

Agency and frustration: overcoming obstacles at the UNHCR

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International Protection is a core concept in International Refugee Law which aims at protecting the fundamental rights of a specific category of persons outside their countries of origin, who lack the national protection of their own countries. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the international organisation mandated with ‘providing international protection, under the auspices of the United Nations, to refugees who fall within the scope of the present Statute and of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees’ (UN, 1950, para. 1). This chapter explores how that mandate is carried out in practice. It begins by outlining the development of the international conventions which provide the framework for ‘international protection’, by which refugees are afforded civil, political, economic and social rights normally provided by nation-states. The history, scale and structure of the ‘Refugee Agency’ also demonstrates the complexity required to provide the protection mandate, which itself operates within a global network of national and international institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private companies, donors and other ‘stakeholders’ in what [Betts \(2010\)](#) has called the ‘refugee regime complex’. Since 2010 in countries across the Global North, notably in Europe and the US, there has been a marked increase in political narratives where the fear of ‘floods of migrants’ or ‘migration crisis’ have fuelled discourse to ‘take back control’ of our borders and laws or to ‘build that wall’ ([Callan, 2016](#)). This has led to a reconsideration of obligations under international law in the wealthy Global North around the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, with notions of ‘burden sharing’ or outright ‘offshoring’ policies where *both* money and refugees are to be ‘processed’ in poorer states in the Global South, such as the UK government’s attempts to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. To understand how such an environment affects the ability of the UNHCR to enact its mandate to provide protection and other services to displaced people, this study surveyed ten professional staff at the agency on what frustrates them and how they keep motivated under such conditions. The findings highlight the continued centrality of people, both *to* and *within* the

organisation. However, there is also a sense of a ‘global protection drought’ in which the content of protection is at risk of being lost.

Conventional wisdom

Ostensibly, the management of forced migration is coordinated by two institutions which came into being in the aftermath of the Second World War. The first is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees which defines the status of refugee and sets out the rights to which they are entitled. The second is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the organisation responsible for overseeing United Nations (UN) member states’ implementation of that 1951 Convention. The original Convention was drawn up at a conference of international representatives in Geneva, to deal with the refugee crisis caused by the land war in Europe. It was signed by 26, mostly European, states with Cuba and Iran represented by observers. A large number of NGOs were also present as consultants at the conference, including the International Council of Women (ICW) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Taking the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights principle that ‘human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination’ (UNHCR, 1951: 12) as its starting point, the final Convention built upon a number of previous international treaty instruments and formed a legal document of definitions and rights in 46 Articles. The Convention was adopted on 25 July.

Article 1, which covers almost three pages of the Convention, concerns the definition of the term ‘refugee’. Over a series of sub-clauses A–F regarding to whom the Convention does (and does not) apply, a key passage appears in paragraph (2):

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Gendered language notwithstanding, the phrases ‘fear of being persecuted’ and ‘outside the country’ have long caused considerable contention over various conceptualisations of the term and status of ‘refugee’ (Adelman, 1983; Barnett, 2004; Pinson, 2010) and precludes Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), an issue that came to prominence in the 1980s (Weiss and Korn, 2006).

Article 35 of the Convention gave the UNHCR an explicit mandate to monitor its implementation. In this, signatory states must ‘undertake to co-operate’ with the UNHCR ‘in the exercise of its functions’ and ‘its duty of supervising the application of the provisions’ of the Convention. That original Convention was augmented by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (OHCHR, 1967) which removed time limits and geographical constraints in the original wording and to date 149 states are parties to one or both legal texts. Those who do find themselves stateless or forced beyond their national boundaries are, by law, afforded ‘international protection’ in line with the articles of the Convention. This protection regime, in the first instance, gives refugees certain civil, political, economic, and social rights and, in the longer term, reintegration assistance through a number of formal processes, the so-called ‘durable solutions’ of local integration, resettlement or repatriation.

