

# Articles

## REFUGEE CHILDREN AND THEIR FUTURE

*Otto Hieronymi\**

*Although children constitute half of the world's refugee population, the long-term future of refugee children still does not receive sufficient attention in the general debate on the refugee issue, and in particular on so-called durable solutions. The positive impact of the successful integration and assimilation in the past of millions and millions of refugees is largely discarded as irrelevant under "today's changed conditions". Equally ignored are the lessons that should have been learned from having allowed during the last 60 years millions and millions of generations of children to be born and raised as refugees with the only future promised to them being a "return" to the past. The conclusion of the present article is that refugee children represent a tremendous potential for the good and also for future crises and suffering. Thus, one of the principal litmus tests of the quality of refugee policies should be: "What do they do for the long-term future of refugee children?"*

"The Child is father of the Man . . ."  
(*"The Rainbow"*, William Wordsworth)

"The Contracting States shall as far as possible  
facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees."  
(1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 34)

### 1. Introduction

One of the most heart-breaking issues in international relations is the future of refugee children, individually and as a group and as a major category among refugees.

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According to the various definitions used by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the size of the world's "refugee population" – including internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers, and other categories of forced migrants – is of the order of fifty million people, about half of whom are children.

The number of forced migrants, including that of children, is reduced every year as a result of their integration in their host countries, of resettlement in third countries and of return or repatriation of refugees to their places of origin. Yet, every year there are also new people in flight, individuals, families, and groups, despite constant hopes that there will be no more persecution, no more outbreaks of new violent crises, and no more amplification of old ones in the future. The vicious circle of intolerance and suffering continues and gains new momentum.

The issue of refugee children<sup>1</sup> is recognized as one of the most important humanitarian challenges of our time.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the growing focus on children (and on women and families) at the level of both humanitarian objectives and action, one cannot escape the impression that the debate about child refugees and in particular, about their longer term future, is often constrained by stereotypes. There are often implicit or explicit political constraints on the debate and in particular on the factors and conditions that can turn the refugee condition or refugee experience – that in so many millions of cases threatens to be a life-time trauma and tragedy – into a success<sup>3</sup> for the benefit of the children concerned and in the interests of the host country and the international community at large.

Faced with the repeating cycles of violence, with donor fatigue and asylum fatigue, with a new hardening of people's attitude towards the unknown and towards "the other", how can one speak about the "success" of the refugee experience and in particular of the "success of refugee children"? The question

<sup>1</sup> "The idea of the child as someone entitled to special protection derives in part from the specific context of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law—the laws of war." G.S. Goodwin-Gill and J. McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, 475.

<sup>2</sup> National as well as international organizations and NGOs have recognized that their policies and actions have to be adapted to the special conditions of children, see for example, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and CARITAS, *Child Refugees in Europe, Guidelines on the Psychosocial Context, Assessment and Interventions for Traumatized Children and Adolescents*, 2002; E. Feller, V. Türk and F. Nicholson (eds), *Refugee Protection in International Law*, UNHCR's *Global Consultations on International Protection*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 555–610; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Rescue Committee, Save the Children UK, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR, and World Vision International, *Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, Geneva, 2004; UNHCR, *Protecting Refugees. A Field Guide for NGOs*, Geneva, UNHCR, 1999; *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, special issues on refugee children, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1996 and Vol. 23, No. 2, 2004; A. Duggal-Chadha, "Children and Disaster", in O. Hieronymi and N. Feix Scott (eds), *Humanitarian Action: The Role of Governments, International Organizations and NGOs, The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Humanitarian Conference of Webster University*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Geneva; *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2006, 85–90.

<sup>3</sup> Before the Feb. 2008 annual Webster Humanitarian Conference, I told a 92-year-old former refugee that I was going to talk about refugee children, her immediate, automatic reaction was: "I hope that you will talk about their success."

of the future of refugee children is a very important and very complex issue to which no full justice can be done in the space of a single article or a single study. It is, however, because of its very importance and complexity that it is essential to introduce new arguments and new points of view into the debate without the pretence or ambition of having found miracle solutions.

Thus, the present article contains a series of reflections on two key themes. First, it examines the question of how we become refugees, the issue of vulnerability and the role of the projected future for refugees and for refugee children in particular. Second, it focuses on the contrast between, integration and assimilation (outside the country or place of origin), on the one hand, and, “return” and (voluntary) “repatriation”, on the other hand, as well as on the issue of multiple identity versus no identity.

## **2. The human potential of refugees: short-term versus long-term perspectives**

The bulk of the traditional “refugee discussion” is limited essentially to three major themes: (i) the legal question of “who is a refugee” and “are you a legitimate refugee” and to the answers to these questions; (ii) the logistics and strategy of organizing and delivering assistance and protection; and more recently and more sporadically; and (iii) “the psycho-social situation and the mental health of refugees”.

All three categories of issues are eminently important and there must be no reduction in the interest in them by the multiple groups of volunteers and other people dealing with them.

### *2.1. Refugee children: multiple aspects and perspectives*

The issue of refugee children raises many questions and like the refugee issue as a whole it can be approached from many different points of views.

There is an immediate short-term perspective, one that is often a question of life and death. The issue of survival is a particularly acute challenge. There is, however, also a medium- and long-term perspective that ultimately is the most important one. This is true not only because many refugees, including children, remain refugees for a long period, sometimes for years or even decades. The long-term perspective is important also because relatively short-term situations and decisions, often a question of chance, will have a profound impact on the rest of the life of the refugees, including refugee children.

The situation and the fate of refugee children can be considered from the point of view of humanitarian actors – those who try to help and protect refugee children, and who often, explicitly or implicitly, make some of the crucial decisions in the name and for the refugee children. These humanitarian actors include national and local NGOs, international organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), other Red Cross – Red Crescent staff, as well as national agencies.

