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# Out of Context

## Ethnographic Interviewing, Empathy, and Humanitarian Design

**Brita Fladvad Nielsen**

Brita Fladvad Nielsen is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Product Design at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway. [brita.nielsen@ntnu.no](mailto:brita.nielsen@ntnu.no)

**ABSTRACT** User-centered and participatory design methods focus on the importance of understanding, and including, the end user in concept development. Current theories especially emphasize so-called “empathic design methods” and the necessity of designing for the “cultural context.” Current design theory therefore assumes that people have a static culture and a set value system. These methods are often difficult to apply when designing for vulnerable people: in this case in a refugee or post-disaster setting. When people are displaced and have gone through life-changing events, they have been uprooted and their individual and collective cultural identities interrupted. New motivations and cultures emerge, often together with an identity crisis. In addition, if designers wish to use empathic design methods for the

**challenging field of emergencies, we need to find ways of understanding the refugee; also when field access and traditional participatory methods prove difficult. In this article I explore the potential of the open-ended, ethnographic interview of resettled refugees in Norway, and how it may be an alternative that allows the designer to frame some of the characteristics of “the refugee identity.”**

KEYWORDS: humanitarian design, empathic design, refugee anthropology, ethnographic interview, refugee camp, identity, self-reliance

### **Introduction**

I have defined humanitarian design as design aimed at filling non-food item (NFI) demands in a disaster setting, reaching from the emergency phase to the durable solutions phase (Nielsen 2011). Product developers, humanitarian aid workers, and evaluators all emphasize the need to create context-specific products for refugee camps (Nielsen 2011) and hereby support the need for an empathic design approach. Empathic designers emphasize the techniques of empathic design-gathering, analyzing, and applying information gleaned from observation in the field (Leonard and Rayport 1997).

User access and observation, however, remain a challenge for product developers (Nielsen and Santos 2014). Humanitarian aid organizations are reluctant – for practical, security, financial, and ethical reasons – to let product developers close to the end user or let product development take place in areas under their supervision. Therefore, a participatory or close reiterative process is difficult to achieve and is an obstacle to achieving tailored design, which again may affect the adaptability of the product. In order to enable an alternative empathic design method for this setting, I have to get to know the end user in new and less intrusive ways, as a supplement or alternative to infrequent or nonexistent user access.

Refugee and disaster anthropology will draw a picture of the perceived “refugee identity.” I will use an ethnographic interview with resettled refugees in Norway to explore whether it is actually possible to build upon this knowledge and to find the basis for empathic design through the perspectives of the refugee’s motivation and self-reliance.

### **Rationale and Choice of Method**

From an empathic or user-centered design perspective, designers must endeavor to understand the culture and society of their intended users and grasp the framework within which their products will be interpreted (Hussain 2011). Design for empowerment theory also embraces participatory methods that require longitudinal field

visits and extensive comparisons (Schuler and Namioka 1993). However, the changing identity of individual refugees and refugee communities make the cultural identity of a refugee hard to grasp and to practically make use of. Also, the practical and ethical concerns of designing for vulnerable groups represent a challenge for product designers aiming at filling the needs of this user group.

Due to the unrest in the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) camps in Africa in 2011, my plans to do field research during this year were interrupted. When conducting research concerning vulnerable groups in risk areas, it can be difficult to gain access. Product designers experience the same thing when trying to get access to users in refugee settings. When it comes to research access, Karin Widerberg explains that: "Seldom, perhaps only sometimes, will things turn out the way one has planned. This means that the research design has to be adapted" (Widerberg 2005). I decided, on the basis of the above, to approach refugees in Norway as a preparation for, and while waiting for, field access.

Ethnographic, open-ended interviewing is suggested by Kantner, Sova, and Rosenbaum (2003) as an alternative to extensive field studies. An ethnographic interview was chosen to explore how one can approach a user to understand the driving factors in a refugee situation. This chosen approach also finds support in disaster anthropology: "Of research in crisis situations ... more dialogic, open-ended methods are suggested as both ethically more appropriate and methodologically more effective" (Button 1991). Further, it was considered beneficial to use a narrative approach, since a focus on the story is considered less intrusive; also, researchers would focus on practical matters to get the larger picture of an experience and not impose words or feelings on the people interviewed.

