

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Research Paper No. 191

UNHCR and community development: a weak link in the chain of refugee protection?

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October 2010



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ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction

In its Executive Committee conclusions, organizational structure and policy statements, UNHCR has expressed its commitment to a community-based approach. But the organization's justification for such an approach has only been made in general terms.

UNHCR has not clearly articulated how such an approach relates to UNHCR's core mandate of refugee protection, nor has it explained how one might assess the impact of community development upon refugee protection. The relationship of community development to resource allocation also remains under-explored. As a result, UNHCR managers do not know how much to invest in community development or what results to expect from this investment.

UNHCR and community development

UNHCR began to highlight the importance of working with refugee communities in ExCom conclusion of 15 February 2001, entitled 'Reinforcing a Community Development Approach'. The conclusion notes that "UNHCR programmes often tend to focus on individual service delivery to refugees, and omit engaging and building on the capacities of the refugees themselves and their communities. Such an approach limits refugee partnership and participation, and invariably produces dependency; this has proved to be limiting, resource-demanding and too problem-focused."

The conclusion goes on to recommend that UNHCR engage in partnership with refugees in order to achieve various purposes, including: strengthening refugee initiative, reinforcing their dignity, achieving greater self-reliance and increasing cost-effectiveness of programmes. Overall, the document is framed as a guide to programming, suggesting that UNHCR should ensure that refugees participate in the design and delivery of the organization's programmes so as to make them more effective, efficient, and respectful of refugees' dignity and capacities. The conclusion does not make any express linkage between community development and protection, and the word "protection" appears only twice in the document.

While the UNHCR 'Tool for Participatory Assessment' (2006) gives much more extensive attention to protection, it is mainly conceived of as a tool linking participation and programming. In participatory assessment, a multi-functional team of UNHCR and partner staff engage in various participatory exercises (mainly focus group discussions) with groups of refugees, disaggregated by age and gender.

The protection risks, coping mechanisms and priority needs of each group are explored, and this information is used to inform UNHCR programming for the subsequent year. The Tool ensures that marginalized groups are included in assessment and planning processes, which contribute to the planning of future protection interventions.

The Tool also notes the linkage to protection: "The role of UNHCR is to support the building, rebuilding and strengthening of communities' capacities to respond to

protection risks and to make decisions over access to and use of resources.” (p. 12) Nevertheless, the Tool’s focus is “to link participatory assessment to the programming cycle,” to include women, men, boys and girls in programmes, improve baseline data, develop more comprehensive programme responses, and to build better relations between UNHCR and partners (pp. 8, 15-16).

In practice, the participatory assessment has helped UNHCR staff to understand the protection implications of assistance programmes. By bringing together multi-functional teams comprising protection, programme and community services staff members to engage with refugees and analyze problems with them, participatory assessment has helped UNHCR to focus “not only on the legal aspects of protection, but also the social, economic and community aspects as these are the spheres in which most rights violations of persons of concern occur,” according to a recent evaluation of UNHCR’s Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (Thomas and Beck, p. 25).

By the time of the release of the 2008 manual on ‘A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations’, UNHCR was making a more explicit link between community development and protection: “This approach... is based on the understanding that by placing people of concern at the centre of operational decision-making, and building protection strategies in partnership with them, they will be better protected, their capacities to identify, develop and sustain solutions will be strengthened, and the resources available will be used more effectively.” (p. 5)

The manual notes that communities have frequently developed their own mechanisms for responding to protection problems, and that UNHCR should seek to build on positive practices and certainly avoid undermining them. It recognizes that communities can also be a source of harm either because of internal power struggles, exclusionary practices, or cultural norms at odds with human rights standards.

This document takes an important step in asserting a relationship between communities and protection: Communities can offer protection solutions, and they can also cause protection problems. In general, the manual is a practical guide, sharing valuable information on how to work with communities. It does not develop a theory on the relationship between community development and protection.

More guidance on the relationship between community development and protection is found in a recent ActionAid field manual on community-based protection. This manual provides both a theoretical section, explaining the relationship between communities and protection, as well as a useful tool kit of participatory exercises and methods for working with communities.

