

INSIDER'S VIEW

Mobilizing Academic Involvement for UN Humanitarian Action

by Luise Druke

This article reflects on the author's experience as a practitioner operating on the frontline between academia and international civil service, mainly in field assignments during a thirty year career as head of offices or missions for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The challenge of UN humanitarian action, namely of refugee protection, especially at the field level, is to strengthen the policy and practice of refugee protection, a task where collaboration with academia through research and advice can bring invaluable inputs. In the political context of authoritarian regimes in refugee-hosting and refugee-producing countries, allies in the academic sector are crucial, as thanks to their analyses, expertise, and local knowledge can represent a counter balance in support of humanitarian efforts. Collaboration among international organizations such as UNHCR, and national, regional, or international academic experts can help to seize underlying opportunities and overcome the difficulties stemming from the realities on the ground. In the author's experience, this relationship has proven a fertile ground for the development of informed policy and practice, translating academic findings and knowledge into important life-changing innovations.

Introduction

Humanitarian and refugee operations predominantly take place in the midst of violent conflict zones, mainly in the African, Asian, and Latin American regions of the Southern Hemisphere. By assisting refugees to return to their own country or to settle permanently in another country, UNHCR seeks solutions to their situation. To achieve this overall purpose, activities range from conferences and seminars for national and international counterparts and diplomats, to briefings and meetings in national capitals, bilateral and multilateral consultations, lectures in academic settings for the promotion of refugee law and policy. This work takes place in an environment of moving targets and constantly changing political contexts.

It became clear early on in my engagement with the UN that divergence between theory and practice often requires fast rethinking and adapting. As a practitioner with pronounced academic interests and sensitivities, my engagement with the academic world took a variety of forms since joining the UN and proved to be a winning approach throughout. Scholars in the legal, policy, and economic fields have been particularly helpful, and these contacts took a variety of forms since joining the UN. The focus was always on refugee protection, this being UNHCR's primary mandate, namely to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees, striving to ensure every

person in need of protection can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state and to return home voluntarily once turmoil in their home countries has ended.

Taking up new assignments with substantially different profiles, which happened in my case more than ten times over a career spanning three decades, required obtaining detailed briefings, input from appropriate historians and important actors and personalities on the ground, as well as understanding the spectrum of views and perspectives on the particular issue I was working on.

Building alliances with holders of objective academic knowledge and enlisting personalities of recognized standing in their communities can help to create an enabling environment and a humanitarian space in which cooperation, negotiation, and protection becomes more feasible. For example, during my UNHCR term as Head of Mission in Chile in the Pinochet era, connections I fostered between academics and practitioners proved particularly useful for developing solutions for persecuted individuals and informing general approaches to protection issues.

In complex humanitarian situations, lessons can be learned and solutions identified only after careful review of all available information on the relevant issues and listening to concerned voices. At a micro-interaction level, knowing how to speak the “right” language with the adequate tone and tact, even in situations of distress and armed conflict, through field radios and satellite communications, is an ongoing challenge. As a speaker of the official language of the UN as a practitioner working in this field, a precondition for constructive and fruitful outcomes is to learn how to adjust one’s own ethical and political paradigmatic views to sometimes quite different perceptions. The support of fresh academic research and understanding when approaching particular regional, functional, and political challenges can provide the practitioner with useful tools in this regard, helping them to buttress negotiating positions and better tackle the operational issues at hand. Conversely, academics might find the lessons learned from the practical application of their research useful for further reflection on how to make their theoretical work more policy relevant and better contribute to the practices of the UN or other international actors. Therefore, interaction with and input from the academic world can offer UN practitioners valuable ideas for refugee protection, creating opportunities for innovation in the humanitarian field.

My first lesson on the importance of bridging the wide gap between academia and the UN was acquired in Chile in the early 1980s, when it was impossible to discuss refugee issues openly in any other place than in a university lecture hall. Diplomats from embassies of Western countries also participated in lectures and helped find and support solutions for former refugees whose return from exile abroad UNHCR had facilitated.

This paper relates the author’s experience of and lessons learned in humanitarian action, especially in terms of formulation and implementation of refugee policy and law.

Bridging Gaps between Practitioner and Academic Universes

Practitioner and academia universes are two different social subsystems characterized by different languages and goals. The UN terminology in general and that of UNHCR in particular are a world apart. Academic language is theoretical, while UN diplomatic language tends to

be rather operational. The main mission of science is the accumulation of knowledge through theory building, though science also strives to find reasonable solutions to practical problems. UN Diplomacy, in contrast, is meant to achieve strategic goals, such as to defuse crises, to bring negotiations to a successful end. Its language is thus oriented toward practical ends. However, theory is not meant to remain confined in the ivory tower. All along, UN practitioners in the field find themselves on the frontline between “theory” and “practice,” which is a fine line between the perception from the practitioner and from an academic standpoint.

As one of about hundred representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees contributing to UNHCR’s overall mission of assisting more than thirty million people, refugees and internally displaced persons, I found the involvement of academic institutions and research in the area of promotion and dissemination of refugee law and protection principles, promotion and training activities in cooperation with States, and human rights and refugee organizations as indispensable. I now turn to illustrate a number of ways that interaction between academics and practitioners can be beneficial for humanitarian action.

