

How Many Years Have Refugees Been in Exile?

Xavier Devictor

Quy-Toan Do



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Abstract

The estimated duration of forced displacement situations is a key parameter in defining an adequate response to the crisis. Where the crisis is short, humanitarian aid may suffice; when it lasts, development interventions are required. Using data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, this paper proposes propose a new approach to estimate the mean and median durations of exile, and their variations over time. The analysis finds that people who were refugees at the end of 2015 have been in exile for an average duration of 10.3 years and a

median duration of 4 years; the average duration of exile has varied between 10 and 15 years since the late 1990s. The number of people who are in protracted situations (over five years) has been steady at 5 million to 7 million since the mid-1990s, and currently stands at 6.6 million. For those people, the average duration of exile is as long as 21.2 years. All these estimates are very sensitive to two situations: Afghanistan, where the crisis has been ongoing since 1979 and increases all averages, and the Syrian Arab Republic, which is relatively recent and lowers the averages.

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Xavier Devictor
World Bank

Quy-Toan Do
World Bank

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Introduction

The Syrian conflict, the unfolding tragedy across the Mediterranean Sea, and the surge of refugees streaming into Europe have drawn the world's attention to the plight of refugees. Policy makers, from East Africa to South Asia, from the Mashreq to the European Union, are struggling to find an adequate response to a crisis which has deep and potentially significant political, economic, and social consequences. As of end-2015, there were 15.5 million refugees (including asylum seekers and people in refugee-like situations) under the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This is the second largest crisis since 1951.

Today, developing countries host the bulk of refugees. Yet, recent events amply demonstrate that in the absence of an adequate international response the crisis cannot be easily contained to a few host countries; some refugees engage in secondary movements and increasingly try to reach OECD countries.

There have been numerous anecdotal reports of refugees remaining in exile for generations. Indeed, forced displacement can last. This duration is highly variable across situations: the exile of Kosovars in 1999 lasted for several weeks, while it has reached close to 70 years for Palestinians. From an operational perspective, the type of support that is needed in protracted situations is essentially distinct from what is necessary during relatively short crises. With the passing of time temporary lack of schooling turns into illiteracy, pressures on social or urban services gradually weaken systems, and the humanitarian response eventually becomes financially unsustainable. In such situations, a different type of approach is needed, one that relies on economic growth and opportunities and that requires a strong engagement by development actors (World Bank 2016). In short, the very nature of the necessary response to a refugee crisis is determined by the (expected) duration of the crisis.

Assessing the likely duration of exile is hence of crucial importance. It helps shape the political environment in which host countries and potential host countries are making policy decisions. It provides the basis on which effective assistance programs can be designed, including the optimal mix of emergency and medium-term support, the degree to which programs need to be embedded in country systems, and the required policy adjustments in host countries.

Based on existing data, it is not possible to calculate an expectancy of the duration of exile as individual-level data are not available. We can however calculate the average number of years people who are currently refugees have already spent in exile. This number can help determine

the degree to which the global response should include a development element. We find that the average stood at around 10.3 years at the end of 2015, with a median duration of 4 years, and significant sensitivity to a few situations. Such numbers re-emphasize the importance of effective humanitarian interventions on the right scale. They suggest that development actors have a role to play but that they need to focus their interventions on a set of discrete protracted situations.

To produce these numbers, we rely on the Population Statistics Database compiled and maintained by UNHCR. The database records the number of “persons of interest” to UNHCR in each year since 1951 and for each situation, where a situation consists of a pair host-origin countries. The calculation of duration of exile is obtained under a *no-turnover* assumption, whereby a decrease in the number of refugees for any given situation is fully attributed to exits from refugee status, while increases are assumed to be fully accounted for by new cases. Although such approach tends to over-estimate the true duration of exile, the lack of individual-level data on registration precludes refining the estimate further.

Attempts to estimate similar statistics have been limited. In a 2004 note to its Executive Committee, UNHCR established the average at 17 years at the end of 2003 (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme 2004). This number has been widely quoted by media, activists, humanitarian agencies, and development institutions (Milner 2014; United Nations 2016; UNHCR 2015).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 1 gives some definitions and background information on the refugee population. In section 2, we provide some summary statistics from our main source of data, the UNHCR Population Statistics Database. Section 3 describes the method followed to construct duration statistics and presents a few stylized facts. The results of our analysis are presented in section 4. Section 5 concludes.