The manual stresses the importance of people solving problems at the appropriate level, with a preference given to levels closest to the individual, such as the family, community and society. “Community-based protection directs the attention of crisis-affected populations towards protection problems and arenas of influence over which they have some control, active agency and responsibility.” (Berry and Reddy, p. 3)

While UNHCR has taken a position in favour of a community-based approach, it has yet to conceptualize the relationship between community development and protection or to measure the link between community development and effective programming. As a result, the organization does not have strong basis for investment in community

development activities and is stuck in a cycle of under-investment and under-performance in this area of work. Indeed, the recent AGDM evaluation noted that “one of the weaker elements of the AGDM strategy is the lack of capacity to implement a community-based approach.” (Thomas and Beck, p. 92).

Community-based approaches and effective programming

One of the main arguments made in favour of a community-based approach appeared in the ExCom conclusion of 2001 and has been repeated in subsequent documents: community participation yields better programming. That is, when communities are involved in planning and implementing programmes, those programmes are more likely to be efficient, effective, appropriate and sustainable.

The argument is utilitarian: community involvement can help us achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. The argument is based on a reasonable theory, but UNHCR has never attempted to assess whether this is actually true, or under what conditions community involvement yields the greatest impact. For example, if a UNHCR field office has a particular goal in mind, such as increasing school enrolment, it can choose among a variety of approaches to achieve that goal: mobilizing communities, engaging government structures, supporting international or national NGOs, or direct action.

Most offices would probably support a mixed strategy. But how do we know if community mobilization is the most efficient means to achieve the end? This is likely to depend on a number of contextual factors, including, for example, the pre-existing structures and level of solidarity within the refugee community; the time period available; the reasons why children are currently out of school; and the expertise and outreach capacity of other actors. Community mobilization may indeed be the most efficient strategy, but given the complex interplay of other factors we cannot assume this unquestioningly.

Development agencies, as well as academic researchers, have made efforts to measure the efficiency of community mobilization. In an evaluation of a sample of 84 projects related to community-driven development, the World Bank asked whether projects involving community participation elements were more or less effective than similar projects without community participation. The evaluation noted the “mixed and limited evidence” that a community-based approach contributes to poverty reduction and empowerment. (World Bank p. 51)

The outcome rating of community-driven development projects was not substantially better than for other projects; however, the evaluation concluded that projects were better designed and targeted to community needs. The World Bank also found that participatory processes raised its implementation costs by 10 per cent (World Bank, p. 27), while also imposing various costs associated with participation on the partner government and beneficiaries, for whom the opportunity cost of participation is rarely calculated. Similarly, consultants working for ActionAid note that donors need to recognize that community-based protection programmes require “time-intensive participatory assessment and analysis.” (Berry and Reddy, p. 17)

These findings raise questions as to whether community participation necessarily

leads to greater cost-efficiency for humanitarian and development agencies. UNHCR also needs to consider the cost of participation for beneficiaries.

In some cases, where refugees are idle because of lack of work, refugees may be willing and able to participate in project implementation. In other cases, refugees may have competing work and family commitments that create high opportunity costs. In urban contexts particularly, transportation may be expensive and refugees may experience protection risks in travelling to community activities or organizing visible gatherings.

The development literature on community participation offers some practical lessons on involving communities in programming. Various preconditions are linked to the success of community-driven projects. The World Bank found, for example, that their community-driven development projects were more successful in cases where the Bank was “supporting indigenously matured participatory efforts or where it has provided consistent long-term capacity-building support to communities over time.” (p. 50). The Bank also found that it needed a longer-time frame to assess the results of community-driven development. The one-year project cycle may be long enough to construct infrastructure, but is not sufficiently long for measuring any impact on community capacities.

Academic researchers are also involved in the effort to measure the impact of community participation on development programmes. For example, relying on a study of development projects in Northern Pakistan, Khwaja has found that community participation does increase the quality of project in relation to non-technical decisions, such as selecting a project or deciding the community’s labour contribution to the project. However, when communities participate in making technical decisions, such as regarding project site, scale, design and time frame, this actually decreases the quality of project outcomes. (Khwaja, p. 434)

MIT’s Poverty Action Lab has studied 20 projects to look at the impact of community-based approaches. These studies use a randomized evaluation methodology that compares indicators before and after an intervention in both a treatment community (where a development intervention took place) and a control community (a similar community where the intervention did not take place). Some of these studies underline the benefits of community-based approaches.