With inspiration from Dillard, "Time is not linear, it is not attached to causal sequences, to fixed landmarks in orderly progression" (Dillard 2009), the narrative approach is seen to support the idea of refugee anthropology, explaining that people's stories are changed through their experience as refugees, and elements are strengthened or streamlined through community support or having to face different situations where your identity has to change to "fit" certain purposes. The ethnographic interview is suitable to "understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana and Frey 2005). Last, the ethnographic interview is more compatible with the empathic/user-centered design approach, where the aim is to understand the person one is to design for.

### **Refugees and Self-Reliance**

Refugee anthropology is one academic field that provides some insight into the constructed, artificial life of a refugee camp. According to Harrell-Bond, "A number of anthropologists have shown the ethos of humanitarian work to be one in which the victims are too often

treated as villains, with the helpers assuming the role of figures of authority. Humanitarian organizations tend also to treat their beneficiaries as an undifferentiated mass. Assistance is often ‘packaged’ and delivered without due consideration of the distinctive values, norms, and social organization of the afflicted population” (Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995). Some observers report that this leads the refugees to “invent a new camp culture that is part affirmation of the past and part adaptive response to the exigencies of the present” (Conquergood 1991). Oliver-Smith noted the “differential impact of assistance on individuals and groups, arguing that disaster aid may compound the psychological trauma of the disaster by undermining the autonomy of survivors and potentiating a debilitating dependency syndrome” (Oliver-Smith 1996). An attempt to circle in “autonomy” versus “dependency” as binary keywords will be made with the aim to get a view on the effect on the displaced person’s belief in his or her own capacities (“self-reliance”).

### **Finding Someone to Interview**

When selecting the people to interview I used three main criteria based on practical and ethical conditions. First, it was important for the scope of the project that the refugee I was going to interview had spent significant time in a refugee camp. Second, it was important that the refugee had not spent too much time in Norway, so that the memories were still clear and real. One evident disadvantage of this preference is that recently arrived adult refugees probably will not have learned Norwegian very well and an interpreter will be necessary.

My last condition was that the person selected should truly want to share his or her story, since I do not have any background in therapy or much to offer if a difficult situation should emerge. This was mostly an ethical decision. The purpose of the research project was to develop better solutions for refugees in camps, not to bring up difficult emotions and traumatic events. The local Red Cross in Trondheim (Røde Kors Sør-Trøndelag), Norway was contacted in order to find refugees to interview. Røde Kors Sør-Trøndelag offers a range of socializing and empowering activities for refugees, together with members of the local population. Handcraft workshops are arranged with assistance from female Norwegian volunteers on a monthly basis as a social activity for women from Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. A spokesperson from the Red Cross told me: “We discover that women open up and communicate despite language barriers, once they have something crafty to discuss, such as knitting.” Focusing on learning skills such as knitting and sewing takes the pressure off having to find a subject to talk about.

I saw the knitting group as a “way in” and a way of gaining trust. An interviewer needs to establish some trust with respondents (Cicourel 1974) and this is what was attempted through the two-hour knitting session which I reported on in my research log:

When introduced to the group a rainy afternoon, I was wondering if it would be a problem that I didn't know how to knit. This turned out to be an advantage, as the women were eager to teach me what they knew. After a while, a girl sat down at my table and started interviewing me about where I lived, what I was doing, how old I was and so on. I realized she was the one speaking better Norwegian and could represent a link. She told me she had six sisters (two of them were there) and that her mother was the one who was helping me with my knitting a second ago. I tried to have her explain to the others what I was doing, what a research project is, and that I was interested in knowing more about their stories through an interview at a private location at a chosen time. Explaining what research means, and what an interview is, was difficult to get across but somehow they understood and suddenly I found myself surrounded by women and girls gathering to hear about the purpose of my visit. Realized that my message about scheduling had not come across perfectly when the girls quickly started to tell me about their experiences in Nepal and how their people had been subjected to human rights abuses by Nepali officials. I saw their mother making a face of disapproval before moving to the other side of the room opposite us. I quickly explained that I needed consent from her and that an interview could be held at a later stage, in a more confidential setting. I also tried to explain the purpose of the interview and that I did not expect anything else than what they wanted to share with me. Due to the reaction of the mother, I thought my chances of an interview were low. However, when the night was over, the girl came and told me that yes, her mother would like to be interviewed. Her only requirement was that she wanted to have her husband around, and we would need an interpreter.

