

2010 Annual Consultations with NGOs

Background Note for the Thematic Session on Urban Refugees “Making it work: From policy to practice in urban settings”

29 June 14:00 – 18:00

Brief description of the issue

Almost half of the world’s 10.5 million refugees now live in cities and towns, compared to one third who live in refugee camps. It is projected that the number will increase in the coming years, owing to the process of urbanization. Protecting refugees and meeting their needs in urban areas present a host of challenges that were explored during the 2009 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, which examined ‘challenges for persons of concern in urban settings’. These include, for example:

- Inconsistent interpretation and application of the 1951 Refugee Convention in States that are parties. 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, discrimination and mistreatment by the local community, or the perception that there are no ‘advantages’ to being identified.
- 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 and adolescents 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.

Policy framework

In September 2009, UNHCR issued a new policy on urban refugees entitled ‘*Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas*’ (<http://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.html>). 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, whether their basic human rights or those stemming from their status as refugees. 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 cannot 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

The discussions will take place in two segments, each lasting one hour and forty five minutes. Each segment will take the form of a combination of panel presentations and breakout sessions. The first segment will focus on ‘*Enhancing protection by addressing legal and human rights concerns*’ and will begin with a panel discussion in plenary (English and French) in Room 2 at 2 p.m. on 29 June 2010. Following the panel, participants will be invited to divide into 3 groups: Room 2 (English and French), Room 5 (no interpretation), and Room 20 (no interpretation). This will enable participants to react to the panel presentations and share perspectives from their own experiences in a more intimate and informal setting.

The same format will be used for the second segment, which will begin at 4:15 p.m. in Room 2 and focus on ‘*Enhancing protection by re-envisioning assistance in urban settings*’. (Please refer to the NGO Consultations Agenda for additional details.)

Key questions for the breakout discussions

1. In light of the challenges you have experienced when working with urban refugee populations, what program models and approaches have you used to try to address them and to what extent were these models successful?
2. What are the lessons that you learned in your context that could be applied to either your own programs or those of others in the future?
3. Can you provide examples of partnership in the areas of advocacy/outreach/services that has been effective in addressing the needs of refugees in an urban setting between: a) UNHCR and the NGO community, b) international and local/community-based NGOs, c) national/local government and NGOs, and d) humanitarian actors and refugee and host communities?

Expected outcomes from the urban session

The session will seek to identify successful programs and good practices that use a rights-based approach to protect and assist asylum-seekers and refugees in urban areas. The specific goal will be to identify models and approaches that may be adapted and replicated, good practices, and models for enhanced or innovative partnerships.

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/>

UNHCR, *Briefing Note on UNHCR Education in Urban Settings*, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4af296206.html>