1 Background: Definitions and Data

Under the terms of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees—henceforth the Convention—later amended by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is a person, who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

Data on refugees and asylum seekers are collected by individual countries, international orga-

nizations such as UNHCR, and national and international non-governmental organizations. Data is compiled from a number of sources, including but not restricted to individual registration of refugees and asylum seekers (information typically includes name, gender, date of birth, country of origin, marital status, and place of displacement), tracking of population movement in situations where the movement is fluid or continuous, standardized surveys such as Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys, Labor Force Surveys (LFS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), administrative records and registries. Yet, data collection is a difficult exercise, due to both methodological issues (UNHCR 2014) and practical challenges, especially in situations of heightened insecurity or mass refugee situations.

To date, UNHCR maintains the most comprehensive statistical database under a uniform methodology. UNHCR publishes annual data on refugee flows and stocks by countries of residence and origin dating back to 1951, shortly after the Office was established. UNHCR publishes annual statistical reports ranging from “Global Trends”, “Mid-year trends”, “Asylum trends”, to a “Statistical Yearbook”. There is a consensus that these data provide the most reliable source of information (Sarzin 2016).

Our analysis exclusively uses data from the 1951-2015 UNHCR Population Statistics Reference database (extracted September 18 2015). Data were provided for 173 countries: 77 percent of these data were based on individual refugee registration, 13 percent on estimates, 5 percent on combined estimation and registration, and 5 percent on other sources. The data are structured as follows: for each situation, the database records annual numbers of persons of concern, which comprise “Refugees (including refugee-like situations)”, “Asylum seekers”, “Internally Displaced Persons”, “Returnees”, “Stateless” persons, and “Others of concern”. A situation is a pair country of origin/country of destination. For example, Somali refugees in Kenya account for one situation, Somali refugees in Ethiopia for another, and South Sudanese refugees in Kenya for yet another. Furthermore, a situation is considered major if it involves more than 25,000 people. It is referred to as protracted if it is major for at least 5 continuous years.

The database, and therefore our analysis, is limited to refugees under UNHCR protection.

It does not include asylum seekers, i.e. individuals who have sought international protection under the 1951 Convention but whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined, and persons in “refugee-like situations”, i.e. individuals outside their country or territory of origin who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained (e.g., undocumented Rohingya originating from Myanmar

in Bangladesh).

The data set we use does not cover the 5.1 million Palestinian refugees who are under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The definition of Palestinian refugees in international law is distinct from other refugees. Palestinian refugees are people “whose normal place of residence was Mandatory Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict”. Importantly, their patrilineal descendants are also considered refugees regardless of citizenship (UNRWA 2009).

For the purpose of the analysis, we do not include Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who are defined as “persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border” (United Nations 2004). The categories “returnees”, “Stateless”, and “Others of concern” are also not included.

Overall, we account for more than 99 percent of the total number of persons of concern for UNHCR who are not either IDPs, Stateless, asylum-seekers, or returnees.

2 What do UNHCR data tell us?

Figure 1 plots the total number of refugees worldwide since 1960. The total count stood at 15.5 million at the end of 2015. It has recorded wide variations since 1951, with a substantial increase over the last period. The current crisis is the second largest since UNHCR was established in 1951. The earlier peak, in the first half of the 1990s, was concomitant to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dislocation of Former Yugoslavia, and the Rwanda genocide.

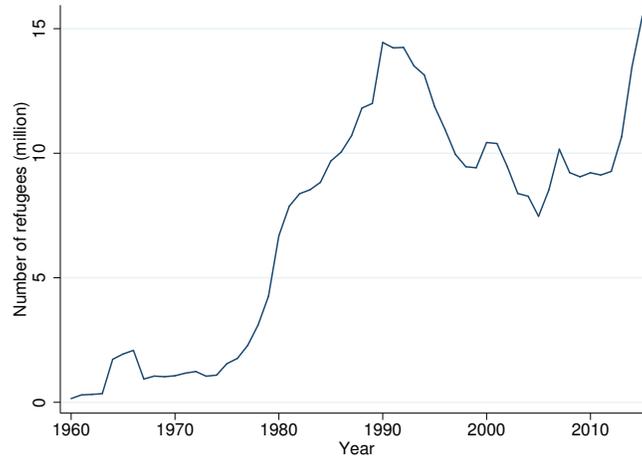


Figure 1: Total number of refugees (1960-2015)

