Ordinary People in Humanitarian Emergencies

A Review of Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts and Evan Easton-Calabria, *The Global Governed? Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance,* Cambridge University Press, 2020. 154 pp. £29.99 (PB). ISBN: 978-1-10881-6700

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" [f]rom global pandemics to hurricanes., we have seen that affected populations often mobilise not just to help themselves but to offer vital assistance to vulnerable members of the community" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 4),

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey social housing block in West London. The fire spread rapidly until it was brought under control during the afternoon of 15 June 2017. In what is said to be the worst instance of a fire on residential premises in the UK since the second world war, 72 people are known to have died, more than 70 were injured and around 150 homes were destroyed.

The Grenfell Tower fire was a humanitarian emergency which unfolded in one of the most affluent areas of one of the most affluent countries in the world, but, despite what might be assumed to be a sophisticated infrastructure of social protection and support, it quickly became apparent that the state apparatus was ill-equipped and slow to act to alleviate the risks, including homelessness and hunger, to which those who survived the fire were exposed. In default of action from state-led organisations, it fell to people resident in the neighbourhood of Grenfell Tower to come forward with food, drink, clothing and other necessities. Temporary shelter for those whose homes were destroyed was provided by local mosques, temples and churches. As one commentator stated, "...communities and groups of North Kensington...applied organic, self-organising methods…" (Charles 2019, p. 167) to aid the injured, bereaved, hungry and homeless.

Now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, a similar pattern of glaring gaps in government support being filled by private citizens is evident. Two prominent examples will suffice to illustrate the point. First, the coronavirus "lockdowns" have highlighted the extent to which many children are reliant upon schools for their basic subsistence, including food. The UK government implemented a voucher system whereby children who are entitled to free school meals would still be able to access food during school closures. However, there have been reports of delays in the distribution of these vouchers, making it necessary for teachers, parents and other volunteers to deliver food parcels to those in need (Guardian, 19 March 2020). Second, in the context of the severe shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) available for NHS workers, care home workers and others involved in essential work among the general public, schools have donated science goggles as alternatives to standard PPE (Guardian, 25 March 2020).

What is particularly striking about these instances of efficient and effective mobilisation by ordinary citizens is that they invariably occur against the backdrop of an official discourse which downplays the agency of non-state actors in times of humanitarian emergencies. The law plays a pivotal role in shaping this official discourse. As I have argued elsewhere, emergency legislation, such as the UK Coronavirus Act 2020, does not simply confer powers on some and impose obligations on others they also construct narratives about why the society on which they will operate is in need of further ordering (Tuitt, 3 April 2020). In short, the official discourse rests upon a normative claim that "... during a crisis or emergency the subject population's capacity for agency or self-governance is sufficiently diminished as to require external governance" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 16).

The Global Governed? Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance is a timely publication which draws on empirical case studies to explore the consequences to populations made vulnerable as a result of humanitarian emergencies of the "...presumption that a community cannot self-govern…" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 21) in such times.

Located in two east African countries (Kenya and Uganda), the book documents how Congolese, Somali and Sudense refugees living in Kampala (chapter three), Nakivale (chapter four), Nairobi (chapter five) and Kakuma (chapter six) have self-organised to " ...provide sources of assistance to other refugees in areas as diverse as education, health, livelihoods, finance and housing" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 15). In doing so, the book renders "legible" the vital role that ordinary citizens play during humanitarian emergencies.   Whilst being rightly wary of "romanticising" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 19) the roles of the approximately eighty refugee-led organisations which provide the empirical material for the book (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 29), the authors reflect

on the "...norms, practices and behaviours...silenced, obscured or ostracised…" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 18) which might otherwise have been allowed to flourish if the role that non-state actors play in times of crisis were to be appropriately acknowledged.

In very concrete terms, the book also illustrates the distinct advantages that refugee-led organisations, and the refugee communities they support, gain as a result of the fact that refugee-led organisations, for the most part, are "... unburdened by the processual obligations of working within the agency systems…" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 79). For example, the regional study set in Nakivale, Uganda revealed the following:

"When...refugees arrive...the offices are often all closed. They need a place to stay the night; we cannot let our people sleep on the streets. The next morning, they go again to find that no one is willing to help straight away. Registering takes time, and in the meantime, what are people meant to do?" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 64).

The same regional study also revealed that often refugee-led organisations were more effective in quickly building "liveable homes" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 59), in contrast to the efforts of UNHCR, which "...will take a long time to even give you a plastic sheet" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 59).

Overall, the authors aim to encourage a fundamental shift in thinking about crisis governance so as to enable those usually perceived as mere subjects of such governance to be acknowledged instead as "...integral actors in the making of global governance, participating in the making of rules and norms and the creation and provision of global public goods" ((Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 11).

The book certainly helped me to think through the question of how and by whom emergency relief is delivered during the humanitarian emergencies that have occurred/are occurring in the UK, and prospective readers should not feel that the book's focus on refugee-led organisations unduly limits the insights that can be gleaned from it. Indeed, as the author's make clear, the implications of their findings are not confined to any particular population (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 11). What the authors seek to do is to draw attention to the necessity for policy and academic literature on crisis governance to adopt an "...ontological focus on the beneficiary or affected populations in global governance" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 20). In this regard:

"... studying refugee-led social protection...has implications for global governance more broadly. The refugee system represents just one example of a policy field characterised by a provider-beneficiary relationship. Health, development and humanitarian governance are analogous contexts. In each of these areas, recipients of aid are usually cast as objects

of governance rather than subjects involved in shaping global governance" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 4).

An important question that the book goes a long way toward answering is why it is that, despite evident deficiencies of state and state-led organisations, a humanitarian emergency will always see "... the authority to govern...transferred from the community to a group of external actors" ((Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020 p. 12). A key example of this phenomenon which is used in the book is the two-decade "monopoly" position exercised by UNHCR's Implementing Partner, InterAid, in Kampala, "...despite being viewed by many refugees as ineffective…" ((Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 118).   For the authors, the answer lies in the fact that "[p]rotection… is inextricable from power" ((Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 116), or, to put it another way,"[p]rotection invariably becomes governance" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 15). It is, thus, in the interest of the state to monopolise forms of emergency social protection. So, in a seeming paradox, "...protection becomes a justification to prevent communities from mobilising to provide social protection" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 117).

For the refugees in the study the "… connection between assistance and governance, and the role of power therein" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p.18) was experienced whenever they saw "...their ideas... 'stolen' by implementing partners" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p.54). Overall, refugees perceived state-led organisations as exploitative of them (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 69 and p. 99). Where refugee-led organisations were seen to have "..infringed upon the territory that had been competitively carved out by agencies for themselves..." (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 68), their ".significance was repeatedly downplayed…" (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 68).

I conclude this review with a final reflection on the relation between power and protection which the authors do so well to explicate. A population made dependent on forms of state-engineered emergency social assistance becomes increasingly vulnerable to authoritarian displays of governance. As the coronavirus lockdowns have caused more and more of the employed and self-employed in the UK to seek the government financial help that comes in the form of Universal Credit, the authors' following words of caution appear especially apt:

 "An immediate threat to a subject population is used to legitimate external intervention in order to mitigate that threat and restore a particular version of normality. Protection can play an important role in safeguarding life and ensuring human welfare, but to protect is also to govern. Protection is mediated by power and, if prolonged, can lead to subjugation and the erosion of autonomy" ((Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020, p. 120).

References

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