OUTCOME NOTE

Refugee camps

Current practice and historical perspectives

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Abstract

This outcome note details the reflections, discussion and learning that were generated in a series of workshops, funded by the Council for British Research in the Levant, that sought to bring together stakeholders from a wide range of organisations led by and supporting refugees. It aims to ensure that research on refugee camp histories engages with contemporary issues in humanitarian practice, and informs humanitarian policy and practice on refugee camps.

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Introduction

More than a decade since the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) adopted its policy on alternatives to camps, refugee camps remain in operation worldwide but seem ever more tenuous as places of protection and security. The international refugee regime itself is in seemingly permanent crisis; this is an age of 'border authoritarianism', as states all around the world, but led by the Global North, fortify their borders and tighten migration controls against displaced people (Brown, 2010; Walia, 2021). The welcome provided since 2022 to Ukrainian refugees by European states, largely without reference to the 1951 Refugee Convention, only serves to emphasise the challenges faced by other refugees. Some of the world's oldest continuously occupied refugee camps, in Gaza, were levelled in the Israeli assault from October 2023 onwards, and their residents killed or displaced; the slow shift 'from camp to city' can be swiftly reversed, or worse (Herz, 2012). Statistics on the proportion of refugees living in camps relative to other accommodation are unreliable (Krause, 2022), but camps remain home to millions of refugees and continue to be a crucial site of humanitarian practice.

In 2025, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI Global hosted a series of three workshops in collaboration with the University of Glasgow, to reflect on, discuss and learn about camps as they are experienced by the practitioners who work in them. It also aimed to put that experience into dialogue with historical research on refugee camps since the First World War – particularly the camps in the Middle East and North Africa where the Allied humanitarian agency, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), housed European refugees from fascism in the 1940s. The series brought together practitioners from a range of humanitarian organisations (some large, some small; some part of the United Nations [UN] system, others not) working with refugees in camps, as well as academic and HPG researchers. To allow for open and honest discussions, workshops were held under the Chatham House rule: information from them could be shared publicly, but without being attributed to individual participants.

This outcome note summarises our discussions. It is organised in three sections, around the topics of each of the three workshops: (1) sites of refugee camps and their material environment; (2) camps as stages on longer trajectories of displacement and settings for characteristic tensions; and (3) visual representations of camps, from technical uses to wide dissemination in traditional and social media.

Workshop 1 – Sites of refugee camps and the stuff that they are made of: the material environment of the camp

Site

Some refugee camps are built from nothing, often in isolated places, while others are adapted from existing sites. As Mackinnon and White explain (2023), the site of a camp makes a big difference to the lives of residents and says a lot about how they are viewed by the authorities hosting them, as a selection of the Allied-run camps in the 1940s illustrates. In Algeria, a small group of Spanish Republican refugees lived a relatively autonomous life in a former hotel at Fouka Marine, where they

were able to work and grow food; in Lebanon, a thousand or so Greek refugees lived in a health resort at Souk el Gharb, free to come and go – some ran small businesses from their rooms; in Egypt, 25,000 evacuees from Yugoslavia lived in a large desert camp, El Shatt, near the Suez Canal, adapted from a British army camp. The Spanish Republicans were veterans who had been left permanently disabled by serious injuries sustained in combat, who were seen as posing no threat. (Able-bodied Republican refugees in Algeria were interned or sent to labour camps in the desert.) The Greek refugees were mostly women and children, under the authority of a Greek government-in-exile recognised by the Allies. The Yugoslavs were much more numerous and politically organised under communist Partisan leadership; even if the Partisans were allies against Nazism, the British military (and the Egyptian government) preferred to keep them in greater isolation. Refugee camps are often understood as places of both care and control. The choice of site reveals which of these is being prioritised.

