



UNHCR's Policy on Older Refugees

I. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

1. Older refugees make up a larger proportion of the UNHCR caseload than may be generally recognized. It is commonly assumed that older people are more likely to choose to stay in their place of origin, or, more tragically still, to perish in flight or to pine away and die in exile. In fact, older refugees make up some 8.5 per cent of the overall population of concern to UNHCR, and reach up to more than 30 per cent for some caseloads. The majority of these older persons are women. The definition of an older person adopted by the World Health Organization is a person over 60 years old. However, the application of this policy will respect factors such as life expectancy and cultural norms that differ from region to region.

2. While the plight of older refugees can be severe, they should not be seen only as passive, dependent recipients of assistance. This policy seeks to highlight that older refugees often serve as formal and informal leaders of communities; they are valuable resources for guidance and advice, and transmitters of culture, skills and crafts that are important in preserving the traditions of the dispossessed and displaced. Older refugees can and do make an active contribution to the well-being of their next-of-kin, and only become totally dependent in the final stages of frailty, disability and illness. Older persons have taken the lead in return to countries as far afield as Croatia and Liberia. Older persons can also contribute to peace and reconciliation measures. Good programming requires that these roles are utilized. Alongside these positive aspects, however, are a number of needs that characterize the situation of older refugees.

II. THE CHALLENGES

3. Three major problems facing most refugees, in particular older refugees, are: social disintegration, negative social selection and chronic dependency. In the case of the older refugees these problems are often compounded.

4. Social disintegration occurs as the formal or informal social support systems erode in periods of economic decline or when war, flight, economic or security pressures cause the separation and dispersal of families. In either case, the number of elderly persons in need, and who are left to their own resources, increases. In

many cases, families have had to make painful choices about abandonment in order to survive. In Eastern Europe, the comprehensive pension, health care and social welfare systems have not survived the transition to a market economy, which has led to a dramatic drop in the standard of living of all those who had to depend on welfare provided by the State, most especially the old. Elderly internally displaced and returnees have been particularly affected. Hardest hit are the victims of forced displacement who have lost not only their former entitlements but also their homes and other economic assets. A further aggravating factor has been the erosion of traditional support networks. Economic decline, social mobility and the pace of social change have eroded community values, so that the old, in particular older refugees, may no longer enjoy the same authority, care and attention that they had in the past. In addition, the scourges of HIV/AIDS and war have often wiped out an entire middle generation, thereby contributing further to the disintegration of the social fabric; invariably, it is the older refugee who is called upon to assume more immediate responsibility towards the younger members of the family.

5. Negative social selection occurs when refugee camps and collective centres empty over time, with those who are young, healthy and able-bodied the first to depart, leaving behind the weaker and more vulnerable members of the group, namely the sick, the handicapped, single mothers with young children and the elderly. When resources are limited, these groups are particularly vulnerable. The plight of the elderly is particularly tragic. Often they have nowhere to go and no one to take care of them. In this way, some collective centres in Central and Eastern Europe have become geriatric wards in all but name.

6. This residual caseload of solitary older persons, unable to secure State benefits or family support, may become dependent on UNHCR for long periods of time. Here UNHCR faces a particular challenge. It must work to ensure that their experience of exile is not compounded by poverty and destitution, while seeking to avoid chronic dependency by helping them regularize their status and obtain access to all possible benefits, entitlements and rights. This is not an easy task where dramatic social and economic change in asylum countries has caused a marked decline in the living standards of all residents.

7. A comprehensive policy on elderly refugees must take into account both these needs and the contribution they are able to make, commensurate with their age and status.

III. AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

8. UNHCR's management of refugee protection and assistance programmes requires that its staff and those of implementing partners recognize the different

needs and potential of all refugees, be they young or old. Their needs are not well served when, particularly in emergencies, refugees are treated as an undifferentiated mass of humanity. To ensure that UNHCR's programmes become more sensitive to the needs and potential contribution of older refugees, a specific policy on older refugees is needed.

