Editorial

Understanding and Archiving Protection in Practice and Failure

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The essays in this special issue attest to the challenges and shortcoming of the Geneva Convention, alongside the continued relevance of the Convention and the important role of the UNHCR in the ongoing protection of displaced persons and rights of refugees. The focus of the issue is on the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention 1951 – widely known as Geneva Convention, but, as the contributors show in many different ways and contexts, it is impossible to ever separate out the rights of refugees and the rights of displaced people who are not addressed and protected by the Geneva Convention and UNHCR. The essays also address questions and ideas beyond the broad themes of the original call for papers of the Issue, and provide reflections on lives shaped under and through the Geneva Convention, and critically analysed how and to what extent the 1951 Refugee Convention or Geneva Convention, which turned at 75 this year, is successful in shaping the lives and practices of displaced peoples - those in the frontline of international protection and those in the need of protection due to regional and internal displacement.

The response to the original call for essays has been promising. We have received some excellent, politically important and policy focused contributions from displaced individuals, refugee scholars and activists, researchers, archivists, humanitarian and development practitioners, and community advocates who responded to the call with essays which could not have been said in short articles. Of seventeen full papers, this Issue includes nine timely essays and one book review, considering the significance of the themes about protection of refugees in practice, challenges, integration and policies, strategic work and effective ideas in the field of humanitarian archiving. Given the high volume of responses to the call for essays, we needed to go for two Special Issues[1]. The second Special Issue will include the remaining contributions focused on migrants' rights, resettlement and heritage, and mobilisations and resistance against border politics, to be published on International Migrants Day 2026. Whilst *Displaced Voices* published only short essays in the past, this Special Issue include standard essays from a realisation that the displaced scholars, activists, and humanitarian practitioners who work with displaced communities internationally and locally have much to say, and these voices should be heard fully, recognised, published and archived for understanding the issues around protection, rights of refugees and displaced people, our responsibilities, shortcomings, and what alternatives are there in relation to effective ways to overcome these shortcomings and promote rights of the displaced, and help enable better protection to these people.

In addition to highlighting the continued protection of refugees and those in the frontline of international protection, the essays present critical analysis and treasured insights into authors'

respective contexts, and address what should be considered as the most effective ways to preserve and promote international protection within local, national and international contexts. These include critical analysis and criticism of how the UNHCR and the Geneva Convention has thus far featured in the day to day lives of the displaced people and those working alongside with them. Authors in this Issue, wary of limited protection framework of the Geneva Convention and the role of UNHCR, humanitarian aid, humanitarian system and international agencies, have discussed about challenges they faced in promoting the rights of refugees and achieving the rights contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention in their specific context and operating environment in Europe, Middle East, South Afrika, South Asia and South America. The essays also showcase some most effective ways to defend the rights contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention and how alternative legal, political, archival and community-based practices support the protection of refugees and internally displaced people.

Ceren Yüksel, writing to answer a longstanding question about how and whether humanitarian work with refugees can be humane, draws attention to the role and function of UNHCR itself in terms of its responsiveness in dealing with humanitarian emergencies and displaced communities. In her internal critiques of the 1951 Refugee Convention itself focusing on its colonial and Eurocentric routes, Ceren returned to an important question which opens this special issue, and critiques "the gap between the rights outlined in international refugee law and the actual experiences of refugees in UNHCR's digital media representations" (Yüksel, this issue). Ceren does not only criticise the UNHCR's role in representations of refugees but also addresses how to overcome this shortcoming and provide an alternative effective way to resolve the issues around digital media representations. Considering her work on the Refugee Data Minder digital archive platform, Ceren highlighted concerns over how UNHCR implies the data it collects in support of campaigns for funding and how data can potentially be manipulated to support campaigns. From her experience in "refugee status determination casework in 2005 to regional and global data roles in 2021", she traces how the shift from print to digital media has expanded that gap and, with it, UNHCR's capacity to sustain the non-admission of rights violations arising from its direct and indirect actions and acts of omission."