These historical examples resonated with practitioners' experiences of displaced populations being accommodated on marshland or mountainsides: the land that host states allocate for a refugee camp is often empty for a reason. Keeping refugees in isolated and uncomfortable conditions can be a way of encouraging them to return as soon as possible. Practitioners noted a tension between refugee self-settlement and encampment. Rohingya refugees arriving in Bangladesh from 2017 were initially provided with shelter materials such as plastic sheets and bamboo; some were then moved into planned extensions to reduce overcrowding or risks of landslides or flooding (Sida et al., 2018). But while service provision and space in the extensions were 'better' from a humanitarian perspective, they did not reflect all the spatial elements that were important to the population: many people targeted for relocation refused, as they had established networks around them, or were closer to economic opportunities such as markets. Another example shared was that humanitarians viewed wood fires as dangerous and tried to replace firewood with gas canisters. But residents were unfamiliar with these, and the result was more, not fewer, uncontrolled fires.

When host states try to 'correct' spontaneous settlement by moving refugees to planned sites, it may be experienced as another forced migration – this was certainly the case when Bangladesh moved Rohingya refugees to the Bhasan Char development on an unstable island (Sajjad, 2025). States' increasing tendency to assume that refugees are a security risk has negative effects, and even relatively privileged refugees can be caught in this assumption. One participant noted that some Afghans evacuated from Kabul when American forces withdrew in 2020–2021, as allies at risk of reprisal, were still accommodated in military bases in the Gulf, their resettlement to the United States (US) indefinitely delayed on security grounds. This brings to mind Vietnamese refugees from communist rule after 1975 who often spent a long time in transit camps around the South China Sea before resettlement to the US, Canada, or elsewhere (Lipman, 2020).

Practitioners recognised the tensions that are manifest in decisions about where to site a refugee camp. Locally, the impact of camps on people (and markets) needs to be carefully monitored – in most countries, a proportion of humanitarian funding for refugees must be invested in host communities

(Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). Host states may refuse the term 'refugee camp', as it suggests permanence, and instead use euphemisms like 'gathering site', which makes the tenure of camps more precarious.

Globally, institutional responses can be driven by politics not empathy: the recent budget cuts to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and UNHCR were political decisions, contrasting sharply with the level of resources allocated to Ukrainian refugees and their access to services and rights (Chhaya, 2026). All participants were dismayed that host state, donor and humanitarian interests so often converge on fenced encampments in isolated areas. This brought to the fore a theme that recurred in the later workshops: dignity.

Stuff

A remarkable British propaganda film from 1944, *The Star in the Sand*, shows Yugoslav evacuees arriving at El Shatt in a sandstorm (Gunn, 1944). From scrap metal and military surplus, they make tools, then essential items like shoes (from old tyres) or clothes (from tent fabric), then toys for their children, paper flowers for their tents, sculptures and artwork. They also plant gardens around their tents. As they use these materials to build a miniature national economy, the film's message is clear: these are not 'mere' refugees but allies continuing the struggle against fascism. Like the site of a camp, the stuff that it is made of affects the lives of residents. But residents also remake their own material environments.

The ground a camp is built on can directly affect its residents' lives: see, for example, the case of the refugee camps for Syrians located in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, which are on ground that is prone to flooding (Champagne and Hariri, 2019). It can affect residents' experience of moving around the camp: the Azraq camp in Jordan is laid out in several 'villages' around an empty expanse of bare sandy ground that is easy for camp staff to drive over in large, all-terrain vehicles, but difficult for residents to walk across (Dalal et al., 2026). One practitioner had spent time at a camp where the ground had not been properly levelled, making tent floors bumpy. Residents solved this for themselves by digging them out, then using the clay they had extracted to make kilns for baking flatbread. And gardening is widespread, whether done spontaneously by residents or planned with external assistance (Adam-Bradford et al., 2017): even in the most unpromising circumstances, like the tent gardens at El Shatt, working the ground of a camp can bring positive effects for residents' wellbeing.

The materials that tents or shelters are made of also directly affect residents' lives. Plastic sheeting for tents keeps out rain but not noise, and living in a tent without a lockable door can feel insecure. A workshop participant noted that privacy was rarely considered or prioritised during camp planning. Instead, residents often adapt tents or shelters to increase privacy: Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp in Jordan moved shelters and created shared, internal courtyards for extended family or neighbourhood groups (Maher, 2015), while another participant noted how Rohingya women in Bangladesh created privacy screens, which doubled up as a small-scale livelihood activity. Shelters are designed to meet minimum standards rather than provide comfort, and residents often make external or internal improvements, from solar panels to shelving. One practitioner recalled attendance at a

women's space dropping as women prioritised reinforcing their shelters with dried leaves ahead of monsoon season. Another had met a girl in Bornu, Nigeria, who had made a decorative mobile for her tent out of cans – these were common in the camp.

