The 11th IASFM Conference highlighted a multiplicity of issues related to forced migration studies. These issues were tackled from a wide array of disciplines and perspectives. In general, the conference was regarded as a resounding success, with a broad range of studies presented utilizing multidisciplinary approaches. Yet as the field of forced migration studies grows and expands, research expectations are complex and ever-changing. There is undoubtedly much to consider in upcoming research, policy and practice with forced migrants, and specifically during future IASFM conferences.

The 11th Bi-Annual Conference of the IASFM was held January 6-10, 2008, in Cairo, Egypt. It was hosted by the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program of the American University in Cairo. Roughly 280 participants were in attendance and engaged in fifty-three concurrent sessions. The conference was entitled ‘Refugees And Forced Migrants At The Crossroads: Forced Migration In A Changing World,’ and presented an occasion for an extensive range of presentations, debates, and performances, focusing on numerous aspects of forced migration.

Overall, the conference was viewed as a resounding success. Panels ranged from presentations by diverse academics studying the connections between environmental change and forced migration and health and forced migration, to practitioners on the ground detailing the problems of detention and deportation internationally. Throughout the conference, there was increased emphasis on policy, cultural theory and personal narrative.

More than ever, the event was marked by a diverse range of contributors of varying origins and from various fields of study. The conference brought together academics, policy makers, practitioners, government representatives, artists, filmmakers and forced migrants themselves to discuss issues of forced migration.

On the plenary ‘Regions at the Crossroads’, Jeff Crisp, of UNHCR, astutely commented that by looking through the programme for the conference, one could easily conceive of just how broad the field of forced migration studies has become. The topics of analysis included natural disaster victims, massacre survivors, stateless persons, diasporic identities, and exilic identities in transcultural contexts. Equally significant, however, was the array of disciplines from which these studies were being undertaken. Presenters utilized anthropology, law, sociology, visual culture, political science, narrative research, health sciences, and psychosocial and gendered approaches to research. However, most participants appeared to emphasize the importance of a refugee-centered approach to research and policy.
The opening plenary included Philippe Fargues, Mike Kagan, Barbara Harrell Bond, Gleb Bazov, Elizabeth Coker and Ray Jureidini from the American University in Cairo: Forced Migration and Refugees Studies Program. They spoke about forced migration in the Middle East and there was discussion about in-transit migrants and irregular migration. The speakers asserted that while billions of people are on the move, the fact that governments and states refuse to recognize them does not mean that they do not exist. The issues of Iraq and Sudan were brought into sharp focus, with the exodus in the former producing the largest displacement of peoples since 1948.

**Multiplicity of issues**

Over fifty papers were presented in parallel sessions on the first day of IASFM 11, which focused on a wide range of subjects including: migrant children, internal displacement, migrant workers, protection, irregularity, entitlement and migration and remittances in conflict settings. One of the liveliest topics of debate concerned the experiences of Palestinian refugees. There was discussion about Palestinian refugees in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, with concern about Palestinian refugees in camps. Some people emphasized that while reparation negotiations are often framed as a historical injustice calling for redress, this often overlooks acknowledgments of responsibility. A lively discussion centered around the 'exceptionalism argument'. While Palestinian refugees were presented for the first half of the century as an exceptional case, this was due to an ideological desire to be treated different from other refugee cases. This argument came under attack by Palestinian advocates and legal scholars in the 1990s, who identified ‘protection gaps’ inherent in the exceptionalism argument.

Studies were presented about remittances in conflict and crisis settings which shed light on new aspects of globalization, conflict, and livelihoods in conflict. There was discussion about how diaspora communities are using their influence to affect political realities in their countries of origin. This can be especially important in situations of weakened or non-existing states, where the diasporic influence effectively works as a substitute for the state, by fostering institutions and providing services such as health and education. The discussion focused on how researchers should conceptualize peace building in “remittances in conflict and crisis” contexts. Should it be a narrow definition, focusing only on high-level formal peace initiatives? Or rather, should researchers employ a more expansive definition, focusing on how the diaspora influences local initiatives that can affect peace building? In this context, the ability of remittances to push back the thresholds for participation in armed conflict is important to take into account. The panel members felt that a bottom-up, or expansive, approach to peace building was essential.

