

**Putting Refugees on the Development Agenda:  
how refugees and returnees can contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals**

*A year since my Office joined the UN Development Group (UNDG), UNHCR is continuing to integrate the Millennium Development Goals into its programmes, contributing especially to Goal number 8, which calls for a global partnership for development, by promoting multilateral partnerships on durable solutions and burden sharing. There is much more to do to include the needs of refugees, returnees and IDPs into development programmes as the UNDG prepares for the Millennium Summit in 2005.*

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers  
Statement to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly  
9 November 2004

## **Background**

The review of the United Nations Millennium Declaration is the primary focus of work within the United Nations in 2005, along with efforts to inject new energy and resources into pursuing the objectives agreed upon at the Millennium Summit in 2000.<sup>1</sup> The review will culminate in the September 2005 Summit on the Millennium Declaration, prior to the commencement of the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> The preparations leading up to the Summit provide an opportunity to ensure that refugees and other displaced persons receive greater prominence in the General Assembly resolution to be adopted, as well as in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in strategies towards attaining them.

The Millennium Declaration makes a single reference to refugees under the paragraph headed “[P]rotecting the vulnerable,” which calls on States to:

*... strengthen international cooperation, including burden sharing in, and the coordination of humanitarian assistance to countries hosting refugees, and to help all refugees and displaced persons to return voluntarily to their homes, in safety and dignity, and to be smoothly reintegrated into their societies.<sup>3</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> General Assembly resolution 55/2, 18 September 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Secretary-General, *Modalities, format and organization of the high-level plenary meeting of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly, Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit*, General Assembly, A/59/545.

<sup>3</sup> General Assembly resolution 55/2, para. 26.

In the lead-up to the September Summit, the United Nations Secretary-General was requested to provide a “roadmap” setting out how the commitments and objectives agreed upon at the Millennium Summit could be fulfilled. In the roadmap, it is suggested that the above mentioned objective should be achieved through:

- ensuring that States comply with their legal obligations to protect and assist all refugees and displaced persons;
- making international assistance and development programmes more responsive to the needs of host communities and more effective in alleviating pressure on the receiving local environment;
- working in the international community to assist the displaced in rebuilding their lives and enable them to resume supporting themselves and their families; and
- improving and making United Nations advocacy work more systematic through the dissemination of international standards, including the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and monitoring adherence to these standards.

Annexed to the Secretary-General’s roadmap, and based upon the relevant themes in the Millennium Declaration, is a list of the eight MDGs, with 18 targets and more than 40 indicators, to be attained by 2015:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education;
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women;
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality;
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health;
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability;
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development.

### **Refugees, host communities and the MDGs**

In mid-January 2005, Mr. Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director of the UN Millennium Development Project, presented the report “Investing in Development” as a practical plan to achieve the MDGs by 2015.<sup>4</sup> Whereas other reports addressing the MDGs often neglect conflict and post-conflict situations, the Millennium Project report takes the view that:

*Without effective strategies to forestall conflict, a significant number of national MDG-based strategies will likely be thrown off course by violent conflict in the course of implementation. We therefore recommend that any international or national strategy to include the Goals include a focus on conflict and conflict prevention.<sup>5</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup> Millennium Project, *Investing in development: A Practical Guide to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, Report to the UN Secretary-General, New York: UNDP, 2005: 329 p. A 74 page overview of the report has been published separately.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

More specifically, the report argues that:

*... donor agencies should aim to provide ongoing MDG-based financial and technical assistance to maintain or restore basic infrastructure and the provision of social services, delivered in a way that reaches refugees and people in conflict zones without worsening the conflict. Since the Goals address many of the same needs as humanitarian relief – security from want, hunger, illiteracy, and disease – wherever possible they should guide humanitarian activities over the medium term ...*<sup>6</sup>

The report also underlines the need to ensure “equitable provision of services and infrastructure to all groups in societies, including people in disadvantaged regions, ... and those with special needs, such as refugees.”<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on equitable provision entails that groups and geographical areas often excluded from national development strategies should also be targeted. To this effect, the report recommends that countries develop “disaggregated reporting on how different regions or groups within a country are progressing toward the Goals in order to shed light on patterns of inequality across groups.”<sup>8</sup>

While they are prime beneficiaries of relief aid, refugees are often excluded from development programmes that follow humanitarian efforts and which seek to ensure the sustainability of these shorter-term interventions. Such a failure to build upon and sustain humanitarian investments results in a waste of both human and financial resources. Ignoring the needs and potential of refugees and regions hosting refugees and/or returnees in transition and long-term development programmes may hamper efforts to attaining the MDGs. This is all the more evident in those situations in which displaced and/or formerly displaced people make up a substantial part of the total population, and an even larger part of the poor population.