The theme of dignity recurred here. When every shelter in a camp and many other objects within it are branded with an agency's logo or a donor's name, everything reminds residents that they are refugees. Some participants would welcome a ban on logos and organisational branding across a whole camp, for this reason. But one participant noted that children at a school run by their organisation specifically requested backpacks bearing its logo, to mark their belonging. Another noted that displaced people who work for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) get a sense of belonging and dignity by wearing t-shirts with logos: it is a source of pride and achievement. This led participants to distinguish between items that are normally branded and those that are not. Most backpacks carry a logo; most buckets – and certainly most houses – do not.

Adaptations to a shelter, meanwhile, can turn it into a home; making them is a way for residents to reclaim agency. As one participant put it, 'People do what they want with what they're given because they can't be given what they want'. But residents' efforts to live a more dignified life can be in tension with camp authorities' efforts to manage the camp as a whole. When residents build out their shelters to make more room for themselves, the camp's general living environment becomes denser and riskier, for example in terms of fire. Another participant recalled that when planners modelled the risk of landslides at a camp in Bangladesh, they found some residents unwilling to move their shelters from a danger zone because they had invested significantly in upgrading their homes. Residents saw their shelters as assets that they had upgraded, as a homeowner would, while from a humanitarian perspective they were disposable, or replaceable.

Sometimes camp planners intentionally make it harder for residents to modify their surroundings: for example, when Azraq was designed as an overspill camp, it was built with more rigid fencing and fixed shelters to make it harder for residents to reorganise or move them as they had done at Zaatari (Dalal et al., 2026). Actions like this help explain how camps become the setting for characteristic tensions between their residents and the people running them, one of the themes of the second workshop.

Workshop 2 – Camps as stages on longer trajectories of displacement, and the setting for characteristic tensions

Stage

Camps are often depicted as dead ends, and there is some truth in this – especially when judged against the 'durable solutions' of return, local integration and resettlement. Some camps are particularly horrific, like the one at Rukban on the Syria/Jordan border that housed refugees believed to have Islamic State affiliation: when access is blocked and residents have no freedom of movement, refugee camps become prison camps (Amnesty International, 2024). But camps are often nodes on wider networks of mobility. The 25,000 Yugoslav evacuees at El Shatt went home as the Second World War

ended, and between 1945 and 1948 the camp became 'the Piccadilly Circus of refugee activity in the Middle East', as refugees returning to Europe from East Africa, South Asia, or elsewhere in the region passed through it (quoted in Mackinnon and White, 2023: 12).

Camps change over time, and so do their populations, developing organic relationships with their surroundings. Residents come and go – for family visits, work, education or to check on their homes. Some refugees register at a camp to secure access to aid or assistance but do not actually live there. One participant noted that in northeast Nigeria, refugees from around the Lake Chad basin have changed their identities to enter camps for internally displaced Nigerians. Camps can also appear as people move from place to place, like those in Greece or at Calais where people enter and cross Europe, or become waypoints to other destinations – Rohingya refugees at Kutupalong embark at nearby Shamlapur to travel to Malaysia or Indonesia by boat.

These movements are not always controlled by residents. Residents can be displaced by a host state – Rohingya being removed to Bhasan Char – or by an occupying army – Israel repeatedly displacing Palestinians within Gaza (Sajjad 2025; Irfan, 2025). Host states often attempt to compel residents to return, and paramilitary forces may do this too: the M23 movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo has tried to close 'collective centres' for Rwandan refugees at Kivu (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Human trafficking occurs, such as when Rohingya refugees – particularly teenage girls – are taken from refugee camps in Bangladesh and forced into bonded labour, domestic service or sex work (Donovan, 2019). Meanwhile, some parties have an economic interest in keeping refugees in camps, or camp-like settings. A participant recalled that when Ukrainian refugees were accommodated at an exhibition centre on the outskirts of Warsaw, managed by the Polish government, they lived in squalid conditions and slept in rows on lounge chairs with no privacy and considerable protection risks, while the centre's owner was paid the same per-person rate as individuals or families hosting refugees in their homes.

