

By [TINA ROSENBERG](#)



[Fixes](#) looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

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Tyler Hicks/The New York Times Somali refugees in

Dabaab, a town about 60 miles from the Kenya border.

In Friday's Fixes column, [I wrote about alternatives to keeping refugees in camps](#) for years. The hundreds of thousands of Somalis streaming today into the camps in Dadaab, Kenya, are getting lifesaving food, medical care and shelter. Camps like Dadaab are designed for emergency care and do it well — but most refugee situations are long-term. Camps condemn refugees to years, maybe decades, of dependency. There are [people](#) in Dadaab who have not stepped outside the camp since it opened in 1991.

There are millions of refugees, however, who never go to camps. Instead, they settle in cities or in the countryside. Some soldier through on their own. But in many cases, the [United Nations refugee agency](#), U.N.H.C.R., helps. Life outside a camp gives refugees the chance to live a dignified exile, and to acquire cash and skills that can benefit them and their country once they go home again.

In 1951, [an international convention](#) set forth the rights of refugees: these include the right to move freely and to work. Camps, however, hold refugees against their will and do not allow them to work in the local economy. Camps are not only routinely violating refugees' rights, the whole camp system is based on their violation.

Lavinia Limón, the president of the [United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants](#), compares the arguments for encampment to the debate about ending slavery. “What were the arguments against freeing the slaves in America? They won't be able to find a job. They are better off where they are. It will destroy the southern economy if we let them loose,” she said. “And all that stuff happened. It really did. There's going to be some dislocation. There is a price. But how many people think that freeing the slaves was a bad decision?”

The Committee for Refugees and Immigrants denounces the “warehousing” of refugees and promotes alternatives. Limón is right that putting millions of fleeing people in camps is victimizing them twice. She is correct that the alternatives carry a price, but a price worth paying.

The problem with this argument is that this price isn't paid by America. It's paid by Kenya, Pakistan and other countries that take in refugees. Refugees flee to nearby countries, many of which are barely better off than their

neighbors. Indeed, often there is no distinction: there are currently Ethiopian refugees in Sudan and Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia. Or there is a difference of perhaps a decade — Ivory Coast hosted refugees from Liberia during that country's civil war, and now Liberia is returning the favor. The United Nations news agency IRIN reports that in the Liberian village of [Janzon Axis](#), on the Ivorian border, the village chief is sheltering on his property the very same Ivorian family that gave him shelter for 14 years.

Including those in Dadaab and other camps, there are well over half a million Somali refugees in Kenya. As a percentage of the population, that would be the equivalent in the United States of 3.75 million people. The United States enjoys economic advantages that Kenya does not. But does anyone think that the U.S. would take in 3.75 million Somali refugees?

This is why refugees are essentially imprisoned and kept dependent on international largesse. Host nations have several reasons for walling off refugees, but there are two that are most important. One is their fear that if refugees are allowed to make lives for themselves, they will not go home again. Legally, they must go home once it is safe, unless their country of asylum lets them stay. But we all know how well that works.

It seems intuitive that letting refugees settle where they wish is an invitation to stay. Camps, on the other hand, seem to make it easy. Everyone is in one place, and everyone is dependent — just close it. “It's a lot easier to deal with people when you just take their rights away,” said Limón.

But it may not be true that refugees in camps are more likely to leave. Jeff Crisp, who is the head of evaluation and policy at U.N.H.C.R., thinks that whether people are in a camp or self-settled probably does not affect whether they go home. Most people want to go home, but they don't want to go with nothing — they want to come home with cash, skills and confidence. And self-settled refugees are often able to maintain closer ties with home. Those Ivorians in Liberia, for example, often cross back and forth — they slip into Ivory Coast to farm their lands during the day, and back to Liberia to sleep at night. These are people who are going home again. Certainly they will go back better-prepared to contribute to the rebuilding of their country than those who return from camps.

Host governments also require camps because they do not want the economic and political costs of absorbing refugees. One reader, Melanie from Oslo ([2](#)), writes: “Kenya's infrastructure, local institutions and social services are inadequate and already strained to a point that many of the country's deeply impoverished citizens are not able to find gainful employment, send their children to school or obtain medical care.” She is correct — which makes it all the more laudable that Kenya, while it has a formal policy of encampment, also hosts thousands of refugees outside camps — some 80,000 in Nairobi.

Study after study has shown that immigrants actually contribute far more money and jobs to their new country than they take — even illegal immigrants. The sudden absorption of tens of thousands of people, however, especially when those people have little education or usable skills, is bound to be a burden. But even they can be productive. S.O. from Chicago ([8](#)) wrote that from his experience as a refugee resettlement worker, poor Somalis often do better than Iraqis in America — they take the first job they can, work hard and form tight communities. Some middle-class Iraqis, he wrote, turn down jobs, handicapped by expectations that are too high. “Just imagine how much talent is lost languishing in today's large camps,” writes Lynn from New York ([7](#)).

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International help for refugees outside camps is often aimed at both helping them and reducing the strains they can place on the communities where they settle. For example, UNHCR will expand or help to stock a health clinic in a neighborhood with a large refugee population. This is crucial — it reduces political opposition to refugees, helps to right some of the unfair burden they place on poor countries and creates something lasting. But the scope of these projects falls far, far, short of what is fair and what is needed. One of the arguments donors like for settling refugees outside camps is that it's cheaper. Well, it shouldn't be. If it is, neighboring countries are being asked to do too

much.

Providing aid to refugees and the communities that host them resembles development work more than it resembles the traditional tasks of feeding and sheltering people in camp. It is not the kind of work the global refugee system is comfortable with. For example, in Janzon Axis, services for refugees — food aid, an expanded health clinic, a new children’s playground — also go to the villagers. Yet UNHCR is building camps for the Janzon Axis refugees, arguing that the only road to the village is impassable during the rainy season, which means aid cannot get through. No surprise; building camps has been our answer for more than 50 years. But a better solution would be to instead take some of that money, and hire the villagers and their guests to build a road.

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This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 7, 2011

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of refugees, based on percentage of national population, that the United States would have to accept to match the relative size of the Somali refugee population in Kenya. It is 3.75 million, not 37.5 million.

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