The Refugee Agency

The UNHCR, headquartered in Geneva, is a truly international organisation. As of late 2023 it has a global workforce of over 20,000 operating in 134 countries. Around 90 per cent of the workforce is based in the field, and many are drawn from the local populations and the refugees themselves. In the agency’s latest Global Appeal (UNHCR, 2024) it acknowledges 130.8 million ‘people of concern’ across the world, comprising 32 million refugees, 10.8 million ‘returnees’, 62.9 million IDPs, 6.9 million asylum seekers, 4 million ‘stateless persons’, 6 million ‘others of concern’ and over 6 million ‘in need of international protection’. In order to fulfil its ‘mandated responsibilities’ to these people, the agency operates through four core pillars: the Refugee Programme, the Stateless Programme, Reintegration Projects and IDP Projects. Its projected budgetary requirements for 2024 (at the time of writing) stand at US\$10.6 billion, most which is sourced from voluntary donations. This donor base includes 69 donor governments, private contributors, foundations, corporations and individuals. The fund is highly dependent on governmental donors for the majority of its income, with the top three in 2023 being the US, Germany and the EU. The US\$10 billion budgetary projections in the 2024 Global Appeal also project a more than US\$6 billion funding gap.

The UNHCR’s mandate and work have changed at various stages in its history. In 1967, the geographical scope of its work expanded from Europe to the rest of the world. In the 1980s, it took on a growing role in providing material assistance to refugees. Since the 1990s, it has taken on a growing role in humanitarian relief, expanding on a role of providing relief to refugees and, increasingly, IDPs, through its framework of *Guiding Principles on International Displacement* (UNHCR, 1998). From the early

2000s, it has become increasingly active in the broader area of migration and the issue of ‘mixed movements’ in particular. Mixed movements (sometimes called mixed migration) refer to situations where a number of people are travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons. This issue led to *The 10-Point Plan in Action*, designed to address the increasing complexity of migration paths and patterns, acting as a ‘source of guidance for UNHCR, other UN agencies, governments and civil society’ (UNHCR, 2007). Most recently, in 2018, the UN General Assembly affirmed the *Global Compact on Refugees*, as ‘a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation’ (UNHCR, 2020). The four key objectives identified in this compact are: to ease the pressures on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third-country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

A complex world

In terms of the scale of displacement, the geographical spread of the phenomenon, the historical accumulation of articles and frameworks (which reflect emergent issues, and expand upon the remit of the agency and the international network of its workforce and donors), fulfilling the mandate of the 1951 Convention is a complex undertaking. However, the UNHCR and its affiliates are not alone ‘with actors other than states and migrants – from NGOs to private security companies and labour brokers – playing an ever more central role’ (Pascucci, 2017: 250). Increased mobility, globalisation, civil unrest and changing national sentiments since the start of the 21st century have seen a range of new international institutions engaging with the issue of human mobility. International, regional and local rules and regimes relating to travel, labour migration, human rights, humanitarianism, development and security have created overlaps, aporias and contestations of authority and responsibilities that constitute what Betts (2010) calls a ‘refugee regime complex’.

Within this complex, Betts identifies a number of benefits and challenges for the UNHCR. On the one hand there are regional consultative processes aimed at managing migration. These include, for example, the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugees and Migration (IGC, 2024) which coordinates governments largely of the Global North, or the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (TBP, 2024) chaired by Indonesia and Australia. These can enable states to address their concerns with ‘spontaneous arrival asylum’ through control of travel, security and the practice of ‘intercepting’ migrants,

thus bypassing ‘without overtly violating their explicit obligations’ (Betts, 2010: 16) to refugees who arrive on their territory. Such considerations are often driven by the political climate of the potential host nations, and the European ‘migrant crisis’ which began in 2014 is a case in point in the complex interplay of international organisations, sovereign states and local NGOs. While Turkey and Germany became two of the top five hosting countries, a number of states in the Western Balkans built hundreds of kilometres of razor-wire fences along their borders. While media and political narratives of ‘fears’, ‘floods’ and ‘crisis’ fuelled xenophobic civil society movements, such as PEGIDA in Germany (Paukstat and Ellwanger, 2016), the image of Alan Kurdi’s young lifeless body on the beach in 2015 became the global emblem of the humanitarian plight of the migrants and mobilised local volunteers throughout Europe and beyond, despite state opposition (Callan, 2016; Křeček, 2016; Molnar, 2016).

