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Community services in refugee aid programmes: a critical analysis

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Introduction

Community services is the hybrid term for one of the ‘sectors’ of the international aid response to refugee crises co-ordinated by UNHCR. It used to be known as social services and focused on providing care for refugees who were unable to meet their needs with the basic provision in the camp. Over the past decade its remit has expanded significantly and it has been at the forefront of UNHCR’s move towards a community development approach in its programmes.

Despite its expanded role, community services is not in the same league of influence in the field or in funding as the priority ‘life support sectors’ of food, health, water and sanitation. As the terms of reference for UNHCR’s recent evaluation of community services stated:

The community services function is a relatively neglected aspect of UNHCR’s work with refugees, attracting significantly less international attention than many other of the organization’s activities. And yet it is a function which seeks to meet some of the most essential needs of refugees, especially those who are at greatest physical and psychological risk.

This paper introduces some of the guidelines and principles for community services that have been drawn up by UNHCR and are expected to be applied in the field. These guidelines suggest that community services programmes should take a developmental approach, which empowers refugees and enables them to ‘rebuild a self-generating community’. Drawing on experience from fieldwork and literature, especially in Zambia, the paper argues that these aspirations are unlikely to succeed within the current refugee aid regime. There are conflicting expectations of what community services is expected to deliver, the principles for community services are somewhat confused, and there are practical problems in putting them into operation.

Many of the examples given here are drawn from my practical involvement as a consultant and NGO worker in community services programmes in Africa. In particular, I draw on the findings of a recent review of one NGO’s community services programme in Zambia (Bakewell 2002) and a parallel study of the same NGO conducted in Tanzania (Dick 2002). The findings of these reviews were consistent with the global evaluation of UNHCR community services function, which was carried out at the same time (CASA Consulting 2002). This suggests that the point raised in this paper may have wider applicability to the community services sector, beyond the examples cited here.

The next section outlines the idealised role of community services, and how it works out into programmes in practice. The following three sections look at the confusion arising from the different expectations of the sector, and problems with the principles and the practice. The paper concludes that UNHCR is not yet ready to adopt the principles and approaches used within community services across all its programming. Rather, it suggests that it may be more productive first to look at the more fundamental issue of moving from needs-based to rights-based approaches in its work.

The role of community services

In refugee emergencies, the focus of UNHCR's social services department was on ensuring that the needs were met of unaccompanied children, elderly people, disabled, chronically sick and others who were socially or economically disadvantaged were met. The NGO responsible for the sector tended to employ social workers, who would move through the refugee community identifying needs and arranging the distribution of appropriate resources. Concerns about the refugees' own mechanisms for dealing with social problems, or engaging refugees in the delivery of resources were left for the 'care and maintenance' phase, after the emergency. Likewise, the development of refugee livelihoods and income generation were areas that were not given priority during emergencies.

It was increasingly recognised that the refugee emergencies were rarely resolved quickly and when this social welfare approach continued over an extended period, it tended to erode existing social systems. This gave rise to a concern about so-called 'dependency' and a drive towards more community-based approaches to meeting social needs. For example, interventions aimed at helping refugees re-establish livelihoods of some sort – such as vocational training or micro-credit - were brought forward rather than being left for the end of the emergency. The Rwandan crisis in 1994 was one of the earliest emergencies where UNHCR put considerable resources into all areas of community services from the start of the programme.

This shift in emphasis has been reflected in the change of name from 'social services' to 'community services' in 1989 (for a brief history of community services see CASA Consulting 2002: Appendix 6). Revised guidelines drawn up over the last decade (UNHCR 1996, UNHCR 1999 see Boxes 1 and 2) emphasise the role of the sector in working with existing social structures to ensure the aid programme meets the needs of all the refugees. Where appropriate structures do not exist, the community services programme are expected to facilitate their development.

Box 1: UNHCR Community Service Guidelines: basic principles and goals

Basic Principles

Community Services activities are based on certain fundamental principles about human beings, they are:

1. The dignity and worth of individual human beings.
2. The capacity of persons to change no matter how desperate their situation.
3. Inherent desire of all human beings to belong to and contribute to a larger supportive community.
4. Every person has a right to live a full human life, and to improve his circumstances.
5. Persons are entitled to help when they are unable to help themselves.
6. Others have a duty to help those who are unable to help themselves.
7. The ultimate goal of Community Services is self-help.

The Goals of Community Services

- **Individual** – to restore the refugees' sense of being human, to enable them to take decisions, and to start living again in self-respecting way.
- **Community** – to restore a sense of security, create a sense of belonging and to rebuild a self-generating community.