Significant efforts have been made to incorporate the MDGs into UNHCR’s planning and operations benefiting refugees, other persons of concern to the Office, as well as the surrounding local populations wherever possible. The “Practical Guide to the Systematic Use of Standards and Indicators in UNHCR Operations”, developed by the Division of Operational Support, reinforces the pursuit of the targets and indicators agreed under the MDGs. This approach has allowed UNHCR to collect data on the well-being of refugees in 93 camps or designated rural areas throughout the developing world and in urban areas in some 100 countries. Some of the more salient findings of this survey are summarized in this document.

In the realization of truly sustainable solutions, however, UNHCR’s efforts and those of its humanitarian partners will not suffice. Therefore, this document also seeks to illustrate how the strategic targeting of development aid toward areas and communities hosting refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons can enable those communities, and the displaced populations themselves, to make decisive contributions towards attaining the MDGs. The MDGs can thus become a shared framework to guide the transition from relief to development.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 186.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

This requires forging new partnerships with and among development actors that are pursuing relevant mandates and have the necessary expertise. In its own advocacy work, UNHCR has applied the objective of MDG 8 (“to develop a global partnership for development”) as the guiding principle and the preferred methodology to assist communities hosting refugees and other displaced populations in meeting the other MDGs. Consequently, this paper first focuses on MDG 8, and then returns to MDGs 1 to 7.

While not exhaustive, the positive examples under each Goal purport to show that, where given the opportunity, displaced and formerly displaced populations can make a difference in terms of meeting the MDGs. It is hoped that this message, which is echoed throughout this document, will be duly represented and heard at the forthcoming Summit on the Millennium Declaration.

## **Meeting the MDGs**

### *Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development*

In recent years, a number of UNHCR-led efforts, including the Agenda for Protection, the development of a Framework for Durable Solutions, and the Convention Plus initiative, have been geared towards the promotion of global partnerships capable of contributing to development and poverty reduction, increasing commitment to good governance, addressing the special needs of the least developed countries, and improving policy coherence.

For example, under the Convention Plus initiative, UNHCR aims to foster new and improved multilateral partnerships with a view to facilitating the resolution of refugee problems. At this time States, international organizations and institutions, and NGOs are discussing a “Statement of Good Practice on Targeting Development Assistance for Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement”<sup>9</sup> outlining the common understandings and practices needed to realize durable solutions to forced displacement through the more effective targeting of development assistance. The Statement contains a non-exhaustive set of concrete examples of good practice. The Government of Uganda, for example, has recently introduced legislation that addresses refugee employment, freedom of movement, integration of services and self-reliance. The Government has also incorporated refugee issues into its Poverty Reduction Strategy. This commitment, which enables refugees to exercise their rights and to use their skills and productive capacities, has been matched with a commitment of the donor community to provide development funds for the benefit of refugees and their host communities.

This joint effort under the Convention Plus initiative to bring additional resources, in financial as well as human terms, to some of the most underdeveloped areas of Uganda will help refugees and their hosts to move towards the MDGs. Pursuant to the Secretary-General’s roadmap, this approach will ensure compliance with the State’s legal obligations to protect and assist refugees; make international assistance and development programmes more responsive to the needs of host communities and more effective in alleviating pressure on the receiving local environment; and assist the displaced in rebuilding their lives and enable them to resume supporting themselves and their families.

---

<sup>9</sup> FORUM/2005/3.

Convention Plus offers a means to advance the dialogue among States, UN agencies, the World Bank and NGO partners on how to replicate existing good practice and make development programmes and tools more displacement-sensitive in the future. These tools include Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.<sup>10</sup> The ongoing review of Poverty Reduction Strategies by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund provides a unique opportunity to establish a systematic approach to addressing displacement in these strategies.

In addition, and also at UNHCR's initiative, in October 2004 the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) adopted a Guidance Note on Durable Solutions for Displaced Persons. For the first time, a common policy was adopted among UN development actors on the importance of attaining durable solutions for displaced persons and how to incorporate them into joint planning and implementation strategies. The Guidance Note has been included in the existing UNDG Guidelines on Common Country Assessment (CCA) and in the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).

*Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

In many countries, refugees have limited or no access to land or gainful employment. As a result, many refugees remain dependent on international assistance for an extended period of time. Consequently, the income of refugees living in camps is difficult to estimate. However, information on income was collected in urban and returnee areas in 2004. In 39 of the 54 urban locations with data for the year 2004, the average monthly income of refugees was reported to be less than 75 per cent of that of nationals. Areas of refugee return indicate a similar pattern.