On the other hand, attempts to intercept the refugee ‘problem’ since the start of the 21st century have led to the redistribution of costs and benefits, or ‘burden sharing’, within the refugee regime and created greater interdependence between Northern and Southern states (Betts and Milner, 2006; Betts, 2010). The vast majority of forcibly displaced people worldwide, some 76 per cent, are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2023a), mostly internally displaced or hosted in neighbouring states. The concept of burden and responsibility sharing looks to enhance the quality of refugee protection in these nations. With that in mind, the channelling of monies and other resources from the relatively wealthy North in order to better facilitate protection mandates is often welcomed by the hosting nations. However, this formulation of control over compassion can have a knock-on illiberal effect, as when Tanzania explicitly cited EU asylum control practices as a justification for its own restrictive approach towards Burundian refugees (Betts and Milner, 2006). Similarly, a number of states in the Global North, including Australia, Denmark and the UK, have attempted or deployed ‘offshoring’ policies by sending *both* money and asylum seekers themselves to have their applications processed in poorer states in the Global South (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011; Fleay and Hoffman, 2014; Collyer and Shahani, 2023).

Such is the extraordinary socio-political and economic complexity in which the UNHCR struggles to fulfil its mandate to protect, return, reintegrate and resettle 1.6 per cent of the world’s population. These are men, women and children who have been divested of home and shelter, personal safety, friends, family and the esteem of recognition. The UNHCR has the massive task of implementing guidelines and frameworks, acknowledging donor requirements and regional consultations, while negotiating political manoeuvres and national sentiments on a daily basis across the globe. In this the agency has adapted and migrated beyond its original boundaries,

in order to negotiate such alternative arrangements and to continue to interpret that mandate ‘in a liberal and humanitarian spirit, in accordance with their ordinary meaning, and in light of the object and purpose of the 1951 Convention’ (UNHCR, 2003: 2). Nonetheless, internally technobureaucratic practices and results-based management (RBM) (Jacobsen and Sandvik, 2018) and the widening gap between asylum laws and actual asylum practices of member states (Trauner, 2016) present tangible obstacles to this humanitarian mandate, while the exclusionary rhetorics of resurgent right-wing populist and nativist agendas have sought to delegitimise the very humanity of the people themselves (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Krzyżanowski et al, 2018).

Methodology

Ongoing external critique and adaptation are, of course, essential for the proper functioning of any large organisation and, as we have seen, the UNHCR has been subject to and had to adapt to changing political vagaries and evolving needs over the decades. However, the professional staff in the Refugee Agency, from fieldworkers and regional staff, specialists in child protection or law, or analysts and officers in international protection have rarely been polled for their views on the challenges *they* face in implementing their mandate. Inspired by Graeber’s (2019) methodology of anonymously canvassing employees about their jobs, this project devised a simple survey with two open-ended questions:

- What frustrates you when you are trying to do your job?
- What keeps you motivated?

The first question sought to understand how staff themselves navigate the ‘refugee regime complex’ (Betts, 2010) from the multiple field sites to the agency’s headquarters in Geneva. Further guidance was given, encouraging respondents to reflect on their role and whether existing structures, policies, politics and practices make this more difficult. With an understanding that such frustrations can be stressful, alongside the psychological impact of bearing witness to suffering (Cody, 2007), the second question prompted the respondents to reflect on ‘where you find support and strength, to keep going under challenging circumstances’.

Though anonymity was key a small number of demographic questions were added, including years of experience in the agency and service area (Policy and Law, Field Protection, Resettlement and Complementary Pathways).

Given the sensitivity of critiquing an inherently political workplace, a small-scale snowball sampling method was employed for recruitment, in which initial contact was made with individuals, through my personal

Table 4.1: Respondents' roles and years' experience

Role	Years' experience
Policy and Law	29
Regional Rep	12
Head of Office	36
Field Protection	10
Parliamentary Diplomacy	11
Principles to Realities	10
Protection in East	20
Displacement	28
Oversee Protection	12
Coordinator	22

network, who have previously worked in the agency. These contacts then distributed the survey through their own personal networks of colleagues. In all ten responses were collected and, while this is a small sample, the project is qualitative in nature and, together, the respondents have over 190 years of experience with the agency, in various service areas, and have worked on field sites across the globe, with several of them moving into senior roles in the organisation.

Table 4.1 shows the current roles of participants and their years of experience with the Refugee Agency.