(UNHCR 1996: 9, 14)

Box 2: UNHCR Emergency Handbook: objectives, principles of response and action for community services

Objectives

- To provide for the welfare of the whole refugee group and to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees have equal access to basic goods and services.
- To assist the re-establishment and development of refugee community structures which can be used in the management of the assistance programme and which can also minimize longer-term problems of dependency.
- To ensure that the assistance provided is appropriate for the refugees.

Principles of Response

- Refugee community participation (including both men and women) should be promoted in all sectors, by building on the community's own resources as much as possible and encouraging individual, family and group self-reliance;
- Special services for the vulnerable should, as far as possible, be provided by the refugees community itself;
- Services should be decentralised but within a structured plan, and must reach those in need;
- Community services should be developed in co-ordination with and in support of the priority life support sectors and should be an essential component of the overall assistance operation.

Action

- Assess community problems, needs and resources. Help refugees to identify and establish the services which will meet their needs in all sectors;
- Ensure prompt identification of and support to the most vulnerable;
- Develop appropriate community management structures including mechanisms to ensure participation of women in decision-making and ensure that all groups within the population are appropriately represented. Identify community workers who can help the vulnerable, spread relevant information and support other sectors;
- Take immediate action to prevent family break-up and reunite families as soon as possible.
- Identify and provide care for all isolated vulnerable individuals, especially unaccompanied minors. Spontaneous groupings, if already bonded, should be kept together;
- Establish communication links with the refugees to ensure good two-way communication between the refugees and those assisting them;
- Build the capacity of the community by identifying training needs and by helping to organize practical and hands-on training in community work.

(UNHCR 1999: 96)

These principles and guidelines suggest that the community services should have a pivotal role with respect to needs identification and the establishment of services in all sectors. Examples cited in the emergency handbook include site planning and shelter, where community services should ensure that those refugees who cannot build their own house receive assistance – ideally from other refugees.

Another cross-cutting role envisaged for community services is in establishing community management structures, such as refugee committees, to facilitate their participation in the aid programme. The NGO implementing community services is expected to establish good communications across the refugee population to ensure that the views and needs of the whole population can be heard.

These principles underlying community services suggest that it may be better regarded as an approach rather than a particular sector. It is therefore not surprising that NGOs involved in community services have been at the forefront of the promotion of a 'community development approach', which has recently been adopted by UNHCR as formal policy for all its activities. This approach aims at:

- strengthening refugee's initiative and partnership, resulting in ownership of all phases of programme implementation;
- reinforcing dignity, self-esteem of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR;
- achieving a higher degree of self-reliance; and
- increasing the cost effectiveness and sustainability of UNHCR's programmes.¹

As the paper presented to the Standing Committee of UNHCR's Executive Committee in 2001 recognises, 'a generalised application of the community development approach will take time and require some adjustments of attitudes within the organization.'² This was acknowledged as the main challenge to implementing the new policy according to the minutes of the meeting.³ The term 'community services' may well be a halfway stage in the move from social services to community development.

Given this broad agenda, the look of a community programme may vary considerably from place to place. Two examples of the aims and objectives of community services are shown for programmes with Rwanda refugees in Tanzania (Box 3) and Angolan refugees in Zambia (Box 4). The areas of intervention might be crudely summarised as:

- social services: ensuring that assistance is given to those with special needs that are not met by the basic goods and services provided in the camps, e.g. fostering for unaccompanied children, care for the disabled or elderly who cannot manage alone.
- community development: activities which encourage the refugees to live and work together and participate in the running of the camp, e.g. establishing refugee committees, youth work such as sports.
- livelihood development: activities which improve the refugees' prospects for generating their income, e.g. vocational training, literacy, micro-credit, supply of seeds and tools for agriculture.

Other areas of intervention which are often associated with the community services sector and may be incorporated with the programmes include primary and secondary education, reproductive health, and sexual and gender based violence. The NGO responsible for community services is expected to have very close contacts with the community and as a result, they are often involved in highlighting protection issues that arise in the camps.

¹ *Reinforcing a Community Development Approach*. Geneva: 20th Meeting Standing Committee, UNHCR Executive Committee 52nd Session. EC/51/SC/CRP.6

² *ibid*

³ Report of the 20th Meeting of the Standing Committee, UNHCR Executive Committee, 52nd Session. A/AC.96/945

Box 3: GOAL Tanzania, Kitali Hills Refugee Camp 1995

In March 1995 the objectives of the Community Services department for the next year were:

- empowerment of refugees
- provision of services for all ages, especially women and children
- provision of income generating opportunities and skills
- adoption of community approach to limit dependency
- support of unaccompanied minors and their foster families

Future aims after the initial emergency were to:

- encourage community and income generating projects
- develop home-based care for vulnerable groups
- develop community based services (day care, pre-schools, recreation groups)
- continue and develop tracing and monitoring of unaccompanied minors
- develop the women's movement to participate in camp decisions
- develop and motivate the youth
- vocational training
- promote environmental awareness

(Lennox-Cook 1996)

Box 4: CORD Zambia, Nangweshi Refugee Camp 2002

Goal

Refugee community is working together in taking initiatives to improve their socio economic situation.

