

SPCP-Thailand

Update December 2006

Objectives and methodology

UNHCR has introduced the Strengthening Protection Capacity Project (SPCP) in Thailand. The SPCP is supported by initial financial contributions from the Governments of Australia and the United States. It is being implemented with the full support and co-operation of the Royal Thai Government (RTG). The key objective of this project is to identify gaps in refugee protection capacity, and to facilitate the development, funding, and implementation of projects to fill those gaps. The SPCP relies on a consultative methodology, involving a range of stakeholders at each stage of the process.

Context

In the context of Thailand, the SPCP is being introduced at an opportune time, coinciding as it does with a similar initiative already launched jointly by a consortium of NGOs and UNHCR in Thailand - the 'CCSDPT/UNHCR Comprehensive Plan'. The SPCP seeks to support this process, by both drawing on existing information and partnerships, and by contributing resources and experiences gained from SPCP projects in other countries. To this end, the SPCP is collaborating with the RTG, NGO partners, donors and refugee communities.

Identifying protection gaps

The SPCP process has also benefited from the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) initiative, which was launched by UNHCR and CCSDPT partners in Thailand in late 2005. This process has involved a series of participatory assessments carried out with refugees living in urban and camp locations across Thailand, and has provided valuable insight on refugees' own views on protection gaps and ways to address them. Drawing on this process and on existing NGO and UNHCR documents, an SPCP report on Protection Gaps in Thailand was prepared and published on the UNHCR website in November 2006.

Some of the major protection gaps identified in this way include: security risks faced by refugees, particularly women and children, in the camps; the precarious legal status of any refugees caught outside the camps; the under-representation of women and minority groups in camp administration; the lack of post-Grade 10 education opportunities; and, in particular, the current obstacles to refugees becoming self-reliant in Thailand.

Development of projects

The SPCP is presently undertaking a range of discussions with governmental partners, refugee committees, community based organisations, and NGOs, in camp and urban locations across Thailand. The purpose of these discussions is to develop projects which will respond to the identified protection gaps.

The types of projects being developed in this way include: safe-houses for SGBV survivors; support to refugee women's organisations; expansion of NGO SGBV programmes; training programmes for refugee health workers; refugee adolescent and school health programs; support to camp-based nursery schools; psycho-social services for urban refugees; support to refugee community responses to child discipline issues; and development of income generating activities as part of a relapse prevention programme for recovering alcoholics in the camps.

The development of projects is being carried out in a consultative manner which engages all stakeholders. To build on these discussions and move forward with the CCSDPT/SPCP process, a workshop for RTG officials, NGOs and donors will be held in April 2007.

In the interim, a number of projects that have been identified as necessary in the collaborative process are already being implemented through the SPCP process. For example, the SPCP is funding the provision of ID cards for 80,000 camp-based Myanmar refugees. This project will be implemented by the Royal Thai Government, and seeks to address an important gap in the protection of refugees in Thailand. It is envisaged that the ID cards will be issued in early 2007.

In addition, the SPCP is supporting the expansion of NGO activities aimed at countering drug and alcohol abuse in the refugee camps. The links between substance abuse and violence, particularly domestic violence, in the camps has been frequently highlighted. The need for expansion of existing activities in this area had been highlighted by refugee communities and NGO partners in all camps.

Working alongside Thai civil society

As part of the broader SPCP initiative, UNHCR is partnering with the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) on a project to engage Thai civil society organisations in refugee protection. This project is supported by a financial contribution from the Government of the United States.

The overall goal of this 12-month project is to advance the policy environment in Thailand toward the realization of refugees' rights; in particular, the rights to work and freedom of movement.

The project seeks to identify and mobilize a core constituency of civil society actors drawn from the business, labour, faith, academic, and human rights/legal communities. This constituency will carry out grassroots advocacy and public education to raise awareness of the refugee situation and sympathy for refugee rights and to present their realization as mutually beneficial to refugees and their host society. It will also enter into dialogue with policy makers to formulate and popularize alternative policies more conducive to refugees' rights, and liaise with civil society allies in donor nations to ensure international responsibility sharing.

The USCRI office in Bangkok was established in late 2006 with the hiring of a Country Director and two Program Officers – all three are Thai nationals with a range of skills in advocacy, public relations, and government. In early 2007, USCRI plan to conduct a baseline, nationwide poll to determine public awareness of and attitudes toward refugees and focus groups to explore the most effective messages toward raising public awareness and support. In mid-2007, the core civil society constituencies should implement a public relations campaign to educate the public as to who the refugees are, the reasons for their flight, and why allowing them their rights is the humanitarian and 'Thai' thing to do.

While most refugee rights require no direct fiscal outlay, some—such as education, health services, and public assistance—do. Therefore, an international liaison between civil society in Thailand and in donor nations will seek to direct humanitarian assistance to support Thai institutions that provide these services to refugees and nationals alike.

Strengthening refugee self-reliance

There have been encouraging signs in recent years of an interest on the part of the RTG to work in cooperation with UNHCR and other partners in improving the situation of refugees in Thailand. In particular, the RTG appears increasingly open to the possibility of vocational training, income-generation projects, and legal employment for refugees in Thailand.

UNHCR and partners feel it is essential to support and inform these welcome policy developments by implementing a livelihood project in cooperation with the ILO in Thailand. The livelihoods project, which is being supported by a financial contribution from the US Government, will build on existing NGO work in this area and draw on the technical expertise of the ILO with the aim of producing a comprehensive strategy for facilitating refugee self-reliance while maximizing the benefits to Thai society.

UNHCR has secured two ILO consultants who are tasked with analyzing the impact of an expansion of self-reliance opportunities on Thai society; developing a livelihoods strategy to comprehensively address the gaps identified in this area, with particular consideration to opportunities for youth and women; and initiating a series of vocational training activities.

The detailed and empirically supported livelihood strategy will include specific projects designed to expand opportunities for self-reliance among refugee populations and provide benefits to hosting communities.

The consultative methodology will enhance cooperation between international and national NGOs, and with other UN partners. It will also serve to forge closer links with the Royal Thai Government, including some governmental departments not usually involved in refugee matters, and establish new links with Thai business leaders.

Administration of Justice

One of the priority protection gaps identified in Thailand has been the relatively large number of security incidents reported in the camps, including violence against women and children. There are insufficient prevention and response mechanisms in place to ensure that the rule of law is respected. As one means to address this problem, UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee recently opened the first Legal Aid Centres in two refugee camps in Thailand. The key aim is to promote the establishment of the rule of law in the camps by providing greater access to the Thai justice system and through improving the refugee's own traditional justice mechanisms.

In parallel, UNHCR commissioned a study on the administration of justice in the camps which was recently presented at a workshop co-organised with the Thai Ministry of Justice. The workshop reviewed how justice is administered in the camps, with the aim of improving refugee justice mechanisms collaboratively with the RTG. The workshop focused, in particular, on juvenile justice and community-based justice issues. As a result of the workshop, the Ministry of Justice will establish up an inter-ministerial working group to focus specifically on the administration of justice in the camps.

UNHCR is also exploring a potential partnership with Griffith University / Austcare on building the capacity of refugee justice/governance systems.