For example, an evaluation of community-based targeting of assistance beneficiaries in Indonesia found that while the community-based approach yielded a somewhat higher rate of errors in targeting (e.g., more wealthy families receiving assistance or poor families being omitted), it led to greater overall satisfaction with the programme. (Alatas, et. al.) One study found that mobilizing communities to monitor public health services improved the quality of service delivery. There were significant increases in utilization of health services and improved health outcomes in terms of reduced child mortality and child weight. (see Bjorkman and Svensson)

However, a similar study found that community oversight of public schools in India through village committees was not effective. In that context, it proved much more effective to train volunteers to give literacy classes. The authors concluded that village committees involve high costs of collective action, and thus people do not participate actively in these committees to monitor the schools. In contrast, individual

or small-group interventions are easy to organize; people are willing to participate; and the improvement in education outcomes is impressive. (Banerjee, et. al., pp. 22-25)

These examples of lessons learned are only indicative of a broad literature. The relationship of community participation to humanitarian and development interventions is a growing field of study. UNHCR has excellent potential to contribute to the expansion of knowledge in this area: it has a broad international presence, access to many refugee and displaced populations, and a leadership role in humanitarian action.

UNHCR's new operational management software FOCUS can also be further developed to facilitate comparison of outcomes across countries. In these respects, the organization is a natural laboratory for testing assumptions about the role of community participation in a variety of contexts. While there may be some legitimate ethical concerns about testing interventions on populations, there is significant potential gain in ensuring that UNHCR's interventions, and the resources it dedicates to them, are used to achieve the maximum positive impact for the populations it serves.

UNHCR's result-based management framework favours an approach that develops programmes on the basis of which interventions achieve the best and ideally measurable results, with the most efficient use of resources. UNHCR can begin by distilling the lessons already learned by development and academic researchers, perhaps by entering into mutually beneficial partnerships with them.

Participation as a right

A second argument in favour of community participation is that people have a right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. UNHCR's manual on a community-based approach notes that "participation is a right, and essential for informed decision-making; [it] promotes protection and reduces feelings of powerlessness." (p. 18) Reference is made to a number of international human rights instruments that include a right to participation, though in fact, the instruments define these rights as related to participation in political affairs, not in humanitarian or development projects, with the exception of Art. 14 of CEDAW which says rural women should have the right to participate in development planning and implementation. (UNHCR 2008, p. 121).

In any event, and according to this argument, participation is an end in itself. UNHCR must facilitate the participation of refugees in decisions affecting them, as this is an aspect of respecting the human rights and dignity of persons. According to this argument, even if participation is not cost-effective, UNHCR is obliged to facilitate refugee participation.

In a political context, participation is an exercise of power: people vote for leaders, run for office, or campaign for their preferred parties or ideas. These are the rights protected by international human rights law. Participation in decision-making on humanitarian action is quite different. Decisions about humanitarian action are taken after consultation with a number of stakeholders, including governments, donors, NGOs, headquarters and regional offices, with refugees playing one role among

many.

Refugee participation and the impact of that participation depends entirely on the goodwill of the UNHCR office, with refugees powerless to hold the office accountable if it does not implement refugee preferences. Indeed, when I have presented the concept of a “right to participation” to colleagues and NGO partners in various training courses, most have reacted with skepticism born of this experience.

Refugees’ right to participate in UNHCR’s decision-making is so weak that it feels misleading to use the right to participation as the main justification for implementing projects with a community-based approach. This is not necessarily a reason to jettison the concept of a right to participation, but a challenge to make participation more meaningful as a tool to empower refugees and to hold UNHCR more accountable to them. Then it would be a right worth protecting.

There is a significant literature on participatory action research from which UNHCR can learn, developing strategic partnerships with current practitioners. It would be useful to pilot some of these methodologies. For example, development agencies have experimented with the methodology of ‘citizens’ juries’.

In this approach, a development-related question is posed to a small group of citizens who hear the testimony of experts, question witnesses and analyze the information. Members of the jury have time to reflect and deliberate with one another on the questions and develop a set of conclusions about which development approach would be most beneficial in their community. The verdict is shared broadly through the mass media, creating pressure on development actors to shape their policies according to the preference of the jury. (Pimbert and Wakeford)

Community participation and improved protection

UNHCR generally argues in favour of a community-based approach by saying that it is good for programmes (making them more efficient, appropriate, and inclusive) or that participation is a right. As discussed above, these arguments have merit, but need further unpacking, testing and refining to make them more practical.