Purpose

Refugee community undertaking a range of activities to improve skills and income, boost access to basic goods, care for vulnerable members, and improve recreational opportunities.

Objectives

- Improved access to adult technology/vocational and English training, especially for recent school leavers.
- Increase in self-help initiatives which generate income and/or improve access to more varied food and non-food items.
- Vulnerable members of the community identified and assisted by community initiatives and through targeting by refugee communities of external aid.
- Increased recreational activity, especially to reduce boredom among youths.
- Continuation of HIV/AIDS awareness in conjunction with the reproductive health programme.
- Continuation of specialist training for staff and refugees
- Agency co-ordination, improve the effectiveness of the programmes through a co-ordinated approach.

(CORD Project Document 2002- unpublished)

Confusion of expectations

The wide remit of community services suggested by these overall principles and objectives suggest that there are great expectations of what it should aspire to deliver. Unfortunately, different stakeholders have different expectations. Refugees, aid agency staff in other sectors and community services staff all have different views of

how community services should work. As a result, there is a danger that community services programmes may fail to succeed from anyone's perspective.

First and perhaps most critically, it is not at all clear that refugees in camps and settlements have a particular interest in the community development aspects of community services. Their expectations of community services are that they should deliver assistance to those who are the most vulnerable to absolute destitution and social isolation. Their measure of community services success is the volume of good delivered.

In two detailed reviews of one NGO's community services programmes in Tanzania and Zambia, both reports highlighted the fact that refugees' expectations from the NGOs were concerned with the delivery of material resources (Dick 2002, Bakewell 2002).

While the NGO and UNHCR community services staff were concerned about notions of community development, capacity building etc., the refugees were looking at what goods they received: how many plastic sheets, what materials for starting a business, what incentives for building a school. When asked about the work of community services, the majority said it was primarily to provide direct assistance to 'vulnerable' people. Very few made any mention of self-reliance, except those few who had received training in community development or worked for the NGO.

This is not to say that refugees are not interested in securing their autonomy or establishing their own livelihoods. Rather it suggests that refugees may not see community development and empowerment being delivered through the existing refugee regime. What they tend to see of the drive towards self-reliance is a refusal of UNHCR and NGOs to provide resources for fear that they might engender 'dependency'. From a refugee's perspective, the community development approach is likely to be read as way of saving money on refugee aid – they may well be right.

Second, there is confusion of expectations among the aid agency staff on the ground, where there is also limited understanding of what the role of community services should be. At one extreme, some expect community services to take care of any social needs that arise within the camps, giving out materials and moving through the camp looking after individuals who cannot manage to look after themselves. This is the most common view among other agencies in other sectors, government and UNHCR field staff. At the other extreme, a community development approach suggests that the role of the agency is one of facilitating the refugees' in looking after themselves.

During the reviews mentioned above, on the one hand, government and other NGOs complained that the community services NGO was not providing sufficient wooden poles to build shelter for new arrivals who could not collect their own. On the other hand, camp management staff complained that community services were referring people to them for extra support, and they are not doing enough to promote 'self-reliance'.

Finally, those involved in community services and other aid agencies also have great expectations what they can expect from refugees. This was recognised in a

participatory appraisal for community services in Mayukwayukwa refugee settlement in Zambia,

How will the [community services NGOs] ensure that even those without relatives are taken care of by the community within which they live? The community members expect NGOs to provide help while NGOs expect the vulnerables to be taken care of by the community. The real challenge is how to bridge or reconcile the variance in expectations.⁴

NGOs expect refugees to look after those who are struggling; as the UNHCR basic principles (Box 1) state, ‘others have a duty to help those who are unable to help themselves.’ Harrell-Bond (1986) characterised this optimistic view of behaviour as the ‘over-socialised concept of man’. In the extreme circumstances that are often found in refugee camps, the refugees often appear to fail in this duty as they focus on looking after their immediate families.

Apart from these different expectations, the principles do not give clear guidance for practice, especially when it is difficult to see how the principles can be worked out in practice. Three areas of confusion are highlighted here: how to square the community structures with international standards of protection; the flawed assumption of dependency; different understanding of building on refugees’ resources.

The limits of participation

The principles of community services suggest that any intervention should be based on participatory approaches, which fully involve the refugees in planning and implementation. ‘Refugees should be the reference point for determining felt needs and in identifying priority groups and individuals’ (UNHCR 1996:14). Moreover, the interventions should be based on existing community structures ‘as far as possible’.

