

Concept Paper
High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges

Challenges for persons of concern to UNHCR in urban settings

Geneva, 9 -10 December 2009

I. Introduction

The third meeting of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges will be held in Geneva on 9 and 10 December 2009, on the theme: "Challenges for persons of concern to UNHCR in urban settings". This concept paper outlines the reasons for a focus on this subject and the objectives of this year's Dialogue, and provides preliminary information on organizational matters.

II. Why focus on urban settings?

Urbanization is one of the so-called "mega-trends" of our times. Of the world's population of 6.6 billion, more people already live in cities than in rural areas. There is consensus that this trend is not only irreversible but will also accelerate in the next decades. The number of people living in cities today in Africa and Asia is increasing at an average rate of one million every week. The population of Africa is projected to more than double by 2050 – from over 945 million to almost 2 billion. Eighty-eight per cent of that growth will occur in the sub-Saharan part of the Continent; and much of this growth will be in urban areas. In other developing regions, increases in population numbers, combined with urbanization, will also accelerate: in the Arab world, the current population of 335 million is expected to rise to over 598 million people by 2050, and in Latin American and Caribbean countries, from 576 million to almost 783 million.¹

Many commentators have attributed the growing phenomenon of urbanization to the limited livelihoods, low standards of living and poor public services available in rural areas. While these factors evidently play an important role in inducing people to move to urban areas, to date, not much attention has been paid to the refugee and forced displacement dimension of this phenomenon in reports and debates on the subject.

Without doubt, the large-scale presence of persons of concern to UNHCR in urban areas has implications for the economy, society and administration of the cities concerned and raises challenges for urban planning and other forms of social, economic, and public governance. There is undoubtedly additional pressure on infrastructure and the environment, as well as on housing and social services. To address these challenges, comprehensive poverty reduction strategies and employment programmes will have to be devised and the support of the local host populations will have to be nurtured.

The longstanding assumption that populations of concern to UNHCR (refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees and stateless persons) principally originate from, and reside in, mainly rural areas is increasingly at odds with the reality. An ever-growing proportion is to be found in towns and cities across the globe. Abidjan, Amman, Bangkok, Bogotá, Cairo, Damascus, Juba, Johannesburg, Khartoum, Nairobi, and Quito, are just some of the cities already hosting sizeable populations.

¹ See UNFPA's *State of the World Population*, 2007 edition.

The perception, for example, that refugees must live in camps as a condition of their status as refugees, or in order to benefit from rights that flow from that status, is not correct. Refugee status and protection entitlements are not linked to the place of residence; nor are the duties and responsibilities of host States, UNHCR and other players to persons of concern limited by the fact that they may be residing in urban areas. Like other people, persons of concern usually gravitate to urban centres to seek security and a potentially greater choice of income-generating and educational opportunities, housing, and better quality basic services.

Many also move to towns and cities because of numerous restrictions on life in camps, the desire to live in proximity to other family or community members, or sometimes to find anonymity and go “unnoticed”. In protracted refugee situations, motivations include the wish to escape from the harsh conditions of camp life and restrictions placed on rights, or the hope of moving on to another country or continent. Increasingly, returning refugees also gravitate towards urban areas once they have arrived in their country of origin. Displaced people who move to urban areas to escape from armed conflicts may remain there even when peace is restored.

Though hoping for greater security and better opportunities in urban areas, many persons of concern find a different reality. They have often lost all of their assets, do not enjoy secure housing, lack supportive social networks, and may not be in possession of the skills and knowledge required to survive in a city. They may also lack or be deprived of the identity documents required to access public services such as rations or subsidized food. In the case of refugees and asylum-seekers, they may be formally excluded from the labour market or denied access to educational opportunities and health services. As “outsiders” and “new arrivals”, they may be the targets of organized crime, xenophobia and violence, forced evictions, expulsions, harassment, extortion and other forms of abuse and exploitation.

III. Objectives of the Dialogue

The broad objective of the Dialogue is to generate awareness of specific challenges to persons of concern in urban settings, draw policymakers’ attention to the need to craft appropriate responses to these issues, and identify good practices to inform such responses.

In particular, it is expected that the Dialogue will:

- Draw attention to the fact that the presence of persons of concern to UNHCR in urban settings is a growing phenomenon that will intensify in the decades to come;
- Foster understanding and acceptance of the fact that the place of residence – whether in rural or urban settings – has no bearing on protection responsibilities towards persons of concern;
- Shed light on the scope, nature and implications of the growing presence of persons of concern in urban areas;
- Highlight specific challenges in the areas of protection, assistance and solutions, including issues such as identification, registration, community outreach, identification of the most vulnerable, shelter, provision of education and health services, and livelihoods;

- Identify strategies, activities and good practices in these respects; and
- Identify opportunities for partnership and concerted action.

IV. Organizational arrangements

Preparations for the Dialogue are already under way. The new UNHCR Policy on Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Urban Areas is pending final consideration by the Office's senior management, and is expected to have been issued by the time of the Dialogue. There are ongoing evaluations and studies on refugee and displacement issues in urban settings, the results of which will be factored into the deliberations of the Dialogue. Furthermore, a portion of the annual UNHCR-NGO Consultations that will take place in June 2009 will be devoted to examining urban-based issues, challenges, and potential operational responses.

V. Participation

Invitations to take part in the Dialogue are being extended to UNHCR's Executive Committee Member States and Standing Committee observers, relevant sister agencies of the UN system, other IGOs, NGOs, academics, experts, practitioners and advocates. Special attention will be given to the participation of persons of concern, as well as Mayors or other representatives of municipal authorities of a number of cities hosting large numbers of refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees.

VI. Methodology

The deliberations of the 2009 Dialogue will follow the same format as previous Dialogue meetings. UNHCR will prepare a discussion note and make available other relevant documents. The High Commissioner, Mr. António Guterres, will chair the Dialogue. To keep the deliberations as frank, interactive and informal as possible, they will consist of a mix of plenary sessions and breakout groups. None of the discussions will be attributed to individual participants. The High Commissioner will not seek to secure a negotiated outcome and will round off the discussions with a "Chairman's Summary", including, as relevant, recommendations.

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