The double session on ‘Environmental Change and Forced Migration’ examined the links between environmental degradation, climate change, and migration. The panelists and participants discussed the nexus between environmental issues and forced migration. They questioned whether environmental migration is, in fact, forced: What are the similarities and differences between development induced migration and
environmentally induced migration? Forced migration usually entails at least one of the following three factors: absolute compulsion, threat and coercion and actual harm. In many cases, the migrant faces one of these three factors but is also drawn by economic pull factors. It was acknowledged that the line between voluntary and involuntary migration is rarely clear. A lively debate emerged around the question of whether there is such a thing as an environmental refugee. Should the terms “climigration” or “climigrant,” be used, as coined by one presenter? The panelists agreed that migration usually has a multiplicity of causes with environmental causes becoming increasingly important. The importance of politics for outlining environmental regulations in forced migration settings was highlighted.

On day two of the conference, much was made about the subject of transnational identities and second generational alliances in diasporic contexts. One speaker re-examined the relationships between hosts and IDPs, in part through Jacques Derrida’s notion of hospitality. Many speakers drew on postmodern theory throughout the four days of IASFM 11 and there were lively debates about exilic identity and transnational realities. One noteworthy discussion led to questions about the diasporic shape and formation in today’s context. There was acknowledgement of varying degrees of migrational and forced migrational trajectories, which shape diasporic networks. It was felt in many of these discussions that refugees develop multiple connections to ‘here’ and ‘there’, and as such develop identifications with multiple reference points in non-hierarchical fashions. The question of how refugees maintain allegiances to their homeland when in protracted exile, when their identifications become less fixed, also brought about discussions of contradictions. In many cases, it was thought that refugees diverge from the dominant, powerful, institutional and political discourses in the homeland, affecting their thoughts about returning to their countries of origin.

On the session on ‘Technology and Forced Migration’, on the third day of the conference, a lively discussion developed about the problems of memory and the politics of representation. While refugee identity is increasingly being seen as heterogeneous, in the spheres of state and media representations often individual and collective identity is essentialised. The question of how nations configure historical narratives and the hegemonic essentalisation of dominant discourses from above, and the questions of what vernacular voices are silenced, and for what reason, led to stimulating debate. In a case study of the representation of genocide narratives by official Rwandan ‘visual sites’, what was striking was the way official histories are managed from the country of origin and directed to both nationals abroad and the international community through media technology.

IASFM 11 also brought about timely debates about forced migration in the Middle East and Africa, with sessions on politics and Iraqi refugees, and asylum in Africa. The Migration-Displacement Nexus sessions were presented in four different panels across the conference programme, exploring regional and broader issues. There was debate about how people view migration and displacement, both being seen as the movement of people across geographical spaces. We distinguished between migration, as an act of having once migrated, and displacement, as a current condition, but there was debate over
whether this is maintained over time and generations. There was discussion about how refugees were displaced from Serbia in 1999, and what impact a future independent Kosovo will have on these people’s lives. Will the IDPs living in Serbia be considered refugees, and what sort of protection and assistance will be offered to them? A later session continued in this vein and considered if a post-conflict return of refugees and IDPs should be problematised rather than assumed. A stimulating discussion ensued about processes of ‘post-conflict displacement’ and ‘post-conflict re-mobilization’, with reference to how new forms of forced migration may be produced as a outcome of the assertions put forth by returning refugees/IDPs.

On day three of the conference, gender, exile and post-conflict integration were discussed. Some presenters felt that existing policies on gender tend to exclude men and boys and that this has been due to a process of gender equality mainstreaming over the last twenty years. Discussion focused around looking at men’s experiences, which is often seen not as a gendered approach, but rather as a “sexuality approach” that focuses on homosexuality. What, then, are all men’s gendered experiences? Twenty years after UNHCR’s first proclamation on gender issues, some participants felt that it is time to look at the experiences of men and boys. The session argued we need to re-think social and cultural stereotypes about refugee men and move towards individualized or intersectional approaches taking into account other identity-based factors. Yet while some people emphasized the need not to ignore the gendered experience of refugee men and boys, others cautioned that this must not undermine hard-won gains for females. Are men and boys really special groups? Is it useful to distinguish between sexuality and gender? In sociological, anthropological and cultural studies such distinctions are critical, and debate emerged around whether it is important to distinguish between social groups for legal purposes and sociological/anthropological purposes. Some people argued that rather than a gendered approach, instead, the study of gender, and its complex phases, should be studied as and in a relational interaction.

Expanding the field

In some discussions across different sessions participants were interested in the impacts of the widening of the field of forced migration studies, both its expanding objects and areas of study and the range of disciplinary approaches that this field now incorporates. Some people suggested that this diversification is a reflection of the complex experiences of forced migrants themselves - that a narrowed approach only serves to limit the scope of understanding of the varied trajectories and experiences of forced migrants, brought about by myriad changes in global politics and economy. Others argued, however, that clearer limits to the field are needed to retain the importance of refugee studies in terms of definitions, objects of study and approaches.

