



**A beneficiary-based
evaluation of UNHCR's
programme in Guinea,
West Africa**

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Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit

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Scope of the evaluation

This beneficiary-based review of the UNHCR programme in Guinea was commissioned by the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) as the second phase of a wider study on the involvement of beneficiary and other affected populations in evaluation processes. In the first phase, the author of this report reviewed the current status and use of beneficiary-based methodologies, considered constraints on their use in refugee and emergency situations and outlined possible methods for field-testing.

Like other players in the humanitarian system, UNHCR is moving away from an output driven approach to evaluation and towards an attempt to measure impact. In support of this initiative, the main objective of the current review was to conduct an experimental evaluation using participatory and beneficiary-based methods which set out to canvass beneficiary views directly. In addition, diverse data collection methods were field-tested and their value for evaluation purposes assessed.

This evaluation of the Guinea programme was conducted by an external consultant, a social anthropologist, with a period of six weeks spent in the field. The consultant invited input from UNHCR staff members, representatives of partner organizations including government bodies, and members of the refugee and host populations. Interviews with staff and partners were conducted in Conakry and Gueckedou, but the bulk of research time was spent in the refugee-populated area around Gueckedou.

A range of research methodologies were employed and documented with a view to generating institutional knowledge about participatory evaluation practices. Care was taken to ensure that the heterogeneity of the affected population was recognized and that diverse views on programming and its impact were sought. A wide range of documents, including earlier evaluation reports, UNHCR and NGO project documents and academic articles on the refugee situation in the forest region of Guinea were also consulted.

Throughout the review period, the consultant benefited from the assistance provided by a large number of individuals. Thanks are due to UNHCR staff in Geneva, Conakry, Gueckedou and Forecariah for investing time in briefings and for facilitating access to documentary material, and providing logistical support. A draft version of the report was shared with staff from Branch Office Conakry and Sub Office Gueckedou (by then evacuated to Conakry themselves). Some of their comments and observations have been incorporated into the body of the report.

UNHCR's partners also gave generously of their time and shared information openly in Conakry and Gueckedou. Perhaps most of all, thanks are due to the beneficiary population and other affected groups in and around Gueckedou.

Without their interest, input and collaboration, often offered at some personal cost, this kind of evaluation could not have been undertaken.

The socio-political situation in Guinea has changed considerably since the field work for this evaluation was undertaken. A series of 'rebel' attacks along the border with Liberia and Sierra Leone in south-western Guinea, included one so severe in September at Macenta, that dozens of people were killed, including the head of the UNHCR Field Office there. Subsequent brutal attacks have also taken place in Gueckedou, site of the UNHCR Sub Office which was burned, and in numerous rural locations. Refugee camps have also been attacked, and Sierra Leoneans and Liberians in Guinea have suffered significantly as a consequence of increased hostility towards them on the part of the local population.

Guinean peasants have been encouraged to blame the refugees for the spate of rebel attacks in the south-west of the country. Such tension has made it impossible for many refugees to continue with crucial subsistence activities outside camps and settlements. In December 2000, as the violence spread through the forest region, many refugees fled back to Sierra Leone, or contrived to travel to Conakry, where many of them now await repatriation to Freetown.

After withdrawing altogether from the zone of fighting in September 2000, UNHCR has now resumed some activities from Kissidougou, and deployed three international emergency teams to the Guinea-Sierra Leone region. Plans to move refugees away from dangerous border areas towards Kissidougou have finally been approved. It is the hope of the writer that UNHCR can now benefit from the findings and recommendations of the following evaluation report in a timely manner.

If new camps and settlements are to be established, an opportunity exists to overcome some of the difficulties and limitations of the former Guinea programme by creative and inventive management. Sufficient resources will need to be made available to the programme managers if this is to successfully take place. Similarly, the opportunity exists to include beneficiaries in the process of assistance provision, to the potential benefit of the UNHCR programme as well as to refugees themselves.

Summary of findings and recommendations

1. UNHCR's programme in the forest region of Guinea caters for the needs of over 370,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia (see table below). Of the Sierra Leoneans, some arrived in 1991 and successive influxes occurred throughout the decade with a large new group arriving in 1998. Assistance to Sierra Leoneans currently takes the form of a 'care and maintenance' programme. Refugees who choose not to live in a camp have not received food rations since the end of 1999.
2. Refugees in the forest region of Guinea are concentrated in the Prefectures of Gueckedou and Macenta. The refugees are widely distributed over a large area, some living in over 60 formal camps while many others reside in surrounding villages. This has obvious implications for both the lives of the refugees and the assistance programme. Camps line the Sierra Leone/Guinea border and some have been made inaccessible in the past because of rebel incursions into the country. A transfer programme commenced in 1999, but was suspended in 2000 as the security situation improved.
3. The Liberian caseload has been in Guinea for the most part since 1991. Many had previously fled from Liberia to Sierra Leone, only crossing the border into Guinea when the Sierra Leoneans themselves fled into exile. The assistance programme to Liberians ended in the early part of 2000, these refugees no longer receive food, medical or educational support. The majority of Liberians in Guinea have either repatriated or registered to do so as conditions in their country of origin are now largely conducive for return. The notable exception are those Liberians from Lofa County, where fighting continues and where the conditions for return do not exist. Approximately 9000 people fled Lofa for Guinea in 1999, this group is accommodated in Kouankan Camp and provided with assistance. UNHCR currently offers protection to the residual Liberian old caseload and no other assistance.
4. During the period of the review, there was renewed fighting in Vonjama (Lofa) and heightened tension between the governments of Liberia and Guinea. Accusations were made by the Liberian government in July that the Guinean government was supporting rebel activity from its territory. This claim was strongly denied by the Guineans. The situation remains volatile and observers fear the security implications of a border closure between the two countries.
5. The failure of the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord for Sierra Leone has presented difficulties for UNHCR in Guinea. Before the situation deteriorated once again, it was anticipated that up to 70,000 Sierra Leoneans would repatriate either spontaneously or on a semi-assisted basis in 2000. The optimism which this prospect generated among refugees and assistance providers alike, has all but ebbed away and a speedy return to Sierra Leone now seems unlikely. This raises questions about future directions for the already long-term programme.

UNHCR'S PROGRAMME IN GUINEA

6. Renewed fighting in Sierra Leone has also precipitated a new influx in Forecariah although few new arrivals have been identified in the forest region. By July 20th 2000, 5369 new arrivals had crossed the border and were being accommodated in the new Kalako Camp, necessitating the postponement of the planned transfer of refugees from border camps until a new site is found.

7. The evaluation period in Guinea also coincided with the completion of the repatriation of refugees from Guinea-Bissau by airlift.

	Gueckedou	Kissidougou	Macenta	Total
Sierra Leonean	261,984	36,749	1,121	299,854
Liberian	21,945	1,479	47,323	70,747
Total	283,929	38,228	48,444	370,601

Refugees in the Forest Region of Guinea at 10/7/00 (Source: Section Informatique, SOGUE).

8. UNHCR's programme in the forest region operates under a series of contextual constraints.

9. Staff of UNHCR and partner organizations in country complain that they are routinely not provided with sufficient resources to fulfil programme objectives. Transport is cited as a particular problem given the topography of the country, the wide distribution of the camps and the state of the roads in the rainy season. These kinds of problems, staff say, sometimes oblige UNHCR to break promises that they have made to partners and refugees.

10. A related concern is the problem of understaffing which persist in Gueckedou, although the situation has improved recently. This issue was previously identified as a constraint by a DFID review team in January 2000. This represents a dual problem; the difficulty of getting needed posts approved by Geneva, and then the difficulty of attracting applications from suitably qualified and experienced candidates. Some departments in Gueckedou, notably Social Community Services are running with inadequate personnel. There is no Community Services head in Gueckedou and no Programme Officer although these posts have been advertised internally since January of this year at least.

11. Another constraint is the relatively weak state structures with which UNHCR works. Several UNHCR personnel feel severely limited by the obligation to work directly with government departments as implementing partners, complaining of bad management and barely hidden alternative financial agendas.

Principal findings

12. Food security remains, or has again become, a key issue of concern for many refugees and Guineans even after such a protracted refugee stay in country. The number of food beneficiaries has decreased considerably over the last two years while other livelihood strategies have not necessarily been capable of replacing it. Other related causes for concern include the quality and quantity of food assistance, changes to the food basket leading to the distribution of loathed maize meal, and the administrative and management problems which lead to eligible refugees not receiving food when they should.

13. Reductions in the quantity of food delivered by WFP have led to a situation where 42,204 individuals who have been defined as vulnerable by UNHCR are no longer receiving food. Each time a reduction in food supply is announced by WFP, UNHCR staff are obliged to scan their beneficiary list for categories of people who can be removed from it. The indications are that the numbers of recipients is set to fall further. In addition, some people who should be receiving food according to current policy are not. In Kolomba camp, for example, a 30 year-old blind man who has been identified as an 'Extremely Vulnerable Individual' by UNHCR, has not received a food ration since October 1999.

14. There is evidence that some refugees are finding it more difficult to gain access to land in the forest region now, than they were even two or three years ago. Land is becoming exhausted, systems of crop rotation and fallow land having been largely abandoned during the stay of the refugees. Guinean farmers are reluctant to allow refugees to continue to use farming land extensively, and are also expressing serious concerns about environmental degradation caused by inadequate alternative subsistence strategies for the refugees.

15. Old caseload refugees broadly speaking reject the notion that they should by now be self-sufficient and no longer need food assistance. They insist that the conditions do not exist for them to manage without external support. Constraints on their achieving self-sufficiency include limited access to land, lack or late arrival of seeds, low wages for daily labour due to a labour surplus, limitations on freedom of movement due to lack of ID cards and the absence of employment opportunities for the educated. If refugees are unable to support themselves and food assistance is cut further, with a correspondingly greater pressure on resources needed by Guinean citizens, negative consequences in security terms can be expected.

16. The UNHCR programme in the forest region of Guinea has long suffered from uncertainty about the numbers of refugees being assisted there. In 1999 a registration exercise was carried out. UNHCR staff, partners and refugees alike express little confidence in the results of this registration which is widely acknowledged to have been tainted by corruption. Refugees also express severe doubts about the results of the 2000 verification. In all the camps visited, there were widespread claims that the numbers of dependants listed on cards had been arbitrarily cut at the verification. Even after the 2000 verification, there are still large numbers of people who complain that their names are inexplicably 'omitted' from the food lists when they are still meant to be receiving rations.

17. Perhaps unsurprisingly, refugees throughout the region complain that they do not receive sufficient non-food items from UNHCR. In some cases, refugees received cooking utensils on their arrival in the early 1990s, and none since. The review period coincided with the onset of the rainy season. The subject of tarpaulins was raised frequently, both by refugees who had not received them recently, and by those who had received them well into the rains, when house roofs were already damaged. The late delivery of non-food items such as tarpaulins and seeds needs to be addressed as delay is limiting the benefits of eventual provision.

18. Overall a very high level of satisfaction is expressed in relation to education services provided by the International Rescue Committee. There is a much more ambiguous response to health services from the refugees with widespread claims that refugees are obliged to buy drugs from private pharmacies, which the health posts and centres in the camps do not have in stock. Medical staff assert that all drugs are available to refugees; an investigation was ongoing into this matter during the course of the review. Similarly, refugees assert that they are routinely required to pay for medical attention on referral to Gueckedou hospital. One serious omission in health provision currently, which is now beginning to be addressed, is the absence of any mental health care for refugees.

