’s power structures and encampment policy is a long-term goal, in more immediate terms, it is necessary to turn the dominant refugee narrative upside-down. Recognising refugees’ potential and acknowledging them as agents who can contribute in an active and positive way to their human and natural environment would facilitate disintegrating the power structures from within as they are sustained in great part by the narrative of refugees as victims. With a narrative of refugees as agents, the IRR would hardly find enough justification to exist. HEPRS can thus be seen as both the objective and tool for achieving developmental goals.

Leaning on Freire’s (1970) thoughts, it can be argued against the institutional view in that power relations matter and are in fact the main obstacles to empowerment. Although the discursive power of the narrative is strong, it is not definite. The refugee communities’ achievements regarding their camp education system must have made clear that they are not completely powerless under the IRR’s umbrella. Drawing on

Freire's general theories, it becomes clear that this context needs a conception of empowerment as a process that entails radical shifts in power relations in applying bottom-up techniques that involve the 'oppressed' rather than top-down processes enacted from the outside. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome; the "outcome of empowerment cannot be achieved through a disempowering process" (Meyer, 2006:32).

HEPRS can enhance refugees' self-image by enabling them to spend their time in camps more usefully and celebrate 'little achievements' in their learning process. Studying can help students see through their time in camps and work towards goals (exams). This will facilitate coping with their fate and increase their understanding of their current situation as nation-less people. Ultimately, HE can contribute to making refugees more critical thinkers by offering them a whole range of new experience and knowledge otherwise beyond their reach and providing them with an area of initiative and achievement otherwise denied to them. Only if refugees are able to participate in planning and policy making regarding their own situation, will they be empowered and no longer be a "modern version of white men's (and women's) burdens" (Sai Soe Win Latt, 17/06/09).

This section challenged agencies' paternalistic attitudes and the assumption that HE provision cannot be maintained in view of large-scale resettlement programmes. This entailed a critical discussion of the paradoxical fear of losing human capital to local communities in an interlinked and globalised world while young people in the camps are left idle and unable to develop to their fullest potential. In this context the question as to whether HE is to be seen as an individual right or rather serves the common

good has been debated. The IRR's continued relief aid and power dynamics in refugee camp settings are here seen as the major obstacle to providing HE opportunities to camp refugees due to the creation and internalisation of the myth of refugees as a 'problem', as passive victims, rather than agents.

4

Challenges and the Road Ahead

The Paradoxes Resolved?

In pursuing the goal of exploring some of the paradoxes underlying higher education in protracted refugee situations, this dissertation set out to build a theoretical frame of reference both informed by the case study but also developed as a lens through which to analyse the practicalities and obstacles relating to the case study. In regard to the latter, three major constraints were found that exist on the level of actors not only due to Thailand's still rigid refugee policy, but also within the authoritarian structure of the refugee community itself, and finally, due to continued external aid that curtails refugees' self-worth and self-reliance which in turn has negative impacts on development. There are, of course, more practical constraints related to funding and lack of resources and further sensitivities exist due to a fear of HE inciting more refugees to cross the border.

The study firstly explored the paradox of basic relief for refugees on the one hand and developmental efforts for higher education on the other. It was found that while the need to move toward developmental approaches in PRS has been widely acknowledged, translating this into practice is still hampered by multiple factors and presents a challenge to HEPRS for two main reasons. First of all, by viewing refugees as only temporarily displaced, many of their rights are being denied. In Thailand, developmental efforts with regard to refugee education have come a long way already, however, as the past has shown, progress in cooperation with the RTG largely depends on the personal commitment and goodwill of MoE staff in charge; Thailand's turbulent political events and fragile system of government here act as an element of volatility. A second and more substantial challenge is that a precondition for HEPRS would be the recognition of HE as an inalienable right for all those aspir-

ing to it. Again, while this forms part of international conventions, such discourse has not yet permeated into practice as was confirmed by both the literature as well as the case study. This is not only hampered by lack of resources, but also by dominant discourse on basic education for all. In response to the relief-development dichotomy, a need to break out of this model was found in that holistic contingency planning approaches have to be adopted in order to cater for immediate needs as well as build capacity within the camps and prepare the population for a wider range of future possibilities.