9. Older people's needs must not, however, be addressed in isolation. They are met normally and most effectively within the context of family and community of which they are a part. Consequently, UNHCR needs to strengthen the capacity of families and communities to meet their own needs and incorporate older people within them. Thus this policy should be seen as linked to the High Commissioner's Policy on Refugee Women and the Policy on Refugee Children. Efforts to mainstream the policy priorities relating to refugee women, children and adolescents, need to be extended to the elderly.

10. Older people of concern need to be integrated within UNHCR's overall protection and assistance programming process. Although often at a disadvantage through reduced physical capability, older persons are a valuable resource with much to offer. The potential contributions of older persons must not be overlooked. They are people with a wealth of accumulated experience and knowledge, well able to participate in decisions and activities that affect their own lives and those of their families and communities. Efforts on behalf of older refugees that see them only as vulnerable individuals to be fed and sheltered are not sufficient; they must be treated as contributing members of their communities.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL

11. UNHCR's primary goal in relation to older refugees is that:

Older male and female refugees, and other older persons of concern to the Office, live their latter years in dignity and security, contributing actively to their families and communities for as long as it remains possible for them to do so, and are offered care and support if they become physically or mentally frail.

V. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

12. In formulating this Policy, UNHCR re-affirms its support for the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, based on the International Plan of Action on Ageing.[1]

VI. OBJECTIVES

13. On the basis of these Principles, UNHCR staff, and those of its implementing partners, should endeavour to address the protection and assistance needs of older persons of concern to UNHCR in a gender-sensitive manner and ensure their equality of access to all measures that will promote their participation and well-being. To this end, UNHCR staff will pursue the following specific objectives:

(i) Early identification of, and care for, older persons with special needs in an emergency;

(ii) The protection of older persons at risk from neglect and abandonment;

(iii) The regularization of the status of older persons so that they can receive benefits to which they are entitled;

(iv) The consistent incorporation, from the beginning of a refugee situation, of gender and age-sensitive protection and assistance criteria that will thus be useful for assessing, monitoring and addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of older persons;

(v) The improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness of protection and assistance programmes by ensuring that adequate attention is given to the needs and resources of all members of the population in a way that takes into account specific needs deriving from gender;

(vi) The improvement of data collection and needs assessment in order to have a more accurate picture of the refugee population and hence more effective targeting of programmes for specific age and social groups;

(vii) In all phases of programme planning and implementation, the role and potential contribution of older refugees should be borne in mind; in this way, they will have the means and opportunities, wherever possible, to continue to realize their potential; such an approach would also promote better community care initiatives for the very old;

(viii) A strengthened community services input in UNHCR programmes to ensure effective outreach to all refugees, and a holistic approach which sees older refugees as part of family and community;

(ix) Responsible phasing-out of UNHCR care for older persons of concern, through the establishment of programmes by local NGOs, relevant Government Ministries (not solely the Ministry responsible for refugee affairs) or in conjunction with

international development agencies. Such phasing out must include a component of capacity-building of national and local structures, where necessary;

(x) The training of UNHCR and implementing partner staff based on more in-depth study of the different needs related to the gender of the elderly population, so as to understand and address appropriately, within their areas of competence, the specific needs of older persons;

(xi) The promotion of awareness of, and response to, the particular needs of older refugees through information strategies directed at the Governments of both countries of asylum and countries of origin, donors, NGOs, other United Nations bodies and the public at large.

VII. CONCLUSION

14. Older refugees will always have special needs, but the High Commissioner does not call for addressing the needs of older refugees separate from those of other refugees. Indeed UNHCR's Policy on Older Refugees has been formulated with the hope that future efforts on behalf of older persons will have become so well integrated into all aspects of protection and programme planning and implementation that a separate Policy on Older Refugees will cease, in time, to be necessary. Commitment to, and due regard for, the components of a policy aimed at older refugees are pre-requisites for ensuring their participation and well-being. Much of what remains to be done for older refugees, therefore, can be accomplished with the resources normally provided by host governments and the international community.

[1] General Assembly resolution 46/91, 16 December 1991.