This story elucidates something about the vulnerability of refugees and one of the challenges when conducting a qualitative study. It made me think about how these sensitivities must be amplified if one attempts to approach refugees in the refugee camp and closer in time to the emergency situations that they have been through.

### **Topic and Context**

The focus of this interview was to extract some of the refugee's view on motivation, self-reliance, and identity in a refugee situation. The interview was to be open-ended in that telling the story in a natural way was important. Self-reliance means belief in one's own capacities and is a precondition for a sustainable development. The aim was to try to lead the conversation into how this part of the identity was affected by the uprooting, the escape, and the stay in the refugee camp before arriving in Norway. To ease the conversation,

small questions about describing situations and daily procedures, and an unstructured interview guide were prepared. This was in accordance with Dorothy E. Smith's viewpoint that one should focus on "how" something is done (Smith 1987), in other words "How do you *do* self-reliance?" or, as Widerberg explains, "We approach the individual as a carrier of social patterns" (Widerberg 2005). I decided to put an emphasis on daily routines and activities and how these were changed, and try to receive reflections around these.

It was decided to conduct the interview at the respondent's home, even though (Halvorsen 1987) believes that the greatest source of error in interviews is that the conversation gets affected by the context it takes place in. When interviewing a person at their home, he or she can be affected by the presence of other family members. However, it ensures that enough trust is gained to get consent, and makes the interviewee feel comfortable.

### **Refugees and Research Ethics**

Research on refugees is research on vulnerable persons. Refugees in Norway are not protected by the same ethical restrictions as other vulnerable groups such as children or patients. However the researcher needs to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of people who have lost so much. This also holds true for designers who wish to use user-centered methods in refugee settings.

Bearing in mind the challenges and advantages of speaking the same language, an ethnographic interview is a good place to start to achieve insight into *who* a refugee is; it is also a way to gain skills that are ethically justifiable when approaching disaster or war victims.

### **The Interview**

On the basis of ethnographic tradition and correspondence embodiment theory, the understanding, in this article, is that one cannot look at any experience as detached from another. The world does not exist objectively in itself or only as a product of the human mind. The truth is found in the relation between a thinking individual and objects in the outer world (Aase and Fossåskaret 2007).

The description of the interview process therefore reflects my experience of meeting a married couple in their home, and the story that emerged includes my brief introduction to their culture. I will call the woman Ana and the husband John:

Even though I had agreed to interview the woman in the presence of her husband, it was the husband alone who welcomed me to their home this afternoon. The house was warm, both the temperature and atmosphere, and filled with children when I entered; I tried to say hi to everyone and remember who I had met before and define who lived there and who did not.

The interpreter and I were shown into a living room with a large sofa and many decorations. I kept looking for Ana,

but she was nowhere to be seen. I gave the chocolate I had brought to John and expressed my gratitude for being invited to their home. John said hi to the interpreter with a hand movement using both hands. I asked if they knew each other, and they said they did. There are only 63 people who speak Nepali in Trondheim, they told me.

After introducing myself, my purpose, and issues of confidentiality, I asked if talking about this issue brought up any feelings or thoughts. John sat with his back straight and a firm look on his face and explained, through the interpreter, that: “No, it is fine. We are used to telling people about it by now.”

I was thinking about how this conflicted with Ana’s reaction at the knitting club.

During the interview, the answers were short and it was difficult to understand what the feelings around topics were, due to the language barrier. The interpreter was highly qualified, but still became a filter who could not transfer the laughs and facial expressions that were important in order to interpret how the person felt about an issue.

Another issue was how to make sure that I understood both John and Ana’s perspective. I tried to use body language to indicate that I wanted Ana to answer as well, but very often John immediately took over the role as respondent. When talking about everyday activities, Ana was talking more, and when asking about providing for the family or responsibilities not connected to taking care of the family, or the decision-making, it was John who answered.

