AIMING FOR A PRACTICAL SOLUTION

While Ninette Kelley says 'It's a pretty bleak picture overall,' her World Refugee and Migration Council is taking a context-specific approach to providing humanitarian assistance in forced displacement situations, and it's building on best practices from the past decade.

By Jennifer Campbell

Ninette Kelley has been involved in refugee and immigration issues since she graduated from law school.

She started a refugee resettlement program for the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada in the 1980s. She co-wrote *The Making of a Mosaic*, a book on the history of Canadian immigration policy, with Michael Trebilcock of the University of Toronto, and was a member of the Immigration and Refugee Board, during which time she determined applications for refugee status and, later, of appeals from removal orders and refusals of family sponsorship applications.

She then went to work internationally, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She led one of the organizations' most complex operations in Lebanon from 2010 to 2015, and was director of the New York office until 2022. She has also published works on global forced displacement, citizenship and refugee protection.

Kelley was named the chair of the World Refugee and Migration Council (WRMC) in December 2025. She is helping to guide the council's strategic direction, engage policy-makers and civil society partners and champion pragmatic, protection-sensitive policies that address international forced displacement and migration challenges and reinforce international co-operation. *Diplomat*'s editor, Jennifer Campbell, sat down with her to talk about the situation of refugees and migrants worldwide.

***Diplomat* magazine:** What have been the consequences to date of the dramatic fall in humanitarian funding?

Ninette Kelley: They've been severe, especially when you consider that the U.S., which was the backbone of humanitarian funding internationally, decreased its

Ninette Kelley, chair of the World Refugee and Migration Council, says cuts to humanitarian funding have been "pretty severe." | Photo: Eduardo Lima



A Lancet *report suggests that the effects of the drops in U.S. humanitarian funding will lead to 14 million additional deaths by 2030. This refugee camp is located in Turkana, Kenya. | Photo: Ninette Kelley*

contributions by 57 per cent in 2025. And what's also of concern is that other donors have done the same. Within the 33 members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's development assistance committee, their cumulative contributions fell as well by some 23 per cent. So it's having catastrophic effects in the field, especially for, and principally for, those people who depend on humanitarian assistance for food, medication, shelter and other life-saving interventions. They're doing without and that is raising their vulnerabilities exponentially. *The Lancet* published a modelling study several months ago, which suggests that the effects of the drop in American funding would lead to 14 million additional deaths by 2030 and that [was] before the Iran conflict, which the International Monetary Fund has projected could lead to 45 million more people experiencing acute food insecurity. Those are staggering numbers. So first and foremost, it's [catastrophic for] those who depend on it, but also it's had a shattering effect on all the humanitarian agencies, whether they be local or international. They've had to close offices, cut programs, cut staffing, limit

> **"[...] The effects of the drop in American funding would lead to 14 million additional deaths by 2030 and that [was] before the Iran conflict, which the International Monetary Fund has projected could lead to 45 million more people experiencing acute food insecurity."**

their reach. That also has ripple effects — and ripple effects for their families. And then, of course, there are governments themselves that are hosting large numbers of forcibly displaced populations. Most of them are in low- and middle-income countries. So what are they left with now? They are left with increasing vulnerabilities in their own countries. It's a pretty bleak picture overall.

DM: Many people see today's humanitarian crisis primarily as a funding crisis. Why do you believe that's only part of the story?

NK: Well, I think it's a big part of the story, don't get me wrong, but I think that the humanitarian sector has suffered from chronic weaknesses for a long time, and you have to remember that it was set up in the post-Second World War period, mainly to deliver aid in emergency situations. And since that time, it's done a staggering and impressive job. The reach, the number of people that it's helped, the specialized agencies that have been developed, their expertise, their capacities, their ability to respond is totally impressive. But over the decades, they have been responding to protracted crises well beyond the short-term emergency role for which the system was designed. The aid delivery model that works in an emergency, when applied over longer periods, leads to aid dependency because it's very much focused on delivering aid, not equipping people with the skills and abilities in order for them to build their own capacities and contribute to their own lives and to the communities in which they live.

That's been a chronic weakness in the system. Add to that the fact that funding in the humanitarian system is yearly, and yet these crises go on for decades. Donors insist on needs assessments, which is right, but the needs assessments are weakened by lack of consistency in data collection and reach. Also, donors don't necessarily respect the needs as they are prioritized in these assessments. They fund their own programs [according to] their own priorities, and so it creates a mismatch between what's being funded and what's acutely needed. Moreover, you have a system that's developed in a manner that has provided parallel service delivery in countries when there has been money to do so, rather than equipping governments to provide those systems and relying on local organizations to deliver in a more sustainable and less costly manner. An added challenge is competition among humanitarian agencies for scarce resources, and often overlapping programs that complicate aid delivery.