Ceren explains powerfully how the first-hand witness accounts of refugee's "rights violations remain scattered across NGO reports, scholarship and short-lived journalism, receding from view, UNHCR commands expanding technological affordances to aggregate, reformat and recirculate its data", which she correctly notes "search engines and AI systems then index, rank, retrieve and reproduce as the authoritative record of refugees' circumstances and the state of international refugee protection." Her essay shows that within "this uneven field" of what she calls "mediated witnessing", "UNHCR does not record evidence of its responsibility for harms that demand corrective action". Ceren introduces us to "RefugeeDataMinder", as "an archive that brings these dispersed local accounts into relation with one another, holding open a form of witnessing in which those who bear the consequences of rights violations are not buried by the silence of non-admission." Her discussion attempts to answer both the questions asked by the deceased displaced Ajok and Professor Barbara Harrell-Bond and provided a much-needed practical solution to the problem about refugee data manipulation and violations of refugee.

Taking its lead from the UNHCR's Refugee Data Finder which focuses on providing a public facing access to UNHCR's Refugee Population Database, "the RefugeeDataMinder" focuses on challenging the inconsistences in the organisation's collection and representation of data, especially within a fundraising context.

Following on from this results-driven essay, Lucy Fulford illustrates the history of how Ugandan Asian migrants have become refugees in the UK. She shows how forced relocation of 50 thousand Ugandan Asian people who were expelled by Idi Amin as part of the "Uganda's entire South Asian population in 1972", was "often framed as a refugee crisis", even by the Ugandan diaspora. In challenging the problematic notion of framing relocated migrants as "refugee crisis", she articulates that although Ugandan Asians as a diaspora came to be known as refugees in the years which followed, and many self-identify this way, the majority who came to the UK came as citizens, not refugees as the legacy of empire. History of this relocation reveals that it was only "a smaller cohort who were left stateless after their Ugandan citizenship was revoked, who became the true refugees of the expulsion". Lucy's essay also shows that the 1951 "UN Refugee Convention provided crucial grounding" for the relocation of this small group of people into Europe. In this reflecting account as a "descendent of Ugandan Asian expellees", Lucy "interrogates the idea of the Ugandan Asian refugee, and, leaning on personal research", she identifies some of "the varying ways diaspora, including the author" who "relate to this term – both positively and negatively" and what it means to people today in the hostile environment.

Whilst the expulsion and forced relocation of 50 thousand people had "undoubtedly echoed a refugee experience", Lucy argues that "this terminology gets to the heart of the Ugandan Asian exodus, as this is a story driven by citizenship, bound up in the shifting sands of post-colonial African governance, British law and international rule through to the implementation of" the Geneva Convention. "This seismic 'refugee moment', can be "better understood as a forced displacement, in which the majority of Ugandan Asians were not in fact refugees in the legal sense, even if they were treated as such and this became an important identity marker". Despite some Ugandan Asians, such as the author's family, did not feel the "identification with the term" 'refugee' and rather decided to shied away from associating with the term, they are faced with the stigma and a kind of shame in the contemporary UK "in which migrants and asylum seekers are so often vilified by politicians and press – the word migrant itself bestowing an undeserving agency upon many who desperately seek refuge."

This harsh reality for forced displaced and expelled people from the global South is reflected in the essay about experience of internal displacement and policies relating to Afro-Colombian people who experienced forced relocation due to climate change and armed conflict in the Chocó and Medellín. Michale Ruprecht provides an excellent insightful discussion based on a doctoral study and empirical research on internally displaced populations (IDPs), which "examines the dynamics through the lived experiences of Afro-Colombian IDPs displaced from the rural areas of the Chocó to the marginalized urban peripheries of Medellín". Drawing on