A third argument in favor of a community-based approach is that community participation helps to protect persons of concern: in other words, participation is good for people. This is hinted at in the existing UNHCR documents, which talk about participation reducing feelings of powerlessness or re-building self-esteem and self-confidence. (UNHCR 2008, p. 18). While reasonable, these assumptions could be tested only if we had adequate ways to assess self-esteem before and after community-based interventions.

This line of argumentation may be particularly relevant to UNHCR, as it directly links participation to protection, which is the organization’s core mandate. The goal below is to build this argument by using the concept of social capital. The hypothesis is as follows: community participation builds social capital, and social capital in turn has a positive impact on various measures of protection, including security, health and economic welfare.

Over the past two decades, social scientists have developed an extensive literature to measure social ties and their impact on welfare and development. The conclusion is that social ties are remarkably important on a micro-level for individual health, employment and physical protection.

On a community-level, communities with stronger social ties score better on indices of social and economic development. This literature provides compelling evidence to demonstrate that stronger social ties promote higher levels of welfare. If this holds true for the populations of concern to UNHCR, then UNHCR should invest in stronger social and community ties as a means for promoting greater welfare and protection.

In the following sections, I will summarize the main points of the literature on social capital, including its definition, measurement and impact; explore the relevance of social capital to protection of persons of concern to UNHCR; and finally reflect on the challenge of implementing projects that demonstrably increase the level of social capital.

The concept of social capital

Social capital can be defined as “the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of society that enable people to co-ordinate action and to achieve desired goals.” (Narayan, p. 6) Social capital has both structural and cognitive aspects. The structural aspects include networks, groups, associations and institutions through which people maintain ties with others.

The groups in this context are very broadly defined and can refer to: geographical groups (such as people living in a specific neighbourhood); professional groups (people in the same occupation); members of a local association or voluntary organization; social groups (families, religious groups, ethnic groups, groups of friends); or even virtual groups (networks generated over the internet in chat rooms through common interest groups).

Networks include the personal relationships which are accumulated when people interact with each other in families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meeting places. The cultural aspects of social capital include generally accepted attitudes, behavioural norms, values and social trust. These are the rules and values that characterize the community, most of which are unwritten.

The literature makes a useful distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. “Bonding relationships take place within the group and facilitate interaction and collective action within it.” (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, p. 16). Thus bonding social capital refers to the strong social relationships within groups that are homogenous in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, class or other social features. Bonding social capital generally contributes to social support and personal well-being. In simple terms, we need friends from our own community to get along in life.

By way of contrast, “Bridging relationships strengthen linkages between the group and other organizations.” (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, p. 16). Bridging social

capital, involving relationships between persons who are significantly different from one another, is generally weaker in terms of frequency of interaction and levels of trust. However, it is particularly important for economic advancement, as people need these more distant ties to get new information, for example, about job opportunities or markets. One author refers to the paradoxical “strength of weak ties.” People need access to broad networks to facilitate their social and economic mobility. (Granovetter)

The literature recognizes that social capital can have negative consequences. It can restrict individual freedom, such as the social norms restricting women’s behaviour in some cultures. Social capital can also create excessive claims on the individual, such as when business owners are constantly asked for money by relatives and are socially obliged to share their wealth. This can crowd out investment and reduce financial success. (Portes and Landolt)

This conundrum arises at refugee camps in Kenya. I recall the striking scene in the film *God Grew Tired of Us* where one of the resettled ‘lost boys’ comes home and finds dozens of phone messages from friends back home who wanted financial support that the young man could not afford to give without jeopardizing his own successful integration. Strong bonding social capital can lead to exclusionary practices, where people perceived as ‘other’ are not allowed access to a community’s resources.

Some have questioned whether social capital is really capital. The term refers to capital because like other forms of capital, these social ties and values generate a stream of benefits, e.g., information sharing and collective action. Like physical or human capital, social capital requires investment and maintenance: it is hard to build, yet easy to destroy. However, unlike physical capital, social capital does not wear out with use, but rather deteriorates from disuse. (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2001, pp. 7-8).

A number of tools have been developed to measure social capital. Some rely on community-level indicators, such as the number of associations in a city. Others involve individual or household-surveys which ask questions such as: membership in clubs, societies or social groups to which individuals belong; networks and social contact (how often individuals see family, friends and acquaintances); as well as norms and values (whether individuals trust their neighbours and whether they consider their neighbourhood a place where people help each other).