Alongside these broader discussions, debates around refugee definitions and protection gaps were discussed throughout the programme, particularly during the session ‘Protection Gaps in Forced Migration’. In a sense, the session followed from IASFM 10, where the dominant debate focused on the argument that forced migration studies must concentrate primarily on assisting and protecting refugees, and considering other groups
– internally displaced or other migrant groups – is a diversion which distracts from the association’s primary and original obligation. Speakers in this session mostly argued against a retreat into refugee-centric legalism. One case study explored undocumented migrants in South Africa from a large survey of Zimbabweans in the UK and South Africa. Many of the undocumented migrants in the study would not be considered refugees under the 1951 Convention, and some who could apply for refugee status chose not to. There was debate about whether a more inclusive attitude to protection is needed, rather than a reduced and more exclusive one. Another discussion looked at the case of young people from specific stateless groups in Africa, Asia, the Baltic, the Caribbean and the Middle East. This area of study provided very stimulating debate, as much was discussed about the ramifications of having no legal framework or effective citizenship. The discussion ended with an appeal for action and practical policy development directed towards the increasing numbers of stateless persons.

During the session ‘Grounding and Contextualizing Protracted Refugee Situations’, presenters stated that at the global level there have been a number of positive developments that are starting to consolidate an approach to protracted refugee situations. There has been an effort to identify particular situations which are ripe for implementing durable solutions. Increasingly, states are developing inter-departmental working groups dealing with the problem of finding solutions to protracted refugee situations. There are also particular protection concerns for women and children. Protection is about solutions, and it was argued by the speakers that there is a link between durable solutions and protections and this should remain strong. Protracted situations are not homogenous and this must be taken into account.

How can this diversity of protracted refugee situations be better incorporated in the discourse? In developing strategies and frameworks, how do we incorporate this diversity? How do we involve the voices of refugees in developing programs, and at the same time, not unfairly heighten the expectations of those that give their voices? Among ethnic groups there are a lot of different voices and we need voices other than those of ethnic group leaders. Are we effectively incorporating urban refugee situations in the discussion, and what is relationship between refugees as “agents in spaces” in connection with policies that are created that transform them as agents? The discussion ended by emphasizing the importance of local integration and supporting local development in this regard. It was agreed that we should help host governments incorporate refugees into local development schemes, but that each case has its own particularities, and practitioners on the ground might be better placed to provide support and assistance.

On the subject of ‘Health and Forced Migration’, the papers were linked by a focus on internally displaced people. The papers reported very different methods: a comparative study using secondary data from two natural disasters, an epidemiological study of a population internally displaced due to conflict, "development disasters" and economic hardship and an intervention study to support mental health following a natural disaster. The discussion focused on the extent to which conclusions drawn from research on forced migration due to natural disaster can be generalized to other forced migration experiences (and especially to refugee populations). Further debate centered on the
potential usefulness of "psychology of place" and "root shock" concepts to refugee contexts and the extent to which the presence of mental health professionals helps or hinders the mental health of people affected by natural disasters. The debate was very lively, ending with discussion about the lack of consultation with survivors of natural disasters about when and what to rebuild and what not to rebuild and the difficulties of gaining accurate information about sensitive health topics such as HIV/AIDS and the relationship between key transport routes and the geography of disease.

The ‘Deportation and Detention’ discussion presented a wide range of issues related to detention, which provided an excellent foundation for understanding the issues as a global phenomenon. In the Mexican context, we heard of an emerging policy environment built around detention from the perspective of an advocate in a human rights NGO. Building on this, the second presentation gave a sense of the actual conditions of detention, this time in Turkey, with some disturbing fieldwork data on state dispersal and detention programmes. It was excellent to hear from a practitioner in the field, working with a legal assistance and advocacy group. Finally, we heard about the long term impacts on the mental health of detained children and their parents from a psycho-social perspective. This presentation examined the Australian context, and looked at individuals and families whose asylum applications had been successful, and so who were no longer detained, although they continued to suffer the ill-effects of detention. Together, the panel set the stage for an understanding of detention as not simply a "Northern" (or "Western") solution, but as a more global trend that has disturbing implications for both the rights, and the well-being of migrants.