qualitative fieldwork conducted by the author in 2023-2024, the essay explores how displacement is experienced by Afro Colombians, and how it is understood, "and navigated in a context of environmental pressures, armed conflict, and socio-economic exclusions". A key argument of the article is that "displacement in Colombia cannot be adequately explained through single-cause narratives; rather, it must be analysed through a multidimensional lens that accounts for the interplay between conflict, climate variability, environmental degradation, historical marginalization, socio-economic inequality, and uneven policy implementation." A shortcoming of the Geneva Convention and humanitarian agencies is explicit in the discussion as the Geneva Convention left the IDPs without protection. The author reminds us that "Seventy-five years after the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the global protection regime for displaced populations remains ill-equipped to address the realities of climate-related displacement."

The case of Afro-Colombian IDPs in Medellín illustrates "how environmental stressors intersect with conflict and marginalization to produce complex displacement dynamics" is an important criticism for UNHCR and a response to the call for this Special Issue." It is essential to acknowledge the lived experiences voiced by displaced people from the Global South who participated in this empirical research. Michael Nabil Ruprecht's essay does not only offer a constructive criticism but also suggests ways for informing effective policies as they identify the gaps in Geneva Convention. "The findings ultimately call for more integrated policy approaches that bridge internal displacement protection mechanisms, climate adaptation strategies, and urban governance." Considering the critical points raised in this essay, the UNHCR and other international humanitarian agencies could bring in change in policies in relation to inclusivity and improve the roles of UNHCR for future policies about protection for the displaced in practice.

Certainly the 1951 UN Refugee Convention is significant for millions of forced displaced people, those in the frontline of international protection, as explicit in Thomars Shamuyarira's essay. This essay discussed the work of the refugee-led organisation, namely The Fruit Basket (TFB) in South Africa, which explores "how grassroots initiatives have stepped in to address these gaps by providing emergency support, safe housing, community education, and human rights documentation for displaced LGBTQI+ individuals". The case study illustrates both "the resilience of refugee communities and the structural limitations of existing protection systems in South Africa". Shamuyarira argues that "refugee protection frameworks must move beyond formal legal commitments and engage more directly with the lived realities of displaced individuals whose identities place them at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities." Recognising and supporting refugee-led responses is essential if international protection systems are to remain relevant in an increasingly complex landscape of displacement.

The TFL case study in South Africa also shows that the country "has one of the most progressive legal frameworks on the continent. The problem is not simply the absence of protection on paper, but the absence of access to it in practice". Indeed, UNHCR has played a

vital role in supporting and promoting protection of refugees in South Africa. Shamuyarira reminds us that the UNHCR has addressed a backlog of more than 153,000 asylum cases through providing significant financial and technical support to South Africa's Department of Home Affairs (DHA), especially in 2021 through signing "the landmark four-year agreement with the DHA". The UNHCR wanted to help eliminating delays in case hearings and helped strengthening the refugee-management system. Nevertheless, the delays in the process of sanctuary still exists as there are significant "structural limits" of UNHCR's role to intervention within specific state policies and systems. It is clear that "while UNHCR can provide technical expertise, financial resources, monitoring and advocacy, the administration of the asylum system ultimately remains the responsibility of" the respective state. The slow-moving implementation of the backlog of cases, in fact, raises a broader question about the capacity and extent to which UNHCR can secure meaningful protection for the displaced people "when the national systems through which that protection must be delivered remain slow, inaccessible or ineffective."