At the same time, UNHCR is required to uphold international standards of protection and humanitarian principles. It does not take long to find examples, where the refugees’ community mechanisms for dealing with social issues may fall below such standards or run counter to them. This can be illustrated by the situation of unaccompanied children in Zambia.

Throughout large areas of southern Africa, it is common for children to be cared for by people other than their parents, most usually relatives but also friends. However, once within a refugee camp or settlement, this largely informal system of guardianship is incorporated within the more formal requirements of UNHCR, which requires reporting and fostering agreements to ensure that the children receive care and are protected from abuse. This is not only to ensure their protection while they are in the camps, but also to facilitate any chance of family reunification.

⁴ Hodi (2000) Participatory Assessment Report: Mayukwayukwa Refugee Settlement, Kaoma District, Western Province, p. 9

This monitoring and reporting on children's placement tends to create an expectation that material assistance will be forthcoming for those who take in children. In western Zambia, small grants are being made to foster families that take in children who arrive in the camps as unaccompanied minors.

However, there is the danger that such a response may result in demands for a similar grant to be given to those who foster other children when the needs arise within the camps e.g. through the death of parents, abandonment or repatriation. Is it appropriate for the community services NGO to differentiate between those children who need fostering because of the circumstances of becoming a refugee – i.e. those who lose parents in flight – from those whose needs arise because of the 'normal' cycle of life within the camp or settlement? Does the same responsibility for protection fall on both? Is this system of fostering undermining the community mechanism for caring for children?

The principle of refugee participation and ownership of community services interventions also runs into difficulties when faced with the different priorities of UNHCR and the international aid agencies. The initiative for HIV/AIDS education activities that are now a standard component of community services has come from UNHCR and aid agencies, greatly facilitated by designated funds from donors. Likewise, as sexual and gender based violence affecting refugees has been highlighted, community services agencies have been at the forefront of new programmes to address the issues, again assisted by designated donor funds.

Although the need for such activities becomes clear over time and the services provided may be well used, it is open to question if they would have been a priority for many refugee communities. Certainly, in the Zambian case, HIV/AIDS awareness was not raised as a priority in the participatory appraisal, which was carried out before the community services programme started. In Tanzania, the main participants in the reproductive health programme were the youth, and parents saw the resultant HIV campaign as shocking and culturally inappropriate.

Clearly, the principles of participation and refugee 'ownership' of community services activities (or the whole UNHCR operation under the community development approach) have boundaries. But these boundaries are not yet marked out. It needs to be clear to all concerned that where the culture of the refugees and social structures runs counter to wider principles of human rights and international humanitarian law, the latter should prevail.

A similar point could be made about any community development programme that is supported by an external agency. However, a development agency has very limited power over those with whom it works. It may not agree in principle with the way the community operates, but all it can hope to do is influence attitudes and behaviour over time. A development agency must negotiate its presence and if it pushes against the prevailing culture to strongly it is likely to be rejected. In contrast, UNHCR has a mandate from the host government and international community to work among the refugees and it does not need the refugees' agreement.

Assumed dependency

A major objective for promoting refugees involvement is to avoid 'dependency'. As the guidelines for community services put it:

It is important to involve the refugees in the provision of assistance and allow the community to share the responsibility of caring for itself and its vulnerable members. This minimizes dependency and encourages self reliance. *The approach used during the emergency period will determine the whole pattern of behavioural response of refugees towards external assistance.* (UNHCR 1999: 97, emphasis in original).

The notion of dependency is frequently used by the staff of UNHCR and NGOs working with refugees as an explanation for the refugees' lack of co-operation or excessive demands of assistance. People who have been refugees for a long time are perceived as having lost their 'natural' means of coping and reliant on the aid agencies to provide all their needs. They do not take the initiative and do not take responsibility for the care of the poorest people within their midst. Communal action is only undertaken with the support of aid agencies, and those who participate are likely to demand payment for their labour. Moreover, rather than working, they exploit the system to obtain extra ration cards and other resources from aid agencies.

For example, among Rwandan refugees in Ngara, Tanzania in 1994, the refugees in Lumasi camp were widely regarded as more difficult because a large proportion had been 'spoiled' by living in camps for displaced people inside Rwanda for some time before fleeing to Tanzania (personal observation, Pottier 1996:411). Angolan refugees who only arrived in Zambia at the end of 1999 were described as dependent by one aid worker, because they complained bitterly about the payments (incentives) offered by UNHCR for their labour in building up the services in the settlement.

This underlying assumption that refugees are prone to dependency is a major weakness in the way that community services has been conceptualised. There is no research to back up the claim that the approach in the emergency will set up a pattern of behavioural response in the way suggested in UNHCR's guidelines (see above). There is a growing body of research that rejects the idea of the dependency syndrome and sees the observed behaviour as a greater reflection on the aid agencies than the refugees.