Given the poor living standards of refugees, UNHCR in recent years has partnered with governments, local authorities, development partners and donors to give refugees the means to escape dependency on humanitarian aid and become self-reliant, whether in exile or upon return to their own country. Experiences in Africa show real achievements in terms of self-reliance where refugees have been given an opportunity to contribute to the development of their communities, and where development interventions have been targeted towards refugees as well as the local population.

The Zambia Initiative, initiated in 2002, aims at fostering development in areas hosting Angolan refugees, thus benefiting both the local population and the refugees. It is a notable example of how a development approach can improve the condition of the targeted communities. The Zambia Initiative has made firm progress towards achieving economic and social empowerment of refugees, as well as poverty reduction and enhanced food security among the local host communities. After only one year of implementation, the refugee-hosting areas reached the target for food self-reliance for the first time in 36 years. The surplus production was sold to WFP and the farmers had a 100 per cent repayment rate on agricultural loans.

A similar experience is in progress in the north-western part of Uganda, host to approximately 250,000 Sudanese refugees who live in rural settlements. The Self-Reliance Strategy for this area has been implemented since 1998 and has resulted in a positive increase in food production for both refugees and neighbouring nationals. A stocktaking in 2003 showed that 60 per cent of the refugee

---

<sup>10</sup> *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – A Displacement Perspective*, UNHCR, October 2004.

population in northern Uganda had become self-sufficient in terms of food production and consequently had been phased out of the general relief food distribution of WFP.

*Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education*

Education is the best investment in long-term stability and prosperity. It improves refugees' chances to integrate in the host country, to find meaningful work and to be perceived as a valuable contributor to the local economy. At the same time, it equips refugees with the necessary skills to reintegrate and rebuild their own country upon return from exile.

In some 100 countries, UNHCR provides education services, including mostly primary, but also some secondary and higher education, vocational training and adult literacy classes. In its education programmes, UNHCR and its partners aim to implement the six goals of Education for All (EFA), namely: education for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; free access to primary education; equitable access to appropriate learning for youth and adults; adult literacy; gender equity; and quality education.

UNHCR seeks to ensure 100 per cent enrolment and retention of refugee children in primary and lower secondary education, with focus on gender parity through structured initiatives and affirmative action to support retention of girls in school. The standards applied in refugee programmes - a student/teacher ratio of 40:1 and teacher training programmes to increase the number of qualified refugee teachers, particularly female teachers (to 50 per cent) - are aimed at gradually improving the quality of refugee education. One example of affirmative action to promote gender parity can be observed in Guinea, where the recruitment of female teaching assistants proved an effective strategy in ensuring a safer learning environment, especially for girls, and in improving the quality of learning. Female assistants also monitor the attendance of female pupils and act as support for the girls.

Although educational data for refugees living in camps are available, the accuracy is challenged by rapid changes in the size of the refugee population, the attendance of children from local communities and the enrolment of over-aged children. Bearing in mind these limitations, the large majority of refugee children living in camps has access to education. In the 67 camps with available data for the year 2004, 76 per cent of refugee children aged 6 to 17 years were enrolled in school. Most recent figures show that gender parity is almost achieved in refugee education in camps. In total, girls constitute 46 per cent of the students enrolled.

In a number of situations, children in the host community do not have easy access to education programmes, and attend schools in neighbouring refugee camps, where services are often better. In other cases, UNHCR pays school fees in order for refugee children to go to local schools. Pakistan serves as an illustration of how education facilities are used by locals as well as refugees. In some places Afghan refugee children attend local schools located just outside the camp rather than the camp school which will be further away. The opposite also happens when a camp school is located at the outskirts of a camp and people from the surrounding area send their children to the refugee school. Thus, the Sudanese population hosting Eritrean refugees has had access to refugee schools, and the local community has benefited from literacy programmes designed for refugees.

It is essential to ensure the sustainability of such programmes throughout the 'refugee cycle', including where refugees are allowed to integrate in the host society and when they are able to

return to their countries of origin. Failing this, the skills and knowledge acquired by refugee and local children may be lost, and important human and financial investments may be squandered.

*Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women*

UNHCR promotes a two-pronged approach for the protection of refugee women: gender equality mainstreaming and affirmative action to support the empowerment of refugee women and girls. A central objective is to ensure the meaningful participation of refugee women in community decision making and in return and reconstruction processes.