There is also, of course, the perspective of other state agents: in the host country, those who have the power to decide about granting or refusing refugee status and many other issues related to the fate of the children; and in the country of origin, the government agents who were involved in the persecution and those who will play an important role in influencing the conditions of repatriation – and in some case these two groups, the persecutors and the ones receiving the returnees – being the same.

And to continue the illustration of the multiple dimensions and the complexity of the refugee situations and of the efforts of dealing with them, one has to remember that the legal and the economic dimension, the basic necessities, as well as the political and cultural aspects have to be addressed.

Finally, there are the perspectives of the single individual child, that of the families, larger groups and communities – as well as the perspective of the host country and of the country of origin as a whole: the *micro*, the *meso* and the *macro* perspectives, all these different perspectives affecting the answers to the questions: what should be done? What are the interests at stake? How can the refugee experience be turned from a tragedy into a success?

There is a certain tendency in the literature and debate about refugee children to focus on a relatively limited number of issues. The choice of the issues addressed is partly determined by what are perceived as the specific child-related issues (and the question of how do protection and assistance needs of children differ from those of adults), and partly by what is considered to be within the power of those trying to help refugee children and within the scope of the official or semi-official definition of refugee issues and in particular the scope of humanitarian action in favour of refugee children.

Thus, the broader political dimension of what should become of refugees, what is the impact of different ways of treating refugees not only on the refugees but also on the host community, are most of the time beyond scope of the discussion.

## *2.2. Anticipating and planning for the refugee flows*

The test of the international protection of refugees, whether the refugee experience will be a “success” or a “failure”, depends not only on how host countries and the international community handle the emergency – keeping the refugees alive, providing food and shelter – but also on what will be the long-term “durable solution”, what will bring the future for the refugees, and especially, what will be the future of the refugee children.

Refugees as individuals and as a group are considered as particularly vulnerable. Yet because of the protection and assistance they enjoy, they may end up being in a better position than some of those who could not or did not want to flee, those left behind and who continue to be exposed, with little protection from the international community, to persecution and actual or potential violence.

When we think of the work of UNHCR and its partners and of other humanitarian organizations, such as ICRC and NGOs, we have a tendency to

think of the emergency faced by the refugees and of the relief and protection needed and received by refugees that help them to overcome or to cope. It is true – if you cannot deal with the emergency, there is not much sense to think of the long-term future: there will be no future worth speaking of.

Yet it is the long-term prospects that really make a difference in refugees' lives. People are more resilient than we often give them credit for. Also, people can – and this is particularly true for refugees – put up with a lot of hardship in return for a positive or a better future. But if your future is blocked, then survival, while important, becomes “mere” survival. Thus, the principal difference between those who stayed or were left behind and those who fled is their view of the future: whose future looks brighter and whose future is blocked?

One of the greatest challenges for humanitarian actors is to be ready when disaster strikes: this is true for natural disasters and for man-made persecution and crises.

Before the 2003 war against Saddam Hussein, UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations expected that this conflict would also lead to major refugee movements, and tried to get their logistics ready to deal with this new, impending emergency. Their relief that the rapid victory of the coalition forces did not lead to massive refugee movements did not last very long.

The ensuing insurgency, violence, and terrorism – largely of a “religious” and “ethnic” nature – led to both massive internal displacement and to flight to neighbouring countries, in particular to Jordan. Again, children represent a very large proportion of these refugees. While the international actors were ready to deal with a short-term emergency that did not materialize, the international community [and the United States and the other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in the first place] have been far from ready to face the challenges and the long-term policy requirements to deal properly with the massive outflow of refugees from Iraq in recent years. Neither the current US Administration, nor the American public in general seem to have realized the need for the same kind of action and generosity and responsibility shown by the United States after the Communist victory in Vietnam.

The massive and successful resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in America was to the benefit of the refugees and the United States. The integration and assimilation of Vietnamese children – while remaining proud of their Vietnamese origins – was one of the great success stories of refugee resettlement. Are people aware, are people concerned in the United States and in the rest of the world, about what will happen to Iraqi refugees and in particular Iraqi refugee children? What kind of future will they face if no similar action is undertaken to resettle, integrate, and assimilate them in new homelands?

### *2.3. How do we become refugees?*

Who is really a refugee – independently of the legal or socio-metrical definitions? How do we become refugees, what is the refugee experience about?

We talk about forced migration. We contrast the refugee experience of “forced migration” with “voluntary migration”. But in most refugee situations – when people cross that fated border under the various categories of dangers and threats so eloquently and so precisely defined in international refugee law – there is still an element of individual or family or group decision.

This is all the more so as both in the past and under present conditions fleeing from persecution, fleeing from actual or potential violence, is not a simple matter: in most cases it requires preparation, it is risky, it is a heart-rending decision. Do we prefer to stay and face the known threats and dangers and suffering, or do we flee and give up whatever was left to cherish and try to move to greater safety, to survival, and a chance for greater freedom and prosperity.

Accepting to flee, accepting to become a refugee means accepting uncertainty: but it also means choosing the hope of a better future. Without this hope, it is no use fleeing.

In these situations – when the conscious or unconscious decision is made to flee and to face the condition of a refugee in a foreign land, or for IDPs in an unknown corner of one’s own country – children are as a rule the “passive partners”. Most of the time the decisions to go or to stay is made by their parents or other members of the family. At times they are sent ahead into safety, at other times they can join their families who had fled earlier only later, through legal means (family reunification) or through the help of so-called smugglers.

Jeff Crisp of UNHCR, who has been for many years one of the most knowledgeable and articulate experts in the world on refugee questions, has argued that we must not view refugees only as victims.<sup>4</sup> Refugees are no more saints than other people. But they are no less “normal” than other ordinary people who can contribute not only to their own well-being but also that of their families and communities. Refugees, like other migrants, often represent the part of the population that has the drive, the energy, the determination to seek a better future.

