

Protection and Assistance for Forced Migrants: The Art of Socio-economic Integration



Jeonghwan Yun

Ph.D., Associate Research Fellow, Policy Analysis Team
Korea Institute for International Economic Policy

“战争不成就英雄，只会留下孤儿寡母。”

(War does not make heroes, only leaves orphans and widows.)

- Arrival (Movie), 2016

Korea's Refugee Law was enacted in February 2012, and came into effect in 2013. Ten years later, in February 2022, Russia opened fire Ukraine. Since February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine War has created more than 7 million Ukrainian refugees internationally, aside from another nearly 7 million internally displaced within the border.¹ At the time of the Russian invasion, there were approximately 3,800 Ukrainians in Korea, and Korea's Ministry of Justice promptly granted them humanitarian residential status. The Ministry also simplified the visa application process to accommodate the specific needs of Ukrainians displaced from their homes.

¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>

Since then, more than 3000 de facto refugees have entered Korea in 2022. However, most of these Ukrainians are not granted refugee status (F-2-4 visa), but a humanitarian status (G-1-6, and other similar categories). There are concerns about the limitations and stability of their G-type visas, as they restrict their choice of occupations and require frequent renewals. This can hinder their participation in stable education and career opportunities, posing challenges for their long-term socio-economic integration.

In a separate incident in August 2021, Operation Miracle brought 378 individuals known as "Special Contributors" from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Korea. The Ministry of Justice emphasized that these individuals and their families were not simply refugees or asylum seekers but were recognized as "Special Contributors" for their exceptional dedication and friendship with Korea. In early 2022, through another exceptional process under the Prime Minister's instruction, they were eventually granted refugee status.

Regardless of the name, the Refugee Law was still applied to support the settlement of the Afghan families. The support package comprises primary social security, medication, education, and job training. However, questions and concerns have arisen about whether the support provided is sufficient for their settlement and long-term integration into Korean society. Given that many of these Afghan families are highly educated and skilled professionals, it would be unfortunate if they were unable to fully realize their potential in their new home. Additionally, there are 242 children among these Afghan families, and it is crucial to ensure their successful growth and integration as proud members of Korean society.

Korea did not draw significant attention to refugee issues until 2018 when 561 Yemeni asylum seekers arrived in Jeju. Even before any decision was made from the authority, the sheer antipathy and controversy rose from the public. A public poll in 2018 shows how 43.4% Koreans believed these asylum seekers are "not legitimate refugees, because they came for economic reasons", and 86.9% expressed reluctance to grant refugee status to these asylum seekers.² The controversy even led to a petition calling for the abolishment of the Refugee Law, which garnered over 700,000 signatures and prompted legislative attempts to amend the law in the National Assembly.³ After a few months, only two Yemenis, out of 561, were accorded of the refugee status, and Yemen was excluded from visa waiver program.

Is Korea any "Refugee-free?" The perception of Korea being "refugee-free" obscures lesser-known facts. As early as 2001, the Korean government granted its very first refugee visa, with the first

² Suk, Insun and Kisik Hwang. 2019. "Yemeni Refugees on Jeju Island and Human Security: Focused on Social Integration." *Minjok Yeonku*, 74, pp. 92-115. (in Korean)

³ Oh, Seung-Jin. 2018. "A Study on the Korean Practice of Refugee Recognition and Some Recommendations." *Kyung Hee Law Journal*, 53(3), pp. 389-414. (in Korean)

application dating back to 1994. In 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, a staggering 15,452 asylum seekers applied for refugee status in Korea, yet only 79 were accepted. Over time, a total of 1,163 refugees have been officially recognized by Korea's Ministry of Justice.⁴ Financial support has also been extended, with approximately \$5 million allocated from Korea's Official Development Assistance (ODA) for "Refugees in Donor Countries" (CRS sector code 930) between 2018 and 2021. This amount accounts for 0.01% of the total ODA under CRS 930 worldwide.⁵ However, these numbers solely account for de jure refugees, while the plight of de facto refugees and forced migrants often goes unaccounted for. Thus, Korea may mistakenly seem "Refugee-free", but at least it is not an "uncontaminated" empty void.

Korea is known for its low acceptance rate for asylum seekers, as low as 1-2%. This is one of the lowest among G20 countries, only second to Japan. Unfortunately, the rate drops lower every year. While it may seem that Korea is detached from global challenges related to refugees, this misconception arises from not accurately counting de facto refugees. Korea's refugee policy leaves out a significant number of forced migrants in a gray zone. While this approach may help prevent controversy, disputes, and conflicts within society, it is achieved through leaving Korea's screening system defensive, and settlement policy relatively passive.

Is it feasible for Korea to maintain a perception of being "Mistakenly-Refugee-free"? Should Korea maintain its current refugee policy? It is commonly believed that most refugees origin from Africa, West Asia, or Latin America. This belief may still be partly valid, and donor countries support the regional peace-keeping efforts to prevent large-scale migration from these regions. However, these donor countries themselves are still major destinations for refugees. They engage in active public discussions and adopt proactive migrant policies. While humanitarian aid and development assistance may alleviate the situation in certain developing countries, they cannot solve all the global challenges we face today.

We live in a time of trans-border composite crisis, and East Asia is no exception. East Asia, both north- and south-, faces multifaceted turbulences, risks, and dynamics, that might lead to a form of mass migration; and is very likely to face bigger challenges, possibly in the near future. It is worth noting that the largest number of refugees accepted in Korea are from Myanmar: not Ukrainian, Afghan, nor Yemeni, those once were a center of media's attention. Whether the public notice it or not, Korea is being called upon to fulfill its role as a responsible member of the global society.

What constitutes an effective refugee policy? It goes beyond simply conducting rigorous screenings

⁴ https://www.index.go.kr/unity/potal/main/EachDtIPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2820

⁵ <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>

of asylum seekers; it involves comprehensive measures for the post-screening phase as well. Recent studies, such as Maystadt et al. (2019)⁶ and Zhou et al. (2022)⁷, provide insights into successful socio-economic integration of forced immigrants. They highlight the significance of a well-designed refugee hosting strategy combined with proper support and regional development policies, and how it minimizes backlash and resource competition between refugee settlers and the local community. These measures can contribute to economic revitalization in the long-run. For Korea, the crucial area for improvement lies in these later stages of the refugee policy, drawing lessons from its own hosting experiences.

Unfounded fears and anticipated risks should not be disregarded; instead, they should be confronted and effectively managed. It would be naïve to hope no one will ever seek refuge in Korea. Korea should not remain unprepared and inexperienced on refugee issue. While preparing for the possibility of a hot war is crucial for any sovereign nation, it is equally important to recognize the challenges beyond the battlefield. Dealing with the aftermath of conflicts demands strategic planning, tactical approaches, expertise, and sufficient resources well in advance. **KIEP**

夫未戰而廟算勝者，得算多也。

未戰而廟算不勝者，得算少也。

(Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple ere the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand.)

- The Art of War, Sun Tzū

⁶ Maystadt, J.-F., K. Hirvonen, A. Mabiso and J. Vandecasteele. 2019. "Impacts of hosting forced migrants in poor countries." *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 11, pp. 439-459.

⁷ Zhou, Y.-Y., Guy Grossman and S. Ge. 2022. "Inclusive refugee-hosting in Uganda improves local development and prevents public backlash." *World Development*, 166.