While the ongoing refugee crisis is global, it remains largely concentrated in developing countries especially in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Table 1 reports the top ten origin and destination countries as of 2015. Beside 5.1 million Palestinian refugees, over half of the refugees worldwide originate from the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Somalia, with South Sudan, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar, the Central African Republic, Iraq, and Eritrea also accounting for large numbers. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the refugees are hosted in neighboring countries: Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan for Syrian refugees, Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran for Afghan refugees, and Ethiopia and Kenya for Somali refugees. The influx of refugees towards the European Union (and especially Germany and Sweden), while representing less than 10 percent of the total, has demonstrated that the crisis cannot be contained in isolated corners of the world (see Do and Werker [2016] for a descriptive analysis of the so-called European migrant crisis).

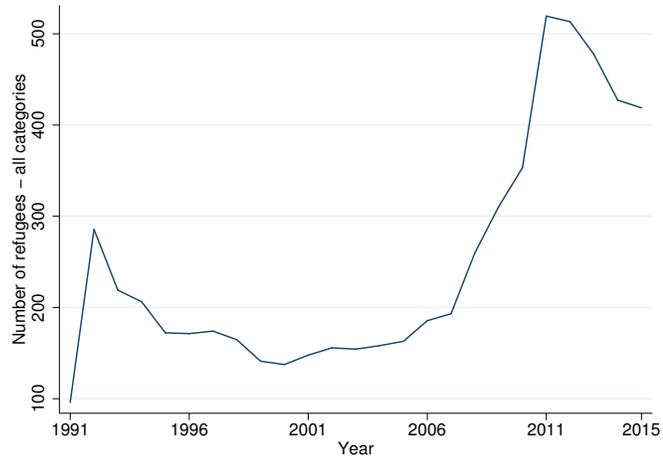
	Host Country	Number	Origin Country	Number
1	Turkey	2,715,873	Syrian Arab Rep.	4,914,718
2	Pakistan	1,566,950	Afghanistan	2,784,373
3	Lebanon	1,079,864	Somalia	1,059,490
4	Iran, Islamic Rep.	979,410	South Sudan	772,394
5	Ethiopia	732,018	Sudan	624,205
6	Jordan	680,952	Congo, Dem. Rep.	497,941
7	Kenya	555,291	Myanmar	481,467
8	Uganda	500,192	Central African Rep.	469,801
9	Germany	484,748	Iraq	381,491
10	Congo, Dem. Rep.	376,144	Eritrea	372,309

Table 1: Top 10 host and origin countries by number of refugees at the end of 2015

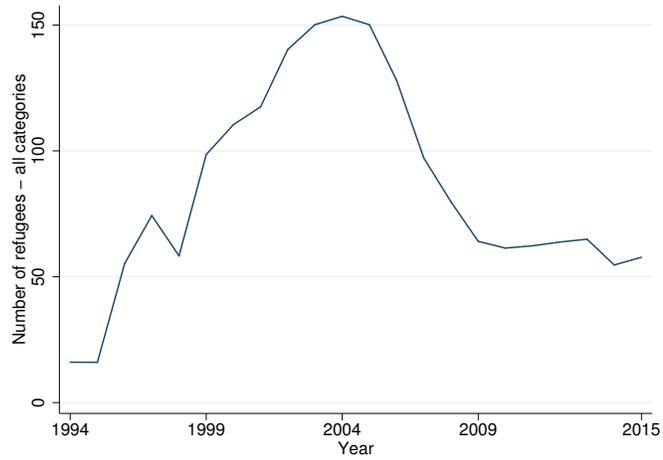
UNHCR data show that there are 33 major refugee situations today which have been lasting five years or more (protracted situations). Yet, forced displacement situations are inherently dynamic and there are often significant variations in the number of refugees during a displacement period. This is often the reflection of the circumstances that cause refugee movements. To illustrate the extent to which UNHCR refugee statistics capture such evolving circumstances, Figure 2 displays refugee statistics for three situations: Somalis, Afghans, and Congolese refugees.

