**Refugees we serve**

Being a refugee in a country that is not one’s own is difficult. That person is neither equal to the citizens of the host country, nor are they able to return to their own country. The only effective way to support refugees in any country is through education, giving individual refugees the skills needed to address the difficult circumstances they are living in, and use these skills to uplift their own community. Skills-building, therefore, should never be an effort that serves the interest of an individual refugee only but a refugee with a strong motivation to serve other members of his/her community as well. This is what we want to achieve with our Learning Centre, providing students with international recognised education and leadership skills.

The Centre for Arab-West Understanding is an Egyptian NGO founded in 2007 with a focus on intercultural dialogue which embarked in 2018 to provide a secondary school education for non-Arabic speaking refugee youth. We have called this, for the time being, the CAWU-Learning Centre since this is how we are registered in Egypt. The goal is to prepare our students for an internationally recognised high school diploma that gives them opportunities to pursue higher education. CAWU’s experience in refugee education made it a natural partner, to execute in 2020 the refugee leadership training project in cooperation with Refuge Egypt of the Anglican Diocese of Egypt, the Comboni Fathers and Sisters and the Egyptian Moral Rearmament Association.

Egypt has been a sanctuary for refugees since ancient times. When there was a drought in countries surrounding Egypt, people came to Egypt as we read about the arch fathers Abraham and Jacob. Centuries later Joseph and Mary escaped to Egypt to protect Jesus from the wrath of king Herod. With the prosperity following Muhammad Ali’s reign, Syrian, Lebanese, Greek and Italian immigrants entered the country. The Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1917-19 led to thousands of Armenians seeking refuge in Egypt. All these migrants received Egyptian citizenship.

The Second World War resulted in millions of refugees which in turn led to the creation of the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950. The support for refugees was regulated in the 1951 UN Refugee convention. Egypt played a major role in the formulation of this convention since Egypt was host to large numbers of refugees following the Second World War. Egypt became the first non-European government to allow the UNHCR establish an office on its territory. New crises, such as refugees fleeing Hungary after the Hungarian revolution in 1956, showed the work of the UNHCR was indispensable.

The decolonisation of Africa in the 1960s let to new crises. When Africa, a continent with a great and fascinating history, was divided between the European powers in the 19th century, Africa was deeply divided into numerous tribes mostly identified by the diversity in languages that were spoken.

Colonisation brought Western education, but African kingdoms and tribes lost their political power. New borders were drawn, often disrespecting existing tribal borders.

Countries were formed, hosting tens of different tribes that had never formed a political unity before the Europeans had arrived. Many colonisers exploited these countries for material gain whilst Muslim and Christian missionaries spread their own belief systems at the expense of traditional African religions. Africa changed dramatically during the period of colonisation but it did not end the tribal divisions. This resulted in African leaders having to choose between allegiances of the newly created nation state or the old tribal allegiances. We see many types of African leaders, those working towards unity while others have embarked on increasing tribal sentiments. It is therefore not surprising that decolonized countries faced instability, some more than others, with tribes and nations fighting each other for resources and power. It became necessary to extend the UN Refugee Protocol in 1967. Egypt also ratified this protocol.

The most important provision of the 1951 Refugee Convention is the prohibition for states to forcibly return a refugee to a country where he or she fears persecution.

Egypt is home to 254,726 asylum-seekers and refugees from 57 nations registered with the UNHCR as of 31 December 2019 according to UNHCR Egypt December 2019 statistical report. Of these refugees 51% is Syrian while 49% is from sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq, and Yemen.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Refugees have come to Egypt because Egypt has been and still is one of the most stable countries in a region full of unrest. Refugees also come to Egypt because they know they can apply for asylum at the UNHCR in Egypt which will protect them from expulsion.

The UNHCR recognises a portion of the refugees which creates a difference in status between recognised refugees and unrecognised asylum seekers and migrants. These numbers are hard to estimate but some claim that this concerns millions of people. The Egyptian census does not distinguish between them and other foreigners who migrate to Egypt. Most of them are illegal. The Egyptian police routinely checks people in the streets and if someone overstayed his/her tourist visa or has no refugee status the police may return the migrant to his/her country.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is particularly hard for refugees and asylum seekers whose native language is not Arabic and female-headed households. Their husbands were either killed or forced to serve in national armies or militia.