Secondly, the issue of HE and the nation-state in relation to refugees' perceived liminality in the national world order was addressed. HE has the potential to help create and shape new nation-states and has had immense significance in national liberation and independence struggles. In the course of globalisation, new communities not of place but of interest are weakening nation-states' monopoly of power. Considering powerful imagined links between HE and the nation-state, this was found to present a further challenge to the camp population's aspiration to open their own camp university as this could be interpreted as a threat to the existing family of nation-states. Nonetheless, this was suggested to have the potential for new interesting academic exchange projects and open up spaces of knowledge generation for the young generation to look beyond dominant camp rhetoric, provided this project is developed with combined and inclusive efforts. Spaces for HE were found not to exist necessarily only within the static nation-state system, but, with the help of modern technology, also virtually through online courses. Distance education cannot be a quick fix to increasing demand; however, in light of resettlement, this option could gain more relevance in that it would enable students theoretically, without denying practical challenges, to complete courses elsewhere.

Finally, both the literature as well as the case study tend to view refugees as victims of war and conflict and as passive dependants on external aid. It was argued that HE could be both a means and an end to empower refugees, help increase their self-worthiness and have a positive impact on the development of their refugee communities as well as host communities while ultimately contributing to relaxing tight power structures within the IRR. It was first of all deemed necessary for the IRR to recognise refugees' agency for which Sen's liberal egalitarian Capability Approach was found useful in that it helps to partly solve the paradoxes by allowing us to recognise refugees' inherent potential, their capabilities, and encourage us to create circumstances for each individual to increase their effective opportunities and freedom to be able to turn their capability sets into valued functionings. From a refugee perspective, drawing on Freire's broadly Marxist conceptions has been helpful to recognise structure as limiting and call for bottom-up action from within by involving the 'oppressed' rather than action imposed from the outside in order to achieve empowerment.

The case study has shown how educational planning is still done for refugees rather than with, and how agencies by intending to act in refugees' best interest develop paternalistic behaviours. What is by now the world's largest resettlement programme, in fact, has proven to be a key challenge for HEPRS, as donors fear that due to this brain-drain their 'investments' will not yield any returns to the local communities. The case study confirmed that while not perceived as a luxury, HE has not become fully recognised as an individual right thus echoing official parlance found in UNESCO's publications for instance. In a tendency to highlight externalities and social returns to HE in the course of increased global HE access, emphasising this right is largely neglected. It was firstly argued that while HE undeniably has greater

immediate, tangible private benefits, only individual self-realisation and self-fulfilment can in the long run lead to sustainable development of whole communities and thus yield the anticipated economic as well as non-economic social returns. With the camp economy restricted, it was found that the human capital interpretation of HE does not have much validity in this context. Secondly, the fear of losing human capital to local refugee communities in an interlinked and globalised world was found paradoxical as strong community links would for instance lead to financial gains from remittances or increased global awareness resulting from the diaspora's lobbying efforts. An argument was put forward that encampment leaves many young promising people idle and unable to develop to their fullest potential when they would factually have the time (but simply not the means) to undertake further studies which can better prepare them for multiple future pathways. What is needed is recognition of the immense human potential lingering in refugee camps and facilitation of conversion processes from capabilities into valued functionings.

Williford in writing about HE in prisons commented on the contradictory social meaning of these two institutions that are "diametrically opposed in purpose" and yet work together towards a common end (1994:164). HEPRS can likewise serve a common purpose, that of refugee empowerment. This dissertation discussed the coercive power of encampment and continued relief aid and how these negatively impact education and development. It was found that the dynamics of international protection largely depend on a narrative of the refugee as a passive victim. HE, on the other hand, could be a tool to reverse this narrative and help shape a new narrative of refugees as agents of their own and their communities' development and as such act as a subversion of power structures from within, rather than adopting approaches that envisage imposing aid on refugees in order to empower them.