Many have noted that refugees (like any other people) are highly skilled at adapting to the circumstances and making the best advantage of their situation (Kibreab 1993, Waldron 1988). When faced with a set of external interventions that can provide them with benefits, they will receive what they can. If provision is based on need then people will present themselves as needy, and when providers are foreigners, it is particularly easy to make the appropriate presentation. However, in taking advantage of the situation refugees are not exhibiting dependency so much as a great capacity for changing their livelihood strategies to their circumstances. They have to appear dependent to receive resources, but this does not mean they have forgotten how to survive by themselves.

Humanitarian aid becomes a component of refugees' resource base, which they manage to promote their interests, but it is not necessarily, and possibly rarely, the major part. Many groups of refugees have been observed to make strenuous efforts to avoid being dependent on humanitarian aid and to preserve their limited autonomy and control over their lives. Sometimes this may take the form of avoiding going to official settlements (Hansen 1982) or subverting the aid on offer to match their own interests and priorities (Waldron 1988). Refugees go to great lengths to preserve their lifestyle and earn extra incomes where they can (Kibreab 1993).

Returning to the example of the Angolan refugees who were complaining about payments for their labour, when I visited the camp early in 2000, I found very few people were present in the plastic covered shelters which formed their new houses. Far from sitting around refusing to work, they were out labouring in local farmers' fields to supplement the rations, which they complained were inadequate. This is still the case today as people continually move out of the camp looking for piecework, trading, and gathering firewood. Refugees are too busy using their time and labour to improve their living conditions to work freely on what are seen as aid agency projects.

This assumption that refugees become acquire this 'dependency' on humanitarian aid casts the refugees as helpless victims who represent a problem for both aid agencies and host governments. This runs counter to any notion of refugees as agents of development which underlies UNHCR's community services principles and the community development approach. This concern about the rhetoric of dependency has been picked up the by the Community Services evaluation which concluded:

We find many of the concepts, terminology and articulation of the CS function to be singularly unhelpful because they repeatedly "problematize" the refugee, rather than focusing on the role that UNHCR's own management and operating procedures play in creating 'dependency' and narrowing the scope of refugee self-sufficiency and 'self-reliance.' Clearly refugee dependency is also the product of host government regulations limiting freedom of movement and the right to work or engage in economic activity.

In the field we heard numerous references to the need to get refugees to stop being so 'dependent', as opposed to a focus on creating appropriate conditions for refugee self-sufficiency. This occurs despite the fact that our findings and a consistent body of evidence from other research and evaluations confirm that in all settings, refugees are actively engaged in every possible type of productive work, based on the opportunities and resources at their disposal. (CASA Consulting 2002: 70)

The evaluation rightly recommended that 'references to dependency should be purged from the UNHCR lexicon' and argues that its rhetoric, training and working practices should be re-orientated to acknowledge refugees as potential assets.

Building on refugees' resources

The community services guidelines and UNHCR's community development approach rest on the idea that people will work together for their community to improve conditions, whether by building schools, teaching adult literacy, or overseeing the operation of grinding mills. However, as noted above, given the value that people put on their time, it is difficult to expect particular individuals to dedicate time to such community work as volunteers with no personal gain.

The problem becomes more acute when the activity is directed towards assisting others in the neighbourhood who are facing particular difficulties – whether helping people build houses, supporting foster families, or collecting firewood for people who cannot get it for themselves. Such support may be available within a well-established community but it is limited. It is even less likely to be forthcoming among new arrivals when people are staying among strangers and everybody is starting from scratch to establish themselves in a camp. Under such conditions, refugees struggle to look as far as their extended family, let alone to take care of others.

This emphasis on building on refugees' resources and encouraging self-reliance means that 'handouts' become a dirty word for community services agencies – as it often is for development programmes. However, faced with the desperate conditions that refugees may face, especially on first arriving in a country of asylum, an input of material resources is required to ensure that all the refugees are able to meet their basic need. In Zambia, refugees did not have enough to support their neighbours; as a number of refugees put it, 'We have the will to help, but we do not have the means.' A community development approach cannot address these basic problems, unless it can deliver appropriate material support. Unfortunately, in Zambia these resources were not forthcoming from UNHCR, which cited its concern about undermining self-reliance (Bakewell 2002).

The statements published by UNHCR in its community services guidelines and the more recent community development approach appear to be positive steps away from the technocratic top-down delivery of assistance to refugees, which dominate aid operations. However, when these principles are worked out in practice, it is too easy for the focus to shift to saving money. For example, the phrase 'building on the community's own resources,' can be interpreted in two ways.

First, a narrow understanding of material and human resources lends itself to a calculus of filling in the gaps – refugee aid is to top up what cannot be provided by refugees themselves. Like any welfare system, this will tend to create a poverty trap where recipients have to show they are poor to receive any help, and they are discouraged from improving their own situation, as their gains will be offset against any grants. This perpetuates the games of refugees presenting themselves as poor and aid agencies claiming refugees are caught in the dependency syndrome.