DM: You've said that the crisis with financial aid should be viewed as a catalyst. What opportunities does that create?

NK: I think it creates profound ones. You can already see it in the humanitarian sector. They're looking at a number of reform initiatives to focus on life-saving needs because they don't have money to do more. I'm not saying this is a good thing, to have to be so limited, but it's focusing attention on how to better determine what the priority needs are and to have continuity across agencies, which is positive. They're recommitting to do more through local partners, which is also a good thing. They've said they would try to move towards more delivery efficiencies. For example, look at artificial intelligence, which I think is going to provide new opportunities in areas such as human resource management, administration, procurement and delivery. Those are all very good things.

They've also said they're going to reduce agency overlap. Whether that happens or not, I think remains to be seen. But a critical area that has not been sufficiently in focus is how do you rethink the way you do business to adapt it to the different contexts in which you operate? And that's the opportunity we think that this funding crisis will bring. And if it's seized, we think we can make some very positive impacts and create a system that's much more sustainable than the one from the past.

DM: What does the WRMC project aim to do that's currently not being done as part of the broader reform efforts?

NK: It really is to take a more context-specific approach to providing humanitarian assistance in forced displacement situations, and it's building on some very good practices that have come out over the past decade. For many decades, humanitarians have worked entirely on their own in forced displacement contexts. Development agencies have worked to improve development prospects of hosting populations, but this work was not inclusive of displaced populations, even though they are part of

Ninette Kelley thinks the funding crisis can be viewed as a catalyst for change. Shown here is a Venezuelan refugee with her daughter fleeing on foot to Los Patios, Colombia. | Photo: Ninette Kelley





Village women in the Ouaddai district of Eastern Chad take part in a community meeting to discuss negotiating support from government as their 700-inhabitant village has been impacted by adjacent refugee camps with 80,000 people. | Photo: Ewen Macleod

the larger country context, often for decades. That gap started to shift, and it was brought on by the Syria crisis, where Europe started receiving a lot of refugees transiting through Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, all middle-income countries. Multilateral development agencies began to look at what host countries needed to manage the shock of these large arrivals and how to stabilize these situations so people did not have to move onward and could live productive and dignified lives.

I don't want to imply it was simply a containment project because that would be inaccurate. But it was to finally bring forcibly displaced populations into the development calculus and to see this is not just a humanitarian problem. It is a development one, too. A lot of development financing came on stream to work with host governments to provide a more inclusive environment for refugees and internally displaced persons so they're not confined to areas and are able to move, to work and to be educated. And they've had some amazing results in places like Kenya and Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda and Colombia.

What we want to see is that not be the exception, but expand that to many more operational contexts. And the trick is how do we do that? Because the development community has changed, but the humanitarian one lags behind. Humanitarian agencies tend to apply the same model to many different situations.

We see three different types of country contexts that require three different types of approaches. One is a country where they have the policies, they have the institutions, but they do need a little additional support to manage an inclusive agenda where refugees and IDPs can receive documentation, move freely, work and access services. Colombia would be an example of that.

Then you have other countries that have the political will, but they don't have the policies or the institutions or the financial resources to put that into practice, and so that's why humanitarians and development actors have worked with countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda and Chad. Great and interesting things have been done, and we'd like to see that continue. Then there are those countries that just refuse to engage, arguing that they don't want them to work or access services and saying they're the international community's responsibility. Those are more difficult situations to influence as are countries where there is no clear authority and/or ongoing conflict and insecurity makes it impossible to have meaningful dialogue. Sudan is an example of the latter.

You're always going to have situations where you need humanitarian response. There'll always be vulnerable individuals that will need help. But what we'd like to see is a move towards more countries enabling refugees and IDPs to move freely, to work, to be educated, to expand their skills and provide productive opportunities not just for themselves, but also the broader community.

Refugees with local school children in the Kalumbila district of Zambia. | Photo: Ewen Macleod



DM: What process is the WRMC project following to help turn ideas into practical solutions?

NK: Well, the aim is the practical solution. We're going to start with an evidence base, and we're writing a paper that articulates the problem and asks an important question: How do you begin to plan and think about transitioning out of an emergency to a more sustainable response? Beyond the emergency phase, how can humanitarian aid align more systematically with national development plans and what institutional reforms, financing mechanisms and preparatory measures are needed to transition to government-led systems? To that end, we're going to bring the best minds we can find around the world, and we've already got a number who are very interested in this. They are coming from the humanitarian world, the development world, finance and include experts with lived forced-displacement experience. We'll bring them together so we can work out these different scenarios, flesh them out and come out with very practical, concrete recommendations. That's the first stage. The second stage is we seek broader consultation among all relevant organizations and governments because we firmly believe that people will support what they've helped shape.