Methods

At IASFM 11 the presence of formal discussion on methods was not as present as at previous conferences. However, it was by no means a finished subject. The issue was discussed on the plenary of the last day and was also raised in different ways by speakers in different sessions. The importance of methodological issues emerged throughout the different papers. What came through was the sense that scholars and practitioners were very aware of the methodological dilemmas from practical and ethical perspectives. The issue of gatekeepers and the role that they play in defining research processes and outcomes was discussed considerably. The question of how ‘other voices’ might be brought to the fore was also raised more than once. There was discussion about the difficulties of negotiating with refugee advocates, whether they are prominent refugee figures in the field or their representatives.

It was generally agreed that participatory methods were very common practices. With these, the observations and views of refugees with whom the research was being carried out could be included in the studies. Much was made of this as a common qualitative practice, and discussions often brought more innovative approaches to light, such as ‘photo stories’, and art related practices, which encouraged testimony through sustained, participatory workshops.
The question of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and insider and outsider positions and where those boundaries blur, was often discussed. More theoretical concerns were also considered, in the sense that qualitative testimony is due to dialogic conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee. The question of ethics was always not far from the debate, and there were debates about how one might break open stories that might cause psychological pain. One speaker described the qualitative process as a ‘leap into the unknown’, where one learns more about the process after they have embarked on the research.

The pressure of data for policy evaluation was also a clear issue of interest, like at previous IASFM conferences. There were discussions about the limitations of qualitative data in relation to policy debates. When measuring numbers of forced migrants where so many are irregular, there was debate about how the data might be measured for policy debates, which require more baseline figures.

Policy and research

Mark Schlakman, an advisor to the former Governor of Florida, spoke at the plenary on the third day, and gave an illuminating and intimate report on the lack of processing in Florida during President Clinton’s term in the 1990s. The account told of a very relaxed immigration service, which rapidly changed in policy.

Throughout the conference, presentations were made by policymakers and practitioners and often discussions developed about the tension for scholars and practitioners in how they negotiate between contract research, research for policy debates and their own individual interests. Some speakers informed us of the tensions in their own work, where contracts and policy research came into tension with their own interests, conceptually and methodically.

The issue of policy in forced migration was no less considerable than it has been in previous conferences. In fact, the pre-conference workshop discussed this very issue. The position of how one might work constructively with the policy making process was a discussion that often accompanied calls that freedom and intellectual independence is a position which is not worth compromising.

Practical voices offered the possibility of a critical compromise, where practitioners and scholars engage constructively with policymaking fields, institutions and multilateral organizations in an attempt to develop work which provides productive outcomes. There was a sense by some that we lack the apparatus and access to influence policymakers and authorities, in order to make any constructive change. While our activities and research may present clear indications, figures, information and sometimes solutions, there was sense, from some, that such research rarely generates constructive policy improvements. In this sense, our work is ‘in a vacuum’. There was thus a sense that much more needs to be done with engaging policy makers, and in particular gaining a clearer, political and bureaucratic understanding of the decision making processes.
Art and Cultural Production

What was unique about IASFM 11 was the move towards discussing forced migration through visual and literary culture. An art show was scheduled for the opening night at the Town House Gallery, in downtown Cairo, with photographs by Guilhem Alandry, Joshua van Praag and myself. The stimulating exhibition brought together Sudanese refugees in Cairo and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The private view was extremely lively and the occasion was marked by a performance by Actors for Refugees, a UK based charity. The performance brought together UK and local actors for a forty-five minute performance, titled ‘Asylum Monologues’.

On day three of the conference, a photomontage and documentary film were screened about refugees in Cairo. This was a resounding success and brought local issues to the conference at an important time. Some people felt that more should have been made at the conference about the issues raised in the film.

The plenary sessions also followed the move towards cultural productions, with a video piece on Palestinian refugees screened during the session where Karen Abu Zayd, Commissioner General of UNRWA spoke extremely eloquently about the plight of refugees in the region. As well, there was a poetry reading on the last day by Stephanos Stephanides, from University of Cyprus and Memhet Yashin. This final plenary session entitled ‘The Voices of the Displaced in Forced Migration Research,’ addressed the question of refugee voices, representation and memory in forced migration research, with contributions from Giorgia Dona, Zachary Lomo, Eftihia Voutira and Arild Birkenes. This final plenary led to a discussion about how action from refugees themselves is of central importance. The debate emphasized the importance of personal narrative and refugee voices in policy, activism and scholarly work. Questions were raised about the construction of narrative and memory, and the complexities of both of these formations.

In general, the conference was thought a resounding success. As the field of forced migration studies grows and expands, research expectations are complex and ever-changing. There is undoubtedly much to consider in upcoming research, policy and practice with forced migrants and specifically during future IASFM conferences.

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