I tried to develop a natural conversation with a focus on the narrative. I tried to move from theoretical concepts to get a description of the way they used to live, how many cows they had, their specific tasks and responsibilities, before they had to flee. This went well, but then I tried to move to the traveling before they arrived at the refugee camp. The response was reduced to a few words:

*John and Ana (J & A):* We became very afraid and so one night we left.

The living room is quiet and I ask if they can tell me a little bit more, but it is still quiet.

*Brita Fladvad Nielsen (BFN):* Can you describe how you traveled? For example, how long did it take, where did you travel?

*J & A:* We were very afraid and we had to find the right bus to take us to India. We had to find the right bus. It took three days because it took so long to wait for the right bus.

Quiet.

It is just as important (often even more important) to analyze what the material does not tell us than what has been said (Widerberg 2005).

The above silence may indicate that the trip was more difficult to talk about than John had expressed.

I kept thinking that the topics have to be more defined and that I needed to move away from the difficult issues for a bit to make them feel less stressed. Again, asking about daily routines in the camp worked much better:

*Ana:* Everyone cooked for their own families. We cooked in shelters made of plastic.

*John:* Most things were made of plastic, only some of bamboo. In the beginning we had oil to cook with but then they gave us charcoal. I do not know why they changed from oil to charcoal. It affected us a lot. In the morning the whole camp was covered by a large smoke carpet.

*Ana:* After that all the children had asthmatic problems. It also affected me and I also got sick.

When she talks about her children getting sick, her eyes become shiny.

Ana uses words such as “taking care of” and says “the children” and “asthma” or “sick” many times during the interview. The husband also emphasizes Ana’s or “the women’s” role as caretakers and how they take care of the children, the animals, and cooking. When asked about food and cooking in the camp, they said:

*John:* It was not so important for us what we ate or what things were like. The most important for us was to find out how we could return to our home.

*Ana:* At first, when they gave us oil to cook with, we could not eat it, since we thought everything smelled and tasted like oil. Then, when they gave us charcoal, we could not eat it because we thought it tasted like charcoal. Back home, everything was cooked on firewood and it did not taint anything.

When Ana brought up these issues, John also had a clear recollection of the challenges and explained them in similar ways. His need to control the interview and focus on the story of the community rather than on individual happenings may indicate his proudness and focus on appearing strong, with a focus on the common good. It also gives some insight into the culture and that Ana and John have different roles in their community and family.

The way the story evolves therefore becomes relevant: the way issues are repeated and how some things are avoided can tell us something, but can also be interpreted wrongly. Also the interaction between husband and wife, and the contrast between answers, became a source of information or new questions.

During the interview, John opened up more and let out his negative feelings about being in a refugee camp. When talking about how the organization of the camp made him “feel like a beggar” he also said, “I don’t know what would have happened if we had stayed there.” He put a great emphasis on their motivation to return home, and how that kept him motivated during the eighteen years that they stayed in the camp.

John spoke on behalf of the family, using “us” often. However, when he talked about work it was “I” and also when he spoke about feelings of dependency.

*John:* I was not really allowed to work. We did not have permits to work. We could take small jobs inside the camp, but for very little money. We used to work illegally outside the camp since we speak Nepali; it was easy and we could work there. I had a small factory. I used to make wool thread. I had twelve spinning wheels and twelve workers there. Everyone working there were from the camp.

*BFN:* What did you use this money for?

*John:* I needed the money to buy clothes for the children. And for their education. In the camp you get ten years of school. After that you have to provide for their education. Also, the children and she [makes a gesture toward Ana] was sick a lot. If one needed complicated treatments one had to pay for health care in the city.

The effect of leaving responsibility to a foreign humanitarian aid organization and the insecurities connected with it had clearly affected John. Nevertheless, Ana expressed her gratitude as well:

*Ana:* I am very thankful to the Red Cross and the UN for what they did for us. I am not sure they could have done something different.

But when asked what they wished could have been different if anything were possible, they said they wished that the UN had worked harder for it to be possible for them to return.

## Findings

Ana, John, and the family stayed in the refugee camp for eighteen years. When entering the camp, the focus of the story is on how they were living together with others and that “everyone” had the motivation of returning as the strongest drive. The story of their people and not having a voice becomes clearer when John also provides the interviewer with books about the fight of the Bhutanese.