The World Bank has developed a social capital assessment tool. This involves three parts. The community profile outlines how to conduct open-ended community discussions and structured community interviews. The household survey explores both the structural dimensions of social capital (organizational density, expectations regarding networks and mutual support, patterns of exclusion, nature of previous collective action) and cognitive elements (solidarity, trust and cooperation, conflict and conflict resolution). The final part of the tool demonstrates how to conduct organizational profiles of key local organizations. (World Bank, 2002)

These measures are obviously proxy indicators, rather than a measure of social capital itself. However, and despite this limitation, which admittedly exists for the well-established concept of human capital as well, there is a growing consensus among

academics that social capital can be assessed and even measured in a meaningful way.

The impact of social capital

A rich literature links social capital to better outcomes in terms of health, wealth, happiness and security. The following are just a sample of the findings (selected from Halpern, except where otherwise noted).

Health

Social networks, and particularly intimate, confiding relationships, act as a buffer to protect people against mental illness. Stronger social capital is seen as the explanation for the paradoxical “group-density effect”: members of minority groups have significantly lower rates of mental illness when they live close together, even if they live in poorer neighborhoods.

Regardless of stress levels, people with a higher level of social contacts tend to report better mental health. People with few supportive relationships are particularly vulnerable to PTSD following a traumatic event. A lack of support at the time of trauma predicts the severity of the stress disorder up to six years afterwards, regardless of initial symptom levels.

Social networks and participation act as a protective factor against dementia or cognitive decline in persons over the age of 65. Social networks also buffer people against the negative effects of stress. It is not so much that social networks stop people from getting sick as that they help people to recover when they do fall sick.

Wealth

A large proportion of jobs are filled by applicants who heard about them through word of mouth (60-80% in various studies in different countries and industries). There is a strong positive association between the size of an individual’s friendship network and the likelihood that s/he participates in the labor force.

Controlling for other factors, persons with more extensive social networks, from farmers to top businesspeople, earn more.

Countries with higher social capital have higher economic growth, after controlling for other factors. A cross-national study found that social capital is more important to economic growth than is human capital.

Social capital increases households’ per capita consumption, and its effect is “several times greater than that of human capital alone.” (Dongier, et. al., p. 8.)

Happiness

Surveys conducted in multiple countries ask individuals to rate their level of ‘happiness’ and ‘life satisfaction’. They show that money buys some happiness, but

not much. And above a certain level, income does not raise levels of happiness or life satisfaction.

Various social factors explain to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction: marriage, frequent interactions with extended family members; frequent interactions with friends and neighbors; and general social trust.

Security

A person's social capital affects both preferences and earnings in the legitimate sector. Strengthening bonds to society increase the costs of deviant behaviour to the individual and thereby make criminal acts less likely. People with stronger social capital are less likely to engage in crime.

A British crime survey shows that people who are separated or single are around four times more likely to be the victim of a violent crime than those who are married. A study of 200,000 adult men in the US found that socially isolated individuals were 1.6 times more likely to be murdered than the socially connected. People with stronger social capital are less likely to be victim to a crime.

Social capital provides informal insurance, especially for poor people facing emergencies. People with stronger social ties can borrow money and obtain care for themselves when needed. (see Feigenberg, et. al.)

The relevance of social capital to refugee protection

The literature on social capital among refugees and IDPs is limited, although there are many studies on social capital in the context of migration and diasporas. This literature shows, for example, that social capital (information and direct assistance from prior migrants) is an important factor in determining migrations flows. (Garip; also Beine, et al.)

In one of the few studies of social capital among refugees, the author notes that "social capital is of significant importance to groups like immigrants and refugees because it can contribute to economic survival and success, even though they may lack economic resources, such as skills, education, and financial capital." (Boateng, p. 62).

In a refugee situation, formal institutions for accessing information, managing risk, and enforcing rules may not be functioning. People need to rely instead on informal institutions, such as friends, kin, social sanctions, and norms, to solve important problems relevant to their well-being. (cf. Narayan, p. 19). Of course, social capital cannot substitute for basic needs: "social capital... consists of the ability to marshal resources through social networks, not the resources themselves... What social capital can do is to increase the 'yield' of such resources by reinforcing them with the voluntary efforts of participants and their monitoring capacity to prevent malfeasance." (Portes and Landolt, pp. 546-547).