Panel 2a shows the number of Somalis who are hosted in Kenya. Refugees started to arrive massively around 1990, after the fall of the Siad Barre regime and the ensuing civil war. Their number declined slightly around the end of the United Nations intervention (1992-1995) as military clashes between factions became shorter, generally less intense, and more localized. It increased again after 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union challenged the Transitional National Government, leading to an Ethiopia-led military intervention. The combination of violence and food crises that plagued Somalia in late 2000s further pushed into exile large numbers of destitute Somalis. The relative stabilization of the situation since 2012 following the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia has led to a small decrease of the number of refugees.

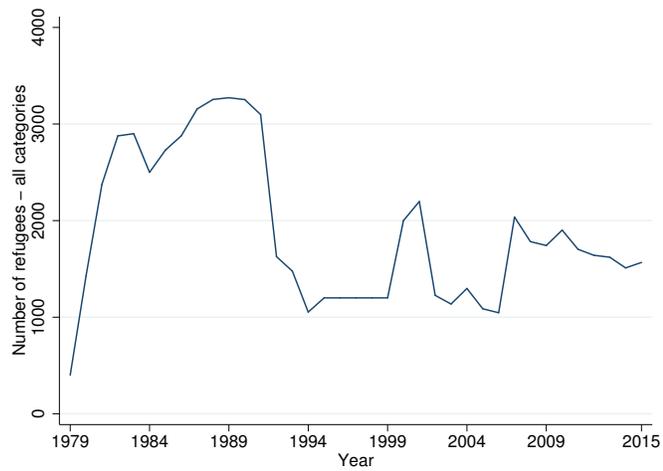
The situation of Afghans in Pakistan follows a similar pattern of ebbs and flows as the political and military situation evolved. Panel 2b reflects the large number of Afghans who fled to Pakistan following the 1979 Soviet invasion, and remained in exile until the withdrawal of Soviet troops in



(a) Somali refugees in Kenya (1991-2015)



(b) Congolese refugees in Tanzania (1994-2015)



(c) Afghan refugees in Pakistan (1979-2015)

Figure 2: What story do refugee numbers tell us? Three illustrations.

1989. There were massive returns in 1991, which resulted in a sharp reduction of refugee numbers. But the outflow resumed in the late 1990s as the Talibans expanded their power and zone of influence. The US-led invasion in late 2001, and the fall of the Taliban regime, allowed for significant returns, but the renewed deterioration of the situation led to a new outflow after 2007.

Finally, panel 2c captures the exodus of Congolese leaving the Eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Tanzania as insecurity spread following the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda (and the flight to DRC of many of the “genocidaires”). Their number rapidly increased as Laurent-Désiré Kabilas Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) launched its march towards Kinshasa to unseat President Mobutu. A small decline following the establishment of the new regime in 1997, was soon followed by a new and larger outflow, as Rwanda and Uganda supported a new rebellion which soon engulfed Eastern DRC in extreme violence and chaos. The reunification of the country following the Sun City negotiations in 2002, paved the way for a gradual return of refugees, although some have remained in exile.

3 Methodological approach

The construction of duration statistics with aggregate data is an arduous exercise. For we do not have information on individual exile experience, hence making necessary some assumptions on turnover. It is also important to clarify what can be measured with available data. This is not the average time people remain refugees: such a statistics would have to include situations that are over and make predictions on the future. It is the average time people who are currently refugees have already spent as refugees. Short of individualized data or detailed breakdown of the population by exile durations, it is not possible to estimate the exile expectancy, i.e. the time a refugee can *expect* to remain in exile.

To overcome such lack of information in the data we are using, we make the following *no-turnover* assumptions. It is assumed that the same individuals are counted year after year. There is at this stage no data to ensure that people who are counted one year are the same as those who are counted the next year. So person A may well return to her country, while person B arrives: the data will note that one person has been in exile continuously. In most situations, this assumption is not correct (there are back and forth movements between the country of origin and the place of exile), but probably not too far from the reality (as long as conditions in a country are so dire that

people continue to flee in large numbers, massive return is unlikely). It implies, however, that any calculation of a duration is an over-estimate.

