

The Urbanization of Forced Displacement: UNHCR, Urban Refugees, and the Dynamics of Policy Change. By Neil James Wilson Crawford. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 344 pp.

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Volume 40, numéro 1, 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111717ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41424>

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Éditeur(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (imprimé)
1920-7336 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Dukhan, H. (2024). Compte rendu de [The Urbanization of Forced Displacement: UNHCR, Urban Refugees, and the Dynamics of Policy Change. By Neil James Wilson Crawford. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 344 pp.] *Refuge*, 40(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41424>

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The Urbanization of Forced Displacement: UNHCR, Urban Refugees, and the Dynamics of Policy Change

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BOOK REVIEW

Neil James Wilson Crawford. *The Urbanization of Forced Displacement: UNHCR, Urban Refugees, and the Dynamics of Policy Change*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 344 pp. ISBN: 9780228008187 (cloth, paperback, eBook).


HISTORY Published 2024-05-13

In **The Urbanization of Forced Displacement**, Crawford offers us an insightful account into the way that international organizations navigate the difficulties surrounding their missions in a world that is heavily influenced and managed by the state and its governing structures. The author deliberately selects the topic of urban displacement and the corresponding response by UNHCR to provide us with a deeper understanding of how policy-making operates within international organizations. By focusing on this specific issue, the author aims to shed light on the complexities and challenges faced by such organizations when formulating policies that address the needs of displaced individuals in urban areas. A significant portion of the existing research conducted on international organizations focuses on the role of states in shaping and influencing the behaviour of these organizations. This book, conversely, shifts the attention to the internal structure of these organizations by shedding light on “specific actors” (p. 5) within UNHCR.

The author argues that UNHCR’s “research and the evaluation unit” played a pivotal role in shaping its response to the growing phenomenon of urban displacement.

The author methodically traces structural developments within the organization that show how successive research units developed and changed their course of action regarding urban displacement over a period of two decades. This research unit worked as part of what the author describes as an epistemic community comprising UNHCR field officers, external non-government organizations, and academics, among others. Crawford analyzes how this epistemic community eventually succeeded in making UNHCR shift its global policy towards urban displacement (and specifically urban refugees), from considering it a marginal issue in its scope of work to its being central in the organization’s global operations. The author utilized UNHCR’s online archives to conduct the research, citing over 400 UN-published documents, cataloguing this material, and

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using it to identify the patterns in UNHCR's work.

The book has seven chapters that explore UNHCR's policy shift on urban displacement. The introductory chapter highlights the aim of the book, which is to examine why and how UNHCR changed its approach. It emphasizes that most refugees today reside in urban areas rather than camps, which was not always the case. Chapter 2 presents a conceptual framework using three concepts: state influence, agency slack, and mission creep. It challenges state-centric theories and explores how UNHCR addressed urban displacement without specific state instructions. In Chapter 3, the author provides a basis for understanding of policy-making in the United Nations, including the actions and interactions of different parts of it, through the framework of the "three UNs": (a) member states, (b) secretariat and officials, and (c) external actors, including NGOs, consultants, and academics, among others. The chapter also provides an insightful history and background of UNHCR's work and growth since 1950.

The remaining chapters delve into empirical evidence. Chapter 4 examines UNHCR's historical handling of urban displacement before 1994 before concentrating on the development of the organization's first urban refugee policies in 1997, highlighting negative portrayals of urban refugees but also the organization's policy development and establishment of the research and evaluation unit. Chapter 5 discusses the opportunities and constraints faced by epistemic communities and research units in enforcing a new global approach to urban displacement. It reveals the failure of the 2003 Guiding Principles due to their perceived liberalism and weak organizational leadership. Chapter 6 focuses on the successful change in UNHCR's official policy on

urban refugees in 2009. It attributes this shift to internal actors utilizing agency slack and the absence of direct state instructions. Finally, Chapter 7 explores the ruptures in UNHCR's successive policies towards urban refugees, emphasizing the importance of understanding how epistemic communities connect the organization with the outside world for comprehending policy-making in international organizations. The chapter provides a snapshot of developments in the years since 2009, including new and ongoing challenges faced by UNHCR, and avenues for future research.

The Urbanization of Forced Displacement has several significant strengths. First, the book provides a comprehensive exploration of the issue of urban refugees in the contemporary world, presenting valuable perspectives for both academic and policy researchers. While it is widely acknowledged that most refugees now reside in urban areas, there remains a crucial need for further research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by displaced individuals living in cities, as well as the way key protection and support organizations work in urban areas and respond to new developments in displacement. By directing attention to the study of this particular population, the book ensures that their concerns receive the necessary consideration, which is often overshadowed by a focus on refugees residing in camps by some researchers, officials, and practitioners. It provides a vast range of insightful examples of urban displacement situations around world in the 1990s and 2000s, such as the presence of large numbers of Iraqi refugees in cities in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, and how these local experiences informed UNHCR's global approach.

Second, by utilizing UNHCR as a case study, Crawford skillfully unravels the intricate

nature of international organizations. International organizations are often wrongly perceived as homogenous entities, but the book clarifies that they are in fact heterogeneous actors comprising multiple sections and parts, with complex external relations and interactions. Through the examination of UNHCR, the book reveals the diverse roles played by different sections within the organization. Notably, UNHCR's research and evaluation unit emerges as a pivotal component in enhancing the organization's capacity to effectively address the specific needs of urban refugees. This insight highlights the significance of internal dynamics and specialized units in shaping the overall response to issues and offers an important contribution to the study of global refugee policy.

Last, the book challenges the prevailing realist assumption that international organizations serve merely as tools to advance the foreign policy agendas of states. It expertly showcases the evolution of UNHCR and its autonomous agency in incorporating urban refugees into its agendas, policies, and operations. This counter-narrative demonstrates that international organizations can act with their own agency, transcending state interests and actively pursuing more inclusive approaches than would be allowed for if purely working at the behest of states.

The strengths of **The Urbanization of Forced Displacement** lie in its comprehensive

examination of urban refugees, its meticulous detail and vast number of examples, its emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of international organizations using UNHCR as a case study, and its challenge to realist assumptions regarding the role of international organizations. By shedding light on these aspects, the book significantly contributes to the understanding of forced displacement in urban settings and the role of UNHCR in global politics while offering valuable insights for researchers and policy-makers alike. The book will be an important source for those who are interested in studying the issues of forced migration, humanitarianism, and policy formulation, and it is an important reference that enriches the field of international relations.

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