The Importance of Academic Knowledge for UNHCR’s objectives

Based on my experience, the requirements for meeting the objectives of a UNHCR representative’s humanitarian action include a number of elements, some of which are as follows:

1. Get a Historian

Such a historian is to assist in gathering relevant background understanding of the political, legal, historical, institutional, and operational context. There is a legitimate expectation that the head of a UNHCR office or mission be fully familiar with policies, procedures, and possible challenges. Dialogue with directly related parties in the political and security arena as well as with contacts in academic and nongovernmental circles is crucial. To maximize effectiveness, contacts with informed historians on the ground, who are knowledgeable of local developments and know the language of the host country, are important for confidence building.

2. Be Reliable

Say what you do and do what you say. This attitude commands respect and is vital for advancing objectives given a mutual interest among the parties and for identifying solutions in which academic support plays an important role.

3. Show Empathy

This is crucial since it is people who matter who make institutions work. If their dignity is respected and appreciated, agendas advance easier. Demonstrating empathy brings benefits to understanding roles and freedom of action and respect for the interlocutor to be supported in different economic, political, and cultural environments. Empathy is the basis for successful interaction of practitioners and academics. Dialogue with academics can also build empathy with the issue we are called to handle and prepare a UN diplomat to more effectively relate to the local stakeholders, that is governmental and nongovernmental partners, including representatives from the media and pertinent scientific community.

4. Respect and Build Your Environment

One must be aware that the workplace is not a university seminar or an academic meeting. Being the UNHCR Representative, there is an expectation that issues be handled with a sound

understanding of the standard operating procedures of the United Nations, including the diplomatic protocol that goes with it, as well as having relevant academics to rely on in the field. Courteous and sincere compliments help to create an agreeable environment for negotiations. Recent and well-researched insights on the issues being negotiated and consultation with stakeholders help to build respect and a conducive environment for constructive work.

5. Adapt Analytical, Diplomatic, and Language Skills

This is important, in order to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This requires intimate familiarity with UN terminology of formal and informal settings, as well as a multitude of UN acronyms and descriptions and main scholarly work concerning the substantive topics at hand. Academic familiarity with topics at hand helps in switching between different languages, topics, issues, and geopolitical challenges raising real and potential obstacles in negotiations and policy implementation.

6. Formulate Fresh Thinking Based on Feasibility Assessments

There is a tendency in the UN system to quickly characterize colleagues who think ahead or “outside of the box” as unguided missiles or that they create an unmanageable Pandora’s boxes giving it the “tall poppy syndrome” label. However, the mobilization of scientific knowledge and the formulation of creative proposals can offer up ways of better understanding emerging challenges and how to address underlying causes.

7. Present Useful Strategies Backed with Reflections of Theory and Practice

Even when the context of a given negotiation appears clear, in an intercultural context with high stakes involved for interlocutors and partners within the United Nations and outside, communication must be clear and free of arrogance. Policy assistance is best when knowledge driven. It should be concrete and not overburdened with academic language or expressions that would take the practitioner time to understand before translating it into action. The utility of academic guidance for the practitioner is to benefit from a research-informed holistic perspective allowing them to “see the forest around the tree,” i.e., to move beyond ad hoc, situation-related, short-term thinking toward assessing potential positive and negative longer term results.

8. Timing of Intervention in Humanitarian Action is as Important as Location in Real Estate

Even though refugee emergencies take place often in time-sensitive circumstances, staying cool, calm, and collected is most helpful to identify the “right time, the person, and the right issue” to be addressed. The question “When to approach whom for what action” in time of crisis requires careful analysis and wisdom in order to avoid misguided actions. Role of timely academic advice/research concerning a matter under consideration for which consensus is yet to be reached is of the essence in order to buttress a negotiation position and process

9. Staying Ahead of the Curve and Looking Ahead

Strategic thinking with convincingly strong and clear arguments helps to bridge short-term detailed considerations and obstacles. The latter appear more manageable when looked at “from the balcony” with distance and detachment by taking a longer-term perspective. The contribution of academic research and insights can make a difference.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, I sought to share lessons from my own experience as head of UNHCR country offices and missions. I have learned in each situation, with even the most desperate threats, results may be achieved, if pertinent academic involvement can be appropriately engaged. UN diplomats in official functions need to remain diplomats, even when speaking in a “personal capacity.” Acting and speaking in multilateral settings is always on the record, one is exposed even if it is meant to be “off the record.” The divide between scientific knowledge and policy practice remains a fine line and as argued above, elements for success include working with persons who know and understand the country’s context when arriving at a new duty station, listening to new findings and challenges, being reliable, and developing empathy and respect for any working environment. Adapting language and rethinking old paradigms to allow for fresh ideas and useful strategies to emerge at the right time with a longer-term perspective will surely prove useful for all parties to a discussion. Producing results and solving problems, in this case of refugees or persons in need of protection, with the local authorities and other stakeholders is paramount to secure a viable compromise and help to bring about hoped-for changes. To operate effectively as a UNHCR representative in complex humanitarian emergencies and tense environments, it is crucial to keep eminent academic scholars and researchers involved to develop appropriate solutions. Refugees involve cross-border movement and this by definition involves questions of inter-national relations and sovereignty. As a result, discussions between national authorities on such sensitive issues of humanitarian action concerning refugees can become tense. Academics and practitioners have an important role to play in the context and endeavor of advancing an understanding and contributing to solutions of old and new humanitarian problems.