

**ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOS**  
**28 – 30 JUNE 2011, International Conference Center Geneva**

**Background Paper**  
**Cityscape: Taking stock of new initiatives**  
**in response to urban refugee needs**

*Tuesday 28 June 2011, 16:15 - 18:00, Room 4*

**Brief description of the issue**

Today, it is estimated that more than half of the world's refugees live in cities and towns around the world rather than in camps or rural settings. It is projected that the proportion of refugees will continue to increase due to the worldwide trend toward the concentration of populations in urban areas and the perceived economic and social advantages of city life to refugees, a growing number of whom themselves originate from urban environments.

While urban settings potentially offer refugees many opportunities not available in camp and rural settings, they also present many new challenges. Among these are:

- Inconsistent interpretation and application of the 1951 Refugee Convention in States that are parties; and in States that are not parties the prevalence of legal frameworks that blur the distinction between refugees and irregular migrants and operate to deny important basic rights.
- The preference of asylum-seekers and refugees to remain 'invisible' and not to be identified owing to a range of reasons including fear of detention and deportation by the local authorities or discrimination and mistreatment by the local community, or the perception that there are no 'advantages' in doing so.
- The heightened vulnerability of women who may be confronted with exploitative labor conditions, gender-based violence, domestic violence or trafficking, or become obliged to engage in prostitution, survival sex or forced marriage.
- The heightened vulnerability of children who may be denied access to education, or become obliged to drop out of school and engage in child labor in order to augment the family's income, or become prey to gangs and criminal networks.
- The difficulty, given their dispersal in neighborhoods throughout the city, of identifying persons with special needs and especially vulnerable groups, including the disabled, unaccompanied children and the elderly and the fact that the urban experience may generate new vulnerabilities or exacerbate existing ones.

A key objective is therefore to overcome the above challenges and secure access to services such as education, health care and livelihoods support. For the past two years, sessions at the UNHCR NGO Consultations have examined factors affecting the protection of refugees in urban areas and have developed recommendations as to how UNHCR, the NGO community, national and municipal governments, and civil society might better work together to meet urban refugee needs. In the final session in this series, we will discuss how the challenges of working with and on behalf of urban refugees have been approached in a variety of urban settings. Panelists will describe how their responses have developed since the issuing of UNHCR's revised urban refugee policy in 2009, and will identify directions for future action.

**Policy framework:**

In September 2009, UNHCR issued a new policy on urban refugees entitled “Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas”. The policy is based on the principle that the rights of refugees and UNHCR’s mandated responsibilities towards them are not affected by their location, the means whereby they arrived in an urban area or their status (or lack thereof) in national legislation. It is premised on the understanding that urban areas are legitimate places for refugees to enjoy their rights, including those stemming from their status as refugees as well as those that they hold in common with all other human beings. It also fully recognizes the need for the policy to be adapted to the specific circumstances of different countries and cities. UNHCR realizes that the objectives set out in the new policy will not be attained by the Office alone. This will require new and innovative partnerships, including with municipal-level authorities and actors, community-based and faith-based groups, refugee groups and local NGOs.

**Format of the discussions:**

A UNHCR representative will describe progress to date in operationalizing the revised urban refugee policy through pilot projects and the development of operational guidance. NGO and government panelists working with refugees in four urban environments will comment from their individual perspectives on the evolution of their response to urban refugees.

**Expected outcomes from the urban session:**

The session will provide participants with an insight into the current status of efforts to meet the legal, human rights, and protection needs of refugees in a variety of urban environments and provide a catalyst to the further development creative programming in this area through the identification of models and approaches for enhanced or innovative partnerships between UNHCR and the NGO community, between international and local or community-based NGOs, and between humanitarian actors and refugee and host communities.

**Suggested reading**

UNHCR, *Report of the High Commissioner's 2009 Dialogue on Urban Settings*, 1 March 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/4b9509269.html>

UNHCR, *High Commissioner's Closing Remarks at the Dialogue on Protection Challenges for Persons of Concern in Urban Settings*, Palais des Nations, Geneva, 10 December 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/4b2607387e.html>

Oxford University Refugees Studies Centre, *Forced Migration Review*, Adapting to Urban Displacement, Issue 34, <http://www.fmreview.org/urban-displacement/>