The alternative approach takes a broader interpretation of resources, which include refugees' social structures and cultural practices, which they deploy to improve their lives; e.g. their capacity to manage activities and goods. This is the interpretation which is suggested by UNHCR's guidelines and its community development approach. Unfortunately, until these principles move beyond community service

deals and are adopted by programme officers and other who control the purse strings, the narrow view is likely to dominate.⁵

Confusion in practice

A further obstacle to working to the community services guidelines is the clash that arises between the outlook of community services and the management practices and attitudes that are found in refugee aid programmes in the field.

Refugee aid programmes throughout Africa are littered with the term ‘vulnerable’ which is used so indiscriminately as to have almost completely lost any meaning. It has effectively become a bureaucratic label for a set of people, who are presumed to have a certain set of, largely material, needs, which they cannot meet for themselves. The standard list includes unaccompanied minors, single-parent households, the elderly, and those who are chronically sick or affected by a physical disability or mental health problems. They are conveniently referred to by the appalling shorthand term, ‘the vulnerables’. One of the major tasks of community services in the field is to ensure that the basic needs of ‘vulnerables’ are met.

Refugees understand the term well and know that those who are deemed to be ‘vulnerable’ should be eligible for some extra assistance. For example, on enquiring from a group of Angolan women in Zambia why they were receiving assistance from the community services NGO to establish an income generating activity, their response was that they were ‘vulnerable’, because they were all widows or looking after orphans.

On further enquiry, it was clear that there were considerable variations in their situations. One widow had a daughter and son-in-law in the camp and had been helped by the son-in-law to build her house. Another was recently widowed within the last month, but her husband had not built proper house in the two years they had been in the camp before he died and she was still reliant on plastic sheeting for a roof. Another widow said that she had received help in building from an amputee – who is the most vulnerable there?

This use of the term ‘vulnerable’ presents problems of principle and practice. In principle the idea of ascribing a set of stereotypical needs to people and then setting out to meet them seems contrary to community services’ aspirations to the empowerment of refugees and the recognition of refugees’ potential for improving their own situation. It runs counter to a community based approach. In practice, the definition of ‘vulnerable groups’ is so broad that it does little to assist in targeting assistance.

The term ‘vulnerable’ needs to be qualified. People are vulnerable *to* some risk or other situation and without knowing what a person is vulnerable *to*, it is impossible to know how to improve the situation. It may be useful to shift the focus of assessment

⁵ A similar point is made by the UNHCR community services evaluation which compares a narrow economic notion of ‘self-reliance’ meaning that refugees are economically independent of UNHCR, ‘off the dole’, and a broader view of ‘self-help’ referring to refugees capacity to organise themselves collectively to improve concerns at the community level (CASA Consulting 2002:71).

towards the risks facing people – the dangers to which they are vulnerable. This might help to identify those who are in the worst position *and* the nature of the assistance they are likely to need.

Rather than targeting labelled groups of people, a more helpful guide to programme design may be an assessment of the type and scale of the risks facing refugees. For example, many refugees may be able to build their own houses, but some may face great difficulties in making adequate shelter. Assistance in building houses could then be directed to those who have no means to build their own house, rather than aiming to help amputees, for example, who may be able to look after themselves. The aim should be to help people in the aspect of life in which they are vulnerable and recognise the other aspects of life where they are not vulnerable.⁶

Caseloads and reporting systems

Another discontinuity in the interface between the world of aid agencies and that of refugees is the notion of ‘caseload’, which is prevalent in the reporting systems recommended by UNHCR. A community services NGO is expected to identify the ‘vulnerable’ people within the refugee population and report on how they have responded to their needs. It is open to criticism from UNHCR if it cannot produce this information. This results in reporting systems focused on identifying the ‘caseload’, naming individuals and giving details of their age group, nationality and cause of ‘vulnerability’ – single-headed households, elderly etc.

This type of reporting militates against a community development approach. The process of collecting the data suggests that the community services NGO is taking on responsibility for the support of those recorded on the forms and it will deliver the required resources.⁷ This system does not facilitate the delivery of assistance from one refugee or group of refugees to another.

Community services NGOs may aspire to support groups of refugees helping each other and others in the community, but this will never happen if their progress is measured by what assistance the NGO has given to individuals. It will be hard for refugees to assert ‘ownership’ of activities if every detail has to be recorded by an NGO. It is difficult to envisage such a system of registering people in need of assistance being used in a community development programme outside the refugee camps.