In a number of operations affirmative action has been instituted in election procedures for refugee leadership positions, in order to achieve 50 per cent female representation in camp leadership and management structures. Such efforts can contribute to actions to reduce the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence as in the Buduburam refugee settlement in Ghana, where women make up 60 per cent of leadership roles and are part of the refugee neighbourhood watch team. In Ghana refugee women are offered training programmes that are aimed at empowering them to become leaders and act as role models for young girls upon return to Liberia.

The progress made in ensuring equal representation of women and men in refugee camp management committees has strengthened refugee women's capacity to mobilize themselves to promote women's rights and seek representation upon repatriation. In some countries, such as Guatemala, Rwanda and Angola, returnee women have mobilized together with other women to promote women's rights to land and property, as well as on other issues. Displaced Southern Sudanese women are currently preparing for repatriation and are actively engaged in identifying means to ensure their representation locally, participation in the finalization of the new constitution, access to land and greater transparency in public spending.

Free education in the camps in Ethiopia, where many refugee women have been for more than a decade, and other training programmes have empowered Somali women and provided them with opportunities to return home better equipped to change their own situation and that of their country. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghan refugee adolescent girls benefited from formal education and skills development and have taken up informal employment to improve their conditions and those of their families. On return to Afghanistan, women who had access to higher education opportunities are now able to work as teachers in their communities and UNHCR returnee monitoring noted that generally all women confirmed that living conditions, although very difficult, had improved in recent years due to the return and reconstruction programmes.

*Goals 4 and 5: Reduce child mortality and Improve maternal health*

UNHCR is working closely with UNICEF and WHO to reduce child mortality by implementing Integrated Management of Childhood Illness programmes in refugee settlements and in locations of refugee return. To improve maternal health, UNHCR is working together with partners including the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), to ensure that the Minimum Initial Services Package for Reproductive Health is implemented effectively in refugee situations and to promote that deliveries are assisted by skilled personnel. The child mortality and maternal health programmes provided by UNHCR and partners are often of benefit to refugee children and women

as well as to the local community. This is particularly the case in remote areas, where health services are not readily available to the host population.

This is the case in the United Republic of Tanzania, where the refugee camps are situated in underdeveloped regions. Recognizing this situation, UNHCR and local authorities have agreed to give Tanzanian villagers free access to medical services in the refugee camps, including maternal and child health care. Thus, pregnant and lactating women as well as severely malnourished children from the local community are able to benefit from the comprehensive reproductive health package and services rendered in the refugee camps. Pregnant women from both communities are admitted into the supplementary feeding programme and all mothers delivering low birth-weight babies are admitted into the nutrition programme.

To minimize maternal mortality, deliveries should be attended by trained health personnel. In 66 per cent of refugee camps worldwide, 50 per cent or more of deliveries are attended by skilled health personnel. In the refugee camps in the United Republic of Tanzania, more than 95 per cent of deliveries were assisted by trained personnel in 2004, against 83 per cent in 2003. This very high percentage is a result of the awareness-raising campaign conducted by community health workers and traditional birth attendants, who have encouraged women to deliver at the dispensaries.

The return of Eritrean refugees from Sudan has called for improved health services in areas of return. Over the last three years, UNHCR has furnished and equipped a number of health stations improving access to services for over 60,000 returnees and 450,000 local residents. This effort has been followed up by capacity building of the Ministry of Health in terms of recruitment and training of personnel.

#### *Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*

The UNHCR Strategic Plan for Refugees, HIV and AIDS (2005-2007) states UNHCR objectives and key strategies based on UNHCR policies, lessons learned and technical guidance from UNAIDS, and the Interagency Standing Committee guidelines on HIV/AIDS in emergencies. For HIV/AIDS responses to be effective, it is fundamental to develop multi-sectoral and multi-partner approaches. The HIV/AIDS programmes apply a human rights-based approach, ensuring that refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR live in dignity and free from discrimination. The key objective of these HIV/AIDS programmes are to reduce HIV transmission and to improve treatment and care for people living with HIV/AIDS, by improving planning and reinforcing surveillance, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes.

It is often assumed that refugee communities have higher HIV/AIDS prevalence rates than their non-refugee neighbours. Recent studies show, however, that in some AIDS-stricken countries refugees have lower prevalence rates than the surrounding populations. These studies also recommend that refugees should always be included in host countries' efforts to fight AIDS, not least because refugees and their host communities always interact to some degree. Much remains to be done, however. Of the 29 countries in Africa that host more than 10,000 refugees, only 10 have outlined activities for refugees in their National Strategic Plans. It is important to note that the same principles should apply post-repatriation. HIV/AIDS policies and programmes need to be directed towards all persons in areas of return, and not solely for returnees, in order to maximize their impact, but also in order to avoid stigma and discrimination against former refugees.