Likewise, in his essay, Transition of life of relocated Rohingya from local community to camps in Bangladesh, Sodip Roy discusses the perception of refugeehood of Rohingya refugees by drawing on his empirical research in two different contexts: the camps and as free agent in local villages. The essay examines how Rohingya refugee's lived experience leads to their everyday lives in the camps. As a non-signatory of the Geneva Convention, Bangladesh has hosted more than one million Rohingya refugees in the 32 camps in Cox's Bazar district, which enabled a home to thousands of Rohingya people who fled Myanmar in different phases even before the largest influx in 2017. A significant number of refugees used to live in various local community areas, instead of refugee camps, in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong districts. The government of Bangladesh has begun to change its practices after 2010, subsequently forcing these Rohingya people to move into the camps by the post-2017 influx. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the affected refugee camps in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, where he collated empirical data for the study, Sodip explores how family reunion and the possibility of repatriation to Myanmar prompted their relocation. "Narrative of such recurrent displacement manifests both the transformation of Bangladeshi nation-state and Rohingya's precarious life in the camps" as the author argues. A thorough exploration of the issues to be resolved provides "an understanding that transnational living in the host community generated some sort of agency among" the Rohingya refugees. "Agentic capacity of these refugees supports living" relatively better in encampment, and they also "assist new refugees to make a bridge with local community". This essay on the "comparative account of refugeehood claims their urgent need for basic human rights and recognition of their capacity towards proper life."

The sixth essay is a short discussion on a comparative study on integration of Kurdish, Iranian and Afghan diasporas in London and Cologne by Ayar Ata, which illustrates integration by drawing on a working paper on social integration and belonging of refugees and migrants in urban spaces in the UK and Germany, specially two mega cities - London and Cologne. Ayar examines social integration in Britain, by taking a critical approach to "the British state's ever-changing" but arguably "largely passive policies and positions on multiculturalism and social

cohesion since 2011". This discussion does not necessarily focus on Geneva Convention as integration is theme which the specific state and government along with the nation-state could do better than being prescribed by international agencies. The author argues through comparisons of lived experience "in the two mega cities that the British state talks-the-talk but does not walk-the-walk, by providing positive publicity, some funding, and resources to encourage and improve social integration and community cohesion." Integration of refugees cannot be ensured by Geneva Convention, because "integration happens gradually, every day at grassroots level in mega urban spaces." It is something that needs to be recognised, understood and discussed "by considering the radical views of cultural theorists and historians such as Stuart Hall, 'subtle' integration, as evident in Germany and is noticeable in London."

The discussion on integration is followed by an eloquent analysis of the limits of refuge and protection, and the "stereotyping of displaced women from Syria surrounding their gendered and ethnic identities in contemporary European diaspora society". Shaden Sabouni addresses the limits of refugee and protection in practice, specifically in the context of Germany. Drawing on their doctoral study, she argues that forced displacement "profoundly reconfigures family relations and gendered life courses", and that many Syrian refugee women in Germany enjoyed free access to legal rights, economic participation, and social freedoms "that extend far beyond the traditional role of housewife." Whilst these transformations enabled "women to challenge long-standing gender norms and pursue forms of autonomy previously constrained by social, familial, and religious expectations", this anew freedom came with cost and loss. These divorced Syrian women paid what Sabouni calls "deep social costs". Drawing on her ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth "interviews with fourteen Syrian refugee women and sustained participant observation within Syrian communities in Germany", the author unpacks "the ambivalent consequences of gender transformation in exile." That is, "forced displacement can produce new possibilities for self-definition" whilst "intensifying moral visibility, community surveillance, and emotional vulnerability." Focusing on Manal's story "as a prototypical case", Shaden shows how divorce becomes "a pathway to independence", simultaneously being "a source of renewed marginalisation through stereotypes surrounding female respectability, motherhood, and marital status." There is trivial that the UNHCR and any humanitarian organisations could do to help changing these social and cultural norms and discourses about gender and women which Syrian women are faced with.

