

Small island nation state challenges in the context of a whole of society approach to large movements of refugees and protracted conflicts

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Small island nation states, particularly English speaking Caribbean states, face many challenges when it comes to dealing with the issue of large movements of refugees and protracted conflicts in the region. Large in this context means relative to population size of any given small island nation state. It is also important to acknowledge the youthfulness of these states and their recent engagement in refugee protection in the form of policy drafting, the proposed enactment of legislation and creation of asylum systems. In understanding the history of many small island states, one can then understand that most have been part of an empire and that since decolonisation, modern history for these islands does not include war or conflict induced displacement, though this may have been the reality for their former colonial power. Thus, for these small island states, to be on the receiving end of refugee inflows, presents a new and challenging dynamic.

As this concept of asylum and protection remains quite novice to both the government and general public, all efforts at protection and assistance must simultaneously engage all actors for them to be effective, in essence, a whole of society approach is in fact indispensable. Further, there is the great challenge of protecting refugees with limited resources, not just economic resources but also the availability of physical space. Unlike other states that can host large numbers of refugees, small island nation states do not have the capacity to host these numbers. There is therefore a great need to be innovative in approaches to solving this problem. While cultivating self-reliance capacity for refugees is possible, lack of legal mechanisms within most small island nation states pose significant challenges. As a consequence, partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders in which responsibility sharing with the view to facilitate local integration becomes crucial.

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is an important mechanism to assist in solving the challenges faced by small island nation states, namely by easing the pressure on countries that welcome and host refugees, building the self-reliance of refugees and expanding access to resettlement in third countries and other complementary pathways. Other effective

solutions that can be analysed are cultural diplomacy and public engagement, support from governments with strong tradition of protection, integration of refugees with their host populations, increased academia programme offerings and partnership and collaboration with faith based communities.

Bearing in mind the lack of knowledge and experience with this issue and the need to combat xenophobia and discrimination, public engagement through the use of cultural diplomacy is one of the best means to influence public opinion and by extension, or in the medium term, policy making. Engaging art in public spaces, being indivisible from political, economic and social systems, and support for this by refugee stakeholders in the government and civil society in collaboration with artists, refugees and cultural icons, is important in 'meeting people where they are at.' This type of art, which ought to comprise of intimate stories by refugees featuring their own voices, is practised in many countries with notable success in shifting public attitudes.

The support from governments with a strong liberal democracy tradition can be quite helpful as nations transition towards the adoption of refugee protection systems and standards. These governments, through their international institutions such as Alliance Francaise and the British Council, can provide countries with support through camaraderie and strategic use of cultural diplomacy. Additionally, they can help financially through livelihood and other projects that boost self - reliance opportunities. Twinning approaches between countries can also be used as a means of providing a hands on learning experience for small island states. Development in collaboration with western governments could result in a means of responsibility sharing in circumstances where hosting becomes problematic or challenging.

Through the support of successful partnerships, gradual and sustainable integration models should be emphasized as smaller nation states can have very closely knit communities. Finding models that allow for contact and building trust with the host community ensures that tension is mitigated and solidarity built. Faith based communities may be indispensable in this regard. Academic institutions can also expand their offerings to include courses related to forced migration.

It is important to understand that the mass influx of refugees into small island nation states poses many challenges and finding long term solutions to protracted conflicts are not easy. However, through proper planning and further research, combined with support from the right organisations and states, these challenges can be mitigated so that refugees can enjoy a dignified life in these small states.

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