The need for an identity and future for their people is obviously still a strong motivation. The motivation for John in the camp situation was to find some way to be the provider for the family, even though there was no possibility for this and what he did was illegal. The

helplessness and lack of self-reliance options when his family was sick is a strong factor for him. When asked about the refugee camp, John expresses his own duties to provide for the family with “I,” while he uses “us” when talking about the common living situation and the motivation to return as over-arching. “They” is used about the humanitarian aid organizations. About the relationship with the humanitarian aid organization, he says: “We felt like beggars.” He also expresses the desperation (in retrospect) of not knowing what would have happened if they had stayed. John’s story and the way he tells it may indicate a *role conflict* between being the *provider and the protector* of the family and the community at large, while meeting the extreme challenges with questions about the future and perhaps cultural challenges to uphold honor and control in the changing environment. His memories of the problems connected to charcoal use and his family being sick also show his focus on *care* behind the outer, preliminary image of strength.

As for Ana, she expresses more joy about Norway and how her daughters are happy and have possibilities now. Her motivation differs from John in this sense and her view on self-reliance is less that of being the provider for the family and more that of seeing the world through the eyes of her children and their future. Ana prioritizes her children and their needs and safety, and also has a stronger emphasis on everyday challenges, while John is more present when talking about the over-arching motivation of return. Ana’s focus seems to be to see that her children are OK. Her focus on the details of camp life and happiness at arriving in Norway are founded on her motivation of *care*.

A large part of the analysis has been decided before the interview takes place, not only through the questions, but also through how it is done (Widerberg 2005). In this case, the focus was on self-reliance and an effort was made to get a small peek at the motivations and identity changes of persons in an extreme situation. It is important to remind ourselves that this is only one single qualitative interview and the results are therefore not for generalization.

The interview supports the findings in the discussed refugee anthropology. The interview therefore shows that academic literature is useful as a basis to understand the refugee’s identity challenges and motivational challenges in a refugee situation. However, for the designer, it is important to gain an empathic point of view, which can only be achieved through personal understanding.

From the empathic design perspective, this supports the idea that production and entrepreneurship activities should be supported (Nielsen 2011) in protracted refugee situations.<sup>1</sup> I will not elaborate at this stage upon how this can be done within the institutional, legal, and pragmatic framework for this; I am simply stating that it is an unfulfilled need that could, idealistically, be improved through increased possibilities of local production rather than a majority of imported nonfood items.

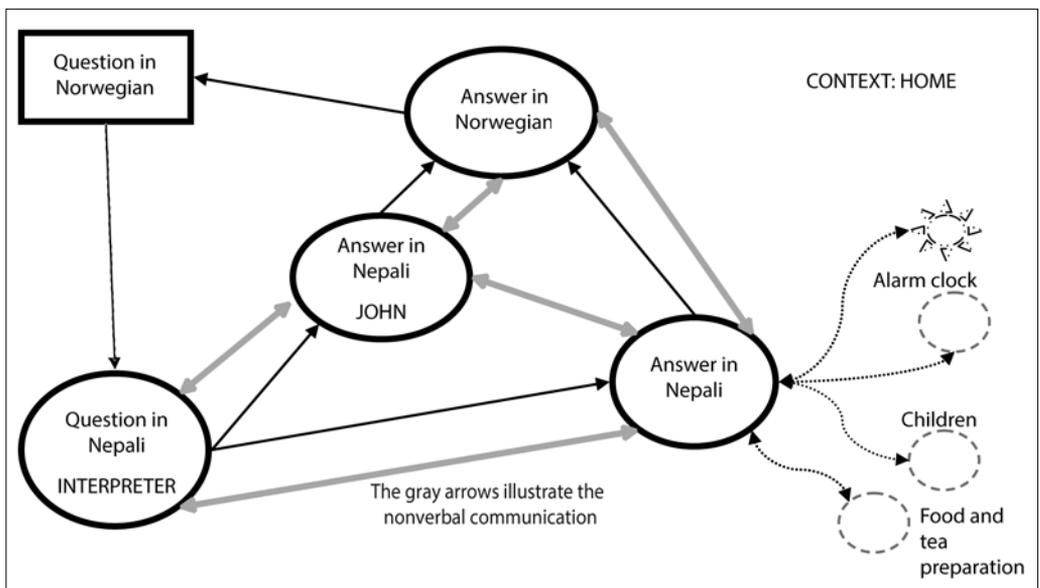
## Challenges

In the presented case there were two major challenges: (a) the contextual and (b) the language. A last question is about the validity of the results.