19. Relations between refugee communities and the local population and civil authorities are said to be good. Relations with the military and police are more difficult and low level harassment is common. Numerous complaints were made about the absence of freedom of movement which is seriously constrained by the lack of any form of refugee ID, which makes it possible for military and police to detain refugees at check points, requiring them to stay for several hours or pay a bribe to continue their journey. While the Government of Guinea is very keen that refugees should be issued with ID cards, this is currently being blocked by UNHCR who envisages problems of control and administration.

20. Direct communication between ordinary refugees and UNHCR staff is rare. Most communication takes place between field staff and the Refugee Committees who occupy an ambiguous position of power, despite their representatives being questionable. Their origins are diverse, some are elected directly by refugees (e.g. Boodou), others are appointed by the Guinean authorities (e.g. Massakoundou). The internal political dynamic of the camps is little researched and understood by those working with the refugees.

21. The residual Liberian caseload in Macenta face an appalling situation resulting from the withdrawal of all material assistance this year. The main point of contention seems to be the withdrawal of medical assistance, and stories abound of recent deaths in town, among families who had not the capacity to pay for medical treatment. Each case makes tensions rise further and the situation overall is volatile. NGOs in Macenta feel powerless to help the numbers of cases of serious need with which they are confronted. Although Liberian refugees engage in day labour for Guinean farmers and business people, or engage in petty trade and the provision of services, they are unable to meet their immediate needs.

22. Liberians from Lofa County are currently unable to repatriate, indeed the UNHCR field office in Macenta is currently refusing to assist repatriation to the county. Fighting is ongoing (e.g. in Vonjama), there was a new influx in 1999, and small numbers continue to arrive. The situation has deteriorated since the fieldwork

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

period, with cross border military incursions into the area. It may well be unreasonable to expect the Liberians to 'integrate' suddenly, when there has been little work in this direction previously.

23. No food rations have been distributed to urban refugees since the end of December 1999. This decision was apparently motivated by the lack of food commodities available to UNHCR/WFP, and a commonly found feeling that refugees in towns are more difficult to control than those in camps. Plans to transfer those refugees who want to go, to camps where they may receive assistance, have been extremely slow to commence.

Recommendations

24. Ongoing efforts should be made to rationalize and improve the accuracy of statistics relating to the refugee population in Gueckedou. There is a high level of scepticism and uncertainty about the reliability of the figures on the part of key partners and others. Only by knowing more precisely than is now the case how many refugees the programme is trying to serve, can decision making be effective.

25. In future registration and verification exercises, more effort should be made to make the processes 'refugee friendly', without undermining their capacity to generate accurate data. Planning must take into account the illiteracy of many of the population, and the fact that the weak are often intimidated and excluded by the strong during these exercises. Refugees must be informed in advance that a registration team is due, and the system should incorporate the involvement of reformed refugee committees. Sufficient time must be allowed to complete the exercise to avoid missing people. Teams might consider conducting house-to-house registration in the case of people who are too old or sick to come to a central point.

26. While recognizing the constraints upon the organization's human and financial resources, UNHCR should as a priority invest in undertaking a systematic food needs assessment. They should attempt to resist WFP pressure to reduce numbers of food beneficiaries until a clearer picture is established of actual needs and local capacities to meet them. Defining levels of relative vulnerability on the basis of the amount of food available makes a mockery of the categories and should be stopped. The vulnerable people who have been excluded from assistance on this basis should be re-instated. The identification of other vulnerable people should be conducted.

27. Systems for dealing with lost and other problem cards should be refined and the process speeded up. Cases of people whose names have been 'omitted' from the ration list should be investigated and resolved. Any structural problems with the information system should be resolved once and for all to prevent this problem from recurring in the future.

28. Donor states should give sympathetic consideration to funding requests for environmental protection and rehabilitation work on behalf of the refugee and host population. This should be treated as a matter of urgency, to prevent further degradation of the environment and the local economy which is threatened by this.

29. Refugee committees are given a significant amount of responsibility by UNHCR, without it being at all clear how representative they are, and to what extent they function effectively on behalf of the refugee population. They are often undemocratic and may even block communication between ordinary refugees and UNHCR field staff, by ineffectively occupying the liaison role between the two. This should not be taken as an injunction to exclude refugees from local management but new ways need to be found to access and involve the refugees more comprehensively.

30. Current moves to develop and strengthen the UNHCR field presence should be supported and extended. Financial support should be sought in the first instance to make possible the long promised establishment of a field office in Ouende Kenema. Refugees should, in the meantime, be given accurate information about how and when they can access UNHCR staff regularly in the camps.

31. There are several refugee organizations in the camps and towns which have appealed to UNHCR for assistance (e.g. The Golden Rule Children's Centre, Gueckedou). Efforts should be made to deal with these applications promptly, whether or not assistance can be given. Some organizations have been waiting for several months in the hope of a positive answer.

32. The single most common form of harassment suffered by refugees at the hands of the local authorities, is being held up at roadblocks for having no ID document. The Protection department is not strongly placed to combat this, as refugees have no papers. Provision of an ID document would at least mitigate against this problem. UNHCR Conakry should deal with local administrative difficulties as quickly as possible, and move forward with the planned distribution of ID cards which is also advocated by the Government of Guinea.

33. A more effective monitoring system for the provision of medical services to refugees should be implemented. If refugees are being obliged to pay for drugs and services for which UNHCR has already paid, action must be taken directly. In the first instance, pressure should be put on implementing partners to ensure that systems of distribution are transparent and free of corruption. Efforts should be made to ensure that refugees are fully aware of the extent of UNHCR's healthcare provision, in order to facilitate monitoring by beneficiaries themselves.

34. Donors should assist UNHCR to address and resolve the problem of understaffing at Sub Office Gueckedou. If suitable staff are impossible to find under present circumstances, new steps should be taken to attract staff to apply. Investments already made by donors are compromised when qualified and inexperienced staff are not in place to implement the programme effectively.

35. Efforts must be made, despite administrative problems, to ensure that the delivery of non-food assistance is timely and cost effective, and that programme objectives are not undermined by the late arrival of inputs.

36. The process of registering those urban refugees who are ready to be transferred to camps should be expedited. Those refugees with special needs, such as the sick and the elderly should be assisted to establish themselves securely in camps.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

37. Steps should be taken to identify and develop further mechanisms of support for income-generation. Self-sufficiency on the basis of agricultural activity is probably an unrealistic expectation. New initiatives should be broadly developmental in character with a view to both possible long-term integration and repatriation. This may be an area where productive partnership between UNHCR and other organizations is possible.

38. A coherent medium-term programme strategy should be defined, in recognition of the fact that repatriation is unlikely for the Sierra Leonean and residual Liberian populations in the foreseeable future. Attempting to run a compromised care and maintenance programme for Sierra Leoneans due to inadequate funds may not be the best way to use limited resources, if more cannot be found.

39. The international donor community is urged to reconsider and address urgently the predicament of the unassisted residual Liberian population. If repatriation to Lofa is not supported by UNHCR, there remains a moral if not a legal responsibility to maintain some level of support. If the provision of food assistance is now impossible, medical care should be considered the minimum level of intervention considered acceptable. Meanwhile the search for durable solutions for this group should continue.

Beneficiary perspectives on the Guinea programme

Food security

40. To a surprising extent food security remains, or has again become, a key issue of concern for many refugees and Guineans even after such a protracted refugee stay in country. In their 1999 report *Forgotten Children of war: Sierra Leonean Refugee Children in Guinea*, Human Rights Watch also highlight the protection implications of inadequate provision of food in the forest region. The numbers of food beneficiaries have decreased considerably over the last two years while other livelihood strategies have not necessarily been capable of replacing it.

41. It is generally acknowledged by refugees and others, that since the arrival of CARE as the UNHCR's implementing partner, food distribution systems have dramatically improved, with less theft, delay and confusion. Nevertheless, there are causes for concern, and these relate to the number of beneficiaries of food aid, the quality and quantity of such assistance, and the administrative and management problems which lead to eligible refugees not receiving food when they should.

42. Moving around the camps, one routinely hears complaints that the quality and quantity of food assistance has declined. When the 'old' refugees first arrived, they received up to twelve items in the food basket. Today they receive only three. In addition, there are widespread complaints that the food ration is insufficient in terms of quantity and does not last the 45 days it is provided for. The distribution which took place during the field work consisted of; Cereal (maize) 13.5 kg, CSB 11.25 kg, Oil 1.125 kg per beneficiary for a 45 day period. Refugees are obliged to sell a portion of their ration in order to supply themselves with other essential items, as well as to vary their tedious diet by adding some kind of sauce to the cereal.

43. In the very recent past, the food basket in the forest region has included maize meal as the cereal. This is detested by the refugees whose 'traditional' staple is rice. While understanding perfectly that rice is a relatively expensive commodity which they are unlikely to receive, they continually lobby for the provision of bulgar as an alternative.¹ Maize-meal is disliked on the grounds that it is culturally unfamiliar and unacceptable to them, that it is unhealthy and causes dysentery, and that it requires a more expensive sauce or condiment than rice or bulgar. The latter can be eaten with cassava or potato leaves which can often be acquired without cost. Maize, on the other hand, should be eaten with peppers, onions and 'maggi', a much more expensive option. One obvious and very visible consequence of their dislike of maize-meal is that they sell it to buy bulgar which is, by now, much preferred as a

¹ In Kolomba Camp, for example, commodities are priced as follows; rice: 750FG per kilo, bulgar: 250 FG per kilo, maize-meal: 100 FG per kilo. It should be noted that in this context, 'kilo' refers to a standard size bowl, rather than precisely one kilogram in weight. In addition, the price of maize-meal when sold shortly after distribution, falls to 50FG per kilo.

substitute for rice. Also, bulgar is easier to store while cornmeal is prone to insect infestation after a relatively short time.

'Vulnerable' people and food aid

44. Although co-ordination takes place between UNHCR and WFP, UNHCR staff feel strongly that decisions about the amount of food which is to be made available for the refugee caseload are imposed on them by WFP.

45. According to UNHCR policy in Gueckedou, there should be 232,204 beneficiaries of food rations, comprising new caseload Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees, 'Extremely Vulnerable Individuals' (EVIs) and others identified as 'vulnerable'. Reductions in the amount of food being provided by the WFP has led to some of these individuals being removed from the food list. These are people who have been identified in the past as vulnerable by UNHCR staff, but who are now assessed as being less vulnerable than others, and capable of independent survival given the material constraints.

46. Beneficiaries of food now number 190,000 and staff have been forced to make difficult decisions about who should be removed from the list. 42,204 individuals who have been defined as vulnerable by UNHCR are no longer receiving food on this basis. Criteria for vulnerability are difficulties such as being an amputee, blind, chronically ill, disabled, a single woman or parent, or an unaccompanied minor or elderly person. Each time a reduction in food supply is announced by WFP, UNHCR staff are obliged to scan their beneficiary list for categories of people who can be removed from it. The indications are that the numbers of recipients is set to fall further.

47. Decisions about when to cut food rations seem to have been triggered by WFP announcements that not enough food is available for the whole population, rather than on the basis of any actual reduction in need. In September 1998, 300,000 people were receiving food rations. This had dropped to 190,000 by July 2000 and is projected to drop again to 170,000 by January 2001. One of the recommendations of a preliminary report on the nutritional status of refugees and Guineans, produced by UNHCR's implementing partners in the field of health, is that current beneficiaries of food should continue to receive rations. The team also recommends further support for Income Generating initiatives with a view to supporting progress towards self-sufficiency, and the distribution of seeds and tools to refugee farmers to the same end.

48. For reasons which are not entirely clear, some people who should be receiving food according to current policy are not. In Kolomba camp, for example, a 30 year old blind man who has been identified as an EVI, has not received a food ration since October 1999. Other, comparable cases were identified in Owet Djiba Camp.