In the long run, however, for such narrative to become reality, providing HE will have to be accompanied by wider reaching policy changes, otherwise the potential benefits of any such programmes will be undermined if graduates are hindered from putting their newly acquired knowledge to use.

In other words, providing HE in protracted refugee situations might seem incongruous, or paradoxical, at first thought, however, it could exactly be a way towards refugee empowerment and a way towards turning the narrative upside down. It could be a way toward allowing ourselves to *see* refugees as agents and toward allowing refugees to *be* agents of development in having positive impacts on shaping their own as well as their host communities' environment. HEPRS can contribute to restoring refugees' self-respect and put a stop to them being "objects of international charity" (Dodds and Inquai, 1983:12).

Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

The implications for policy and practice are manifold, and only a tiny fraction can be addressed here. Most importantly, in an unstable environment like a refugee camp, educational provision must remain flexible to serve a wide spectrum of needs and allow learners to develop skills that are useful for life and that can be adapted as life circumstances change as they usually do rapidly in those situations. The challenge is to develop contingency plans to prepare students for various conceivable future scenarios while allocating scarce resources efficiently to serve the full educational cycle. It is acknowledged that HE, while attending to a select number of high achievers only, is more capital-intensive than primary education. However, this is not particular to the camp context and the paradoxes surrounding HEPRS can be resolved with

combined efforts. To achieve this, different options for refugees to access HE have to be enabled and developed side by side.

Due to dearth of prior research on the issue of HEPRS, this paper is not comprehensive and hopes to present a base from which to draw implications for other protracted refugee situations and have opened up areas for future research. These areas could include economic and non-economic benefits of HEPRS to camp settings, or analysing the issue from a university-perspective in enquiring conceivable motivations for admitting refugee students, that is, 'international students' who cannot bring with them the welcome higher international student fees, apart from enriching their socio-cultural and ethnic diversity. The issue could likewise be analysed through a host government lens to ascertain challenges and benefits for host societies. Also, the role of diasporas and remittances in educational planning and financing merits further investigation.

The case of Burmese refugees in Thailand in particular deserves more detailed focus in extensive field research not only on the issue of higher education. Studies are presently being prepared on the ways graduates are able to apply and develop their skills and newly-found knowledge in their camp communities. These will hopefully reveal further implications on how HEPRS can best be implemented while giving more weight to the individual's right to HE. Additionally, the idea of a camp university that was briefly introduced does warrant more attention. Agencies' assumption of wide ranges of educational opportunities opening up to resettled refugees could be a topic of research amongst diaspora communities.

Toward the Right to Lifelong Learning

In highlighting the need for higher education in protracted refugee situations, this paper does not want to miss out on emphasising that it is primarily root causes of conflict and forced displacement that need to be addressed by the international community. And yet, when these attempts fail and people are coerced to leave their homes and find themselves in a foreign land with restricted freedoms, we cannot deny these civilians, who are mostly the least responsible for the economic, political and structural reasons causing their flight, their right to develop to their fullest potential. The right to education, to all levels of education, is undeniable and must not be constrained by circumstances beyond the individual's control.

Moreover, in highlighting *higher* education, it is not intended to divert from much needed efforts to improve the basic education systems in protracted refugee situations. Rather, this paper proposes to develop the whole education sector and see its components as mutually reinforcing. HE cannot stand aloof from primary and secondary levels, as these are interlinked; skewed investment would ultimately weaken the system as a whole as well as the chances for refugees to ultimately access HE opportunities.

The ideal goal is for a balanced and inclusive education system that offers multiple options for quality lifelong learning in meeting the needs of all learners in an equitable manner, education that enables refugees to become self-reliant. As Epictetus said, 'the educated only are free'.



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