The system as it stands is geared towards ensuring accountability to UNHCR and the flow of information is one way out of the camps. It is a long way from a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation, which involves the whole refugee community. As noted above, refugees may have a very vague idea of what community services are about and tend to assess it on the basis of what it is delivering for them. Community services NGOs may have objectives that are concerned with the development of

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the use and abuse of the term ‘vulnerable’ in community services see Chapter 4 of the UNHCR community services evaluation (CASA Consulting 2002).

⁷ Although at times there may only be sufficient resources to identify the ‘vulnerable’ but nothing available to assist them – e.g in Zambia (Bakewell 2002:17) and Thailand (CASA Consulting 2002: 43 fn 42).

community organisations, enabling the community to care for the ‘vulnerable’ within their midst, increasing economic activity, etc.

To some extent the work of a community services programme, which successfully adopts such a development approach, will be largely invisible – the facilitator should not be the focus of attention. From the community services NGO perspective, it will evaluate its work more positively if the community feels it is doing things for itself rather ascribing all progress to the NGO. Such an evaluation may not be read so well with UNHCR and other donors who expect reports to detail how many refugees its implementing partners are assisting.⁸

Sectoral divides

The division of refugee aid programmes into sectors presents a further challenge in coping with the interface between the international refugee aid regime operating in the camps and the lives of the refugees. The aid programme in refugee camps and settlements tends to be divided into sectors, one of which is community services, and each aid agencies (and at times the host government) has responsibility for one or more sectors. This helps to establish a clear division of labour between the different actors in the camps and makes co-ordination easier. NGOs are very familiar with thinking in terms of sectors and their staff will be trained accordingly.

However, refugees, or any other population for that matter, do not divide their lives up so neatly. Community services is expected to work across the sectors and often act as a referral point directing refugees to available resources and identifying areas of need to be tackled by other sectors. This is very difficult to put into practice as it relies on a degree of co-operation and co-ordination, which is rarely found among agencies working in refugee camps. Each sector has its own expertise and encroachments from others, which suggest where it should work or how it should engage with the community, are not welcome. Put bluntly, to put the community services principles into practice in the field would require a shift of power between UNHCR departments and NGOs, which is unlikely in the extreme.

Managing participation

UNHCR’s policy documents and guidelines are emphatic about the need for refugees’ participation in all areas of its programmes. The introduction to its Handbook for Emergencies (1999) states, ‘UNHCR is committed to the principle of participation by consulting refugees on decisions that affect their lives,’ and, ‘It is important to encourage refugees’ participation at all stages of planning and implementation’ (UNHCR 1999: ix, 7). Unfortunately, it is difficult to see these principles being worked out in the field.

⁸ A counter argument is that UNHCR cannot be aware of how people fall through the cracks in the aid provision if it does not know about individual stories. Without that knowledge it cannot fill the cracks (CASA Consulting 2002:50). However, this could be addressed through case-studies or other methods, without the need for advising UNHCR of all cases.

For example, in western Zambia, when UNHCR planned to open a new site for housing recently arrived refugees it did not consult with them about the design and planning for the new extension. It appears to regard it as a technical matter and the refugees were simply been informed of what was happening; the refugees' involvement would start when they moved to the site. On enquiring about this lack of participation, a rather embarrassed member of UNHCR's field staff acknowledged that they had not thought of encouraging refugees' participation at the planning stage.

The scope for participation is further limited by the management systems of UNHCR and many of its implementing partners. A community services NGO may conduct a participatory appraisal to set the direction of its work and aspire to respond to the refugees initiatives throughout the programme. However, they may have limited little autonomy to do this, especially if they are dependent on funds from UNHCR. It can develop plans in consultation with the refugees, which inevitably raises expectations, and then it goes to UNHCR for funding and has those plans cut back in a one-sided negotiation process where budgets are cut in line with UNHCR's priorities⁹.

Budget lines are specified in great detail and NGOs pressurised to stick closely to them and explain any deviations have to be explained through the sub-project monitoring reports. If new initiatives develop or the priorities change in the field, the NGO can only respond after going through a longwinded bureaucratic procedure to get a budget revision. This may take months and leads to delays in the field.

Management styles matter. An organisation that has not developed a participatory, empowering management structure cannot run a participatory programme. The way things are organised in the offices will have an impact on the operations on the ground. For all its rhetoric about participation, UNHCR's systems and management structure do not facilitate the participation of refugees or even its implementing partners in the field.

Conclusion

The discussion above paints a gloomy picture of the prospects for community services being able to live up to its principles and guidelines. Some of these problems arise from muddled thinking and a failure to ensure the principles and guidelines are grounded in the environment in which community services will have to operate. Other obstacles are related to the lack of resources, both financial and human, which reflect the limited commitment to community services with UNHCR. The management structures and practices also present barriers to implementing programmes using developmental approaches (see also Crisp 2001).