Barbara Harrell-Bond(1932-2018), a British American social scientist in the field of refugee studies, who was teaching at the American University in Cairo, describes in Voices in Refuge, the difficulties refugees in Egypt face. She wrote in 2009 that “the lack of national laws on refugees and the unwritten non-integration policy of the Egyptian government have all contributed to the hardship of refugees in Egypt.” [[3]](#footnote-3) The UNHCR has been working for years with the Egyptian government to improve the status of refugees in Egypt. This has borne fruit. Today “Syrian, Sudanese, South Sudanese and Yemeni refugee children have access to education in public schools in Egypt. Refugees and asylum-seekers from other nationalities rely on private or informal education institutions as they have no access yet to public education.”[[4]](#footnote-4) There are still hindrances such as refugees not being able to work without a work permit which reduces work to the informal sector. “Most ratifying states allow refugees to work immediately although some require that they have been resident for three years before allowing them to work. After the three years, refugees should not have to have a work permit,” Barbara Harrell-Bond states. [[5]](#footnote-5)

The numbers of refugees in Egypt have been growing in the past decades. The largest groups from sub-Saharan Africa are from Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Sudan gained independence in 1956 and hosted about 600 ethnic groups speaking over 400 languages. Fighting started rapidly between the Muslim dominated north and the south where traditional African religions and Christianity were dominant. Decades of fighting have created many millions of refugees. I have witnessed the camps around Khartoum in the 1990s where Southern Sudanese refugees were living in horrendous circumstances, that were far worse than anything one could have seen in Egypt in these years. No wonder many tried to escape to Egypt where life was hard but far better than in Sudan. Southern Sudan became independent in 2011 but without the charismatic John Garang (1945-2005) at the helm, tribal fights erupted in the newly independent country, resulting in more refugees fleeing north to Egypt.

The next largest group of African refugees is that of the Eritreans and Ethiopians. The history of Eritrea and Ethiopia is strongly related with Tigrinya both widely spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Both countries were also strongly influenced by Christianity since the 4th century and later experienced Muslim influences. In 1890 Eritrea became an Italian colony, which after a short period of British and UN administration became an autonomous part of Ethiopia in 1952 under US pressure. The authoritarian rule of emperor Haile Selassie and the Marxist government that succeeded him resulted in a 30-year war for independence. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) defeated, under the leadership of Isaias Afwerki (1946 - ) the Ethiopian forces in Eritrea and helped a coalition of Ethiopian rebel forces take control of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.Since then, Ethiopia has been a federal democratic republic.

The achievements of Isaias Afwerke have been huge since Ethiopia had, and still has far more resources than Eritrea. The Eritrean population has been growing from 1 million in 1960 to 3.2 million in 2010. Meanwhile the Ethiopian population has been growing from 20 million in 1960 to 112 million in 2019. The achievements of president Afwerke have come with a high price. He created the national service in 1995 that regulates that nationals, between the ages of 18 and 50 have the duty to participate in national service in the armed forces. With this, Eritrea has become a deeply militarised country that was able to defend its own interests at the expense of the interests of individual citizens. In May 1998 a border dispute resulted in the Eritrean–Ethiopian War, which lasted until June 2000. I have visited Eritrea in this period and met in a delegation of the Cairo Foreign Press Association, with president Afwerki. We were allowed to visit the trenches at the frontline where we saw the body of a recently killed Eritrean soldier and heard stories of young recruits who wished the war would be over. The final peace agreement between the two countries was only signed in 2018, twenty years after the initial confrontation.

Eritrea has built a well-trained army that is with 250.000 – 300.000 personnel which is roughly the same size as that of Ethiopia. The national service is mandatory since the termination of the war with Ethiopia, and conscription is open ended. And there has been no demobilisation. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Continuous political disturbances in the Horn of Africa including the Tigray war that started in 2020 and the ongoing national service in Eritrea, continues to create new refugees. Eritrean refugees in Cairo explain that the national service is harsh, it makes it hard to maintain a family and this has created a steady stream of refugees who escape overland to Egypt through Sudan, where living conditions for refugees are not only very difficult but Sudan also uses the Cessation Clause in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which allows a host state to declare the conditions in the home state to be ‘okay’ so that refugees must return here. It is fear for forced return that makes many refugees move as fast as possible to Egypt.