Findings and discussion

The two questions used to survey the participants could be considered quite distinct, in purpose and quality. Clearly, any large transnational organisation operating within budgetary constraints and hierarchal management, planning and communication structures will regularly be a source of frustration for employees when dealing with so many stakeholders, while also attempting to provide ever expanding services on the ground. As such, responses could tend towards pithiness and manifest obstacles. Conversely, asking about motivation can often be more of a psychological inquiry, provoking affective reflection. The analysis here thus considers the two questions separately, in the hope that both sets of results provide useful insight. The first set of findings fall under the rubric 'Frustrations', and consist of the largely, though not exclusively, manifest themes of 'Lack of resources', 'Structural fog' and 'Protection drought'. The second set proved to be much more personal, moral and human centred in the themes of responses recorded under 'Motivations': 'The people we work with', 'Positive outcomes' and 'It

matters'. Although the following findings are presented separately, ultimately the discussion will attempt to synthesise the inherent relationship between the inevitability of obstacles and the motivations that enable or demand that we must continue to cope.

Frustrations

Lack of resources

The first and most obvious issue emerging from the analysis is a lack of resources. However, while 'budgetary constraints' were mentioned, more often it was insufficient human resources that was seen as a problem.

[T]here is insufficient human resources for the work we have to do and therefore things do not get finished/drag on. (Head of Office, HO)

The HO also singled out 'inconsistent human capacity on child protection' and an unwillingness or inability to develop a workforce strategy to address such shortcomings. The Parliamentary Diplomat (PD) was also particularly concerned with a similar overarching problem in the 'limited institutional support for career management for colleagues interested in shaping our organization'. This affected the organisation's ability to 'retain talent', 'develop the next generation of leaders' and 'fulfil our roles'. More specifically, in terms of skills, the PD lamented:

In the not-so-distant past, UNHCR used to be a leader on analysis, reflection and research on refugee issues – all topics directly related to knowledge creation and dissemination and feeding into the exercise of our mandate. The elimination of our research series pointed to a direction of far less interest in this topic.

Structural fog

Alongside limited resources, organisational problems such as bureaucracy, administrative rules, repetition and duplication were frequently cited by respondents. In something of an overlap with skills shortage, a sub-theme of 'ill communication' emerged that points to structural issues in the organisation.

The planning of our collective work is not done collectively so we don't have a clear way to identify synergies and effectively plan together – and then during implementation of our plan our management complains we are not working effectively together when the problem stems from the way in which planning is done in silos. (Child Protection, CP)

Instances of '[l]ast minute requests becoming the norm', unwillingness to 'share information' or 'requesting more than one person to complete the same task' seemed to lead to frustration and a sense of competition rather than cooperation. At its worst such ill communication led to 'trust issues', turning discussions into a 'personal thing' or ultimately 'leading to confusion over common objectives and undermining outcomes'. This structural fog also affected the capacity for clear analysis and reflection, as outlined by Policy and Law (PL):

Less reflection leads to poorer long-term thinking and planning which in turn reflected into multiple initiatives to move into topics where we don't have a clear mandate or a competitive advantage, making us have to dedicate time to initiatives whose value is not really clear in detriment of those closer to our mandate at a time where it faces many challenges.

On a more personal level, of course, this can also lead to internal disaffection: 'Working in a small office, information is important and not being in the information loop is frustrating and can lead to feelings of a hierarchy in the office, not just of a fear of missing out.' (Coordinator)

Protection drought

While any large organisation will have internal issues around resources and organisational structures, the particular global political complexities within which the UNHCR is expected to provide its mandated provisions led to some of the most concerning responses.

The organization has progressively shifted from a mandate-oriented approach to a donor-oriented approach. The need to survive is understood, but along the way we have lost focus of our mandate in favor of pursuing donors' priorities. Therefore, we are often left to wonder how donor-driven interests are compatible (or not) with the exercise of our mandate. (PD)

The shift towards satisfying the desires of donors, who are largely member nation-states of the UN, also troubled the Regional Rep (RR), who was particularly candid in their replies:

Increasing and unabashed member state politicking has frustrated me and questions the faith in the so-called 'protection systems' evolved for forced displacement in the last 7 decades. Those who pretend to protect push the limits when it politically suits them, while genuine needs may be allowed to fall by the wayside.