Technically, if a situation has N_t registered cases in year t , and N_{t+1} in year $t + 1$, then the number of individuals who remained in exile between t and $t + 1$ is given by $\min(N_t; N_{t+1})$. In other words, in years of net refugee outflow, i.e. $N_t > N_{t+1}$, the no-turnover assumption implies that there was an exactly $(N_t - N_{t+1})$ outflow of individuals, rather than a larger outflow mitigated by some inflow. Similarly, in years of net refugee inflow, i.e. $N_t < N_{t+1}$, it is assumed that no refugee left between t and $t + 1$, but rather that $(N_{t+1} - N_t)$ is the exact number of newly registered refugees. Such assumption will over-estimate individual exile durations because it ignores the possibility that among the $\min(N_t; N_{t+1})$, some might actually be new cases.

With the no-turnover assumption, we construct a “lower-bound envelope” of refugee population dynamics as illustrated in Figure 3. This allows us to determine the earlier possible date of arrival for each cohort of current refugees. As an illustration, we go back to the Somalia-Kenya situation. In 2015, the number of Somali refugees in Kenya amounted to 418,844 persons. The first year such number was reached was in 2011. The no-turnover assumption implies that all current refugees have been in exile for 3 years. But in 2010, the number of refugees was 353,208 persons. We conclude that the difference between 2010 and 2011 represents 74,104 new refugees in 2010, who have hence been in exile for four years. In 2009, the number was at 310,458: the difference between 2009 and 2010 (42,750) are therefore people who have been in exile for five years, etc. We repeat the exercise for each year until the beginning of the crisis in 1991. This gives us a number of new arrivals for each year since 1991. On this basis we can calculate average and median durations for this situation.

Next, we aggregate all situations and consider one single “global refugee population”. We have for each year a number of people who arrived in a variety of situations and make up a global flow. We can hence calculate global average and median durations. For each year, we can also break down the flow across countries of arrival. We can construct similar lower-bound envelopes starting from any “current year” which we choose as a reference point. For example, we can apply the same protocols to evaluate average and median durations as of 1994 (the lower-bound envelope is depicted by the dash-dot line in Figure 3). This allows us to follow the variation of aggregate mean and median averages over time.

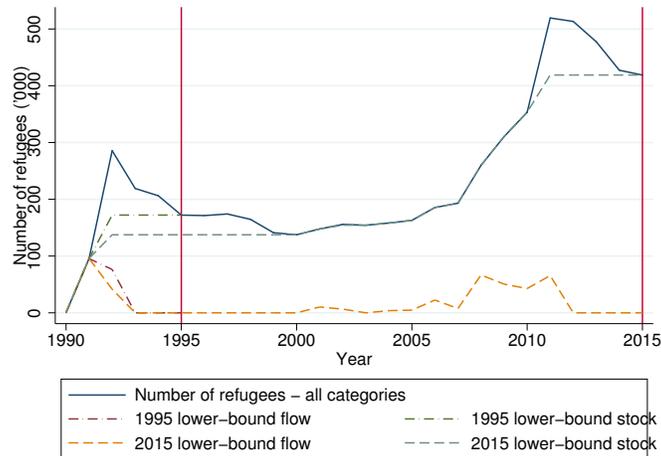


Figure 3: Lower-bound envelope - the case of Somali refugees in Kenya (1990-2015)

4 Results

How long have refugees been in exile? Figure 4 shows the distribution of the “global refugee flow” (aggregating all situations) by duration as of 2015. It provides a nuanced picture of the current refugee crisis.

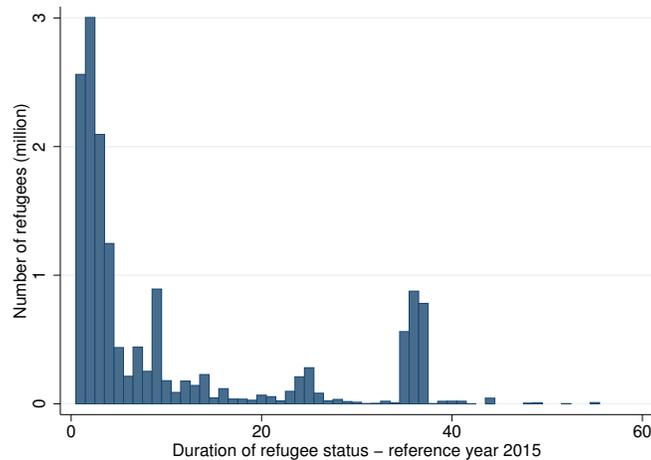


Figure 4: Distribution of refugees by exile duration (as of 2015)

There is a large cohort of about 8.9 million “recent refugees”, who arrived over the last four years. This includes about 4.8 million Syrians, as well as people fleeing from South Sudan (.7 million), Afghanistan (.3 million), Ukraine (.3 million), the Central African Republic (.3 million), and Pakistan (.2 million).