The literature potentially can help to illuminate various aspects of refugee protection. Refugees suffer from the physical and psychological trauma, as well economic losses,

associated with persecution and flight. The social capital literature reminds us of an additional level of loss: the loss of social ties. Many refugees are missing family members; they have lost their network of friends, neighbors, and colleagues; they are out of work. The social capital literature suggests that this loss is not inconsequential.

Psychological and physical health

People with higher levels of social capital, particularly strong social bonds with friends and neighbours, are more likely to maintain good mental health and to cope positively with the stress of physical illness. This helps us to understand the vulnerability of refugees to psychological distress and physical illness. Because of displacement, they may have lost the social ties that support persons in traumatic, stressful situations. In situations where refugees have lost their social networks, we can expect physical health to deteriorate and psychological well-being to be difficult to restore. In situations where refugees have been able to retain strong social ties, they will be able to cope better physically and psychologically.

Interventions that build social ties may have measurable impact on physical and psychological health. UNHCR is already supporting a range of these activities in the field, such as support groups for persons with particular illnesses or psychological conditions, community activities to engage older persons, and volunteer networks to reach out to persons with disabilities.

However, when funding becomes tight, these community services activities are often the first to be cut, as they are not seen as life-saving. In fact, because they strengthen the social ties crucial to good health, these activities may be protecting the refugees' right to health at an efficient cost. UNHCR can work with partners to identify better measures of the impact of community activities on physical and psychological health.

The literature suggests that employment has a strong impact on psychological well-being. People who are employed have more money (which contributes to well-being), but they also develop a broader range of social contacts. This has an independent positive impact on welfare. According to the literature, unemployment is a 'disaster': it reduces income but it also reduces happiness directly by destroying the self-respect and social relationships created by work.

When people become unemployed, their happiness falls much less because of the loss of income than because of the loss of work itself. The social-psychological impact of unemployment is even greater than the impact of divorce according to a study covering forty-six countries. (Layard, pp. 64-67). The enforced idleness of many refugees who do not have the right to work has a serious psychological impact. The right to work is thus a health issue, not just an economic one.

Residential living patterns also have an impact on psychological well-being. People benefit from living in close proximity to others from their ethnic community. In refugee camps, UNHCR typically creates neighborhoods populated by members of a particular ethnic group.

In urban areas, UNHCR may have little control over where people live, and in some circumstances, it may be thought that dispersing the refugee population would be less

likely to evoke a negative reaction from the host community and perhaps more likely to promote local integration. However, the research on social capital suggests that we should encourage communities to live in a compact geographic area, as this has a positive impact on psychological well-being.

Economic well-being

The literature on social capital suggests that bridging social capital is highly relevant to the improvement of economic outcomes. People who have a broad network of social relations with people of diverse backgrounds are more likely to find jobs, keep jobs, rise up the career ladder and develop their own businesses. Refugees are newcomers in an asylum country, and to get ahead economically, they need not only vocational skills and legal permission to work; they need social ties with the host community to help them navigate the local labour market. In other words, the literature suggests that bridging social capital, social ties with the host community, is an important element of local integration.

Some refugees may find it easier to develop these ties, especially if they share a language and culture with the host community. Others may face huge challenges, especially where the host community is unreceptive of refugees, such as in countries where xenophobic attitudes are common.

In many cases, UNHCR focuses on language and vocational training as a means of promoting livelihoods. The literature on social capital suggests that we may need to think of additional interventions that focus on forging social relations between the host community and refugees.

In their contribution to more extensive bridging social capital, a variety of community services programmes may have a measurable livelihoods impact. For example, projects to include refugee parents in PTAs, to support integrated community centers, to conduct public information campaigns to improve the image of refugees in host society, to offer social and cultural orientation, to organize cultural events bringing together communities: all of these may have a measurable impact on livelihoods.

Security

In industrialized countries, people without social ties are more likely to commit crimes and also fall victim to crime. Overall crime rates tend to be lower in communities where people watch out for each other and help each other. Where refugees are living in urban areas, UNHCR can promote protection by looking at which neighborhoods have the right mix of social conditions to accommodate refugees safely.

Social ties also provide people with a means to cope with protection emergencies. In my experience of working with urban refugees, I have learned that many refugees use social ties to gain release from detention. They may be able to rely on friends to bail them out; a neighbor or friend from the host community may negotiate with the police on their behalf; or in some cases, the refugee community establishes a friendly relationship with the local police station and is able to secure the release of

community members.