Thus, the human potential of the refugees must not be wasted: this is in the interests of all involved, and this is the meaning of long-term success or failure of refugee protection.

#### *2.4. Who are the most vulnerable?*

Who are the most vulnerable? Who have the greatest potential of success – for their families, their countries of asylum, and for their countries of origin?

A few well-known counter-intuitive facts of experience should be mentioned here. Despite the commonly assumed scale of vulnerability of different categories of refugees, going from children (most vulnerable), to women (the second most vulnerable category) to men (who are supposedly the least

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<sup>4</sup> In 2003, in the discussion in one of the sessions at the 8th Webster Annual Humanitarian Conference on the economic and social consequences of humanitarian crises.

vulnerable group, who can the best fend for themselves and for their families), when it comes to adjusting to refugee life and coping with new situations, the scale or hierarchy are exactly the reverse.

Whether in camps or outside camps, it is children, who are the first to build bridges, learn the languages, and open lines of communication to the surrounding world. They are followed by women on whom falls the main burden of dealing with all the practical chores of daily life and of finding pragmatic solutions to the down-to-earth problems of survival and of keeping the family together.

Men are the least flexible – they may show great outbursts of courage, but they are prone to brooding and to violence, including violence against their own. In fact, it is often their lack of flexibility, their plain male stubbornness that most hamper the children and the women in their efforts to adjust, to cope, and to integrate.

Children are sensitive; they are physically and emotionally highly vulnerable. But children also have surprising reserves of resistance and a much greater instinct of survival than most adults, men or women. Children also have a great capacity of adaptation to new circumstances. They are like an unwritten book: they learn languages, customs, rules, and opportunities much more quickly than their parents. Children “fit in” much more quickly than adults or older people.

They may be passive partners, but children know, whether they are explicitly told so or not, that the objective is to have a better future than the past that was left behind. Children may be and are heartbroken because of what and whom they remember from back home, but they also expect every day that the future will be better than the situation that was left behind.

In fact, the success or failure of the refugee experience truly depends on the future of the children.

### *2.5. The debate about refugee children*

How and why do children become refugees? Are they “simply” a corollary victim of the persecution directed primarily at their elders, their parents, and other relatives? Can they, do they decide on their own whether to flee or to stay behind? Would the persecutors, the perpetrators who are responsible for the flight prefer to separate the children from the adults – would they like, do they try to retain the children through promises or through force? Should the children be treated, protected, assisted differently from their parents, before, during, and after flight, and most importantly, at times of individual return or mass repatriation? Should children enjoy priority and privileges when refugee status is being granted? Should the faster and easier integration of children in the country of asylum be credited to the parents and should families be allowed to stay because of the children?

These and similar questions are raised all the time in policy discussions, in academic research, and in the day-to-day work and decisions of humanitarian

workers in the field and by officials in charge of status determination, people who have to make decisions that will affect other people's lives – of children as well as of adults – the moment the decision on their status has been made.

The answers to most of these questions cannot be given in isolation from a very large set of more or less interdependent factors. It is not only the preferences or the whims of the officials who are responsible for status determination that will determine the answers. It is also what these officials believe the future can be or should be for these refugee children.

What are the options for refugee children? The three basic options defined in such clear and final-sounding terms in the refugee debate – (i) “voluntary” repatriation, (ii) “third-country” resettlement, and (iii) local integration and assimilation – hide a very complex and uncertain reality and future.

The list of questions can be continued: who makes and who ought to make the decisions for the children? Is it the children themselves, their family? Local authorities or/and international organizations?<sup>5</sup>

Whose interests are and should be uppermost on the list of criteria on which the decisions are based: the short- and long-run interests of the children? Of the parents? Of the host country or the country of origin? Or the interests of the international community at large?

The perception of the interests and the “best future” of refugee children have evolved over the decades as a result of the changing international political situation and of the evolution of the dominant doctrines concerning the position of children in society.<sup>6</sup>

A fundamental question, one that both host-country authorities and families and relatives face in practice all the time, unfortunately does not receive sufficient attention in the literature or in drafting and applying rules concerning refugees. This question is to what extent are the interests and the preferences of the children taken into account when decisions are made about repatriation resettlement or integration and assimilation? All those who work with refugees know that the presence of children can be (unless it is systematically discouraged) a powerful factor in facilitating the integration and assimilation of a refugee family. They also know that in general the interests and the views of the children weigh little when set against the preferences of parents or the views of officials.

## 2.6. “Durable solutions” and the future of children

The status of refugee is meant to be temporary: durable solutions mean the end of being a refugee. This is in the interests of the refugees (being a refugee is an

<sup>5</sup> “All children are entitled to protection and care under a broad range of international, regional, and national instruments. Of particular relevance for separated children (and one should add also for refugee children) are ... the right to participate in decisions about their future.” See *Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> “The best interests of the child constitute the basic standard for guiding decisions and actions taken to help children, whether by national or international organizations, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies ... A child's opinion should be listened to and given due weight in relation to the child's age and maturity. Children must be kept informed about plans being made for them. . . .” *Ibid.*, 17.



exceptional situation), being a refugee is outside “normalcy” – the objective in the end of becoming a refugee is a return to normalcy. It is also in the interests of the host country or countries, because refugees are people in a limbo: they enjoy the host state’s protection, but because of their uncertain future it is not clear how much loyalty they give to the host community in return for this protection. There are, in fact, three main phases in the life of all refugees: life before becoming a refugee (and becoming a refugee may be a positive experience), being a refugee and life after one has ceased to be a refugee.

One need not know the subtleties of international and national refugee law, and their increasingly narrow and legalistic interpretation, in order to understand the situation, the needs, and the actual and potential rights of refugees. This goes also, and more particularly, for the numerically largest group of refugees, the children.

Who are refugee children? There is the legal definition (according to national and international law), and there are *de facto* definitions. There are those who fled alone (unaccompanied minors), those who came with their parents or other members of their families, and then there are children born to refugees. In a way, the latter are children born into the refugee condition – something that is in clear contradiction with the legal definition of a refugee (someone who has to cross an international border . . .).