Once our consultations are completed, we will fine-tune the recommendations. The next step is to bring those recommendations before governments representing donor and host countries, because it's politics at the end of the day that's going to run the show here. We need political commitment to embrace the vision and support it. In regard to donor countries, we are focusing on middle powers because while they're unlikely to be able to fill the gap of the United States at the moment, they do have important networks within the countries that have large forcibly displaced populations, providing development



Ninette Kelley speaks to children in Arsal, Lebanon, when she worked for the UNHCR. | Photo: Compliments of Ninette Kelley

and humanitarian support. If they work collectively, middle powers could be the best chance of reforming the humanitarian response framework that preserves essential emergency response capacity while advancing reforms aimed at reducing long-term dependence on parallel humanitarian and development systems.

DM: What does a transition from the current system to a new system actually look like, and what does a successful humanitarian response look like 10 years after a crisis begins?

NK: Well, quite simply, we have many situations in the world where refugees and internally displaced persons are not confined to camps, where they have the ability to move, to work, to be educated, where we can measure their contributions, both in terms of their own ability to be self-reliant, but also in the ways that their productive labour benefits the host community. So that would be a sign of success. Again, we have seen this shift start to happen elsewhere in countries like Colombia, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.

Another sign of success would be that when humanitarians go into a country, they apply a much more nuanced approach to their activities, tailored to what is required for that country, and in partnership with development partners there, which is not always the case now. It would be a much more systematic approach than the ones we have right now, and one that is government-led. So it's not humanitarians going in setting up parallel services, but working as much as possible through and with governments and local partners to enable that to happen. [We need the host governments because] it is their country and they have responsibility to ensure the security and well-being of those who reside within it. They are often wary of letting refugees work, concerned that they unfairly compete with locals for jobs, cost too much or end up staying forever. Humanitarian aid reassures them that the world is sharing the burden and signals that displacement is temporary. But it often is not. Displacements often last for decades, and the funding that accompanied the emergency phase diminishes. So we need to prepare for that. Evidence points to the fact that an influx of refugees often is accompanied in the short term by rising prices, stretched services and depressed wages, but these diminish over time as increased demand generates economic opportunities in trade and services. When refugees can move freely, work and take part in the community, both sides tend to benefit. It costs less than long-term aid, refugees build skills and savings, and those assets are useful whether they stay or eventually go home. Right now, there's a gap between the evidence and the political willingness to move. That's what we're working to bridge.

You have to have a deep political economy analysis to know what's possible and what's not. And wherever it is possible, donor humanitarian and development programs have to be aligned under overall government direction and leadership. That's the goal.

DM: How do host communities benefit when displaced people become economically self-sufficient rather than remaining dependent on humanitarian aid?



Syrian refugees at a camp in Arsal, Lebanon. | Photo: Ninette Kelly

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NK: Well, it's definitely the case that initially, if it's a mass influx, it does create a shock to those communities. So there are costs those communities bear. That's undeniable. But as I mentioned, there is ample evidence across many different operational contexts to show that over time, negative effects diminish, and overall, there is a net positive effect. Because if those refugees are allowed to move to work, they bring skills, they bring demand, they create markets, they add to tax revenues. There are all sorts of measures that show that allowing them to become productive members of society is far less costly than trying to contain them in an aid-dependent model where their productivity is stymied and not of benefit to themselves or to the communities in which they live.

But it needs to be supported. It doesn't necessarily just happen overnight. It needs supportive policies and work to go alongside it. And like I said, I'm not advocating for no more humanitarian assistance — not at all — just a much more targeted, context-specific, oriented and shaped policy than we have at present.

The response to our project has been overwhelmingly positive. And the move towards integrated humanitarian-development approaches tailored to each country's political and socio-economic context is imperative. Shifting humanitarian institutional practice will not be easy, especially given the very complex environments in which humanitarian aid is delivered. However, we think if we get the right people around the table, we can make an impact. You can't discuss these things without people who have real global experience working on the ground in these different contexts to say, 'Hey, that sounds good, but if you're going to have success, you need to consider and account for these things,' and that's exactly the kind of deep analysis we want.

DM: Do host governments need to play a much bigger role?

NK: Absolutely. For a long time, when there's a large influx, initially host governments say, 'This is not our problem. This is an international problem. We can't manage this,' and so the humanitarians come in, register the populations, set up camps, food distribution networks and health facilities, which are often critical at the outset. These aid delivery mechanisms run independent of government-run services and become costly parallel mechanisms that are not sustainable for situations of protracted displacement that dominate the forced displacement landscape today.