Another large cohort, of about 2.2 million, has spent between 5 and 9 years in exile. It includes refugees from Afghanistan (.5 million), the bulk of the current Somali refugees (.4 million), and people fleeing from Colombia (.3 million) and Myanmar (.2 million).

About 2 million people have been in exile between 10 and 34 years. This includes years during which numbers are relatively low, and two episodes where they are higher, around 14 years ago, with the arrival of about .2 million Sudanese refugees, and around 24 and 25 years ago, with the arrival of about .1 million Somalis and .1 million Eritreans.

A last large group of refugees has been in exile for 35 to 37 years: these 2.2 million refugees include mainly Afghans, but also about .3 million ethnic Chinese who fled into China during the 1979 war with Vietnam. Finally, there are few very protracted situations, up to 55 years, including mainly Western Sahara.

Mean and median durations The figure also shows that the mean duration current refugees have spent in exile stands at 10.3 years (as of end-2015). The median duration, however, stands at 4 years, i.e. half of the refugees worldwide have spent 4 years or more in exile. These averages however are sensitive to specific situations. For example, if refugees from Afghanistan (and refugees who fled Vietnam to China in 1979) are not included, the mean duration drops to 7.1 years and the median to 3 years.

Our approach also allows us to look at the evolution of the average duration of exile over the years. We restricted our analysis to the post-Cold War era, i.e. from 1991 on, since this marked a fundamental change in the global geopolitical system. Figure 5 displays the evolution over time of the average (panel 5a) and median (panel 5b) durations of exile since 1991. To see how these statistics are affected by particular situations, the dashed line excludes some situations – Afghan refugees, Vietnamese refugees in China, and Syrian refugees.

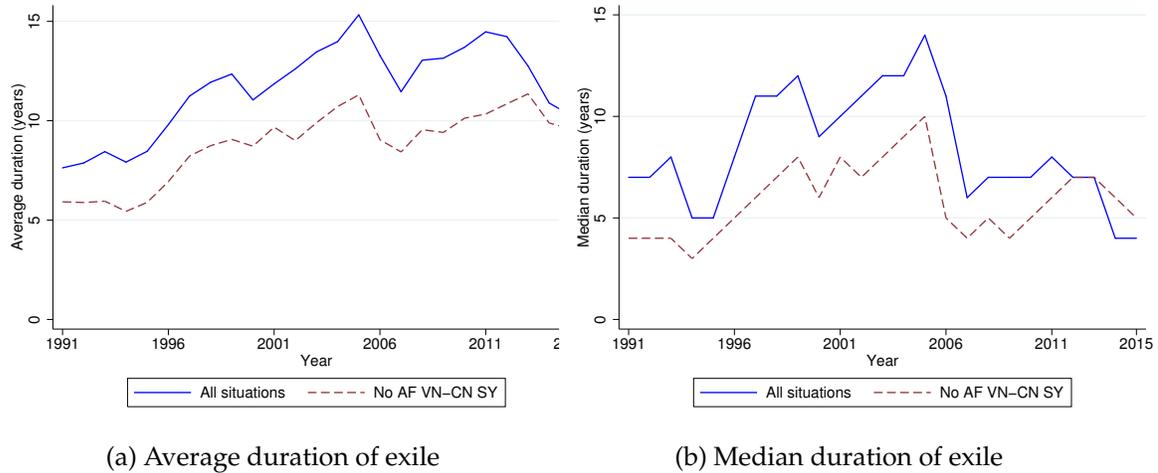


Figure 5: Exile duration statistics

In the absence of any refugee flow (inflow or outflow), the averages should increase by one year for each additional year, i.e. the slope of the line should be equal to 1. Any downward deviation from that “45-degree line” can be caused by an outflow of refugees who have been in exile for longer than the average (due to either returns, integration in host countries, or any other reason associated with discontinuation of registration). It may however also be caused by a net inflow of new refugees who would reduce the average duration of exile. Conversely, when the line is steeper than the 45-degree line, it indicates that outflow mainly consisted of refugees that had not been exiled for long, i.e. less than average.