For children, even more than for their parents and for other adults, the nature of the “durable solution” is particularly important: they have had a shorter “pre-refugee” life than the adults, and the weeks, months, and years spent as refugees do appear relatively longer than for persons who became refugees as adults or in old age. The difference is particularly striking for those children who have had no “pre-refugee” life, that is, were born into the refugee condition.

Under the “international refugee regime” (as created by the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol) durable solutions (to be achieved as rapidly as possible) were, in the order that corresponded to the conditions of the time and to the intent of the signatories:

1. third-country resettlement (and integration, assimilation and naturalization);
2. local integration, that is, in the first country of asylum (leading to assimilation and naturalization);
3. voluntary repatriation (with the emphasis on “voluntary”).

For decades, the preferred durable solution was third-country resettlement and local integration and assimilation. Today, it is repatriation, preceded by temporary protection and isolation, in order to prevent “unwanted integration”, especially by children.

In an insightful paper presented at the 10th Annual Webster Humanitarian Conference Erika Feller, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner – Protection, argued that “refugees are not migrants”.<sup>7</sup> The point she was making was that

<sup>7</sup> E. Feller, “Refugees are not migrants”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2005, 27–35.

refugees enjoy certain (international) rights that migrants do not. Confusing the two categories will not ease the hardship of the thousands and thousands of migrants who at the risk of their lives are trying to enter and find a new life in countries that do not want them, migrants who among many desperate steps, also claim that they are refugees (without fulfilling the increasingly exacting interpretation of the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention).

Erika Feller, who does not lack compassion for these “irregular migrants”, argues – out of experience with the harsh reality of the contemporary perception in the liberal western societies of the “unwanted” – that confusing these migrants with *bona fide* asylum-seekers with a legitimate claim for refugee status will only undermine the international refugee regime (that is, further weaken the support of the western democracies for this regime), without bringing a solution for the economic and social plight of these foolhardy irregular migrants.

Still, it may be useful to compare the experience and the success or failure of migrants and the situation of refugees and asylum-seekers.

### *2.7. Refugee children and the second generation*

The success or failure of the migration experience depends essentially on two sides: the migrant and the host community. Third parties can have a direct or indirect influence, but it is the interaction of the migrant and of the host community that will determine whether we can speak of success or failure. This is true for refugees as well as for other categories of permanent or temporary migrants.

It is obvious that this is especially true for children: how are they treated and how do they react (and are told and taught to react). If you are treated as an inferior outsider – you will feel and behave as an outsider. If you refuse to behave according to the rules and customs of your host country – inevitably you will be treated as an outsider, or worse.

The challenge to refugee children is the same as the challenge to the second generation of immigrants – they can be a tremendous source of energy and loyalty to their new country or a source of tensions and frustrations and missed opportunities.

One of the greatest contrasts between traditional countries of immigration, on the one hand, and countries that consider both “economic immigration” and asylum as a temporary phenomenon, with both migrants and refugees in the end “going home” (and also leaving room for new generations of arrivals), on the other hand, is with respect to the position of the “second generation”.

In the traditional countries of immigration, the second generation usually enjoys full citizenship rights (as after a relatively short period of time is the case also of the “first generation”), and has received the full benefits of a “local” education, that includes beside the full command of the host country’s language also the development of a sense of belonging, or to use an “old-fashioned” term,

a sense of patriotism. It used to be widely recognized that in the traditional countries of immigration the “second generation” used to be among the most dedicated in upholding the values and interests of their country.

Since in the traditional countries of immigration a large proportion of the population is of immigrant descent, it is common for people to recognize that part of their identity is of foreign origin. As a rule, in case of open or hidden tensions or conflict between the “new” and the “old”, the new would or would have to prevail. The degree of integration and assimilation required, however, is not so high that it would mean a total rejection of all earlier values and identities.

Most of the western European countries that had difficulty to accept that Europe has shifted from being a continent of emigration to a continent of immigration, discovered the issue of the “second generation” in the last 20 or 30 years.

For countries that considered foreign workers as a temporary phenomenon – and that had also seen many of the refugees they had initially accepted, move, sooner or later, to overseas destinations – it was a difficult transition: from “guest-workers” to foreign labour who had to be “integrated”. In this transition, one of the stumbling blocks was the “second generation” – those who had only a distant or indirect link with their country of origin, but at the same time had not integrated effectively into the society into which they were born.

This failure to integrate and to assimilate tends to be the combined result of the attitudes and policies of the host country, the explicit pressure of the first generation on the second generation not to integrate and very often of the pressure of religious or political groups that consider integration and assimilation as treason to the homeland.

At times the measure for integration and assimilation is set too high. At times, however, migrants and refugees refuse or are pressured to refuse even a minimal effort at integration.

### *2.8. Achieving “normalcy”*

This leads back to the issue of success or failure. What can be called a successful refugee experience – in particular for children? The simplest and probably the most valid definition of “success” is a situation when the future becomes – potentially and actually – better than the past, a situation when the hope for a better future does not turn into illusion but becomes part of daily reality.

What are the various elements of this view of a better future? Some of the most important ones should be mentioned here, as an illustration, without pretending that this list is complete. Some of the elements are material, others are still real but more intangible, some of them are objective, and others are highly individual and depend on one’s experience, perspective, and perception.

A first set of elements has to do with economic conditions: work, income, ownership, and economic security; the availability and the quality of food, clothing, housing, and other components of living standards; the ability to earn one’s living, to provide for one’s family; all these are key elements that determine whether a refugee child can grow up into an “ordinary” adult member

of his or her community – with the opportunities and difficulties that are common to all members of the society he or she lives in. Health and access to education also belong to this broad category of elements.