49. Furthermore, there are numerous refugees in the camps who claim to be vulnerable and who have not been formally identified as such by UNHCR. Staff agree that there is a problem in this respect, but feel that wasting resources on defining a problem they have not the resources to address is pointless. This is

arguable; only with a comprehensive and reliable needs assessment can informed appeals be made to donors.

50. Guinean citizens also view diminishing food assistance to refugees with alarm, as it is seen to increase the reliance of the refugees on the already over-stretched local resources. Furthermore, providing food aid of a kind which is disliked by the refugees leads to its sale to merchants who export it out of the area, leading to a net reduction of the amount of food available in the area. In some locations, e.g. Owet Djiba, citizens claim that there is simply not enough food in the immediate area given the numbers of people, the low agricultural yields caused by over farming, and the inadequacy of refugee food supplies. Some people say that they are forced to travel as far away as Farana or beyond the camp at Koundu Lengo Bengo to buy food.

Land

51. In only relatively few cases have UNHCR or its partners negotiated for agricultural land for refugees in a formal way. In most cases, negotiations have been conducted directly between Refugee Committees and corresponding village committees, or between individuals. This may have led to UNHCR being overconfident about the extent to which refugees have been able to acquire, and maintain access to productive agricultural land.

52. There is some evidence that some refugees are finding it more difficult to gain access to land now than they were even 2 or 3 years ago. While refugees in Boodou and Kouankan said they did not have difficulties gaining access to land, those in Kolomba (one of the oldest camps) and Nyaedou (a new camp) said that this is a serious problem.

53. Refugees say that where they were once able to negotiate informal leases with land owners (albeit at a price), that in some places this is now more difficult as Guineans are less willing to allow them to use it. They admit that this is because the land is becoming exhausted, systems of crop rotation and fallow land having been largely abandoned during the stay of the refugees. Guinean farmers are said to be being defensive and even reluctant to refuse land explicitly, but are putting land to light use themselves, so as to have a legitimate reason for denying it to the refugees.

54. There is a corresponding sense of an increasingly serious situation on the part of the local populations, who in some cases seem to be panicking now about the effects of the refugees on their farming land, and on the forest around it. They are relatively resigned to refugees' overuse of the environment, but feel that there are limits. While they can live with seeing the forest routinely stripped of its fruits, they point to irreversible damage (e.g. the destruction of palm trees) as something that they are powerless to prevent, but which is going to cause real problems in the medium term.

55. Villagers living near Kolomba Camp explicitly identify increased and destructive competition for land as having started after beneficiaries of food rations started being cut two or more years ago. Similarly, forest products have also been overused since this time. Particular concerns are expressed about the forest here, as 'traditional' belief is that only here can the spirits of the ancestors be contacted.

56. In the same village, citizens pointed out that some refugee activities lead to tension between Guineans themselves. If a citizen allows a refugee to farm on his land, and the refugee then encroaches on a second citizen's land, the latter is likely to blame the first citizen rather than the refugee. There is a strong feeling that UNHCR should be assisting them in the field of agriculture because of the hospitality they are extending to refugees, and because of the resulting damage to their environment.

57. Guinean villagers without exception talked about the desirability of the war in Sierra Leone coming to an end and the repatriation of their refugee guests. The renewal of the conflict in Sierra Leone is seen as a blow to their hopes of making an attempt to repair the damage which has been done in the short term.

Self sufficiency

58. Old caseload refugees broadly speaking reject the notion that they should by now be self-sufficient and no longer need food assistance. They insist that the conditions do not exist for them to manage without external support. It may be that this is true in terms of the lives which they aspire to live in Guinea, but not true in relation to UNHCR's inevitably lower expectations on their behalf. Constraints on their achieving self-sufficiency are said to be :

- Limited access to land for farming and other activities, e.g. hunting and fishing by refugees are not permitted by Guineans. Problem of the expenses associated with hiring land – e.g. at Kolomba 10,000 FG per acre of swamp/ 10,000 FG per 3 acre upland. Or (e.g. at Nyaedou), refugees pay a 'registration fee' of 500 – 1000 FG to land owners, and then a sack of rice after the harvest.
- Lack of seeds for planting, and the late arrival (in July of 2000) of those which are provided. Planting should ideally take place from April or May onwards.
- Low wages paid for casual work due to surplus of refugee labour. e.g., Owet Djiba daily rates for male labour are, for brushing swamp (i.e. slashing grass) 700 FG. For turning swamp (i.e. preparing for planting) 600 FG. Women: weeding 500 FG.
- According to Guinean businessmen in Macenta, labour prices have dropped substantially since the arrival of the refugees. One man, who had spent some time in Sierra Leone before the war there, said that he now employs refugee labour at 500FG per day, while in 1990 he was paying Guineans 1500FG per day for the same work.
- Perceived and actual danger and risks associated with conducting business in Guinea, even supposing that capital loans are available.
- Limitations on freedom of movement due to lack of ID cards.
- Increased family sizes for old caseload over the years, increasing the pressure on households.
- Absence of employment opportunities for the educated.

59. Economic survival for refugees is based on a variety of low paid casual and manual jobs, ranging from agricultural and domestic work to load carrying, or on very small scale petty trade activities such as the selling of palm oil and firewood. It is predicated on the capacity of refugees to leave the camps to find such work. When conditions of insecurity exist and this freedom is not available to them, their economic circumstances deteriorate rapidly.

60. In many respects, the capacity of the old caseload to become autonomous economically is little different from that of the new. The notion of self-sufficiency is predicated largely on an assumption that sustainable agricultural activity has been established. The evidence indicates that it is more hand to mouth than this suggests, and that it plays a relatively smaller role in livelihood strategies than casual labour. The Sub Office acknowledges that even the families UNHCR is able to assist with land and seeds (approximately 4-5000 families) are unable to cater for all their food requirements due to an insufficiency of land. They are estimated by the Agricultural Officer to be able to feed themselves for between 7-8 months of the year only.

61. Refugee teachers in Kolomba assert that the new caseload Sierra Leoneans in Guinea have had significant advantages over the old caseload who are now expected to be self-sufficient. For example, they were hosted on arrival by 'old' refugees who are said to have treated them better than they themselves were treated by the Guineans.

62. If refugees are unable to support themselves and food assistance is cut further, with a correspondingly greater pressure on resources needed by Guinean citizens, negative consequences in security terms can be expected.

Registration and verification

63. The UNHCR programme in the forest region of Guinea has long suffered from uncertainty about the numbers of refugees being assisted there. In 1998, for example, after the most recent substantial influx of Sierra Leoneans, there was a widespread assumption among aid workers that many of the 'new' arrivals were in fact old caseload refugees 'recycling' themselves in order to gain the benefits of a new arrival in the country.

64. In 1999 a registration exercise was carried out. UNHCR staff, partners and refugees alike express little confidence in the results of this registration. UNHCR staff assert that refugee 'cheating' was widespread and acknowledge that there was considerable corruption by registration clerks, many of whom had been employed on a temporary basis for the procedure. Refugees agree that the process was corrupt, claiming that many of them were obliged to bribe officials before they were permitted to register.

65. A group of refugee teachers at Boodou Camp insist that the registration exercise there was unfair and inaccurate. The fact that it was conducted partly by Guineans is offered as one of the reasons why the data it generated is so poor. In addition, there are bitter complaints about the fact that there was little or no pre-warning about when the registration would take place. Many refugees, consequently, were not in the camps at the time of the exercise, having left to work on Guinean farms. Numerous people who were excluded from the register on this

basis are said to have returned to Sierra Leone despite the attendant dangers of so doing, some have been killed there. Refugee Committees in camps appear to have been largely excluded from the registration process, a fact which is resented by refugees.

66. Opinions differ on the 2000 verification which UNHCR insists was accurate and fair and which was conducted exclusively by UNHCR and NGO staff. The refugees, however, make many criticisms of it. Refugees in Kolomba and Boodou insist that they were again not informed in advance that it was to take place, many also claim that the verification teams left the camps without having completed the exercise, having run out of time. Those who were not verified have not benefited from assistance since that time. The Guinean village head at Kolomba, concurred that the verification team left Kolomba camp without finishing the verification, and indicated that the camp chairman had been unjustly blamed for this by some refugees.

67. In all the camps visited, there were widespread claims that the numbers of dependants listed on cards had been arbitrarily cut at the verification. Refugees are unable to explain why this is the case, and many did not realise that it had happened until they failed to receive further assistance for them. In Baladou Camp, for example, a Sierra Leonean woman described her case. Having initially fled from Sierra Leone to Sowadu Camp, she registered there with her 8 children and received a refugee card on which all were listed. During the 2000 verification exercise at Baladou, the entire family presented itself but only four of their names were written on the new card. She is illiterate and did not realise this until later.

68. Another frequent complaint is that during the verification exercise, small children were asked to name family members and describe family relationships. It is claimed that they were intimidated and confused by verification staff, and that they often made mistakes, which led to the family losing assistance for some members. UNHCR staff agree that this strategy was used, and claim that it was necessary to prevent strategic refugees attempting to cheat the system. In other cases, illiterate and confused peasants are said to have been intimidated by the presence of the 'important people' in the camp, and also made mistakes or were too afraid to speak at all.

69. Members of the Kolomba women's group complained that women were assumed to be lying if they could not remember how old they had told registration clerks their children were, on arrival in Guinea. Many people within this population have only the vaguest idea of their age (even among the younger generation), and women pointed out that they found the whole process of registration and subsequent verification frightening, confusing and alienating. Senior UNHCR staff absolutely deny the possibility that the verification was contaminated by corruption, and offer no explanation other than that the refugees are lying to explain how such anomalies as described above might have taken place.

Card issues

70. Even after the 2000 verification, there are still large numbers of people who complain that their names are inexplicably 'omitted' from the food lists when they are still meant to be receiving rations. CARE agrees that this is a problem, and says

that the lists it receives from UNHCR are often problematic, including repetitions and mistakes.

71. Weekly UNHCR field meetings are often characterized by discussions about whether or not field staff are permitted authorize the delivery of food to those whose names are omitted but have been verified in the field. There are continual complaints from the field staff about this recurrent problem, which is often dismissed as a 'computer problem' to the satisfaction of no-one.

72. One refugee man in Baladou found that his name had been omitted and failed to benefit from food distribution for several months. The Field Assistant finally managed to meet the person and verify the card on 29/3/00, but no ration had yet been received when I visited the camp on 27/6/00. The Field Officer was following up with the Protection department at this time, but the delay is unacceptably long.

73. Similarly, the system for the replacement of lost cards seems to be only variably successful and efficient, with some refugees waiting for 4 months or more for replacement cards.

Non-food items

74. Perhaps unsurprisingly, refugees throughout the region complain that they do not receive sufficient non-food items. In some cases, refugees received cooking utensils on their arrival in the early 1990s, and none since. Women in particular plead for further distributions, on the grounds that some are reduced to sharing cooking pots, and that they are unable to afford replacements without assistance. Requests are also routinely made for other non-food items such as blankets, mosquito nets, clothing and scholastic materials.

75. The review period coincided with the onset of the rainy season. Consequently the subject of tarpaulins was raised very frequently, both by refugees who had not received them recently, and by those who had received them well into the rains, when house roofs were already damaged. Standard house design in most of the camps is inefficient, given the difficulty of obtaining sufficient grass or palm thatch to make roofs waterproof. The houses are constructed with very shallow roofs, which make waterproofing without a tarpaulin very difficult. Houses in comparable Guinean villages are round rather than rectangular, and built with a much more steeply pitched roofs. Tarpaulins are relatively infrequently seen here. Partners involved in the distribution of tarpaulins and other construction work in camps could have an important information spreading role to play in this respect.