Since the late 1990s, the mean duration of exile has consistently remained between 10 and 15 years. The relatively low average duration in the 1990s corresponds to a peak flow of refugees leaving their country, as a result of the dislocation of the Soviet Union, of the conflicts in Former Yugoslavia, and of violence in Somalia and the genocide in Rwanda. In this case, a low average duration is the symptom of a deterioration of the global situation. From 1996 on, the mean duration increases along the “45-degree line”, which reflects the relative moderation of in- or out-movements until 1998-1999 and a large return of Rwandans which is paralleled by an outflow of Congolese. The curve once again goes up along a “45-degree line” until a peak in 2005. It drops in the following couple of years, largely due to a massive outflow of Iraqi and Somali refugees, renewed violence in Afghanistan, and large-scale departures out of Myanmar. The following years see ups and downs until the Syrian crisis erupts, pushing large amounts of people into exile and hence reducing the average duration of forced displacement. Once again, again a decline in the average duration reflects an aggravation of the problem.

The difference between the solid and dashed lines reflects the importance of three situations: Afghan refugees (see panel 2c) and Vietnamese refugees in China over the entire period, and the Syrian Arab Republic towards the end of the period. In the former case, the total number of refugees has consistently remained above 1 million since 1979. Similarly, the 300,000-strong Vietnamese refugee community who settled in China in 1979 has steadily grown in size ever since, given demographic growth. If these situations are not taken into account in the computation of the average duration of exile, the number henceforth drops by 2 to 4 years. The Syrian crisis shows up in the data in 2012 by bringing the average exile duration down (panel (a)), and its effect on the median is even starker (panel (b)).

The median however has fluctuated widely, between 4 and 14 years, following the ebbs and flows of ongoing conflicts. It typically increases in years where the flow of new refugees is relatively limited, and it drops dramatically when there are large numbers of new refugees, for example in 1993-1994 (with conflicts in Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda), in 1997-1999 (with conflicts in DRC and other parts of Africa), after 2003 (with conflict in Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan), and since 2013 (with the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic). A decline in the median duration of exile is typically the consequence of a degradation of the global situation.

People in protracted situations A natural additional stylized fact that the data can produce is a time series of the number of people in protracted situations. Figure 6 shows the number of refugees who have been exiled for more than 5, 10, 20, and 30 years, respectively. Among current refugees, up to 6.6 million, i.e. about 42.3 percent of the total, have been out of their country for five years or more (i.e. in a protracted situation). The number of protracted refugees has been remarkably stable since 1991, at 5 to 7 million throughout most of the period. A rapid increase around 2007-2008 corresponds to the earlier flow of Sudanese and Iraqi refugees five years earlier. We also find that while the number of refugees in exile for 5 or 10 years has remained relatively stable over time, the number of refugees in exile for over 20 and over 30 years has gradually increased, in large part due to the lack of solution for Afghan refugees.