Of course, the list should have started with safety or security – the absence of safety and the persecution and violence were the main objectives of the flight: safety, security are essential elements of this future different from the past.

The causes of, and motivations for, flight and becoming a refugee obviously include lack of freedom, systematic discrimination, violations of human rights, and lack of effective protection by one's own the state or government. A better future means freedom and protection by (good) laws, and the absence of open or hidden discrimination.

At the end of this list, there is the increasingly used concept in political debate, and also in international relations analysis and theory: the question of identity.

### 2.9. Multiple identities

In a free, peaceful, and democratic world it is possible to have two or even three overlapping national identities.<sup>8</sup> This is the case of many successful migrants today, and this is the case of many former refugees who have been successfully integrated and assimilated in their country of asylum and yet who remain marked by the country from which they came – by their accent, their memories, by the many visible and invisible peaceful ties to their country, and community of origin.

There are countless examples of this phenomenon among both migrants and refugees throughout developed and developing countries: Indians and Pakistanis in the United States and Canada, Americans and Portuguese and French and Germans in Switzerland, and the “Swiss in foreign lands” the so-called “*Suisses de l'étranger*” or “*Auslandschweizer*”, spread over five continents.

The key factor here is that there is no serious conflict between the two identities, no tension, and incompatibility between this “double allegiance”. This is the concept and reality that is at the basis of the “European citizenship” of the European Union, (which essentially follows the Swiss model of the three levels, of bottom-up citizenship, where citizenship is determined first at the lowest level, that of the “commune”, and then of the canton and then only at the Federal or national level). And this idea was behind the abolition of the restriction or outright prohibition on the double citizenship by countries like the United States and Switzerland – countries that were keen in the past and remain keen today, to ensure the loyalty of their original and new citizens, loyalty to their core democratic values, but also loyalty to certain societal standards. Double identity,

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<sup>8</sup> O. Hieronymi, “Multiple identities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Convergence or conflict?” in A. Vautravers (ed.), *Identity and Conflict*, Geneva, Webster University, 2008. See also A. Maalouf, *Les Identités Meutrières*, Paris, Grasset, 1998 (in English: *On Identity*, London, The Harvill Press, 2000); P. Weil, *Qu'est-ce Qu'un Français?* Paris, Folio Histoire, Gallimard, 2004; and W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

double citizenship need not lead to split personalities, to tensions at the individual or the community level. In many, many cases it is a bridge and a source of understanding in an international system that is characterized by both diversity and a growing internationalization.

But, in today's globalized world it is as much of a problem as it was in the past to be rootless, not to belong to the community of your country of origin and/or of your host country. This can be an important economic or political or legal practical issue. At the same time, it can be a serious personal problem that contributes to and deepens the sense of exclusion and aimlessness.

The case of refugee children illustrates the two possible paths, the two approaches to identity and their consequences both for the individuals and for their communities and for the world at large: one leading to the "success stories" of normalcy, and the other leading to tensions and crises and ultimately to tragedies.

### 3. Integration, assimilation, repatriation – or none of the above?

#### 3.1. Success or failure of migration and of the refugee experience

There have been countless situations of refugee children that developed either into a positive future or else led to life-long tensions, problems, and often violence.

To continue the reflection started above, the long-term "success" or "failure" of the migration and of the refugee experience, depends essentially on (i) the conditions in, and various groups of actors in the host country, (ii) conditions and actors in the country of origin at the time of the migration and in the future, and (iii) on the migrants themselves and their ability to cope with the difficulties and to make the best of the opportunities, on their willingness and ability to adapt, to integrate, and to assimilate in the host country, while making the best of the intangible – moral, intellectual, professional, and psychological – resources brought along from their country of origin.<sup>9</sup> While "refugees are not migrants" the impact of these factors is even more decisive in the success or failure of the refugee experience than is the case for "ordinary migrants". In the case of refugees, of course, there is a fourth set of factors: the role of international actors and the effectiveness of the international refugee regime and of international help and assistance in the case of any specific individual refugees or groups of refugees.

European countries (both political leaders and the public at large) – including Switzerland – have been very slow to recognize and to admit<sup>10</sup> that following the Second World War and the great success of western Europe (and of the western community, in general) in achieving prosperity and social progress, consolidating freedom and democracy, and the respect for human rights and finally the *de facto* perpetual peace among the western democracies, have turned

<sup>9</sup> O. Hieronymi, "Identity, integration and assimilation: Factors of success and failure of migration", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2005, 132–50. See also, UNHCR, "Local Integration", EC/GC/02/6, 25 Apr. 2002, Global Consultations on International Protection; N. Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, London, University College London Press, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> On the dangers of the lack of integration and assimilation of foreigners in Switzerland, see Chapter V of O. Hieronymi and C. Carlöz, *La Crise internationale et la sécurité de la Suisse*, Genève, Georg, 1988.

western Europe from a continent of emigration and a major producer of refugees, into a continent of immigration and of asylum.

The notion that foreigners – whether economic migrants or political refugees – are only temporary “guests” who will leave in accordance with existing rules (or can be sent home when no longer needed), was a notion still widely held as late as the 1970s and the 1980s. In fact many people still hold on to this view.<sup>11</sup> Also, 20 or 30 years ago, few were ready to admit that the failure to integrate and assimilate foreigners – and in particular the “second generation” that really had no place to go home to – could lead to missing an opportunity to strengthen national cohesion; and that this failure could become a source of a national security problem in the broad sense, by creating a growing body of people who are really at home “neither here, nor there”, with all the consequences of social marginalization of young people in particular.

Today, the need to “integrate” foreigners into European society is at least officially recognized, both in the European Union and in Switzerland.<sup>12</sup> In Switzerland, every Canton has an Office of Integration with the task to facilitate the integration of foreigners including that of children. However, most Europeans, and the Swiss authorities in particular, are reluctant to go beyond “integration” and to advocate “assimilation”. For example, the Geneva Government, as explained by the Head of the Geneva Office of Integration, refuses to promote assimilation because this would mean replacing the “original values” of the foreigners with the values of Geneva and Switzerland.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, children who grow up in a country and in a society without fully internalizing its basic values will never be able to become full members of their community.