76. Many of the refugee claim that they are unused to building with grass, as they were able to use tin sheets in their home villages. They now suffer from inadequate shelter as roofs leak causing discomfort and sickness. If UNHCR is not in a position to provide regular distributions of tarpaulins, some effort should be made to address this house design issue, at least so that refugees who are currently building shelters, e.g. at Kouankan and Forecariah (Kalako), are advised to use the Guinean design in preference to the conventional 'refugee' model. Feelings run extremely high on this issue, as evidenced by the fact that one UNHCR consultant

and his driver were held hostage for 4 hours in Kaliah Camp, after a dispute about the delivery of tarpaulins in Forecariah.

77. The quality and quantity of tarpaulins distributed are both issues of concern to the refugees. It is very common for two or three families to occupy a single room each in a house. When insufficient tarpaulins are distributed to cover the whole roof, conflicts can break out over which family is to go without. Refugees also complain that the quality of tarpaulins has deteriorated during their stay in Guinea. Thick, corded tarpaulins which were distributed in the early years are known as 'Geneva', in comparison to the thinner and less durable 'bulgar bags' which are distributed currently.

78. The late delivery of non-food items such as tarpaulins and seeds needs to be addressed. UNHCR is allocating resources to their purchase but the maximum benefit is not derived from them by refugees when they are delivered late. Delivering tarpaulins when the rain has already started, (e.g. Kolomba Camp early July 2000) or seeds when the planting season is almost finished are cases in point.

Services

79. Overall a very high level of satisfaction is expressed in relation to the education provided by IRC. Two minor complaints are common; that the number of school materials (e.g. books) distributed has decreased over recent years, and more importantly, that the regular late payment of teachers has a negative effect on their performance in the classroom, and that it causes them to get into debt, bringing financial difficulties to their families.

80. Education is explicitly seen as an anti-conflict strategy by the refugees, and as the principal means of making capital out of their exile. IRC schools are therefore highly praised, and there are constant requests for further post-secondary and vocational training opportunities, including French language training. In view of the fact that education is seen as a way of preparing for an eventual return, Sierra Leonean students desire that the educational syllabus that they are using, should be harmonized with the Sierra Leonean system so that when they repatriate they do not lose the benefit of the some of the years they have studied in exile.

81. There is a much more ambiguous response to health services from the refugees – not to UNHCR policy which is understood as generous and appropriate – but to what actually happens on the ground. There are widespread claims that refugees are obliged to buy drugs from private pharmacies, which the health posts and centres in the camps do not have in stock. This is very frequently asserted to amount to anything which is not aspirin or chloroquine. (e.g. Ouende Kenema)

82. Notwithstanding the cultural preference for injections, and some possible confusion about what drugs are in fact being offered, the extent to which this is cited as a problem indicates that there is a real issue here. All heads of health facilities interviewed, indicated that they had a full stock of between 30-40 different types of drugs, and that these are routinely prescribed to refugees. I was informed while in the field that an investigation was ongoing in this area, so did not wish to prejudice it by my own enquiries, but some action is necessary in this respect. In camps where

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MSF rather than DPS is responsible, e.g. Boodou and Kouankan, such complaints are not made.

83. Another repeated claim is that refugees are routinely required to pay for medical attention on referral to Gueckedou hospital. A teacher at Kolomba Camp, whose father was taken to Gueckedou for an operation, was informed that all post operative care including painkillers were his own financial responsibility. Again, these are complaints which UNHCR is aware of, and some attempts have been made to get the head of DPS and Director of the hospital to intervene. UNHCR staff indicate that they find it difficult to find concrete evidence to present to the authorities. More efforts need to be made in this direction.

84. One serious omission in health provision currently, which is now beginning to be addressed, is the absence of any mental health care for refugees. Many have resorted to consulting Guinean herbalists for treatment with varying results. Emphasis on this important sphere should be made a priority.

85. Finally, those camps which are most isolated geographically make repeated pleas for an ambulance or communication system for urgent cases, e.g. Kouankan and Kolomba.

86. Water and sanitation were rarely raised as problematic issues, and seem to be considered satisfactory in most of the camps visited. The exception is Kolomba Camp where the number of water points is said not to be sufficient.

Income-generating activities (IGA)

87. The IGA implemented by the American Refugee Committee are generally highly appreciated but there are some complaints about limited coverage. There are a relatively small number of beneficiaries in each camp although ARC loans and grants represent practically the only access to credit for refugees.

88. Some fears are expressed in certain camps (e.g. Owet Djiba and Ouende Kenema) about taking loans from ARC, on the grounds that there are always family and community claims on a refugee with access to cash in such a poor society. These lead to fears that money might be unwillingly diverted as a result of such pressures, and become impossible to repay. Business is slow in underdeveloped Guinea, and other obstacles also exist to profit making activities. Refugees in Ouende Kenema, for example, complain that when they establish small businesses in the camp market, they are made to pay taxes of between 10,000-20,000 FG, a prohibitive amount. According to the Sub Office, refugees operating small businesses within the camps are not liable for such charges.

89. Due to the numbers of refugees, and the distribution of the camps, not all activities implemented by UNHCR's partners reach all the camps and potential beneficiaries. In some cases, NGOs are exhorted by UNHCR to expand their activities without being given the resources to do so. One partner, ERM, was requested by the Sub Office in Gueckedou, to extend its activities to further camps at the same time that they were told that they would have to reduce their budget. This is clearly contradictory, and highlights the desirability of extending the coverage of projects in the refugee affected area, while raising the question of how such activities

are to be funded. Refugees in some camps, such as Owet Djiba, clearly feel that they are relatively ignored and receive less support than communities in other camps.

Security

90. Relations between refugee communities and the local population and civil authorities are said to be good. Relations with the military and police are more difficult and low level harassment is common. One family in Baladou, for example, described a situation when soldiers came to the camp late at night and accused them of having drugs in their house. The family feared that the soldiers would plant them if they accepted a house search, and felt obliged to pay a bribe so that the soldiers would leave.

91. Much more common, however, are complaints relating to freedom of movement. This is seriously constrained by the lack of any form of refugee ID, which makes it possible for military and police to detain refugees at check points, finally requiring them to stay for several hours or pay a bribe to continue their journey. Refugees are easy targets for this kind of treatment, to which Guineans too are subjected. As refugees, however, they have no way of acquiring legitimate papers at this time, and they are powerless to do anything about their predicament. It is common knowledge that bribes are demanded at checkpoints, some of which have no legal authority. NGO vehicles have, unusually, been permitted to use UNHCR license plates to avoid this problem.

92. The Government of Guinea is very keen that refugees should be issued with ID cards, but this is currently being blocked by UNHCR who envisages problems of control and administration. Cards for this purpose have been prepared in Conakry, but not issued due to specific problems, and an apparent reluctance to facilitate any real freedom of movement for the refugees.

Communication with UNHCR

93. Direct communication between ordinary refugees and UNHCR staff is rare. Until the arrival of the present head of mission, refugees in Ouende Kenema Camp say that their representatives were regularly invited to Gueckedou, to meet with UNHCR and the Refugee Coordinating Committees, to be informed about the availability of assistance. This mode of interaction no longer takes place. Most communication takes place between field staff and the Refugee Committees who occupy a rather ambiguous position of power, although their representatives is questionable.

94. Field staff spend relatively little time in the field, partly because of the follow up work they need to do in the office, and because they are not permanently based in their zones. This has negative consequences for refugees with problems, who find it difficult to access staff, and in some cases do not feel confident enough to do so. Many people with whom I spoke did not know who their field officer was. The quality of interaction between field staff and refugees is variable. In one horrifying example, a refugee woman reported that she had been forbidden to speak to her Field Officer, when he became annoyed that she mispronounced his name. It should

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be added that there are also many field staff who enjoy good personal relations and have a high reputation among refugee communities.

95. Refugee Committee Chairmen also complain that when they forward problems on to UNHCR staff in the camps, action does not always follow and that they are consequently criticized by the communities they serve. They lose credibility and are no longer taken seriously, cannot function as leaders, under these circumstances.

96. UNHCR has itself identified a need to establish a field office in Ouende Kenema, but until now the funds for this initiative have not been forthcoming. Sub Office confidence about the extent and effectiveness of the coverage of its field presence in the camps without further development, may well be misplaced.

97. The Refugee Coordinating Committees in Gueckedou town no longer have the confidence of UNHCR management who consider them to be redundant since the establishment of the field team. The functions of these two entities, however, do not entirely overlap and concerns of the refugees that their voice is being marginalized should be taken into account. Specific problems between the current committees and UNHCR staff should be addressed.

98. At present, UNHCR appears to be using its mistrust of the existing committees as a mechanism or justification for lack of direct communication with the refugees more generally. This practically amounts to a deliberate policy of anti-participation. One of the committees' requests is that they are informed when UNHCR is facing constraints and difficulties, so that they can at least pass this message on to their constituencies. As one of them put it, 'When the doctor is sick, the sick are dead.' Given that interaction with Refugee Committees is at present the only form of consultation or participation offered to the refugees by UNHCR, this represents an alarming situation.

99. There are, however, significant problems with the Refugee Committee system as it stands. Their origins are diverse, some are elected directly by refugees (e.g. Boodou), others are appointed by the Guinean authorities (e.g. Massakoundou). In some cases, leaders are connected with Sierra Leonean ruling families, e.g. one Vice Chairman is the son of a Sierra Leonean Paramount Chief. The internal political dynamic of the camps is little researched and understood by those working with the refugees.

100. The Refugee Committees are extremely variable, and some ordinary refugees have nothing to do with them. Committee members are often considered to be 'big people', in some cases inevitably corrupt and self-serving and to assume that they are looking out for the interests of the wider population in all cases may well be a mistake. This will be even more of an issue if and when programming becomes more participatory than it currently is. In Kolomba Camp, for example, some refugees expressed direct concerns that information is 'not well relayed' by the committee. On the other hand, some committee members argued that they are not well facilitated to play their part by UNHCR, who fails to sufficiently inform and involve them.

Gender-based violence

101. Gender violence is perceived by the Sub Office to be a serious problem in the camps. The relative brevity of individual camp visits made it more difficult to investigate this issue than would have been the case with a more prolonged stay in fewer camps. The issue has been partially addressed by the establishment of an IRC project which is extremely popular among refugees consulted. However, the extent to which it is has the capacity to successfully address the problem of domestic violence is questionable. Groups consulted generally responded positively with particular reference to group labour and income generating activities rather than to its ostensible objective. Most people consulted felt that the problem of gender violence is significantly less in Guinea than it was in Sierra Leone, and that most attention is reasonably paid to women who suffered abuse in the home rather than host country.

102. In Ouende Kenema, women members of the SGBV group indicated that the work of the group had successfully helped to address the problem of gender and domestic violence. Committed and engaged community workers work to try and change public opinion in relation to the acceptability of domestic violence. The view that domestic violence has increased as a result of the refugee situation is not broadly speaking shared by refugee women, who are in some respects using the changed environment to make changes to their own social position within the community.

Prostitution

103. In some camps, sections of the community complain about increased levels of prostitution in exile. This is a complex issue which has significance at a number of levels. One of the most serious and worrying accusations is that the main customers for refugee prostitutes, given the lack of available cash within the camps, are staff of NGOs and other organizations. This kind of behaviour, if true, clearly constitutes an unacceptable abuse of power and must be prevented. In Kolomba, prostitutes' 'favourite time' is said to be when the food distribution teams are present in the camp.

104. Those who were willing to talk about this sensitive topic included women's' groups and youths of both genders. The consensus was that selling sexual favours, whether formally for cash or on the basis of a kind of patronage, is a function of poverty and an absence of alternative income generating and attractive livelihood strategies. It is rarely asserted that young women involved in such activities rely on them for their basic needs such as food and shelter, but rather that they engage in them in order to be able to gain access to the additional material benefits which they understand to be what makes life worth living.