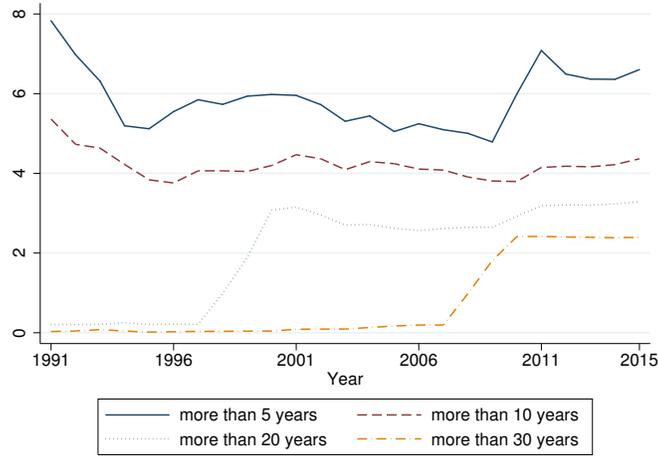
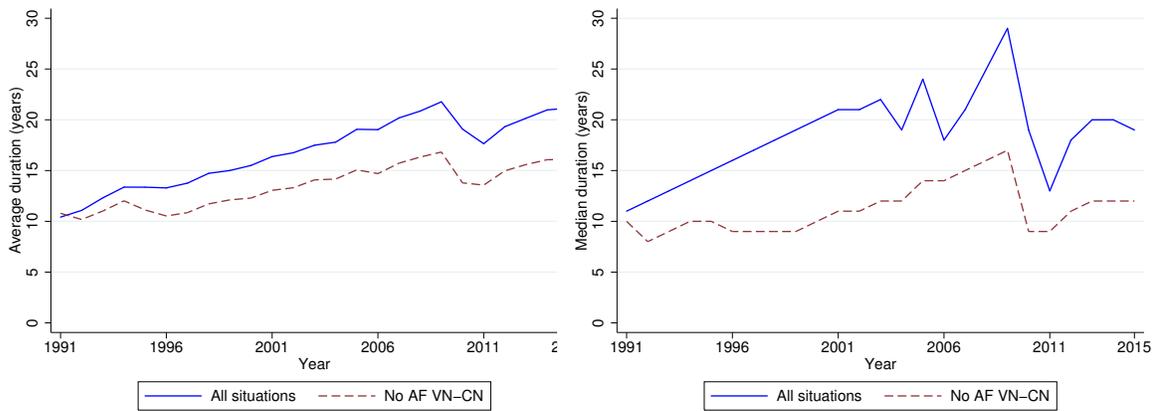


Figure 6: Number of refugees in protracted situations (1991-2015)

Finally, we look at the evolution of the average and median duration of exile in protracted situations (i.e. only for refugees who have spent at least five year in exile). Figure 7 suggests that until recently, these two numbers have been on an upward trend, driven by long-lasting situations involving large numbers of people. This includes Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Vietnamese refugees in China, Western Sahara refugees in Algeria and Mauritania, Somalis in Kenya, and Myanmarse in Thailand. The average and median durations for these populations currently stand at 21.2 and 19 years, respectively. The slope of the curve, however, is less than one, which reflects the constant inflow of new forcibly displaced refugees: this is consistent with the trends described above. The decline in the average duration of protracted situations in 2009 corresponds to the peak of entries in these categories that is observed in figure 6.



(a) Average duration of exile

(b) Median duration of exile

Figure 7: Exile duration statistics - protracted situations

5 Conclusion

This short analysis of UNHCR data provides several insights. First, it shows that available refugee data can be used to clarify some important parts of the policy debate. Much of this debate has been informed by advocacy on the one side, and xenophobia on the other. Using evidence can help provide a more nuanced perspective of a complex issue.

Second, it highlights the limitations of available data. In particular in the absence of individualized data, it is not possible to calculate the average duration of exile, but only an over-estimate. It is also not possible to calculate an expectancy which could be useful for policy makers. Should individualized data be available, such calculations would become possible.

Third, it provides an over-estimate of the mean duration of exile at around 11 years and of the median duration at about 4 years. The mean duration of exile has been fairly stable since the late 1990s, at 11 to 15 years.

Fourth, it underlines the plight of those who are in protracted exile. Their number has remained steady since the mid-1990s, at 5 million to 7 million people. The mean duration of their plight, however, has gradually increased and exceeds 20 years.

Fifth, it suggests that all these numbers are very sensitive to two country contexts: Afghanistan, which pushes all averages up (and without which the average duration of protracted situations is reduced by almost half) and the Syrian Arab Republic which still brings them down. Yet, when both situations are excluded, neither the mean nor the median varies substantially.

And sixth, it shows that in many cases a reduction in the average duration of exile is the result of an inflow of new refugees, and hence of an aggravation of the situation.

Unfortunately, comparable data are not available to carry out similar calculations for IDPs. The definition of a “protracted situation” for IDPs is also complex, considering that there is no clear definition of what would constitute a measurable end-point for their ordeal. Case studies may provide more useful insights than aggregate global figures.

These numbers re-emphasize the importance of effective humanitarian interventions on the right scale. They suggest that development actors have a role to play but that they need to focus their interventions on a set of discrete situations. Time-series also show that the perceptions of a crisis spinning out of control are not supported by the available evidence. And let us never forget that this is not about numbers but about people and about an immense amount of human suffering.

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