### *3.2. Being a refugee as a permanent life-long condition, and identity*

A major source of humanitarian, but also of political and social concern is the persistence of so-called “protracted refugee situations”: situations where refugees

<sup>11</sup> “What is certain, however, that if in a country or countries the systematic official policy message diffused systematically to a large and growing number of foreigners is that they have no chance to become accepted and respected members of their communities, then the chances of their voluntarily espousing and respecting the political, moral and cultural values and rules of their host countries (where they may have even been born) diminish thereby.” O. Hieronymi, “European values and interests: the need for liberal asylum and immigration policies”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2001, 81.

<sup>12</sup> ECRE, *Position on the Integration of Refugees in Europe*, London, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> According to Robert Cuénod, Delegate for Integration of the Government of Geneva:

L'Etat de Genève agit de manière active en matière d'intégration, y compris en scolarisant dans l'enseignement public, par des programmes adaptés, des enfants dont les parents ne disposent pas toujours de titres de séjour; et cela conformément à la Déclaration internationale des droits de l'enfant, que la Suisse a ratifiée. L'Etat veille au maintien de l'identité propre de l'enfant lui proposant des cours de langue française, bien sûr, mais aussi des cours de sa langue d'origine, afin qu'il ne la perde pas, et favorise de ce fait le lien vers l'extérieur de ses parents. Voici une réponse claire aux défis posés par l'intégration, dans le respect... de l'identité originelle... Je crois en la capacité de *partager son identité*... selon les codes de sa culture ou nationalité d'origine et de la nôtre, laquelle définit les règles de conduite sur notre territoire. L'assimilation vise au remplacement de valeurs par d'autres valeurs. C'est l'annulation de l'identité originelle. La République et canton de Genève n'y souscrit pas.

R. Cuénod, “Opening statement”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2005, 15.

can neither integrate and assimilate in their country of asylum nor do they have realistic chances for a peaceful and successful repatriation, not to mention the lack of resettlement opportunities in third countries.

According to UNHCR:

A definition of protracted refugee situations should . . . include not only the humanitarian elements of the phenomenon but also its political and strategic aspects. In addition, a definition must recognize that countries of origin, host countries and the international community are all implicated in the causes of refugee situations. In protracted situations, refugee populations have moved beyond the emergency phase – where the focus is on the life-saving assistance – but cannot expect durable solutions in the foreseeable future.

The length of the refugee condition, and in particular the lack of durable solutions in the foreseeable future affects children especially harshly.<sup>14</sup> Six-years ago Jeff Crisp estimated at 3 million persons the number of African refugees alone in “protracted situations”.<sup>15</sup> While there have been a number of successful repatriation programmes since then, the 2006 UNHCR report estimates that in 2004 the worldwide number of refugees in “protracted situations” was of the order of 5.5 million or more than 60 per cent of the refugee population of concern to UNHCR (compared with 48 per cent, in 1993).<sup>16</sup> These numbers, of course, do not include the Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

### *3.3. The tragedy of generations of Palestinian children in the Middle East*

In fact, the best known and most extreme example of “protracted refugee situations” in today’s world is where children are born and raised as “refugees” for generations. This has been the case of the Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, where the overwhelming majority of “Palestinian refugees” are in fact descendants of refugees and not refugees in the commonly used sense of the term. Thus, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA),

UNWRA’s definition of a (Palestinian) refugee also covers the descendants of persons who became refugees in 1948. The number of registered Palestine refugees has subsequently grown from 914000 in 1950 to more than 4.4 million in 2005, and continues to rise due to natural population growth.

While Palestinians who have moved to other parts of the world, integrated, and became citizens of the counties where they had settled, the Palestinians in the

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, *The State of the World’s Refugees 2006: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 106. It is symptomatic that in the concluding section of the chapter dealing with protracted situations that calls “for an integrated approach” children are not mentioned specifically, 25–127.

<sup>15</sup> J. Crisp, “No solution in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2002, 115–50.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, *The State of the World’s Refugees 2006*, *op. cit.* 14, 109.

Middle East – with the exception of a large number in Jordan who have received Jordanian citizenship – have not benefited from local integration or third-country resettlement. The Palestinian refugees in the Middle East are explicitly excluded from the protection of the “international refugee regime”.<sup>17</sup>

Neglecting the economic and social conditions and future prospects of the Palestinian refugees and remaining idle while their living standards and conditions have been constantly deteriorating has been as important a problem as the lack of agreement on the “political” issues.

While there is a widely held thesis that Israel alone is responsible for this situation – the fact is that generation after generation of young Palestinians have been offered by their leaders, by their “friends” in the Arab world, and by an indifferent “international community” a terrible view of the future: “your only hope for a normal future is the destruction of Israel and a ‘return’ to your rightful homeland”. Until that day comes you have to live and think as a refugee – and your children and grand-children will also have to share this fate.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See O. Hieronymi and C. Jasson, “Palestinian refugees: The need for a new approach”, *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2002, and a slightly updated version: O. Hieronymi, “Lessons from the international refugee regime for the solution of the Palestinian refugee crisis”, unpublished paper presented at a seminar organized by Webster University on International Refugee Protection and the Palestinian refugees, Geneva, 20 Nov. 2004.