105. Increased promiscuity among young refugee women is sometimes expressed in terms of a casual relationship with a better off man who is expected to act as a kind of protector or patron to the woman. Gifts of food or clothing may be made, but the woman is unlikely to receive any support in the event that she becomes pregnant. This kind of relationship is to be distinguished from what is described as 'refugee marriage' when a more formal relationship is entered into, even if this is not expected to outlast the refugee situation. The latter are entered into between

refugees themselves or between refugees and locals. No bridewealth payment is made and they are considered pragmatic associations rather than important social and familial relationships. Several refugees made the point that 'traditional' marriage systems have all but broken down in the camps, there being no chance of formalizing marriage with bridewealth payments. Parents may be willing to allow their daughters to become involved in what would otherwise be considered to be unsuitable relationships, simply because involvement in a sexual relationship with a man, however casual, implies that the family has one less mouth to feed.

Language problems

106. Sierra Leoneans and Liberians are English speaking refugees in a French speaking country. This fact does complicate the process of limited integration, especially in relation to any potential shared education system, and with reference to health services. The Heads of refugee health posts are always Guinean (although many staff are refugees) and communication with them, and with local authorities can be difficult for refugees. For refugees who live in areas occupied by co-ethnics, communication is easier as the vernacular language can be used. Dealing with officials who are posted to the forest from other parts of Guinea can, obviously, be more difficult. The current situation of residual caseload Liberian students who are expected to integrate into the Guinean education system, indicates the desirability of supporting French language learning among the refugee population generally.

Liberians in Macenta

107. The residual Liberian caseload in Macenta face an appalling situation resulting from the withdrawal of all material assistance from this year. Feelings are running extremely high in Macenta, where Liberian refugees feel that they have been entirely abandoned by the UN, and some are making threats about possible violent responses to this. The local authorities, the Refugee Committees and others are involved in trying to pacify the population, but note should be taken of the warnings emerging from UNHCR staff in Macenta, that the situation is in many respects dire. The main sticking point seems to be the withdrawal of medical assistance, and stories abound of recent deaths in town, in families who had not the capacity to pay for medical treatment. Each case makes tensions rise further and the situation overall is volatile.

108. Staff in the Croix Rouge office in Macenta feel powerless to help the numbers of cases of serious need with which they are confronted. Although Liberian refugees engage in day labour for Guinean farmers and business people, or engage in petty trade and the provision of services, they are unable to meet their immediate needs. One blind man, an EVI who has nevertheless not been receiving assistance, told that he is only able to pay his rent and feed his family due to the kindness and charity of friends.

109. An old woman described her struggle to feed her dependent grandchildren in their mother's absence. Despite taking in washing and doing any odd jobs she can find, she cannot generate enough income to keep them healthy, much less treat them when they become sick. Branch Office staff have responded to the effect that Liberian EVIs should have been in receipt of food and medical assistance even when

assistance was withdrawn from the rest of the population. Any discrepancy is asserted to have been the result of administrative difficulties rather than a policy decision to deny them assistance. This was not clear to beneficiaries in Macenta.

110. The rhetoric of abandonment by UNHCR is expressed by parallels drawn by Liberians between the pre UNHCR arrival emergency phase of their exile, and their current position when assistance has been cut off. Some of this group fled first from Liberia to Sierra Leone, and then from there to Guinea. They ask what is the difference between themselves and their Sierra Leonean contemporaries, that assistance to should be cut from them only.

111. Liberians from Lofa County are unable to repatriate, indeed the UNHCR field office in Macenta is currently refusing to assist repatriation to the county. Fighting is ongoing, e.g. in Vonjama, there was a new influx in 1999, and small numbers continue to arrive. How can assistance be refused under these circumstances, and in the absence of any alternative durable solution having been identified or achieved? It may well be unreasonable to expect the Liberians to 'integrate' suddenly, when there has been little work in this direction previously.

112. The government Bureau Coordination Refugiés in Gueckedou urges UNHCR and WFP to restart assistance to those Liberians who cannot repatriate due to continued fighting in their country. Security fears about the effect of a large, unassisted refugee population in the area may be well founded given the proximity of the border and the desperation of the refugees.

Urban caseload

113. No food rations have been distributed to urban refugees since the end of December 1999. This decision was apparently motivated by the lack of food commodities available to UNHCR/WFP, and a commonly found feeling that refugees in towns are more difficult to control than those in camps. Serious logistical difficulties had also been experienced by UNHCR when they attempted to distribute food to refugees in Gueckedou and were confronted with the serious resentment of the Guinean population which feels that little has been done to repay it for its generosity to refugees. The urban refugee group, meanwhile, feels cheated by UNHCR on the grounds that they were allowed to settle in town, and were supported there, and have only now been told to leave if they want continued assistance.

114. There are also major complaints, especially in Gueckedou itself, that the registration procedure for those willing to transfer to camps has been too slow and that they remain needlessly in town suffering. One old Sierra Leonean woman described how she has been evicted from her room, unable to pay her rent, and that she now sleeps outside and will continue to do so until such time as UNHCR is willing or able to transfer her to a camp. She also has justified fears about her own capacity to build a house in the event that such a transfer is achieved.

115. Old and disabled people in Kouankan Camp are currently facing a similar situation where they are unable to construct houses alone, and no support is forthcoming as WFP refuses to provide food for work for the project, and no other budget is available for the work. Branch Office Conakry staff explained that

transferring urban refugees to camps represents a problem for UNHCR. One of the reasons for the withdrawal of assistance to them in towns was the reduction in food assistance made available by the WFP. In effect, it is as difficult for them to be provided with food rations in camps as in towns, given the ever decreasing quantities of the food commodities provided by WFP.

Conflict in Sierra Leone

116. A somewhat surprising request was directed at UNHCR through the Consultant by very many individuals and groups throughout the evaluation. This is that the UN should act to expedite peace in Sierra Leone, and indicates the omnipotence which is ascribed to the UNHCR and other UN agencies by the refugees. While people are desperate for peace and repatriation, there seem to be little grounds for confidence that the refugees feel that they have any power to affect the political situation in their country in the short term. Their view is that solutions lie outside the capacity of Sierra Leoneans alone, and many are of the opinion that only an international military force will clear the country of the RUF. This includes those who have family members implicated in their activities.

Management issues

117. Many of the issues raised by refugees as their principal concerns relate to the consequences of a level of policy which is decided far from the camps at the regional offices in Abidjan and in Geneva.

118. Sub Office staff feel seriously constrained in attempting to implement policies which are felt to be imposed from above, and express frustration and a degree of hopelessness about their own capacity to address this situation. The withdrawal of assistance to Liberians is a case in point. Privately, several staff expressed concerns about possible failures in relation to UNHCR's protection mandate vis a vis this situation. Officially, however, it is unclear if any efforts have been made by the Sub Office to challenge the decision at the regional level. Some staff members in Gueckedou strongly felt that the evaluation should include a visit to the regional offices in Abidjan.

119. In this sense, it is paradoxical that an evaluation which was expressly designed to canvass the views of beneficiary populations, was constantly referred back to institutional centres such as Abidjan and Geneva. The Senior Programme Officer in Conakry acknowledges that minimum standards of assistance are barely met by the programme, and ascribes this to inadequacies of funding. Budgetary constraints always exist, and it is suggested that future beneficiary-based evaluations are linked to more analysis of the financial situation than was possible in this case.

120. Further to this point, the organization of the project cycle itself appears to put pressure on effective work in some cases. Complaints from the refugees about the late delivery of non-food assistance is mirrored by complaints from staff about the impediments which they are faced with resulting from the late arrival of funds. For example, repairs to the roads should sensibly be carried out in January to April, the dry season, but funds for the work did not arrive this year until May. In some cases NGO partners are able to pre-fund the work, but this is not always possible.

Similarly, approval for the purchase of seeds for distribution to refugees was not forthcoming from Geneva until late May 2000, making it impossible to implement the work until long after the appropriate time.

Local populations

121. Given the length of time that UNHCR has been operating around Gueckedou, little attention has been paid to the host population in this refugee affected area. Some of UNHCR's partners feel that there should be a more balanced response to both refugees and hosts. Sporadic hopes of a possible repatriation for the Sierra Leonean population may have contributed to the relatively low level of developmental initiatives undertaken by UNHCR. Waning interest on the part of the donors in the Guinean refugee situation has led to a series of cuts in the care and maintenance programme with no corresponding developmental activity. This results in the threat of a decline in the living conditions of refugees, with no strategy in place to mitigate against this.

122. A representative of the sous-prefecture in Gueckedou emphasised that the reduction of food assistance to refugees implies that they are in a position to farm as an alternative livelihood strategy. From his point of view, this is not possible as there is simply not enough land. Putting pressure on the food security of the refugees has inevitable negative consequences for the local population too. What has been relatively peaceful co-existence between the two communities is undermined when this takes place as is now happening.

The past and the future

123. Many meetings and discussions with refugees begin with them giving thanks to UNHCR for their assistance in the early days of exile. UNHCR's initial response is remembered as timely, appropriate and generous. There is little understanding of why the kind and quantity of assistance provided has changed over time. This relates partly to the perception that the situation of refugees has changed little over the years and that self-sufficiency has not been achieved by most. If UNHCR made greater efforts to maintain a meaningful dialogue with refugee communities, a more positive and collaborative working relationship could be generated between the two groups.

124. Such a relationship would make it possible for the Sub Office to respond more quickly and effectively to changes in the situation. There is growing recognition in Gueckedou that a crisis may be approaching in relation to refugee livelihood. With an increasingly difficult relationship developing between refugees and hosts based on concerns about unacceptable environmental degradation and fears that food security is decreasing to dangerous levels for the reasons outlined above, UNHCR needs to be in a position to act. Waiting until the WFP has further decreased the quantities of food commodities which it brings to the region, or until the local population revolts against the exhaustion of its land and refuses access to refugees, is simply not a viable option. Recognizing such shifts in the context depends on UNHCR in Guinea functioning as a learning organization, and this requires more comprehensive monitoring and refugee involvement than currently exists.

Beneficiary-based methods: participation or consultation?

125. One of the objectives of this evaluation was to consider the usefulness of beneficiary-based approaches for UNHCR's evaluative work. The paper written in preparation for this evaluation concluded that such approaches have been underused, partly because of confusion about which methods to use, and how to implement them. One of the findings of the report was that evaluation reports rarely document their data collection methods. Section Two of this report sets out methods used in this evaluation, and assesses their usefulness.

126. In the first instance, a differentiation must be made between participatory and beneficiary-based approaches to evaluation. The former involves beneficiaries at all stages of the evaluation process, inviting them to participate in drawing up the Terms of Reference, defining the themes and issues to be investigated, identifying review questions, collecting and analysing data, and playing a part in decision-making based on the evaluation findings.

127. It is arguable whether an evaluation process which does not involve beneficiaries fully in this way can be described as participatory. A further question exists about the conditions required for this kind of evaluation to be carried out. It has been suggested that when the programming which the evaluation is designed to assess is not participatory, the evaluation itself cannot be participatory. In the first place, the structures and social networks required to implement such a process very often do not exist.

128. Secondly, a centralized, top down programme, is unlikely to be prepared to allow beneficiaries to share power and affect decision making in the way true participatory work demands. UNHCR programmes are predicated on refugees and other beneficiaries functioning as recipients of assistance and not as decision makers and judges of it. Mechanisms rarely exist in such programmes for refugees to become involved in any meaningful way in discussions about the best use of resources, or about effective modes of assistance delivery.