This approach has been taken in the Great Lakes region, where refugees, returnees and host communities stand to benefit from improved HIV prevention and AIDS treatment programmes under a new World Bank grant for the Great Lakes Initiative on HIV/AIDS (GLIA). In March 2005, the World Bank approved a USD 20 million grant to help Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda to step up the fight against HIV/AIDS. The programmes are a joint effort by the World Bank, the UNAIDS Secretariat, UNHCR and the governments in the region through their national AIDS programmes. Programmes for refugees, returnees and surrounding communities will receive funding from this grant over the next four years. The funds will help tackle the problem from a cross-border perspective, ensuring continuity of care when refugees return home, and also ensuring that the HIV-prevention skills that refugees have acquired in countries of asylum will benefit their communities of origin upon return.

To improve the malaria control in refugee settings, the Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta (CDC) is providing technical support for UNHCR to develop a multi-year strategic plan to combat malaria. The plan takes a community-based approach focusing on prompt treatment, the procurement and distribution of long-lasting insecticidal nets to populations at risk of malaria, to ensure adequate quantities of antimalarial drugs and diagnostic tests and monitoring and evaluation of data.

#### *Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability*

UNHCR's Environmental Guidelines stipulate that refugee-related environmental problems and measures require action by a number of parties. Local actors include host governments at the national and local levels, refugees themselves, local communities and local NGOs. International bodies involved include UNHCR, other UN agencies, international NGOs, and multilateral and bilateral development agencies. Whereas the host government should take the leading role, UNHCR often assumes a co-leading role to ensure the establishment of linkages with other UN agencies, NGOs and donors, with a view to promoting the integration of refugee-related environmental concerns into their policies, programmes and projects. The Guidelines furthermore recommend that rehabilitation of refugee-affected areas could, with the agreement of beneficiary governments, be covered by bilateral development funding.

In refugee camp settings it takes a consistent and comprehensive effort to keep the water supply safe and clean. Furthermore, it is important to make some of the services available to the local communities so as to prevent potential conflict. In eastern Ethiopia, water supply is being improved in a refugee-hosting area regularly devastated by drought. A sustainable water distribution system will be bringing water to the local Ethiopian population as well as to Somali refugees. Together with a new well field, the water system has developed the region's groundwater potential, which will serve as a lasting positive legacy long after the refugee problem is resolved.

UNHCR also provides water and sanitation facilities for returning refugees within the context of voluntary repatriation operations, both *en route* and upon return to areas of origin. Presently, hundreds of thousands of returning Afghans and their local communities are benefiting from the construction of water points. In 2004 alone, 3,500 water points were constructed. Likewise in South Sudan, water is one of the key areas for rehabilitation in anticipation of the return of some 500,000 refugees and an estimated 4 million displaced people. Boreholes are being rehabilitated in the main areas of return to lay the ground for sustainable return and reintegration.

When refugees leave camps in which they may have lived for decades, there is a need to rehabilitate the affected areas and to sustain the investments and services that should continue to benefit the remaining refugees and the local population. The Sustainable Options for Livelihood Security in Eastern Sudan (SOLSES) programme is a tailored response to the rehabilitation needs of refugee-impacted areas, after nearly four decades of refugee presence. At the height of the refugee operation in 1985, more than 1.1 million refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia were receiving assistance from UNHCR and others. The people who benefit from this programme are mainly Sudanese nationals, but there will also be refugees who opt not to return to either country. The SOLSES programme responds directly to the expressed needs of Sudanese communities and authorities. International agencies collaborating in this effort include UNICEF, UN-HABITAT, GTZ International Services, IUCN-World Conservation Union and GOAL Ireland, while representative line ministries and national NGOs also play an important role. Activities in the environment sector include reforestation of degraded woodlands, benefiting approximately 70,000 local residents. In the water and sanitation sector, the SOLSES programme includes the rehabilitation of water systems in and around refugee camps, so that the withdrawal of refugee-related water supply does not jeopardize the Sudanese population.

Similarly, in Nepal, a rehabilitation programme covering 13 village development committees was implemented from 1994-2000. The programme included forestry management, construction of water supply and sanitation facilities, health posts, schools, access roads and other community facilities. The programme has proved to be useful not only to build confidence among the host population, but also as a vehicle for instituting development activities in the refugee hosting communities, which would otherwise not have been made available to the population of these areas.