The RR's loss of faith was not only limited to donor related concerns:

Refugee hosting states and those with IDPs have learnt to 'play the game' with developed western states and leverage other aspects such as trade and regional politics to divert attention/questioning of their record for protecting the forcibly displaced ... As expected, affected states play their own increasingly blatant politics by forcing returns/blocking borders/shipping off asylum responsibilities and so on.

Within the internationalist framework of the UN, the sovereign self-interest of member states, in both the Global South and Global North, stands in uneasy – if not dysfunctional – opposition with the universalist principles of accords such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This has led to what the RR called a 'global drought of protection' in which few are faithful to the accords they signed up to.

[T]he environment for international protection today has shrunk to low ebbs and tragically there is no shame left in doing so. The fact that most member states are unclean in this mess – does not allow any of them to hold a moral high ground and assert respect for protection principles. We are in a sea of diminishing returns. (RR)

Such honest reflections are sobering. While additional resources can theoretically be acquired, procedures streamlined and information transparently disseminated, transforming the international protection environment is not a task that the UNHCR alone can undertake. Indeed, this is not within their remit but falls rather to wider, global reappraisal of relationships between nation-states, international humanitarian law, and associated conventions and accords. With the shadows falling over such universal humanitarian principles we turn now to what keeps the professional staff going through such darkness.

Motivations

The people we work with

When asked to reflect on what keeps them motivated, *people* featured prominently in the minds of all respondents, in the form of 'similarly committed colleagues and partners' (PL), 'who are passionate for what we do' (PD). There was near unanimity in the sense that support came in the form of other colleagues. Oversees Protection (OP) expresses the level of coordination and commitment needed:

For example, timelines and understanding deadlines are a very real concern for reporting – and there are many parts to the whole – the

drafters of the report in one region, the headquarters folks in another that will approve the report, my office liaising with another part of the system for final clearance and final submission for translations. I find support and strength when working with these colleagues and we can talk to each other about what is needed and understand further what obstacles they might be facing and what help is needed, then we can all better meet the deadlines, as well as have greater collegiality, esprit de corps.

RR echoes that 'Real protection, needs hands on sites to make it happen – it is a 360 degree voice and perspective' but most respondents agreed that 'The people we work with' includes 'the local people, forcibly displaced people, local and national authorities and vested motives of regional/global powers' (RR). The sense that complex cooperation is required 'whether internal or external partners/stakeholders' is always guided by the 'vision to achieve protection/solution outcomes' or 'the fact that innocent people suffer for no fault of theirs'. Field Protection (FP) sums up the centrality of people in their mission: 'Direct contact with the people we work for. Listening to their needs and goals, working with them to find solutions, and remembering they deserve our best provides a lot of motivation to work hard and push through the frustrations.'

Positive outcomes

This focus on the ultimate humanitarian purpose of the UNHCR was also apparent from testimonies where, despite the challenges outlined above, the respondents somehow succeeded in moving the dial. However, achieving 'outcomes that benefit displaced and stateless persons' or the 'daily lives of refugees, IDPs and statelessness persons' (PL) is not necessarily solely something that happens in the field. Structure and policy aimed at long-term efficacy were also cited: 'In such a large organization, there aren't really avenues for most of us to have an impact on the organization as a whole, but I see these colleagues as the most substantial contribution I can provide to UNHCR when I am no longer here.' (FP)

Here we see again the importance of recruiting and empowering capable and motivated people in organisational structures, an issue of importance given the relative seniority of the sample. However, it is what such people have been able to achieve in the wider provision of protection such as 'orientations and trainings on programming for child protection which was initially questioned by DSPR [Division of Strategic Planning and Results] and DIP [Division of International Protection] colleagues but which is now seen as a good practice' (CP). This relationship between individuals and organisational structures in achieving positive outcomes was neatly expressed

by one participant who described their job as ‘Turning protection principles into realities on the ground’.

Being in a position where I have the right title and portfolio to actually make an impact on the way we work to promote critical thinking, proper planning, strong protection principles and strong relationships with and *accountability to the people we work for*. (Emphasis added)

More succinctly this impact was described as, ‘Clear strategic objectives with the intention to achieve them. Changes in people’s lives’ (OP).