129. It should be noted as a matter of some importance, that given the hierarchical nature of the organization, some staff at field level also feel relatively alienated from centres of power and decision-making. Finding ways to involve beneficiaries directly in the Guinea assistance programme is, therefore, felt to be a luxury by some staff who see their own roles as being the implementation of decisions and policies they have had little or no hand in defining. Field staff in Gueckedou express their frustration at the extent to which decisions are taken at country office level without reference to their experience on the ground. Similarly, staff based in Conakry sometimes feel impotent in the face of decisions relating to the programme which have been taken in the regional office in Abidjan, or even at headquarters in Geneva.

130. Given the above, it was never likely that the experimental beneficiary-based evaluation which this report describes, was going to be fully participatory. It is not

necessarily the case that this would have been impossible, but support would have had to have been won for any such project at each level of the organization, and facilitating steps taken to translate such support into action.

131. Participatory evaluation exists on a continuum which includes work which is best described as consultative. It is probably fairest to describe the current evaluation in this way. It was conducted by an anthropologist, with the aim of canvassing beneficiary views as to key themes and issues for investigation and then collecting diverse opinions on such subjects. Beneficiaries were excluded from the planning stages of the evaluation, due largely to logistical difficulties. The structure of evaluations, which begin and end in Europe, makes it difficult to include beneficiaries' views at the framing and analysis stages, a point which should be considered for future work. The specific focus of the evaluation, consequently, was not predetermined before arrival at the field site, although possible themes of interest were identified by the consultant and UNHCR staff during the planning stages.

132. Anthropological work generally relies on a long period of intensive fieldwork whereby the researcher immerses themselves as fully as possible in the community in order to attempt to understand their lives and experience from their point of view. The principal research strategy is participant observation. The method recognizes that people do not always accurately describe their own activities and practices, and that this is true for a number of reasons. One of the justifications for a long period of fieldwork, therefore, is that incongruities between what people do, and what they say they do, can be identified and explained. This is perhaps particularly useful in a situation where beneficiaries are often assumed to be unreliable witnesses given the necessity that they function as strategic actors for their own survival.

The Guinea evaluation: circumstances and methods used

133. This experimental evaluation spanned a period of six weeks fieldwork. This is relatively long for a conventional evaluation and extremely short in anthropological terms. The explicit objective of the mission, as defined in the Terms of Reference, was to undertake a substantive evaluation of the UNHCR programme in Guinea, inviting input from UNHCR staff members, representatives of partner organizations including government bodies, and members of the refugee and host populations. While interviews with staff and partners were conducted in Geneva, Conakry and Gueckedou, the bulk of research time was spent in the refugee-populated area around Gueckedou in Guinea's forest region.

134. One of the major constraints for the consultant was that it proved impossible to live with the beneficiary population concerned. The camps and settlements around Gueckedou are extremely numerous and dispersed. Furthermore, most of them are located on or close to the Guinean border with Sierra Leone and Liberia. Incursions of rebel armies from both countries have been one of the challenges faced by the UNHCR and other assistance providers during the 1990s.

135. The SOGUE finally insisted that staying overnight in the camps was impossibility on the grounds of possible personal risk. In fact, at the time of the evaluation, no security incident had been reported in any camp for at least a year. It is unfortunately the case, that renewed insecurity has again become an issue since the time of the fieldwork. More generalized fears about risks from the refugees

themselves were stated guardedly. In any event, there were significant implications of the fact that work in the camps was possible only during the hours of daylight. Informal interaction with camp refugees outside their own working hours was, therefore, not possible. The situation was somewhat easier in Gueckedou and Macenta towns, where it was possible to meet with refugees in the evening. An additional benefit of this was that it was possible to visit refugee families in their own homes and get a first hand understanding of the conditions of their lives.

136. Fieldwork was carried out during the early stages of the rainy season, which itself had implications for the extent to which ordinary refugees were free to spend time talking with the evaluator. On more than one occasion, key individuals were not available to discuss the successes and failures of the programme, as they were fully occupied with subsistence activities. This was particularly true of women in some camps. Given the reliance of the refugee population on farming and wage labour subsistence activities, camps were relatively empty during the day, and only those less active people who had not been obliged to leave the camp were regularly available to talk. It should be noted, however, that in some locations, individuals made a special effort, at some personal cost, to remain in the camp when I was due to visit, in order that they could contribute their views. The fact that beneficiary-based evaluations are not cost free to beneficiaries should not be overlooked.

137. The evaluation period began with two days of briefings in the UNHCR office in Conakry, where staff were frank, open and helpful. There was a degree of uncertainty, even nervousness, about the fact that the evaluation themes had not been set in advance. It is possible that assistance provided to the consultant was offered by some as a form of indulgence, and that they did not feel the evaluation to be important or relevant to their work.

138. On arrival in Gueckedou, the Consultant spent a further short period of time receiving briefings from the Head of Sub Office and Unit Heads. Again, the notion that beneficiaries should have a role in defining the nature of the evaluation was not easily understood as useful. During this time, interviews were also conducted with many NGO partners and government representatives in Gueckedou.

139. From the start, the consultant made strenuous efforts to arrange a meeting of all stakeholders to the assistance programme. This took some time to arrange, due partly to a possible resistance on the part of certain staff in the absence of the Office Head. The fact that the meeting took place at all, albeit half way through the evaluation process and too late to define provisional review themes, was due to the wholehearted and active support of one of the Unit Heads without whose support and input the meeting may never have happened at all. The stakeholder meeting will be discussed in more detail below.

140. It was ultimately decided to change the provisional evaluation schedule on the basis of the fact that overnight residence in any camp was not found to be possible. Initial plans had been to restrict the focus of the review to a handful of camps, with the intention of staying in each for a week or so. When it became clear that this was not an option, it was decided to broaden the focus and aim to cover more camps. The critical advantage of staying overnight in camps relates to the greater degree of intimacy which is possible, and the opportunity this avails to win the trust of individuals at a personal level. Without this chance, it was felt that more

mileage could be got from a more extensive approach which aspired to generate more comparative data, albeit of a different quality.

141. Camps were selected on the basis of geographical location, size, age, national and ethnic composition, proximity to the border, contacts and chance. No attempt was made to find 'typical' or 'representative' camps, on the basis that these do not in reality exist in a situation of such diversity. Care was taken, however, to avoid visiting only larger camps and those conveniently located close to main roads and through routes. Perusal of previous reports on the area indicated that many of the smaller and less accessible camps are rarely visited for the purposes of evaluation.

142. In the early stages of time spent in Gueckedou, a Sierra Leonean refugee research assistant was employed to facilitate the research, act as translator where necessary and contribute broadly to the evaluation process. The individual selected is educated to tertiary level, speaks English, French, Krio and Kissi and was employed as a teacher before taking up this contract. Given the significance of links of family and friendship in this kind of social environment, the advantages of working directly with a beneficiary cannot be overstated. The success of this strategy can only hint at the advantages to be derived from working with communities directly in a truly participatory way. When an outsider seeks to enter a series of communities who are impoverished, and have experienced adversity and violence, the sanctioning presence of a relative insider are tremendous.

143. In many camps visited, family and friends of the research assistant were encountered, thus situating the evaluator in some kind of recognizable local framework. Important in this respect was that although he was relatively well known by name and reputation in several camps, the research assistant had for several years been living in Gueckedou town and had also spent time in Conakry. His assistance was, therefore, not complicated by direct involvement in camp life, and the possible claims of patronage, which might otherwise have caused a methodological difficulty. Such personal connections were not necessarily subsequently involved as participants in interviews and discussion groups, but the social value inherent in casual meetings and the capacity for learning about the specific social context were very great. In particular, useful information was learned about the political economy of certain camps, and about contingent socio-political dynamics.

144. Transparency was conceived as a central principle of the evaluation. In all cases, the consultant was explicit about the reasons for her presence in camps, and care was taken to explain her role and position to beneficiaries. In some cases, this may have been limiting in terms of the kind of information which it was possible to learn. Ethically, however, any other approach would have been unacceptable. It was in any case often very clear, that reservations about talking openly with someone perceived to 'belong' to UNHCR were capable of being overcome after initial ice breaking conversations. In some cases, the context was definitive and individuals who had not been prepared to speak in public situations, sought out the evaluator later in order to share information which was considered to be too delicate to express in front of others.

145. Methodologically speaking, the difference between an approach which is predicated on canvassing beneficiary views directly, and one which does not seek to do this, is significantly greater than the variation between what it is possible to learn

using different data collection tools. In fact, what emerged in this evaluation fieldwork, was that maintaining a separation between different methods was relatively difficult to do, even for the purposes of comparison.

146. Numerous different research methods were employed, both in order to acquire as deep an understanding as possible of beneficiary views, but also with a view to assessing the relative merits of such methods. It should be stressed that by far the most effective mode of learning was simply by talking openly with beneficiaries under a range of circumstances. Technically very complicated methods were not attempted due to time constraints and a feeling that they were not necessary. This fact is encouraging in terms of the possibility of developing the use of beneficiary-based approaches in conventional UNHCR evaluations. Such approaches are often ruled out on the grounds of time and expense.

147. The findings of this report suggest that any direct and relatively prolonged interaction with beneficiaries is valuable and worthwhile, even when an integrated participatory or beneficiary-based methodology cannot be employed for these or other reasons. It is worth noting that communities often expressed pleasure and surprise at the amount of time spent in each camp. It was a point of principle to remain with beneficiary groups until anyone who wanted to contribute had had the chance to do so, and to be as scrupulous as possible about keeping appointments. Many interviews and meetings with refugees groups are said by them to be cut short by visitors with over packed schedules. Members of other affected groups, such as the host population, said that this was the first time they had been consulted directly since the early stages of the refugee influx.

148. Before fieldwork proper began, preliminary discussions were held with key staff in Geneva, Conakry and Gueckedou. Project documents were examined, as well as previous evaluation reports including those produced by Human Rights Watch and DFID.

149. In the camps, a routine was established whereby Refugee Committees were consulted initially, with follow up meetings held with other groups and individuals. When refugee leaders have been elected, evaluation teams show respect for these bodies and for the refugees more widely, by consulting them first. In addition, leaders are often in a position to discuss organizational and administrative matters which the wider population may not be conversant with. Evaluators should be aware that they will receive the 'official version' of the situation from organized bodies, and that individual or group interests may mean that this varies from other refugee perspectives. This is not, of course, a reason to discount it. Problems relating to Refugee Committees in the forest region were discussed in Section One of this report, and indicate that evaluators should not always assume that formal refugee bodies are fully representative of their constituencies.

150. Meetings with Refugee Committees in the forest region provided an introductory account of life in the camp and local perceptions of the UNHCR assistance programme. It quickly became apparent that it was considered impolite and inconvenient for visits to be made to committees without advance warning. Committee members are unpaid and many are routinely engaged in subsistence or other activities unless a formal appointment has been made. This being the case, efforts were made to call into camps selected for fieldwork in order that a meeting could be pre-arranged with the Refugee Committee.

151. At the same time, it was often possible to schedule mutually convenient times at which to meet with other groups, including women's' groups, groups of teachers, students and youth associations. Visits to camps were often planned to coincide with market days in order to facilitate the observation of livelihood activity. Meetings with Refugee Committees varied considerably, with some such groups having prepared themselves thoroughly to make appeals for assistance of various kinds. Other Committees operated more casually, but requests for assistance were always made regardless of explanations about the role of the evaluator.

152. In most cases, two or more visits were made to each camp discussed in this report. It was notable that after the initial visit, a certain degree of formality persisted in meetings and encounters. On subsequent visits, however, it was found that news of the evaluation had circulated and that people were generally fairly comfortable with the presence of the consultant, and prepared to interact with less formality. An additional benefit of returning to camps several times, was that individuals with a specific contribution to make to the process were able to arrange a meeting or interview with us, or to take the opportunity to approach us informally to discuss concerns.