<sup>18</sup> The following long quote on the situation of Palestinian refugees, from an article first prepared in 2001–02 and then updated in 2004, unfortunately still seems applicable:

The Palestinian refugee situation and the militant intransigence, which it has fostered on both sides, have engendered in the Middle East the longest lasting and most explosive man-made humanitarian crisis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. . . The Middle East is the only region in the world where the great majority of refugees were born refugees, rather than being direct victims of flight or forced expulsion: they are second, third, fourth generations of refugees, without any stable legal status and protection. Most of them have not benefited from any of the long-term solution defined under the international refugee regime: (1) local integration, (2) third country resettlement and integration, and (3) voluntary return. . . UNWRA, whose task has been to provide assistance to the Palestinian refugees not only has no protection mandate similar to that of UNHCR, but in fact is not allowed to assist in job creation for Palestinian refugees. While. . . (it) is still called “United Nations Work and Relief Agency”, its “work” mandate has been de facto eliminated – out of fear that providing work for the refugees could have reduced their desire to return to their place of origin or to the place of origin of their parents or grandparents. This situation has clearly aggravated the conditions of the Palestinian refugees and has led to the radicalization of the refugees themselves. Because of the lack of effective resettlement, because of the limits of local integration, and last but not least because of systematic militant propaganda, for hundreds of thousands of children and adults, the only hope in life, the only perspective for the future is “return”, return to a place and to a past that no longer exist. For many, even in Gaza, leaving the camps to live in Gaza City was seen as a form of betrayal. Maintaining refugees in a limbo – not only the refugees themselves, but their children, grandchildren and their great-grandchildren – where their only hope for a normal life and future is the demise of the government in their country of origin, is contrary to the obligations, to the spirit and to the practice of the international refugee regime. The Hungarians in 1956, the Czechoslovaks in 1969, the Vietnamese in the mid-1970s were clearly the victims of oppressive communist regimes. Yet neither the Hungarians, nor the Czechoslovaks, nor the great majority of the Vietnamese who fled from Communist rule were forced to accept the idea that they must not entertain any hope for a normal life before the collapse of the Communist regimes in their countries of origin. The cases where refugees were preparing for revenge in their host countries – whether individuals or entire groups – have had in most cases disastrous results. Among all the leaders in exile who were preparing for takeover of power by violent means – there were very few only who have managed to bring peace and prosperity to their country of origin or benefits to their host countries. . .

O. Hieronymi, “Lessons from the international refugee regime”, *op. cit.* 17. See also, D. Artzt, *Refugees into Citizens: Palestinians and the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1997; S. Peres and A. Naor, *The New Middle East*, New York, Holt, 1993.



### 3.4. *Integration and assimilation in a new homeland*

At the other end of the scale one can cite the case where refugees have found new homelands, where they integrated and assimilated: they were not only able to find a place and to start a new life for themselves and for their children, but in most instances also, they made a major contribution to the dynamics of their host countries, in economic, cultural, and social terms. One should not underestimate the difficulties, the hardships, the loneliness, and sorrow of these “integrated and assimilated” refugees. They experienced homesickness, they resented the loss of homes and land and identity, they suffered from the loss of contacts with family members, from language problems, economic problems, and from having to start a new life at the bottom of the social scale. All these were real problems and they did not disappear overnight: they weighed on them for years, for decades, and often for a lifetime.

What made the difference was that *their future*, the view of the future of those who were able to leave behind the *refugee identity* (and the *refugee mentality*) did not consist of war and vengeance. They hoped for return – to a better, safer, freer, and more just world in their country of origin – like all refugees do. But nourishing that hope was not the principal business of their lives – they could get on with dealing with the ordinary challenges of everyday lives, without having to dream of war and martyrdom for themselves or for their children.<sup>19</sup>

This was the sense of helping the million of displaced persons or “DPs” after the Second World War, this was the fundamental concept of the post-war international refugee regime (from which to this day the Palestinian refugees have been systematically excluded), but this was also the basic philosophy of the more or less limited or successful international efforts to help the millions of displaced people between the First and Second World Wars.

These families and children “who went on with life in a new country”, integrated and assimilated, were not only European post-war refugees, not only the Hungarians after 1956, not only the Vietnamese after the debacle in Saigon, they also included the Chinese who escaped to Hong Kong, millions and millions of refugees following the partition of India and in fact all the Palestinians outside the Middle East (and some also in the Middle East).

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<sup>19</sup> The success of the refugee and migration experience in the traditional and new countries of immigration depended and continues to depend on both parents and children – as well as on their “original communities”. Today there is growing awareness of the problems both for children and for the host countries, not only in Europe but also in North America, resulting from the refusal (and often the use of physical or psychological violence) by parents and “community leaders” to let young people assimilate “at the expense of the traditional values of their elders”. For a penetrating analysis of this issue by a Canadian writer and observer, see I. Manji, *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change*, Vintage Canada, 2005. See also the study on “multiculturalism” by W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, and, for a fairly extreme critique of multiculturalism in the United States, S. P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004. See also, S. Marchi, “What is Migration Without Integration?” in O. Hieronymi and S. Hasan (ed.), “Migrants and Refugees: the Challenge of Identity and Integration”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2005, 22–26; and I. Bloamrad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and in Canada*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006.

The sins of omission against generations and generations of Palestinian refugee children should be a warning for the international community of the consequences of ignoring the explosive potential of hopeless, protracted, never-ending “refugee condition”.

At the same time, the positive experience, the gains for the children, their families, for the host countries, and ultimately also for the countries of origin of the millions of former refugees, who were welcome, integrated, and assimilated in their new countries and societies, without “forgetting” their origins, but also without being forced to be obsessed by these origins, should be a positive lesson for the world and in particular for the Europeans and for all the OECD countries.

### 3.5. “Preparing for return”

Today there is a broad consensus that voluntary (or even non-voluntary) repatriation is not only a pragmatic necessity, but also by far the best long-term solution to terminate the refugee condition. In fact, there seems to be an implicit consensus that, but for relatively few exceptions, this is the only acceptable long-term solution.

Local integration and assimilation and third-country resettlement are perceived as less and less acceptable to first countries of asylum and even more to potential third countries.<sup>20</sup> The principal argument supporting this view has to do with the allegedly excessive burden on the host community: lack of space, lack of resources, and last but not least profound and insurmountable differences between the local community and the foreigners, in cultural, ethnic, economic, and political terms.

