SPRING BOOKS

MIGRATION

Refugee economics

Heaven Crawley questions a call for enterprise zones as a solution to forced migration.

In April 2015, more than 700 refugees died crossing the Mediterranean Sea. That disaster, argue migration specialist Alexander Betts and economist Paul Collier in *Refuge*, opened the world's eyes to the scale of the crisis. More than 65 million people are displaced globally; some 1.4 million have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe since the start of 2015.

The book's premise is one few would deny: that the refugee system, set up after the Second World War, fails to protect or provide for those forced to migrate. Millions of refugees are left in limbo, festering in grossly underfunded camps in developing countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and South Sudan. With no protection or socio-economic rights, particularly to work, many travel to other countries. A small proportion make the dangerous journey to Europe, Australia or the United States.

Betts and Collier's book is one of very few

to provide an overarching account of how the refugee system took its current form, and the mismatch between refugees' needs and the system's capabilities. It is also one of the few to consider how the global approach might be reformulated. The authors call for policies to move from humanitarian assistance to development. They advocate harnessing "the remarkable opportunities of globalization" to create a win-win for developing countries that support refugees with limited resources and for rich countries struggling politically to manage migration.

Refuge:
**Transforming a
Broken Refugee
System**

ALEXANDER BETTS
AND PAUL COLLIER
Allen Lane: 2017.

Refuge is self-assured, but neither its diagnosis nor its vision take us closer to a solution. Early on, Betts and Collier argue that post-war institutions such as the United Nations' refugee agency (UNHCR) are not keeping pace with shifts in the triggers of forced migration, from individual persecution to war and social disruption. They offer a sweeping historical and geographical account of the causes of refugee movements, cherry-picking examples. But they engage only partially with the complex political and economic realities.

They attribute the growth in refugee numbers to violence and instability spurred by the end of the cold war, technological changes, resource extraction and the rise of Islamic extremism. They discuss the spread of 'free' elections that can legitimize oppressive regimes. But they largely omit or misrepresent the role of international politics, foreign policy, the arms trade or outside

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military intervention. They describe Libyans as “having liberated themselves” from the regime of Mu’ammar Gaddafi, yet make no reference to the 2011 military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or its consequences. Decades-long conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan are covered in a few pages. There is no mention of the targeting of individuals, groups and communities because of their beliefs or identity in countries such as Syria and Myanmar.

Betts and Collier then present “four big new ideas” relating to the duty of rescue, safe havens, autonomy in exile and incubation of post-conflict recovery. They call for a paradigm shift, away from a focus on vulnerabilities and towards building refugee capabilities. This is important at a time when the toxic rhetoric in the United States and parts of Europe routinely presents refugees as a social and economic drain or a security threat. But the call is not new. The actual and potential contribution of refugees has been extolled for years, from posters reminding people that Albert Einstein was a refugee to campaigns calling on governments to allow refugees to work. The International Monetary Fund expects refugees who arrived from 2015 onwards to boost annual output in their host countries, with gross domestic product

(GDP) rising by 0.5% in Austria alone by the end of 2017. Meanwhile, problems associated with refugee camps such as Dadaab in Kenya are well understood by academics and a plethora of international organizations.

What is new is the contention that global capitalism can come to the rescue of the refugee system through the creation of special economic zones (SEZs). Developed through increased financial investment by rich countries, SEZs offer tax breaks and reduced regulation as well as, ostensibly, opportunities for work and autonomy. The first was established in Ireland in 1959; there are now more than 4,300 globally. The authors argue that if refugees are offered an opportunity to work closer to home, they will be less likely to embark on risky journeys run by smuggling networks. The European Union has already established SEZ partnerships with Jordan and Lebanon, which between them officially host nearly 1.7 million Syrian refugees, although the real numbers are thought to be much larger.

Yet the tactic’s potential is questionable. In India, some dub SEZs ‘special exploitation zones’. Critics suggest that they can compromise labour rights and lead to low wages, forced overtime physical abuse, land grabbing and environmental degradation. Refugees need the universal basics: meaningful

regulated work, rights to education, housing and health care, and a sense of a future. The authors give no account of how rights would be protected. Nor do they explain why refugees, and not other migrants, should have such opportunities, or whether it will be possible to make a distinction. In the context of ‘mixed flows’ of people moving for protection and work, this is a pressing challenge.

With little serious discussion of human rights, Betts and Collier’s recommendations effectively remove rich countries’ international obligations, and legitimize narratives that position refugees as ‘undeserving’. They present partnerships between the EU and governments of countries that host many refugees, notably Jordan, as evidence that “the embarrassment of the rich world can be leveraged into a solid system of international financing for the first countries of asylum”. There is another explanation: that governments want an easy way out, and global businesses want new ways to make money.

In my view, the book’s fundamental flaw is the way in which flows of refugees, and the needs and aspirations of people fleeing violence, conflict and persecution, are understood. The analysis is underpinned by ethnocentric assumptions, such as the assertion that “most of the billion-plus people of India would be better off in Europe or North America”. Terms such as “honeypot” countries and “boutique” asylum systems reinforces populist narratives. And in their simplistic conclusion, Betts and Collier argue that setting up SEZs in Jordan earlier in the Syrian refugee crisis would have prevented millions of refugees moving on, borders closing, people-smugglers thriving and even Britain leaving the EU. That is a misrepresentation. It also brings the focus back to Europe, ignoring difficulties in countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Chad, which host some of the world’s largest refugee populations and for which investment in SEZs seems unlikely.

Although the book’s timeliness will make it of significant interest to a general readership, Betts and Collier also call on policymakers to take forward their ideas. They are right that crisis is an opportunity for reform. SEZs may provide work and dignity for some refugees in some settings. But alone, they cannot reform a broken system. What is needed is the political will to address the drivers of refugee flows across policy areas: conflict, development, foreign policy and trade. Academic energies should be directed towards working out how to engage politicians and policymakers in looking for a long-term holistic approach that builds a better refugee system, rather than a quick fix of the type proposed in *Refuge*. ■

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