When it comes to voluntary repatriation, it can be difficult for humanitarian agencies to ensure that conditions are appropriate and there are no other conflicts of interest at play. The Syrian civil war has ended, but agencies (and refugees) remain unsure whether services or infrastructure are adequate to support returnees (UNHCR, 2025). Refugees are being forced to return to Afghanistan amid similar concerns (IRC, 2026), calling into question the notion of 'voluntary' repatriation. A survey of Somalis who had returned to Mogadishu found that those who had lived in Yemen were quite positive about their experience of camps there (they had been forced back to Somalia by the Yemen war – a second displacement), while those returning from Djibouti were less positive about their time in smaller camps with fewer facilities, facing discrimination from local communities (from research for Crawford et al., 2024). Returnees from Kenya had lived in informal settlements but spoke of their experience much more positively than their return to Mogadishu, as they had had access to education, shelter, and opportunities for livelihoods: some even spoke about going back there, though they had returned to Mogadishu as part of a UNHCR scheme that covered cost of transport and rehousing (ibid.).

Humanitarian policies and guidelines have since the 1980s stressed the need for voluntary repatriation to be conducted 'with dignity'. But the meaning of this term is context-specific: it is shaped by culture,

and by people's experiences and expectations both prior to and during displacement. For Rohingya in Bangladesh, who fled persecution and discrimination, repatriation with dignity would require Myanmar to grant them citizenship rights; for Syrians in Lebanon, who fled warfare, security was a more important concern (Holloway, 2019). When humanitarians and/or host states make plans for camp residents' repatriation that do not reflect residents' own understanding of what constitutes dignity, tensions arise.

Setting

Historical research on refugee camps often reveals evidence of tensions. An Armenian at the British Army-run camp at Baquba, Mesopotamia, after the First World War left each day rather than working as an unpaid labourer in camp, as was expected; caught re-entering the camp one night, he explained that he was a respected merchant and would rather accept a reduced food ration than do menial work (White, 2023). Residents at a camp for European displaced people after the Second World War threw potatoes through the windows to protest the poor quality of food (Ibrahim, 2021). When 220 Greek refugees at Moses Wells camp in Egypt were told in 1945 that their planned repatriation had been delayed, they protested so angrily that the UNRRA chief of mission resorted to calling British troops for assistance (UNRRA, n.d.).

These histories resonated with workshop participants. Residents of refugee camps have their own strong preferences about what constitutes appropriate employment, a dignified life or an acceptable destination on leaving the camp. Camp authorities, juggling logistical imperatives and donor and host state preferences, often fail to meet them. Practitioners flagged instances where camp residents were not legally allowed to work, and so would be classed as 'volunteers' who were not paid for their contributions. They noted how terminology can 'other' camp residents, as when agencies refer to 'cash for work' rather than 'wages', or even deny them their rights, as when Bangladesh refused to use the term 'refugee' for Rohingya (de Chickera, 2018).

A previous HPG study on dignity in displacement asked refugees in six different countries a question: 'What does dignity mean to you?' (Mosel and Holloway, 2019). The study noted the impact of things like humidity and temperature inside shelters or their distance from water distribution points or toilets. Tensions increased when residents' dignity was infringed, as when latrine facilities were not gender segregated – but management at one camp reprimanded residents for building toilets behind their shelters. When discussing dignity, workshop participants cited some positive examples from Greece, where the Office of Displaced Designers gave skilled professionals the opportunity to continue their work, or at Azraq, where residents could seek funding to trial their own design innovations, such as building wind turbines from oil canisters.

Poor communication frequently exacerbates tensions, including between residents. Rohingya participants in the HPG study understood why larger families received more food rations, but not why they received additional non-food items such as a lantern or floor mat, since each family needed only one (Mosel and Holloway, 2019). Participants stressed that residents' preferences can vary, even

within the same community. In the early days following the Rohingya displacement to Bangladesh, some refugees preferred to buy food and other supplies for themselves with a cash allowance, whereas other community members worried that they would not find what they needed at emerging local markets or would be treated unfairly, and preferred aid in kind (Holloway and Fan, 2018). A participant recalled that shelter programmes were designed around a voucher system, meaning refugees could select the materials they needed to improve their homes, rather than them all being given the same kit.