The rhetoric of the community service guidelines and principles is appealing and shows steps towards developmental thinking within UNHCR. However, it is far from being absorbed within the mainstream. Community services as a sector tends to be sidelined and 'put upon' within refugee aid programmes as the depository for tasks

⁹ According to the UNHCR community services evaluation (CASA Consulting 2002:21), the community services budget (3% of UNHCR's overall budget) tends to be a pool that includes many items which do not fit elsewhere. UNHCR community services staff have little control over this budget and this must reduce the chances of community services' priorities being recognised.

that do not fit within other sectors. This is made easier as long as its role remains unclear.

It might be tempting to conclude that community services has been set up to fail. It has been the main area for exploring a developmental approach and so far, it appears wanting. There is a danger that this piloting of such approaches in a marginalised sector may tend to hide the continued operation of top-down, at times oppressive humanitarian aid regimes in the mainstream.

Before UNHCR starts trying a shift towards community development approaches, it needs to put a lot more thought into the one area where it has been trying to implement it. Early dissemination may simply mean that the case is undermined and we can return to business as usual. At this stage, pushing the community development approach as a general policy that builds on the failing model of community services will not work – it will be unclear and under-funded. Its failure to deliver results is likely to cause a reaction to go back into top down responses.

Perhaps that is what is required by the political and security situation. If that is the case, it may be better to come clean, acknowledge refugee camps are not places where human rights are respected in the same way as outside and get on with it. Tinkering at the edges through inflated ideas of what is achievable in community services may simply waste a lot of time and effort, not to mention money. It may help satisfy the desire of humanitarians to live up to the standards to which they aspire, but is it actually in the best interests of the refugees? It is unlikely to fool them.

If it is to sow a community development approach with any chance of success, UNHCR needs to do a lot more preparation of the soil. This echoes the findings of the community services evaluation, which concluded that the community development approach should not be ‘mainstreamed’.

Overall, our assessment is that while crucial in the medium to long-term, it is a strategic error under current circumstances to attempt to ‘mainstream’ a community development approach at this time – making all staff responsible and ‘accountable’ for implementing techniques, practices and approaches that they do not adequately understand.

Instead it argues that UNHCR should take a more strategic approach of disseminating the core concepts in the community development approach:

Through a trained, experienced staff and the strategic involvement of partners and external consultants, the CS function should model and transmit to others the use of community development methods and techniques for enhancing refugee protection (CASA Consulting 2002: 69).

As a step along the way, it recommends that UNHCR should routinely employ ‘situation analysis’ as an assessment tool for planning and monitoring, which moves beyond the narrow needs-based approach which dominates in current programming. Situation analysis can be distinguished from the assessment methodologies in current use, by its focus on analysing the situation at the level of the individual, the refugee

community and the wider social and political context of the host society and country of origin. Moreover, it explicitly investigates the refugees' capacities and resources rather than positioning them exclusively as the source of needs and problems (CASA Consulting 2002:100 and Appendix 6).

This is a practical recommendation which will start to improve the soil. Is there scope to take things even further by re-orientating UNHCR's programmes towards a rights-based approach? Ironically, given its focus on protection and rights guaranteed to refugees with respect to host states, UNHCR has yet to adopt a clear human-rights framework for its humanitarian aid activities and still operates largely within a needs-based approach to assistance (Kenny 2000). It has made efforts to raise the profile of protection issues among its implementing partners, especially the rights to physical protection and personal security to tackle problems of sexual and gender based violence and abuse of children (Valid International 2002). The focus of this has tended to be community services and but it has yet to reach across into other sectors. The discourse has remained firmly one of protection and beneficiaries, which keeps the refugees in their place.

The issues addressed in the community development policy are consistent with the adoption of a rights-based approach. Starting from questions about rights may be more productive for disseminating the approach beyond the community services enclave, as it may avoid getting caught up in the development/relief debate, which neglects these more fundamental questions.

There are still many important questions to be addressed about the idea of a rights-based approach. There is a danger that it can remain at the level of rhetoric rather than transforming the relationship between aid agencies and those they serve (see Uvin 2002). A number of NGOs have declared that they are adopting a rights-based approach to programming, but it is still early days and it is not yet clear how far it might deliver concrete benefits, especially in programmes with refugees. Moreover, any shift in programming is likely to be highly circumscribed and possibly resisted by the policy framework of the host and donor governments.

If these issues can be tackled, and we have yet to see if they can, a rights-based approach would offer a more solid and consistent base for bringing the community services principles into the mainstream in the longer term. Attempting to graft the community development approaches onto the needs-based outlook, which dominates UNHCR operations, is likely to remain a very frustrating exercise, which will remain on the margins of refugee aid programmes. For now, it may be the only practical option available, given the many constraints facing UNHCR and its implementing partners, but the more radical agenda of transforming the relationship between aid agencies and refugees is one worth pursuing.

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