153. To summarize, on the initial visit (usually scheduled for early in the morning or late in the afternoon in order to maximize the chance of finding key people at home), a loose schedule of meetings was arranged with various formally or informally constituted groups interested in participating in the evaluation. Wherever possible, these meetings were well spaced throughout the proposed visits to allow time for individual interviews and opportunistic encounters.

Group meetings, interviews and opportunistic encounters

154. When time is limited, meeting with groups of refugees together is a useful strategy. Not only does this make it possible to gather numerous views simultaneously, but also the interchanges which take place between participants in the meeting or discussion may throw up new issues, or indicate points of disagreement. Reasonably careful management of the group profile, or at least an awareness of this, makes it possible to counterpoise different views for discussion.

155. This is one way in which it is possible to explore the competing views which may be held between different sectors of the population, such as between men and women, elders and the youth, those who receive direct support in food or other aid and those who do not. It is always critical that facilitators of group discussions are aware of muted groups in these circumstances. The most obvious danger, and one which is often noted, is that in mixed meetings, women, youths or other relatively less powerful groups may not speak freely. Nevertheless, their presence at general meetings is important, as discussion topics can be carried over from one meeting or conversation to another.

156. In formal meetings, full explanations were made about the nature of the evaluation, its aims and objectives. Comments and contributions were invited, and these were followed up by detailed questions relating to points raised. Comparative data was sought so that similarities and contrasts between camps could be identified. Issues which had been raised in one camp were often raised in another, in order to cross reference experience and accounts. People who attended meetings did so

voluntarily, and were also invited to ask questions or seek clarification from the evaluator.

157. Meetings with women's' groups predictably provided information on domestic matters and highlighted concerns relating to food assistance, health care and employment opportunities. It was notable that 'focus groups' designed to consult small groups on specific issues, almost always expanded into wider meetings whose subject matter also ranged more widely than planned. A decision was taken to allow this shift, rather than restricting participation of interested parties and new subjects for discussion, due to a feeling that insights into local priorities might be lost if this was done.

158. It was notable that with some few exceptions, although the views of the disaggregated population were explicitly sought throughout the evaluation fieldwork, there was a considerable degree of consensus among beneficiary groups. Even where significant differences in opinion might have been expected, such as between refugee and host populations, there was a substantial amount of agreement.

159. In Kolomba Camp, for example, refugees tended to acknowledge that their subsistence activities are destructive to the environment, but insisted that they had no choice but to continue with these activities if they are to survive. Similarly, members of the nearby Guinean village of the same name, concurred that although tremendous damage is observable to the local forest in particular, that the refugees have no alternative subsistence strategies open to them. This common understanding went a good way towards maintaining relatively easy relations between the two groups who see themselves as different kinds of victims of the situation.

160. Meetings with student and youth groups proved illuminating. Youths spoke fluently and freely about their concerns and conditions in the camp, often highlighting exactly the same concerns as their parents and grandparents. Not yet allowed access to decision making functions, their grasp of the local political and economic situation was nevertheless thorough, and proved a valuable complement to the testimony of groups which might be seen as more political in their accounts.

161. Inevitably, group meetings included a substantial amount of appeals for assistance. While difficult to deal with given the lack of authority to promise help in the face of real need, even these were interesting in terms of the evaluation. For many of the people with whom I spoke, this was the first time that they had had the opportunity to talk to someone from the UNHCR. As such, providing a forum for such discussions may in itself have been a worthwhile thing to do. The kinds of help which communities, in the form of discussion groups asked for, were themselves revealing of their concerns and preoccupations. Relatively comfortable camps, for example, tended to make appeals for what other refugees might have considered 'luxury' items, such as community centres, sports equipment and so on. In worse off camps, desperate appeals were made for food assistance and shelter materials.

162. Individual interviews and meetings were organized on the basis of snowball sampling. Attendees of meetings were invited to indicate if they felt that they had more to say in a more private context; equally they were asked to nominate others with something to add. When contributions became very personal or complicated, arrangements were made to continue conversations outside the confines of an open

meeting. The local knowledge of NGO staff working in the camps was also utilized, with counsellors and social services staff most helpful in identifying individuals with particular experiences to share.

163. Care was taken to include individuals from as wide as possible a range of social sectors and groups. As such, the evaluator ensured that people from all economic levels were met, including those employed by NGOs (considered the most prosperous locally), people running small businesses, peasant farmers, and those with particular difficulties of health or situation who are unable to generate an adequate income to feed themselves and their families. Roughly as many women were consulted as men, and conversations were also routinely held with youths, school students and children. These kinds of individual meetings varied considerably, some taking the form of social home visits, others clearly defined as interviews. In some cases numerous topics were discussed, in others, a single critical issue was covered.

164. In addition to the kinds of interviews just described, many casual encounters were used as starting points for discussions with individuals and families about their circumstances, and life in and around the camps. In most of the camps visited, many of these took place on undirected walks around the peripheries of camps, where a good number of people live out of the hubbub of the day to day life of the camp trading centre, political activity, market area and so on. Casual conversations with some of those people who did not actively seek me out, were a valuable way of cross checking the kind of information I was receiving in more formal, public spaces. This was also the least intimidating and most natural way of visiting people in their own homes, where observations about the quantity and quality of household equipment could be made.

165. Social surveys were not, ultimately, employed, due to a lack of time, and the difficulty of involving beneficiaries in their design and implementation without adequate training resources. An attempt was made to produce a questionnaire with a group of refugees in one camp (Owet Djiba); it proved impossible in the time available to convey effectively what was required and to produce a viable set of questions. It was not felt that a questionnaire prepared in the field by the consultant would be an interesting beneficiary-based research tool, although with more time available, this would have been a reasonable strategy of 'triangulation'.

166. Elements of PRA techniques were used, notably wealth ranking and transect walks. These generated valuable data. In the case of transect walks, the method was in any case logical in terms of the participant observation approach being used, and the data produced was not attributable exclusively to the use of the technique. Nevertheless, it was a useful exercise given that it is always desirable to cross check findings, 'triangulation' being a necessary security strategy with any qualitative social research. Wealth ranking, done here with several women's' groups in particular, generated more precise data than might otherwise have been available, relating to issues of household economy (including commodity prices and crisis coping strategies). The exercises remained directed by the evaluator to a disappointing extent, however. As in the case of questionnaire writing, it was felt that much more time and training would have been needed to make this a genuinely participatory mode of data collection.

Stakeholder meeting

167. On 7 July 2000, approximately half way through the evaluation, a stakeholder meeting was held. The original intention had been to hold this meeting as close to the beginning of the review as possible, with a view to using it as a launching off point for the evaluative work. One objective of the meeting was to inform all actors in the refugee situation around Gueckedou about the evaluation which was to take place. The meeting was intended to provide a forum within which some key programme and other issues relating to the refugee situation could be raised by UNHCR staff, NGO personnel, Government of Guinea officials, refugee representatives and members of the host population.

168. The purpose of the stakeholder meeting was specifically to bring together representatives of each of the interest groups affected by and involved with the refugee situation in the region of Gueckedou. This was considered useful in recognition of the fact that each was likely to have a different perspective on the refugee situation and assistance programme. While individual meetings and interviews were also held with key actors at the beginning of the evaluation, it was considered valuable to give this diverse group the opportunity to debate between themselves, some of their concerns and preoccupations vis a vis the situation. In particular, each of the main stakeholders was invited to discuss the operational context of their work, and highlight problem areas, as well as areas of achievement.

169. Secondly, each of the interest groups was invited to contribute to the identification of evaluation themes, a process which would clearly have been more useful if conducted earlier in the process. Similarly, the question of evaluation criteria was discussed with reference to UNHCR's 1998 suggestions; effectiveness, economy, impact, relevance and unanticipated consequences. In particular, actors were asked to contribute to the selection of fieldwork sites, in recognition of the fact that their local knowledge might help mitigate the recognized tendency for evaluations to be conducted in camps and areas which are easily accessible rather than for any more positive reasons. Finally, the consultant sought to learn from the meeting what were the key areas of agreement and disagreement with reference to UNHCR's policy and practice of refugee assistance in the region.

170. The stakeholder meeting was conceived as a way of attempting to gather views from diverse actors in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation. It was one concrete way of demonstrating the ethos of participation which the evaluation aspired to, even in the face of operational constraints. There was, as has been suggested above, some resistance in some quarters to the notion that refugee representatives should be invited to participate equally in the meeting. Revealingly, meeting invitations sent out from the Sub Office to NGO staff and other partners, described the purpose and proposed content of the meeting, while those sent to refugees simply requested their presence at the Sub Office at a stated time. It is a testament to the engagement and interest, but also to the powerlessness of the refugees themselves, that they presented themselves as requested. Invitations to members of the host population were not issued, a fact which was not discovered by the consultant until it was too late to remedy this error.

171. Disappointingly, there was little initial enthusiasm for the meeting on the part of UNHCR's partners and some UNHCR personnel. One government official went so far as to complain that as far as he was concerned, this was not how an evaluation

should be run. He maintained that what he expected from such a scenario, was that an evaluator would ask him to complete a questionnaire, and then invite him to a concluding meeting to discuss the results of his and others' responses. The idea that beneficiaries themselves should be involved was not popular across the board. Interestingly, however, the same government official proceeded to make a series of extremely interesting observations about the status of the assistance programme, with which others present engaged, and which provoked a valuable series of responses.

172. While several UNHCR staff were present at the meeting, it was made clear to them by the Sub Office Head, that their active participation was not encouraged, and many remained rather quiet throughout.

173. For the refugee representatives; the Chairman and Secretary General of both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian Refugee Coordinating Committees and the Chairman and Chairlady of Boudou, Nyaedou and Fandou Yema Camps, the opportunity to participate in the meeting was welcomed with relish. Not surprisingly, some of them were rather intimidated by the setting, but overall they contributed effectively and interestingly to the meeting. Sadly, some of them waited to make their contributions until rather late in the meeting, when some of the other participants had already left. The question of how to make a meeting of this kind equally conducive for all participants, is one that should be more explicitly addressed on any further occasion.

174. The meeting did not, in fact, generate the kind of debate which had been hoped for. Numerous issues were discussed by speakers from each of the groups, but largely in isolation from each other. Two of the most important themes which emerged were the lack of communication between the refugee population and the UNHCR specifically, and, on the part of the partners, widespread complaints about the difficulty of working under the constraints of UNHCR's unpredictable and bureaucratic programme cycle. Financial issues included the difficulty of achieving extensive operational coverage and consistency in an under resourced and crisis managed situation.

175. Although the stakeholder meeting was not as successful as might have been hoped, the view of the writer is that it was an extremely valuable exercise and that the strategy has substantial potential in beneficiary-based evaluation. It was clear from the outset that participants were not clear enough about the rationale behind, and the purpose of the meeting, and that they might well have contributed more productively if this hurdle had been overcome. It is also worth noting that organizational personnel are obliged to attend a great number of meetings, for logistical reasons the stakeholder meeting was held directly after the UNHCR weekly co-ordination meeting.

176. In retrospect, it may have been too much to ask that people invest in a second long and demanding meeting in one morning. Ideally, stakeholders might be brought together for a more structured and longer workshop, having had plenty of time to prepare themselves for active participation in the evaluation process. The overall impression, with the notable exception of the refugee representatives, was that people were interested, but simply did not have the time or energy to commit themselves fully to the meeting.