So it is very important that planning beyond the emergency phase begins soon after with the government including all the implicated ministries such as those in charge of health, education, water, sanitation, labour, security and finance. This is where development partners are key as they have partnerships with line ministries that humanitarian agencies traditionally do not. I experienced the need for such broad government engagement acutely in Lebanon. It was particularly challenging as the ministers came from different political factions, but it was absolutely critical to have an open dialogue with all of them and try to forge a united policy to move forward. It cannot be ignored — certainly not now, in the crises that we face.

DM: When it comes to donors, do they also need to change how they work in forced displacement situations?

NK: Definitely. Humanitarians, development actors and donors are all implicated in how things have moved forward for good and for bad. Donors have their humanitarian and development programs, and they are not always joined up. So what they're funding on the humanitarian side is not necessarily linked to a larger development agenda, which we think it should be. Moreover, as I mentioned, they do require agencies to do needs assessments, but then they don't necessarily follow those the needs with the funding that's required.

Donors do not systematically co-ordinate among each other and you need that coalition to move things meaningfully in the field. And I think if they insisted on impact assessments, at least for high value donations, looking at the outcomes that are being achieved by this funding, that would be enormously helpful to course correct and also show the benefits of the funding received. Currently agencies are required to report on whether they did what they said they would do with the money received and not necessarily the impact it had. This is often challenging to do, but impact assessments can also provide a critical gauge of aid effectiveness and guidance on how to do better and they can bring greater accountability.

DM: You touched on this briefly, but can you expand on what role middle powers can play in reshaping the humanitarian response, both short and long term?

NK: In the short term, they're not going to be able to fill the gap left by the decline in U.S. funding. A lot of middle power governments have strong relations with governments who host large numbers of forcibly displaced persons. They have humanitarian and development programs in those countries and diplomatic flexibility. If they co-ordinated their efforts, they could be a very formidable force of change in this sector, in a way that is badly needed, and would benefit from their concerted, consolidated engagement.

DM: Is this ultimately a humanitarian conversation or a diplomatic one?

Venezuelan refugees cross the border to Maicao, Colombia. | Photo: Ninette Kelley.



NK: I think it's both. It's definitely a humanitarian crisis that needs to be addressed, but it's not going to be addressed by humanitarians alone, and there needs to be a lot of voices around the table to move this ship in a different direction. There is a huge shortfall of humanitarian funding that is having a devastating impact on millions of lives. Alongside this, there is an opportunity to reshape humanitarian responses and align them more closely to sustainable development ambitions. It's important not to lose sight of the great achievements that have happened in the past and recognize the impressive and needed expertise that humanitarians bring in addressing both emergency and protracted situations.

DM: How does this project fit in with the larger work of WRMC?

NK: WRMC is an international council that draws leaders and practitioners from around the world who have a common commitment to address issues related to refugee and migrant protection in a very pragmatic and policy-oriented manner, and it has a good track record. Its recommendations were taken up by the UN Global Compact for Refugees and the Global Compact on Migration. It's been a leader in efforts to freeze foreign assets of corrupt officials and repurpose those assets for those who have suffered as a result of that corruption, both here in Canada and internationally. It's had very strong input and influence in shaping responses to climate migration in Latin America and South America, and also broader migration policy. So, this project is very much an extension of that work and those commitments.

DM: Given your many years' experience, what would an ideal global migration system look like? That seems to be the big question.

NK: I'm not sure there's an ideal one, but I think the current one does suffer because migration is often portrayed as a threat overwhelming borders and yet global migration is what the world depends on in many respects. It's transfers of skills, expertise and



This Rohingya refugee is showing her scars. More than one million Rohingya refugees live in congested camps within the Chittagong division of Bangladesh. | Photo: Ninette Kelley.

remittances, and today, migration as a proportion of the world population is three per cent. It's the same as it was in the 1960s. So the inflammatory discussion that goes around the topic distorts the discourse. The World Bank several years ago came up with a major study on global migration management, and I think it's very helpful in seeing how we can move towards better systems. Its recommendations include opening more legal pathways for migrants whose skills match what destination countries need. It also addresses the situation of irregular migrants whose skills do not match. Among its recommendations are having labour migration as an aspect of development plans and programs, including building in-demand skills and lessening remittance costs.

Our project addresses one aspect of global migration policy — focusing on those who have been forced to flee and live in environments where their skills and capacities are not able to flourish. It's a problem that will benefit from gathering experts around the table to better elucidate and explore solutions.