There is no doubt that this view is not unrealistic. There is often considerable resistance to turning a temporary asylum (and whatever the legal definition, the very term refugee implies a temporary condition even if this temporary situation may last for years and even decades) into a permanent membership in the host community. It is also true, that the prospect of a permanent stay of the refugees might weaken the willingness to grant asylum in the first place.

At the same time, it is also likely that in many cases the real or the alleged unwillingness or inability of the refugees to conform to the rules and traditions and political preferences of the host community, their unwillingness or inability to integrate and to assimilate, may induce the host country to insist on the

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<sup>20</sup> See L. Thomas-Greenfield, “US refugee admissions history and policy”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2001, 164–65.

In seeking durable solutions for refugees, the United States gives priority to the safe and voluntary return of refugees to their homeland... With regard to refugees resettled in the United States, the U.S. Government promotes economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible (limiting the need for public assistance) and encourages refugees to contribute to the diversity and enrichment of our country as have previous newcomers... All of (the) benefits are intended for short-term use during a refugee's transition to becoming an independent, contributing member of the national economy and of American society... (the) U.S. remains committed and while encouraging burden-sharing and increased numbers by our European friends, we will continue to be the largest resettlement country in the world.

temporary character of the stay of the refugees. These are typical situations of self-fulfilling apprehensions.

Return or voluntary repatriation is seen as the preferred solution today: it is argued that it is in the interests of the host country, it is in the interests of the refugees themselves, and in the interests of the “international community” (that does not have to show solidarity with the first country of asylum and the refugees through offering resettlement slots). It is also supposed to be in the interests of the country of origin itself. Successful return or repatriation is considered to be an opportunity of national reconciliation and an “internationally recognized sign of return to normalcy”.

One of the essential conditions of a “successful return” is that it should be peaceful and that it should involve successful reconciliation. There can be question that nurturing the sense of vengeance in children is not the best way to prepare them for integration into their host societies or for “reintegration” in their society of origin (or the society of origin of their parents). The list of former refugees turned into armed liberators who turned into tyrants and oppressors (and “producers of refugees”), is unfortunately very long on four continents – and not sufficiently studied by the unconditional advocates of refugee return.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, how “voluntary” is voluntary return? How ready are the countries and the communities of origin to receive back the refugees? And how ready are the returnees for reconciliation and for starting a truly new chapter?

Here again the role of children and how they are raised and the image of the future they receive play a crucial role. The spirit of return and repatriation, just like the spirit of integration and assimilation, in order to be successful has to be focused on the future and must not be poisoned by distorted memories of lost hopes and of the tragedies of the past.

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<sup>21</sup> The story of Paul Kagame and of his fellow refugees from Rwanda is only one of many well-known cases not only in Africa, but also in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Under the heading *A Refugee's Childhood*, L. Campling wrote the following about Kagame's case:

The revolution came to define an entire swath of Tutsi refugees like Kagame who, in the face of violence and the Hutu monopolization of power, had consequently fled to Uganda where they became known as the “59ers.” In Uganda Kagame went to school to learn English, and then continued his education at a local state school in Ntare where he excelled. But as a Rwandan “59ers.” he was not granted Ugandan citizenship and as such did not qualify for a scholarship to enter secondary school. Instead he benefited from financial assistance via a family friend based in Belgium that enabled him to continue his schooling”.

This sense of alienation in Ugandan society was later summarized in an interview with Kagame: “Professional advancement was restricted for Rwandans in Uganda. There were limitations on our progress,” as quoted in C. M. Waugh's biography, *Paul Kagame and Rwanda*, Power, Genocide and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Jefferson, NC, McFarland and Co. Inc., 2004. But Kagame also stressed, according to Waugh, that he “would never have accepted Ugandan citizenship... I wanted to be a Rwandan...” (and further on). As one RPF leader put it: “If the NRM [the National Resistance Movement] could liberate Uganda, the RPF [the Rwanda Patriotic Front] began to ask why it could not do the same in Rwanda,” as quoted in M. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002: “Museveni [the President of Uganda] subsequently selected Kagame for a nine-month training stint in Cuba and in 1989 he was again sent abroad for training, this time in the Joint Combined Exchange Training course by the US military in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas...”. L. Campling, available at: <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/2859/Kagame-Paul.html> (last visited 4 July 2008).

#### 4. Conclusions

The principal conclusion of the present article is that one of the best ways to assess the quality of refugee policies is to ask “what do they do for children” – both in the short run and in the long run in their countries of asylum or in their countries of origin.

The second main point is that the long-term benefits of integration and assimilation of refugees should receive much more attention than is the case today, not only for the benefit of refugees (and especially refugee children) but also for the benefit of countries of asylum and of resettlement and for the international community at large.

The third central conclusion is that the theory and practice of repatriation should receive a much more critical consideration by both experts and political leaders throughout the world. Unfulfilled or unrealistic promises of repatriation and returns driven by vengeance and memories of past conflict and violence are not “durable solutions” for solving refugee crises: they lead to new crises or to the amplification of old ones. Misusing children in this process should be added to the long list of crimes against humanity.

Today tremendous work is carried out by countless volunteers and professionals in favour of refugee children in UNHCR, ICRC, NGOs, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), as well as national agencies, addressing such issues as safety, family unity and reunification, health and education. Yet, it may be argued, that essentially for political reasons, the issue of the long-term future of refugee children does not receive the full attention that it deserves.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of children should be at the heart of the “refugee debate” not only because they are half the total “refugee population” in the world, not only because of their vulnerability, or conversely because of their ability to cope, but primarily because they are even more directly affected in their lives than their parents and other adults by the “success” or “failure” of their refugee experience.

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<sup>22</sup> European Commission, “Policy Plan on Asylum, an Integrated Approach to Protection in Europe”, Brussels, EU, 2008.