Practitioners also felt that agencies often harvested feedback from residents but did not act on it, even though it frequently highlighted tangible things that could be remedied, like a lock on the toilet or a better bed. An example of better practice was cited: the World Food Programme (WFP), needing to cut food rations in camps for internally displaced people in South Sudan, brought community leaders to WFP's warehouse to explain how much food it could bring in each day and talked through its ration calculations.

Refugees' efforts to assert their dignity, and practitioners' attempts to respect it, occur in difficult contexts. In 2019, the Bangladeshi government suspended its own Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner and shut down mobile phone services after almost 200,000 Rohingya refugees attended a peaceful protest to commemorate the second anniversary of the genocide: this marked a turn towards treating them as a security threat (Human Rights Watch, 2019). It then began to erect barbed-wire fences around the camps, as well as constructing watchtowers and installing video surveillance (Fortify Rights, 2020).

Displaced people in very different geographical contexts have suggested that delivering aid at home would be a more dignified method of distribution than making them queue at distribution points; this is also recommended in many humanitarian guidelines, though it rarely happens in practice (Mosel and Holloway, 2019). When it does happen, it is often prompted by protection concerns, rather than by efforts for greater dignity. Agencies in Gaza distributed food directly to tents as a matter of safety, because Israeli soldiers repeatedly killed Palestinians as they queued for food (Amnesty International, 2025).

Workshop 3 – Visual representations of camps, from their technical uses to their wide dissemination in traditional and social media

Visual representations in camp planning and management

Practitioners make technical use of images of camps, producing maps (often on a base layer derived from a satellite photo) for planning and management purposes and to assess a camp's impact on its surrounding environment (Bryant, 2021). Images like these are familiar to practitioners and can often be freely downloaded from the UNHCR data portal, but they are rarely seen by residents of camps. Participants were keenly aware of the power dynamics that such visual representations can embody.

One practitioner summed them up by recalling the director of a camp for Syrian refugees who kept a giant camp map in his office and would move Lego minifigures around it to represent residents when talking to visiting dignitaries.

Participants discussed their own experiences of using such images. Many crucial tasks in a camp, from planning a site to tracking eviction trends, cannot be done without the ability to map. But practitioners were aware that residents' perspectives on the camp might be very different from their own. Some agencies have tried to make maps more accessible to residents (though not everyone can read a map). But people who live in a camp often know where to find what they need – the map is for NGO workers, who don't. The things that make a camp liveable for residents, such as transport or cafés, are not marked on standard humanitarian camp maps. Some such spaces need to be kept off maps to keep them safe. And maps can also have a negative use. According to one participant, in the early days of the Calais 'Jungle' camp, the site was unmapped: a volunteer sketched a map to show which communities were where. As the French state became involved, more formal maps were produced, then used to delineate, define and shrink the camp until its demolition.

Participants also discussed the long tradition of 'counter-mapping'. Most mapping is rooted in state practices like military surveys or identifying and locating taxable land and populations. Top-down camp maps based on aerial or satellite photos serve the purpose of humanitarian efficiency, allowing communities to be supported at scale, but they ultimately derive from military reconnaissance techniques produced to support bombing and control. Counter-mapping maps against these practices to produce maps that may not be legible to outsiders but that serve the needs of the community. Community-led 'safety mapping' learns from this tradition: it asks residents to draw the camp as they see it. But if the purpose of the map is to serve humanitarian actors' needs, even to help them understand how residents understand the site, can it still be a 'counter-map'? Nonetheless, there was general recognition that humanitarian mapping would benefit from more proactive consultation, in advance, with both residents and host communities. As well as serving humanitarians' technical needs, it might then help support residents in living a dignified life.

Wide dissemination in traditional and social media

Images of camps are also widely disseminated in traditional and social media, and play an important role in humanitarian reporting and fundraising. Humanitarian agencies often want to stress their own role. In reports to big donors, where the viewer's knowledge can be assumed, images of white tents emblazoned with UN or NGO logos provide evidence of activity: efficient, clean and organised camps. In images for the public, the need to get attention in a crowded and often sensationalist media landscape and to build empathy for displaced people can lead to 'poverty porn', presenting camps as cramped and dirty. A perceived distrust of charities can contribute to this, as agencies feel impelled to provide evidence of branded delivery to communities in need.

