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BACKGROUND PAPER

Session title: Building resilience: programming strength for the future

Date: Thursday, June 16, 2016

Time/Room: 10:30 – 12:45/Room 3

The notion of resilience emphasizes that despite exposure to severe adversity, stress and turmoil, such as war, mass casualty, violence, or political oppression—often the bases for which refugees are forced to flee their homes—individuals and communities can demonstrate positive adaptation and a strong capacity to recover and even thrive (Luthar, 2007).

The positive adaptation process that characterizes resilience has often been described as an individual trait (i.e. he/she 'is resilient') based on intrinsic temperament, personality, cognitive skills or genetic predisposition. However, current research, theory and, increasingly, practice recognizes the interplay between both the capacity of individuals, and the capacity of their social and physical ecologies to facilitate their coping in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2011). For refugee youth, these social and physical ecologies are often weakened, fragmented or destroyed as a result of natural disaster or conflict; the latter and its consequences often representing the source of significant threat and severe adversity.

Inherent in the refugee experience is often distress associated with loss of home, disrupted educational or professional plans, unstable legal status, detention, dangerous journeys, family separation, lack of income or housing, dependence on aid, and harassment or rejection from the host community. The effects of these experiences can surface in complex manners. The impacts of psychological trauma can be debilitating and lead individuals impacted by violence, conflict, and oppression to struggle with physical, psychological symptoms that may impair basic functioning. A strengths-based or resilience-focused approach to recovery—that considers the individual as a part of a larger support system of family and community, not in isolation—can help individuals transforming such experiences into personal growth and understanding. Such efforts are underway, including integration of a resilience-focused approach within NGO and UNHCR programming with adolescents and youth.

Social and physical ecologies are important to facilitate young people accessing the capitals (resources) they need to buffer the impact of psychological stress. These capitals (resources) are often grouped into the following categories:

- Social Capital – relationships with friends and caregivers, feelings of trust, cultural embeddedness;
- Human Capital – the ability to learn, play and work;
- Financial/Institutional Capital – social welfare programs, healthcare services, specialized educational or mentoring programs); and
- Environmental Capital – land, water, biological diversity (natural) and safe housing, recreational facilities, and schools (built).

Adequate access to, and the application of, the capitals described above are critical to the dynamic process of positive adaptation needed for adolescents and youth to overcome severe adversity and transition into a peaceful and productive adult.

Based on the description of resilience provided above, and the importance of accessing social, human, financial/institutional, and environmental capitals, the following considerations should inform the design of programming aimed at building resilience among adolescent and youth refugees. First, programs should be designed and implemented in a way that builds, and never erodes, supportive community and social connections between refugees as well as with host communities. Second, advocacy efforts and programming should pursue policies and activities that give young refugees opportunities to learn, play and work as they are in "transition" awaiting a durable solution (return, local integration, resettlement). This includes engaging adolescents and youth to understand their individual and collective educational and work aspirations, and aligning opportunities to those aspirations while making them age and sex appropriate, accessible according to their availability, and meaningful in terms of practical knowledge and skills that can be applied in the short- and mid-term. Third, programs should coordinate access to financial and institutional services such as social safety nets, mentoring and healthcare. Finally, programs should ensure access to a safe built environment to minimize threats to personal safety; including in situations where a large number of refugees are living in host communities.

The above considerations should be pursued through a commitment to consult with and actively engage youth refugees in programming aimed at building their resilience. As reinforced through the recent Global Refugee Youth Consultation (GYRC), young refugees are forward facing, they have hopes and aspirations for their futures and they seek partners in achieving them. As resilience increases among young refugees, their agency and pursuit of self-determination will increase, and our work as the humanitarian community is to facilitate actualization of that potential through active engagement and support.