Refugees from many other countries fled political disturbances in their countries and came to Egypt, including other African and Arab countries in the region.

Most social services are provided by the UNHCR, UNICEF, World Food Program, World Health Organisation, Catholic Relief Service, CARE International, various church projects and other institutions the UNHCR is cooperating with. The government of Egypt allows refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt have access to public healthcare services. It is the aim of the UNHCR to ease the pressure on Egypt which is not surprising. The country is overpopulated since 99% of the population lives in the Nile Valley and Delta. The percentage of people living below the poverty line has increased from 27.8% in 2015 to 32.5% in 2019. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Refugees are, unfortunately, often perceived to be a threat for poor Egyptians in the informal sector. That is not entirely justified. Refugees perform many jobs that even the Egyptian poor do not want to perform, such as women working as cleaners, housekeepers or nannies, in Egyptian and expatriate families, and they live there with the family. The life for refugees is a struggle for sheer survival. Most refugees are unemployed, underemployed, or exploited for their work by being paid lower salaries than Egyptian workers. A substantial number of refugees depend on support provided through the World Food Programme. Others are somewhat better off since they attract remittances from relatives who are living abroad. For one Eritrean family we are aware of, the mother with children lives in Egypt while the father is working illegally in Saudi Arabia, which is risky since if the Saudi authorities discovered this he would be expelled to Eritrea where he would be enlisted into the Eritrean National Service, which would end any support for his family in Egypt.

Since Egypt lacks the means to provide these communities with support, the most desperate among them roam the streets of Cairo and target fellow black Africans, since the Egyptian police would surely clamp down on them if they would dare to target Egyptians or Western residents or visitors to Egypt. Others try to escape to Europe and in doing so often fall into the hands of human traffickers. Many have perished. [[8]](#footnote-8)

There are hundreds of unaccompanied minors in Egypt. They are provided with a stipend of the UNHCR which is discontinued after they or an older sibling turns 18.

The government of Egypt and the UNHCR are aware that it is needed to prevent refugees from becoming an economic burden in the long run. The UNHCR wants to enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third-country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Refugees “must be given assistance and opportunities to integrate and ultimately contribute to Egyptian society. Most important is education, so that they are less likely to resort to criminal activities in order to secure a living,” Barbara Harell-Bond concludes. [[10]](#footnote-10)

This is precisely what we are trying to achieve with the Center for Arab-West Understanding Learning Centre. Our aim is to develop this learning centre into a proper school with a license of the Ministry of Education and Cambridge Assessment accreditation which will make this the first school ever in Egypt that will provide refugees with internationally recognised education that will provide opportunities for higher education, teacher training and better job opportunities with a mentality of serving one’s own community.

Cornelis Hulsman,

Founder, principal of the CAWU Learning Centre

1. UNHCR, Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq & Yemen, 2020, p.5, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/10/ERP2021EN.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cornelis Hulsman, Arrested and Expelled, Arab-West Report Newsletter, September 30, 2018, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/arrested-and-expelled> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barbara Harell-Bond, Foreword in Nora Eltahawy, Brooke Comer, Amani Elshimi, Voices in Refuge; Stories from Sudanese Refugees in Cairo, the American University in Cairo Press, 2009, p. xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. UNHCR, Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq & Yemen, 2020, p.5, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/10/ERP2021EN.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eritrean_Army> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_National_Defense_Force> Accessed April 9, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cornelis Hulsman, Poverty, Water and Stability, Arab-West Report Newsletter, August 6, 2019, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/poverty-water-and-stability>, Cornelis Hulsman and Jonathan Holslag, Serious Negative Consequences of Egypt’s Impending Population Explosion, Arab-West Report, March 22, 2018, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/serious-negative-consequences-egypt%E2%80%99s-impending-population-explosion> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cornelis Hulsman, Coptic Demographic, Migration and Bureaucracy, Arab-West Report Paper, December 23, 2019, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/coptic-demographics-migration-and-bureaucracy> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. UNHCR, Egypt Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq & Yemen, 2020, p.18, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/10/ERP2021EN.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Barbara Harell-Bond, p. xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)