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AGE, GENDER, DIVERSITY MAINSTREAMING INITIATIVE KEY TO URBAN PROTECTION

The UN Refugee Agency’s (UNHCR) approach to urban refugee protection in Nairobi, Kenya should serve as a model and best practice for programs worldwide. By embracing the Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming Initiative, UNHCR has significantly improved their relationships with the refugee community and has drawn upon resources within that community to strengthen protection. UNHCR has forged new partnerships with NGOs and local officials as well as senior management of schools and health clinics. With minimal resources, UNHCR Nairobi was able to achieve these positive results mostly through its willingness to develop a new approach to urban refugee protection.

FROM GATEKEEPERS TO COMMUNITY OUTREACH

UNHCR once had a strained and even hostile relationship with refugees and civil society in Nairobi. Communication and cooperation was limited, and UNHCR was viewed largely as a gatekeeper to accessing protection and not as a partner. Only those refugees who were willing and able to approach UNHCR’s offices received assistance or protection.

In 2005 UNHCR initiated a new approach to its urban program, the so-called “Nairobi Initiative,” and used the Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) participatory assessment to apply a collaborative intra and interagency approach to improve coordination, protection,

and provision of services to refugees in Nairobi. Some of the issues identified in the assessment were later incorporated into urban refugee programming and refugees themselves often become key actors in protection strategies. For instance, through the participatory assessment UNHCR discovered that there was a high number of young refugee girls working as domestic laborers who were often exploited and abused. In response, UNHCR partnered with a local Kenyan social service organization to begin to offer training to refugees in home care management as well as employment placements in more healthy work environments. Refugees are trained on human rights issues so that they are also better able to defend their own rights as well.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- UNHCR should appoint clear leadership at headquarters to ensure that staff is trained on the new urban refugee policy, that best practices from pilot cities are gathered and disseminated, and that country offices are implementing the policy.
- UNHCR needs to develop an accountability framework similar to the AGDM framework for its new urban refugee policy to ensure that it is implemented in country programs with protracted and emerging urban refugee populations.
- UNHCR needs to ensure that urban refugee needs are well reflected in their global needs assessment.
- UNHCR must clearly link community services with protection and elevate the role of community services within the overall structure of UNHCR, especially in urban settings.
- To help advance the urban refugee policy, UNHCR senior management must dedicate sufficient resources to ensure that the AGDM Initiative is fully mainstreamed throughout UNHCR operations worldwide.

UNHCR also committed itself to an ongoing dialogue with refugees throughout the year. This has been successfully achieved in part from UNHCR's establishment of some 20 community-based outreach workers. These refugees serve as points of communication between UNHCR, its partners, local NGOs and officials, and the wider refugee community. They are trained on how to respond to refugee arrest and detention, how to refer SGBV survivors to appropriate services, and how to identify extremely vulnerable individuals.

For the first time in recent history in Nairobi, UNHCR was able to establish contacts with refugee communities at large and better understand community structures. In accordance with the AGDM guidelines, UNHCR's Deputy Representative helped to establish and facilitate a multi-functional team consisting of UNHCR and various NGOs to conduct the outreach and interviews. The involvement of UNHCR senior management in the exercise helped contribute to its success.

PARTNERSHIPS AND TRAINING

In the AGDM assessment all refugee groups highlighted the lack of legal documentation, which often leads to arbitrary arrest and detention, as a top issue of concern. For the first time UNHCR began to more systematically and intentionally register and document any refugee wishing to reside in Nairobi rather than in one of the camps. UNHCR also expanded its formal partnerships to include local legal aid organizations.

Today, UNHCR and its partners regularly communicate directly to police stations as well as the Department of Prisons to inquire about refugee arrests and detention. Kenyan lawyers, magistrates, and judges have also been trained on the provisions in the Kenyan Refugees Act of 2006 as well as on identifying and responding to vulnerable refugee groups. Some have gone on to become trainers themselves, holding meetings and workshops for their colleagues, including trainings on the Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming Initiative.

UNHCR has also worked to establish relationships with local authorities, including district commissioners responsible for areas in which there is a large refugee presence. As a result of this relationship, many of the district commissioners are for the first time more aware of refugees' rights and the particular challenges they face. In one instance a district commissioner invited UNHCR to participate on the district board as a key stakeholder, highlighting the crucial role that local officials can play in helping to protect refugees in cities.

Due in large part to UNHCR's community outreach and partnership with the Nairobi City Council's Health De-

partment, most refugees now have access to primary health care. By showing one's Mandate Refugee Certificate and paying a minimal fee which is required for all patients, refugees are largely able to access city run health clinics. In areas where there is a large concentration of refugees, UNHCR provides minimal financial as well as staff support to these clinics.

In 2003 primary education was made free for all children in Kenya. UNHCR capitalized on this change and began reaching out to headmasters in schools located in refugee neighborhoods to educate them about the right of refugees to attend school. UNHCR and its partners also built up a relationship with the Department of City Education who was able to provide information about refugees directly to its headmasters and teachers.

CONCLUSION

Most refugees today credit UNHCR for dramatically changing and improving its approach toward refugees living in urban areas and agree that the communication between UNHCR and refugees has improved. Refugees appreciate the organizations providing legal aid and liaising with police stations and courts. They are grateful for the existence of the refugee community outreach program and also have benefited in recent years from greater access to education and health services.

This positive change is a direct result of UNHCR and local NGOs' outreach efforts, partnership building exercises, and institutional trainings on refugee law, principles embodied in the AGDM Initiative. It has been achieved with minimal resources; however, to expand on these initiatives, more resources would be required—but a little can often go a long way in an urban context.

UNHCR's urban refugee policy will undoubtedly further help solidify and legitimize these important efforts in Nairobi, but it is essential that UNHCR headquarters appoint clear leadership on ensuring the implementation of this policy worldwide. Developing an accountability framework similar to the one used for AGDM may be helpful in this effort. In comprehensive needs assessments, country offices must include the needs of urban refugees, something that was largely lacking in 2010. Finally, the experience of Nairobi clearly reveals that community services play an important protection function, especially in urban settings. UNHCR must acknowledge this and elevate the function within its Department of International Protection Services.

Elizabeth Campbell assessed the needs of urban refugees in Nairobi in November 2010.