Strong refugee communities, with strong internal structures plus good relations with the host community, are able to provide some protection against detention. UNHCR can identify and disseminate these positive practices among various refugee communities, with refugees teaching other refugees about how to join together for purposes of protection. UNHCR can support communities to improve their existing protection interventions, such as by offering paralegal training to refugee community activists.

Strong community ties are also a buffer in other emergencies; they are a kind of 'informal insurance'. Some refugees are easily able to borrow a small amount of money from friends or neighbors for transportation to a hospital or UNHCR office in case of an emergency. Other refugees experience social isolation and face an emergency all alone.

Social isolation is a serious protection risk, which UNHCR can consider in its evaluation of risks. For example, through targeted questions, we may find that some single refugee women live in a neighbourhood with supportive members of their own community and/or good relations with the host community, people whom they can trust, and who are willing to help out in a time of emergency. Other single women are socially isolated and have no one to support them in an emergency.

Lack of social capital significantly increases the level of risk. UNHCR's recently released update of the Heightened Risk Identification Tool does include a general question about support mechanisms, and as field operations continue to work with this tool, the tool could perhaps explore further lines of interviewing to illuminate the factors that mitigate risk, including social capital. (UNHCR, 2010)

Measuring the baseline of social capital

UNHCR needs to understand the baseline level of social capital among the refugee population it serves. If we understand the baseline, we will be able to analyze the potential success and challenges of a community-based approach in our operation.

Some refugee communities have strong levels of both bridging and bonding social capital: the refugees trust one another and their leadership structures; they organize themselves for mutual assistance; and they have strong networks with the host community.

It is not difficult to implement a community-based approach with these populations, as UNHCR can support them in building on existing strengths. They will use any donation of materials for the benefit of the entire community. They can mobilize volunteers to look after children or vulnerable persons. They may need just a bit of training or equipment in order to solve a wide range of problems, including education, shelter and livelihoods.

Other refugee populations have extremely weak social capital. This weakness may be linked to the situation in the country of origin. Ethnic or political disputes at home may have led to a breakdown in social trust.

It has been suggested that while inter-state conflict can mobilize national unity and promote greater social cohesiveness within a community, civil wars damage social capital greatly: “[Civil conflict] divides the population by undermining interpersonal and communal group trust, destroying the norms and values that underlie cooperation and collective action for the common good, and increasing the likelihood of communal strife... This damage to a nation’s social capital... impedes communal and state ability to recover after hostilities cease.” (Colletta and Cullen, p. 1).

It is very problematic when some individuals in the community suspect others of being spies or agents of persecution. In my experience, community mobilization may not succeed at all under these conditions.

Conditions in the country of asylum also influence a refugee community’s level of social capital. Ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity within the refugee community can make social solidarity more challenging.

In some asylum countries, refugees live dispersed over a large geographic area, making community action costly and time-consuming. If refugees are not able to gather legally, or fear that gathering together will make them a target of unwanted attention, their social life may wither. This may be more likely the case in urban refugee situations than in camps. It is objectively more difficult to undertake a community-based approach with such communities.

The goals of a community-based approach must be entirely different depending on the baseline level of social capital. A baseline will help us to shape realistic, achievable goals for a community-based approach in operations. Adapting the World Bank’s Social Capital Assessment Tool, I have worked with multi-functional teams in the context of participatory assessment to assess the level of social capital among refugee populations in two urban areas, Amman, Jordan and Nairobi, Kenya.

The variations are striking. We found dramatic differences among refugee populations, even those of different ethnic groups from the same country of origin, such as the Anywaa and the Oromos in Nairobi. In Jordan, we found differences between Iraqi communities residing in different cities of the Kingdom. In some areas, Iraqis have positive relations with the host community, while in other areas the relationship is strained. (Calhoun)

Measuring the baseline of social capital also helps to assess the impact of any projects undertaken to improve social relations among refugees and between refugees and the host population. If it can be shown that after a specific intervention, people are more likely to trust each other, visit each other, share with one another, and support one another in emergencies, this can be claimed as a positive impact on protection. Such interventions should consequently continue, even if funding is limited.

Which interventions promote social capital formation?

So far, my reading of the literature on social capital has yielded greater insight into the evidence of its impact than prescriptive guidance on how to promote social capital formation. Indeed, in concluding a series of papers on social capital, the World Bank noted dejectedly that there has been more success “at documenting the beneficial

impact of social capital than at deriving policy prescriptions and providing guidelines about how to invest in it... Investing in social capital is more difficult than investing in human capital where a number of time-tested approaches are available (building schools, training teachers, developing appropriate curricula, and so forth).” (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, p. 25).