177. For the refugees, on the other hand, this was an almost unprecedented opportunity to voice their views in front of an audience of decision makers, and was much appreciated. One of the outcomes of the meeting was that a further meeting between the Head of Sub Office and the leaders of the Refugee Coordinating Committees was scheduled for the following week. This may or may not have been a good thing for them. One worrying trend seems to be a move on the part of the Sub Office to scale down what little direct communication they have with the Refugee Committees, on the grounds that their role has been superceded since the establishment of a UNHCR field team. The view of this report is that this would be a disastrous move, moving the programming away from, rather than towards participative programming of any kind, and short sighted in terms of efficient programme management.

Knowledge gained

178. The first and most predictable kind of knowledge generated by beneficiary-based methods of evaluation relates to the level of beneficiary satisfaction with the assistance programme. It should be noted that the beneficiaries consulted did not always come to considered conclusions about the relative success of the programme with reference to UNHCR's mandate, their institutional objectives and constraints. Some individuals were in a position to make these kinds of informed evaluations themselves, but for the most part it was necessary to consider and interpret the 'raw data' of beneficiary responses.

179. Conversations with educated refugees, however, demonstrated their significant facility with the language of humanitarian assistance. References to their awareness of the difficulties presented by 'donor fatigue' increasing demands on the resources of the UNHCR, and the unwillingness of the international community to support long-term refugees, were not uncommon. Nevertheless, appeals were continually made, even by such professional people, for the kind of assistance that UNHCR is clearly not in a position to supply, as well for assistance which should already be available.

180. It is very clear that the majority of beneficiaries do not fully understand UNHCR's mandate, and look to the agency to fulfil state functions, as well as operating as a development organization. While requests for the effective and timely delivery of the assistance which UNHCR does aspire to provide are reasonable, the organization will never be able to live up to far reaching beneficiary expectations. Many refugees openly acknowledged that their expectations are extremely high, and indicated that they were aware that these could not always be met. Indeed, some suggested that however much assistance is provided to them, their appeals for further help are unlikely to diminish.

181. In this sense, the task is to make a separation between what refugees would like UNHCR to provide in an ideal world, and what the organization is able to deliver within the framework of its mandate and its financial capacity. In fact, numerous legitimate complaints can be made of the UNHCR programme in Guinea, some of which are outlined in Section One of this report. There are refugees who are badly served by the programme, who fail to receive even the most basic assistance despite being entitled to it, or who are not treated with the respect they deserve by

the agency. The fact that some refugee expectations are exaggerated, should not be taken as a reason to overlook these specific criticisms.

182. Another noteworthy point about the process of beneficiary-based work, is that some beneficiaries consulted clearly felt extremely uncomfortable about criticising an organization which does so much for them. It was relatively difficult to convey a sense that constructive criticism need not be negative and that it would not be construed as ingratitude. Most meetings and interviews were prefaced by a 'vote of thanks' to UNHCR for the assistance which it has provided over the years, even when new appeals for help were subsequently made.

183. As mentioned above, refugees and hosts alike frequently took the opportunity to present their personal problems to the evaluator, in the hope that something could be done for them. This is a difficult issue to negotiate while carrying out fieldwork. On the one hand, the kinds of assistance for which people ask is indicative of the problems they face and of the real difficulty of their situation. In addition, from a personal point of view, it is not easy to justify preventing people from making their appeals. The least one can do is listen.

184. However, so much time must not be lost according interlocutors this courtesy, that the data required for an informed evaluation to be made, cannot be collected. Requests for assistance can, it should be emphasised, be productive conversation starters for both parties. The evaluator may be in a position to give advice to the individual concerned, or to pass information to an appropriate organization. In addition, however, asking questions about the reason for the request, and about other avenues which have been explored, are also legitimate ways of eliciting useful information about local problem solving processes and perceived solutions. This kind of contextual local knowledge is critical in building up an impression of the impact of assistance which is provided to beneficiaries, and of the effectiveness of its delivery.

185. Attempting to understand the refugee situation from the point of view of beneficiaries of the programme is one of the central objectives of beneficiary-based methods. While evaluations always seek to learn lessons about the programme in question, beneficiary-based methods make it possible to be more precise about the kinds of lessons which it is worth learning. Without canvassing beneficiary views, an evaluation loses the opportunity to access two main types of information which are germane.

186. The first type of information is straightforwardly factual. One of the key issues relating to food assistance in Gueckedou at the time of the review, was that the provision of maize meal was causing problems at both the household and market levels, as discussed in Section One. UNHCR is not in a position to determine what kind of rations are available for distribution. Their partners WFP, however, indicated that they were simply unaware of the refugees' preference for bulgar.

187. Previous studies have raised the question of the extent to which assistance providers are cognizant of the internal socio-political dynamic of the communities of beneficiaries and other affected populations. This report suggests that while UNHCR staff are clearly aware of the problematic nature of refugee representation in the camps, they are not well informed enough to take steps to improve the situation. Only by taking the time to learn from beneficiaries about the nature of such delicate

political situations, will it be possible to move forward in this respect. The time spent in camps and with refugees by field staff is currently insufficient for this to be a realistic prospect. Beneficiary-based methods of monitoring and evaluation offer an opportunity for positive engagement if the desire is genuinely there to transform Refugee Committees into viable and trusted political institutions. Beneficiary-based methods, furthermore, are capable of generating an analysis of the situation which is rooted in the reality of the local political economy, rather than in the neutral, stable world of planners.

188. Another example relates to the views of the host population, which had not been sought by UNHCR in this context for a long period of time. The testimony of Guinean villagers indicated a sense of impending crisis in relation to land use around the prefecture of Gueckedou, as well as providing corresponding information about the impacts of environmental degradation on both their and the refugees' livelihoods. While environmental concerns are very much on the agenda at the policy level, their implications at the grass roots level appear not to have been addressed. This example also indicates the value of soliciting beneficiary views regarding changes in the situation over time, something which appears to be insufficiently considered by implementing actors.

189. The question of refugee access to land for agriculture lies on the boundary between the two kinds of information referred to above. While it is acknowledged by UNHCR and other staff that there is not sufficient land for the entire refugee population to practice subsistence farming, the consequences of this are not addressed. Only by talking directly with refugees and Guineans is it possible to establish the extent to which this represents a serious threat to a policy of self-sufficiency for refugee communities.

190. Aside from the material facts which it is possible to learn from beneficiaries, there is also the question of alternative understandings or interpretations of commonly accepted knowledge. While refugees and UNHCR staff largely agree, for example, on the constraints on refugee self sufficiency, the agency still proceeds on the basis of this as an objective. The fact that both assistance providers and beneficiaries know that it is effectively impossible given the conditions, has not translated into a re-appraisal of policy in this respect.

191. Similarly, it is generally accepted by both UNHCR staff and refugee communities, that there are vulnerable people living among the refugee population who should be receiving targeted assistance according to UNHCR's own criteria. The fact that UNHCR does not have the capacity to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect, does not mean that this is not objectively true. This unfortunate group becomes invisible to UNHCR, in the sense that their position is neither documented nor dealt with. The impact of the assistance programme on their lives, and on the lives of those who struggle to support them, is not assessed. Without canvassing beneficiary perspectives directly, it is unlikely that the plight of this group would have been identified. In UNHCR documentation, they exist only as the difference in figures representing vulnerable people identified by the agency, and those receiving food rations.

192. Finally, analysis of diverse interpretations of accepted facts highlights the extent to which beneficiary views are not canvassed by an organization which appears to care little about the motivation which is ascribed to it by beneficiaries.

During the verification of the refugee population earlier this year, young children were selected by UNHCR staff to identify family members and 'verify' the data on refugee cards. UNHCR staff claim that this was the only way it was possible to mitigate against refugee 'cheating', while refugees were left outraged and bemused by a process which they saw as inherently unjust and ineffective. This kind of activity by UNHCR may well increase refugees' attempts to manipulate a system which they sometimes see as designed to exclude them from assistance. The fear and resentment which is generated by such a strategy, is one of the 'unanticipated consequences' of programming which an evaluation is intended to identify, and may well have implications for the effective administration of camps in the region.

193. The question of why UNHCR in Gueckedou does not always act on knowledge it has in relation to the programme is a vexed one. Admittedly, the agency is not alone in this respect. Several NGO staff, for example, indicated that they were aware of problems relating to unassisted vulnerable people but action is broadly speaking not taken. It may be that UNHCR's recognized coordinating role is a reason for the inactivity of some of its partners.

194. An over-simplified explanation for UNHCR's inaction is that their financial situation does not allow them to invest resources in making changes to the status quo. The only offered justification for the absence of any needs assessment work in relation to vulnerable people in the camps was that no resources existed to identify, much less to support these people under the current financial situation. Evidently this is a structural problem, and one which makes running the programme extremely difficult. UNHCR Conakry staff have spent significant amounts of time and energy attempting to attract funds to the programme, to no substantial avail. Learning generated by beneficiary-based or other methods are unlikely to result in improvements to the programme if realistic funding is not made available to it. This will result in failures to honour UNHCR's mandate, and to adequately support the refugee population in Guinea's forest region.

195. The data generated by this evaluation suggests that if UNHCR is serious about moving towards the assessment of impact of its programmes, rather than the narrower aim of assessing programme outputs in material terms, that beneficiary-based methods should be considered a crucial component of evaluation methods. The principal objectives of evaluations are usually agreed to be lesson learning and accountability. The findings of this experimental evaluation suggest that beneficiary-based methods have a significant contribution to make to institutional lesson learning, indeed that they open up the parameters of possibility in this respect. Whether downward accountability is achieved by an evaluation which is consultative rather than fully participatory is a moot point. Consulting beneficiaries should be seen as a necessary first step towards downward accountability but cannot be seen as sufficient.

Reflections and recommendations

196. Beneficiary-based work is most effective when it has the support and commitment of the country programme. Staff locally should be encouraged to feel their share of 'ownership' of the evaluation process. Meaningful and early communication between the external evaluator and the country, sub or field offices should be a pre-requisite. UNHCR staff should be invited to participate in the

design of the evaluation, and help to make it directly relevant to their work by their input.

197. In order to make beneficiary-based methods of evaluation more participatory, further ways should be found to involve beneficiaries in the planning stages of the work, with inputs to the Terms of Reference and other planning tools. On this occasion, evaluation themes were left relatively open until quite late in the process, in an attempt to overcome the problem of an absence of beneficiary input at the early stages. This caused some confusion among non-beneficiary participants, who clearly felt uncomfortable with the vagueness of the evaluation plan, yet did not seem willing to contribute to it. In the event, it was the consultant who effectively defined the evaluation themes after a series of meetings with key individuals in the field. While viable, this is not entirely desirable. An evaluation designed interactively with input from all actors might have generated more useful and relevant results.

198. Despite the difficulties of attempting to use participatory evaluation techniques in a programme which is not participatory, further efforts should be made to develop such methods and involve beneficiaries directly in data collection and analysis. It is likely that a training component would need to be introduced to the process for this to be effective.

199. It is felt that introducing some elements of quantitative enquiry into the beneficiary-based methodology would strengthen and reinforce it. During the present evaluation, and for reasons discussed above, social surveys were not used. It is recommended that such methods are also attempted as data produced in this way would have represented an important complement to the qualitative material it was possible to collect.

200. Given the complex and politically charged nature of financial planning and management, it is suggested that future beneficiary-based evaluations are linked to a programme audit and closer assessment of the programme cycle and associated constraints than was possible on this occasion.

201. To be most effective, beneficiary-based evaluation should be linked to ongoing beneficiary-based monitoring processes. This would increase the capacity of the approach to assess programme impact over time and through changing circumstances.

202. Beneficiary-based methods introduce dynamism into the evaluation process and allow the critical relationships between UNHCR and recipients of assistance to be investigated, and their implications for the smooth running of the programme assessed.