Following on from this authentic analysis about the limits of refugee protection Gladys Kemboi, Dominique Marshall and Courtney Stickland offer an excellent discussion about best practices in humanitarian archiving, which "can raise the visibility of collections at risk and foster connections between invaluable repositories and institutions, expertise, and resources to facilitate the rescue of the archives of displaced communities." The discussion draws on open interviews with the 13 members of the Steering Committee of the project, "Humanitarian Archive Emergency" (HAE), about their ideas, practices, and experiences. These colleagues gather around the urgent goal to "establish a census of archives and essential records at risk related to humanitarian response and global health, develop mechanisms for their reporting and sustainable rescue, create an ethical approach to triage, and shape a medium-term strategy to

address the issue." They work around the globe in humanitarian aid and development, risk management, archival sciences, history, education, learning, public knowledge sharing, diplomacy, international relations, policy analysis, digital preservation, data and information management, and open scholarship. The article examines "how the members' respective fields have informed their sense of the place and role of archives in the lives of refugees and displaced communities, as well as in humanitarian public work since the adoption of the Convention." They analysed the influence of such professional, ethical, intellectual and personal traditions in the strategic work they hope to accomplish at the HAE." From this unique collection of testimonies, their essay drives to offer "original suggestions about infrastructures of archival creation, preservation and dissemination of all scales and places for the next 75 years of the global refugee regime."

This discussion on best practices in the field of humanitarian archiving leads to the discussion on Living Refugee Archive as another best practice in the field of forced displacement and refugee rights. In this final article Paul Dudman writes about how the Living Refugee Archive continues to promote and offer genuine solidarity with refugees and any displaced communities. Paul as the founder and curator of Living Refugee Archive offers a short personal reflection about best practices of archivist solidarity and how archivists could promote protection and refugee rights through solidarity work with the Displaced and co-producing projects, such as the Living Refugee Archive, to help amplify community voices. The short essay illustrates how archivists could showcase alongside recording and preserving the important tangible and intangible records and objects that promote rights of refugees and displaced communities, and document their histories through the archival collections. Through illustrations of Refugee Week 2026 and the work of Living Refugee Archive, the discussion attest that an archivist can, as researchers and community advocates, engage with and co-work directly with communities as an effective way of supporting and promoting refugee rights. Drawing on the activities, including three exhibitions and a day long workshop by the Living Refugee Archive team during Refugee Day 2026 at the University of East London which was conducted with the City Lit College and community activists, the article offers a personal reflection on the best practices including oral history, digitising and decolonising the archives through direct face-face engagement at 75th Geneva Convention. The article ends with exhibiting the three exhibitions held during Refugee Week 2026, and with emphasising that it is vital to prioritise both digitalising and decolonising the archives alongside decolonising the history of refugees.

Finally, the Special Issue contains a book review by Gabriella Ibba who offers a thorough review of *Archiving Gaza in the Present: Memory, Culture and Erasure*, an edited volume of Dina Matar and Venetia Porter eds. (2025), which provides excellent insight into how to creatively archive the brutal genocides and ongoing terror and ethnic cleansing in Gaza in Palestine, keeping the authentic history. Gabriella notes that "the book's central intervention lies in its rethinking of archiving under settler-colonial violence". She highlights the key arguments of the edited collection, that is, "Rather than treating archives as static repositories of the past, the contributors present archiving as an urgent practice rooted in the present." The

collection shows how "archiving becomes both political and existential: a way of sustaining memory, identity, continuity and dignity under conditions designed to undermine and erase them." The collection attested that archiving could become "inherently a form of resistance". The collection is not an account of destruction because it "foregrounds Palestinian history, cultural heritage, artistic production, and collective memory under attack." Gabriella's review shows that "Across its pages, Gaza emerges not only as a site of rubble and dust, but as a place of longstanding intellectual, cultural and artistic vitality." While the collection present a range of perspectives, the book's central intervention lies in its rethinking about how archiving of both history of destruction and heritage and identity "under settler-colonial violence" can become possible. The review of the three-part edited volume ends with an emphasis on the significance of "archiving as decolonial practice and resistance through arts, despite the erasure that continues."

Endnotes

[1] Both of these Special Issues are being edited by Dr Rumana Hashem and being peer reviewed by the same editorial board, the reviewers: Dr Alfredo Babo, Paul Dudman and Dr Anna Maguire. Authors of the Issues have been fully informed, consulted, and have consented to publish their articles in respective Issues as their contribution's best suite the Issues.