### Contextual

Even though the interview was conducted in Norway, I experienced a number of interesting contextual and sociocultural challenges. As experienced, the ethnographic interview and observation go hand in hand, as pointed out by Lofland (1995). Detaching the responses and the story that emerged from the people and the context would have stripped the interview of content and meaning. The way that Ana and John interacted with each other and also the children, and how she left to serve me food and so on, all become valuable information and a small introduction into their culture.

It was a challenge to keep up the flow of conversation. When talking about certain parts of the story, Ana and John went quiet. Gorden wrote that “Reminding the refugees or war victims of memories which are sometimes traumatizing, the stories told can take a tragic turn by evoking a range of negative emotional responses” (Gorden 1980). Even though Gorden’s research was conducted in a refugee camp, and Ana and John were sitting safely in a living room in Norway, the reactions observed in this interview reminded me to distract them through a different time or subject question. Also, the context – with several children present in the room, an alarm



**Figure 1**

Knowledge loss/distractions in an interview using an interpreter

clock going off, and Ana serving me food and tea – provided some interruptions.

### **Language Challenges: Using an Interpreter**

During the interview, it was clear that the use of an interpreter affected the clear understanding of nonverbal communication. Interview data are more than verbal records and should include, as much as possible, nonverbal features of the interaction (Fontana and Frey 2005).

Proxemic communication is the use of interpersonal space to communicate attitudes, dironemic communication is the use of pacing of speech and length of silence in conversation, kinesic communication includes any body movements or postures, and paralinguistic communication includes all the variations: volume, pitch, and quality of voice (Gorden 1980). The interpretation of any of these becomes difficult when depending on an interpreter. The kinesic communication was still possible to interpret, since the body posture often changed directly when introduced to a topic. Also, Ana's reaction, even when she did not speak, depended a lot on the topics brought up by the interviewer. The validity of the interpretation, however, becomes an issue, as her reactions may be a result of something that I missed due to my lack of language and cultural insight. Language skills therefore become an issue of validity.

Dironemic communication is impossible to notice unless one is familiar with the language, and the paralinguistic is also difficult. This is a great argument for a field observer to increase language skills before going to a field; even if one needed an interpreter, one would be able to interpret nonverbal communication more easily if one had some knowledge of the language.

### **Validity**

It must be added that my knowledge about Bhutanese culture is limited and this may question the validity of my interpretation. Also, interviewing husband and wife at the same time was a prerequisite for consent. Still, it proved to be a challenge since John mostly decided on their common response on several things and in a way "controlled" the interview. The interviewer had visualized that this could happen. Also, the interpreter was acquainted with the respondents and this also raises questions about validity.

### **Conclusions**

Individuals and communities that are displaced due to extreme events experience an effect on their belief in their own capacities. According to refugee anthropology, this may result in a stronger need for finding self-reliance options, or in debilitating dependency. Concerning the exploration of method, the outcome also shows that designers *can* gain user insights and empathy with camp refugees through ethnographic interviews of resettled refugees.

The issues highlighted by the respondents in this interview were:

- (a) The ability to work and make a living
- (b) Protection for your family and safety
- (c) The strength of the community's history
- (d) The importance of education, in order to have some feeling of control over the future

The interview also highlights one of the major physical problems in in refugee camps connected to the distributed items: the health effects of indoor cooking. Two million people die every year from indoor cooking.

It also highlights the need for approaches that take into account an individual's need to feel "in control" of his own life situation, or "self-reliance." For designers, these two problems could be solved in one by designing low-cost, sustainable cooking solutions that take health into account and at the same time can be produced within the camps and give some feeling of self-reliance and perhaps an extra income-gathering possibility.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Note**

1. The vast majority of refugee camps have been in existence for much longer than had been intended. While the wishes for the majority of the refugees may be for peaceful and voluntary repatriation, there are now many millions of refugees around the world who exist in what the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees refers to as "protracted refugee situations," living for more than five years outside their countries of origin (Kennedy 2008).

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