It matters

Ultimately, the motivations of this admittedly small but relatively senior selection of global civil servants fall back on notions of compassion and common humanity based on the liberal and universalist principles that underpinned the foundations of the UN in the post war period. These motivations were described as:

Commitment to the core mandate of the organization. (PL)

My work, the mandate, the vision, the continuously increased need for political solutions to displacement [in] the face of growing contemporary challenges. (PD)

Mentions of the mandate refer to the underlying purpose of the UNHCR, and thus the professional staff who are employed there, to monitor the implementation of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, it is not purely principles that matter, and both passion and compassion are part and parcel of the job. Indeed, staff suggested it would be hard to endure the challenges the agency faces were it not for the humanitarian impetus they held at heart. They described this as:

A belief that it all matters and we can make a difference regardless of challenge. (RR)

I am drawn to this work as a matter of passion, commitment and because it isn’t easy. (HO)

[T]he fact that the situation globally is worsening, rather than improving is distressing and hardens my resolve. (PL)

Conclusion

The world has seen significant change since the end of the Second World War when universalist, Western liberalist philosophies were drawn upon to create a series of policy documents and associated organisations which, it was hoped, would prevent a repeat of the global carnage that defined the first half of the 20th century. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was accepted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948, the assembly had only 58 member nations. The Soviet Union and certain allies of the Eastern Bloc, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, abstained from voting, as did Saudi Arabia and South Africa. Honduras and Yemen did not vote, and Resolution 217 was passed by 48 countries, from Afghanistan to Venezuela. Liberation struggles across Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of political Islam in the Iranian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s have all contributed to a proliferation of independent nation-states and today there are 193 members of the UN.

Questions of scale seem important to address here. This survey is simply too small to serve as a guide for policy changes and the findings are informative rather than definitive. Politically and philosophically, many more people are citizens of many more independent states, with competing conceptualisations of rights and duties. The dominance of Western, secular modes of understanding the human condition has been subject to substantial postcolonial critique (Binder, 1999; Mutua, 2002; Cistelean, 2011; Akoth, 2014) and we live in what Habermas (2008) has called a ‘post-secular’ world. In many of the ‘Western’ states that saw, or see, themselves as beacons of universalist liberal principles, a turn towards ‘nativist’ exclusionary politics is evident (Callan, 2016; Mishra, 2017). The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 – centred particularly in the US, the UK and Europe – hastened a long decade of austerity in these regions, decimating fundamental state services, while the ‘rescue’ of the banking industry (arguably orchestrated by central banks) channelled a massive wealth transfer from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic ladder, increasing inequality (Piketty and Goldhammer, 2014; Engler and Klein, 2017; Sherman, 2019). Finally, in terms of scale, in 1951 the UNCHR was responsible for approximately 2 million refugees; in 2023, it estimated there were more than 110 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2023b; O’Neill, 2024).

This is the context in which discussions around ‘offshoring’ or ‘burden sharing’ occur in the Global North. The study here presents a counter-point to such abstract considerations which seek ways to subvert international law and conventions. The testaments presented here do not sit easily with such ‘donor-driven’ discussions, where ‘people’ and humanitarian principles were clearly central in the voices of the participants in both their frustrations and motivations. Within the UNHCR, an inability to retain and nurture human resources, and a perceived lack of analysis and reflection, aggravates the

structural fog leading to ‘poorer long-term thinking and planning’. It might seem that the people tasked with providing protection need some protection themselves. Most troubling is the sense of an overall global protection drought, with ‘unabashed politicking’ in both rich donor countries and lower income hosting nations both learning to ‘play the game’. Yet at the same time the sense of mission and purpose is striking in the motivations of the staff at UNHCR. A spirit that extends across the globe and involves millions of people, from local populations, those displaced and protected, local and national authorities, international organisations and the compassion of countless civil society contributors large and small, creating a global protection regime which does dramatically change people’s lives. There is a tension between a global civil society who see shared humanity in the faces of others and the uncivil times in which we seem to live, where the ‘other’ is demonised and scapegoated for political ends. This contention is, at its core, a philosophical one which extends well beyond issues of forced migration but the mandate and work of the UNHCR act as an exemplar and an attempt to embody and realise our common humanity in a complex and unequal world. Because it matters.

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