How international recognition of cultural practices could be a new way to protect refugees

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More than 6.6 million refugees live in camps located largely in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In these camp communities, unique cultural

practices can arise. In our new research, we found the oral histories and healing practices of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal changed over the decades they spent in camps.

In other words, camps foster new and unique cultural practices.

Camps are dynamic, culturally significant spaces. This finding does not celebrate refugee camps. It does recognize the strength and tenacity of people living in these situations.

But the cultural practices in the Bhutanese camps are now threatened because the refugees and their cultural practices don't have legal protections. We propose the significance of these cultural practices may provide an alternative pathway to protection.

Protecting remaining refugees

Camps managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provide legal protection and basic support for people fleeing persecution. But what happens when camps officially close but refugees remain?

Last a year a Bhutanese refugee, and our long-term research partner, asked us this question. He was part of one of the world's largest resettlement programs for refugees. After decades in camps, between 2007 and 2015 almost all 100,000 refugees from Bhutan were resettled in the United States, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Not everyone was resettled. Roughly 6,000 refugees remain in Nepal due to old age, ill health and hope for repatriation to Bhutan, and some are newly arrived political prisoners only just released.

These people are still refugees. They cannot go home, and have limited ways to build a new life in Nepal. But the UNHCR has phased out its involvement in the camps. The refugees' legal protections and food rations are being cut. These refugees are sitting in limbo, with their homes, their community and their unique culture having no legal protections.

For decades Bhutan has refused to take back the people they ethnically cleansed. Nepal refuses to grant them citizenship. There aren't many pathways to protecting refugees once the UNHCR is not involved.

It is necessary to think creatively to identify possible solutions to protect these remaining refugees.

Unique cultural practices

We were particularly interested in the refugees' oral histories and the rituals of their traditional healers, known as jumping doctors.

Oral histories are a key way communities make sense of the past and find meaning in their current situation. While the oldest refugees understood their exile in terms of religious persecution, the generations raised in the camps saw their history primarily in terms of being advocates for democracy.

The oral histories of the Bhutanese refugees changed in the camps as they interacted with the governing organization, which provided a robust education in democratic values.

Without protections, the remaining refugees may face restrictions in transmitting their oral histories.

Camp management also provided protection and certifications for

traditional healers to practice their craft. Their healing rituals involve the creation of healing effigies, drumming, jumping and chanting. In Nepal, the number of traditional healers is dwindling and healers are not recognized via a certification process.

Without the protections from the UNHCR, jumping doctors and their knowledge may disappear.

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage might be a way to protect these practices and, by extension, the refugees who remain after UNHCR withdraws from a camp.

We tend to think of UNESCO Heritage Sites as physical places like Notre Dame or the Great Barrier Reef.

But UNESCO also safeguards cultural practices, such as dance, theater, food and craftsmanship. Through the intangible heritage convention, unique cultural practices and practices at risk of being lost can gain recognition. The hope is recognition will support sustainable development, open up funding pathways and ensure cultural knowledge does not disappear.

To gain recognition, a cultural practice must be nominated. Ideally, communities will self-nominate a cultural practice they recognize as significant, is transmitted and recreated across generations, and provides a sense of identity.

We analyzed the nomination process and found significant gaps between the goal of having communities nominate their practices and how it is implemented. This means the culture of communities based in refugee camps are at a significant disadvantage.

Towards a fairer process

Currently, nomination forms are only available in English and French. Communities that lack access to education in these languages may struggle to complete the forms. To be accessible to all communities, the form should be available in a variety of languages.

When examining the nomination process, it became clear some minority groups, refugees and stateless people will struggle to have their cultural heritage recognized. This is because governments of nation-states verify the community practice meets the nomination requirements and they ultimately have responsibility for the protection framework.

It is unlikely nation-states will nominate or accept responsibility for protection of cultural activities in refugee camps. The current process means refugees are subject to the whims of nations' priorities.

It doesn't have to be this way. The nomination process could be modified so communities can self-verify. Further, it may be necessary that organizations beyond or outside of the nation-state take on responsibility for the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

Linking to a globally recognized brand like UNESCO could provide livelihood strategies for situations like the Bhutanese refugees. For example, the Bhutanese want to build a memorial center to ensure their oral histories are recorded. International recognition could help them secure funding and create employment opportunities. Global recognition could attract visitors to the memorial center.

This is not to suggest refugee camps should become tourist destinations, but it may provide a way for them to make decisions about their own cultural practices.

Refugee camps are not generally thought of as culturally significant sites. But it is clear from our work with Bhutanese refugees the camps are

sites of important cultural practice but refugees have limited scope to advocate for safeguarding these practices.

A truly community-driven path for cultural heritage protection through UNESCO could be an avenue to achieve this important goal.

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