Some social scientists emphasize the long-term historical processes that lead to social capital formation, which creates doubts about whether relatively short-term interventions by external actors can have a positive impact on social relations. (see Putnam, 1994) A recent meta-analysis of ten interventions designed to promote social cohesion in sub-Saharan Africa found that there was inconclusive evidence of these interventions’ impact on building social capital: the studies replicated a weak improvement in social trust within community groups, but a negative effect on inter-group relations. In some cases, there were adverse effects to the community projects, including rent-seeking, elite capture, and social discord. (King, et. Al.)

However, the literature does have some positive lessons to share. A field experiment in Liberia used surveys and an innovative public goods game to show that a community-driven development programme involving broad community participation in selecting and implementing projects can increase levels of social cohesion, even after the project concludes. (see Fearon, et. al.)

In general, the research discourages agencies from social engineering projects that try to create social ties where these do not exist at all, as these are likely to fail when external support is withdrawn. It is better to build “existing social ties and work alongside the definitions of the situation of community members rather than seeking to impose them from the outside.” (Portes and Landolt, 546)

A study on microfinance shows that when women receiving group loans have weekly meetings rather than monthly meetings, they develop stronger, long-lasting social ties with one another: they are more likely to visit one another socially and attend social events together. These women also do better economically. They are more likely to assist one another in case of a health emergency; four times less likely to default on their loans; and more likely to have financial transfers with people outside their immediate families. (Feigenberg, et. al.)

The authors conclude that “repeat interactions can in practice facilitate cooperative behavior by enabling individuals to sustain reciprocal economic ties... [D]evelopment programs can increase social ties and enhance social capital among members of a highly localized community in a strikingly short amount of time.” (Feigenberg, et. al., 28)

Some of the guidance is cautionary, showing which pitfalls to avoid. For example, the literature refers to the ‘Rockefeller effect’: If outside agencies provide financial support to a community initiative, the initiative may be taken over by a new elite. A recent evaluation of a project targeting vulnerable women in Western Kenya confirms this result. The project attempted to build the capacity of local women’s groups to reduce rural poverty through a process of training, support with equipment, and ties to external actors.

However, women's groups involved in the project tended to be taken over by more educated and younger women and even by men. The groups in the programme had more changes in leadership and membership than those outside of the programme. Ultimately, vulnerable women, uneducated and older women from the village, were actually disempowered by the project and lost social capital. (Gugerty and Kremer)

In another study on randomized aid allocation by an NGO in Kenya, it was found that "social capital is not easily created: assistance specifically designed to strengthen cooperation and participation appears to have had very limited effects in the short run." (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, p. 16). Based on 12 studies on the role of social capital in development, the World Bank makes several conclusions about the role of external assistance in social capital formation.

First, it can be destroyed easily and rebuilt only slowly and with significant investment of time and resources. Second, social capital can have perverse impacts. For example, bonding social capital within an ethnic group can be useful in providing mutual support during a time of crisis, but also lead to exclusionary practices. Third, external actors have had only limited success in contributing toward the building of social capital. Assistance is most effective in helping help people to develop external linkages, such as bridging social capital. (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 19)

Conclusion

There are substantial justifications for continuing to develop a community-based approach in UNHCR. The community-based approach can yield more efficient programmes. It can be a right in and of itself. It can promote a higher quality of protection. However, unless UNHCR continues to develop its understanding of this approach, there is a risk that it becomes an ideological statement. I sometimes sense that the frequent usage of the phrase "rights and community-based approach" in many UNHCR documents is more a statement of fashion than of substance.

For me, a community-based approach is a practical approach to achieving the protection of refugees. A community-based approach can be an effective and efficient means of delivering programmes, and it can promote the protection of refugees, mainly by increasing their level of social capital. The approach will be most successful if accompanied by testing assumptions through rigorous programme evaluation, using a variety of methods and building on the existing literature in humanitarian, development and academic circles on community development and social capital.

This fits in with the overall move toward evidence-based humanitarian action and results-based management. We must have the willingness to experiment and freedom to get it wrong sometimes. We can then refine the community-based approach based on what works and jettison approaches that do not have a positive impact on the protection of refugees. This is a future role for an intellectually dynamic, results-oriented community services function rooted in UNHCR's protection mandate.

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