When it comes to humanitarian imagery, key questions to ask include who is taking the photo, for what purpose, and have residents who appear in the photo given their consent? These questions

do not lead to simple answers. Commissioning local photographers or residents themselves to take photos may help, but power still lies with the agency that commissions them. Some residents want their suffering to be made visible: they want the world to know what is happening, and/or they hope for help, as seen in the numerous TikTok and Instagram accounts bearing witness to various atrocities around the world, but most notably, perhaps, in Gaza (Abu Laban, 2024). ODI Global has largely moved to using illustrations, graphics or anonymised photographs rather than photographs of identifiable aid programme participants, but removing real people from images of camps may risk erasing them from the conversation. Mutual aid and diaspora groups raising funds for displaced people, for example in Sudan, focus on solidarity rather than sympathy; practitioners in the workshops felt that humanitarian agencies could learn from the images and stories they share on crowdfunding platforms.

Participants acknowledged the pressures that produce disempowering images of refugee camps and their residents. Humanitarian agencies are struggling for media attention, public sympathy and funding. Donor governments are trying to justify their official development assistance spending to sceptical publics. But residents' dignity is often a casualty of these pressures, as they are portrayed in undignified ways to raise awareness and money (Holloway and Grandi, 2018). Participants were also concerned about the corrosive potential of AI-generated imagery – the possible consequences of which are only just being realised (Down, 2025).

Conclusion

So what is the point of revisiting how camps are sited, built, lived in and pictured? The workshops landed on a few hard truths that are worth stating plainly, especially now.

The first is that the 'alternatives to camps' agenda, more than a decade old, has not resolved the underlying debate so much as relocated it. Camps remain home to millions, and the recent budget cuts to UNRWA, UNHCR, and the humanitarian sector at large have not produced (and will not produce) better alternatives; they have so far produced worse camps, or no support at all. This is the genuine tension the sector lives with: camps make displaced people legible and reachable, which is the precondition for assistance at scale in some contexts, but that same legibility serves containment, surveillance and control. The history runs straight through to the present: camp mapping practices inherit the logic of military reconnaissance; host states still allocate empty land precisely because it is uncomfortable; the choice of site still telegraphs whether care or control is being prioritised. Whether a camp is a place of refuge or more akin to a holding pen is rarely the result of a 'clean' decision and almost never a permanent one.

The second is that many of the problems surfaced in these workshops are not implementation failures waiting for a fix. They recur across a century and across radically different contexts, from Baquba in 1918 to Azraq today, because they are structural. Refugees assert dignity and agency by remaking what they are given, while authorities manage camps as systems: the two are frequently in tension. Branding reminds people they are refugees even as it provides accountability to donors. Feedback is harvested

but not acted on. Fundraising imagery strips dignity to win sympathy. These are not bugs that better guidelines will eliminate: they are the contradictions inherent in delivering aid at scale to people who would rather not need it, within political systems that often do not want them.

That does not make the findings from these workshops an argument for fatalism. The point is the opposite. If there are inherent tensions, then the question is not how to fix camps once and for all but how to manage these trade-offs more honestly and with less harm. Consult residents and host communities before mapping, not after. Treat dignity as context-specific rather than assuming a single template. Recognise that humanitarians work within tight constraints set by host states, donors and security politics, and be candid about the limits of their influence rather than promising transformations they cannot deliver. We need to stop pretending we can address all the issues that are present in camp-based responses, and be more realistic and empathetic about how we deliver aid. This moment of change and reflection in the sector, with the massive decrease of funding coinciding with ever-increasing displacement numbers, is a moment for humanitarians to ground themselves in community-led and solidarity-based approaches. Thinking historically matters because it shows that practices once thought neutral or technical carry assumptions that outlive their origins. Naming those assumptions is the first step toward not reproducing them by default.

The outcome of the workshop is a call for clear vision rather than clean solutions: to stop treating camps as a problem solvable through the next round of innovation, and to start treating them as a permanent feature of an unequal world that humanitarians can make more or less dignified, but cannot make right on their own.

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