



Listening to Refugee Voices

Policy development and planning *for* refugees must be done first and foremost *with* refugees, by listening to their needs and concerns, and building all protection and assistance activities around them. Ideally men and women, adults and children, and any persons of different backgrounds and with different needs should be equally involved. Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) is a strategy to promote gender equality and the rights of all persons of concern. AGDM also calls for targeted actions to address identified inequalities and protection gaps, and empower those who are discriminated.

What is Participatory Assessment?

To support this commitment to AGDM, UNHCR has developed a methodology for regular Participatory Assessments. During such assessments Multi-Functional Teams visit refugee camps, reception centres, detention facilities and private homes to talk to persons of concern to UNHCR: asylum-seekers, refugees and persons with other forms of protection.

Using an AGDM approach, individuals are grouped according to their gender, age, cultural background and legal status, and interviewed either in assemblies or individually. During these interviews, problems and concerns are raised, and the facilitators ask the asylum-seekers and refugees to propose solutions.

While interviewees talk about their personal concerns from a subjective point of view, the large number of interviews conducted allows us to form a general picture and discern trends from the compilation of individual stories.

What is a Multi-Functional Team?

Multi-Functional Teams are formed by representatives of host governments, UNHCR, NGO partners and sometimes other UN Agencies in order to carry out Participatory Assessments. Such teams should be composed of male and female staff with a variety of professional backgrounds to make sure that the information collated is interpreted from different angles. Multi-Functional Teams conduct the interviews with persons of concern, and compile their statements. They analyse the information, identify protection risks, and propose solutions.

How does AGDM improve the lives of refugees?

Sometimes it does not take much to improve the living conditions of asylum-seekers and refugees or protection provisions, and some of the issues have proven to be easy to address, such as complaints about food which does not take into consideration cultural, religious or special needs. Other improvements include a change in the behaviour of staff and security guards in reception centers, or better regulated access to Internet. Children have also voiced their wishes for learning support, toys, playgrounds and sports facilities. These changes, though small, have had a positive effect on the overall atmosphere in refugee facilities.

In many countries, AGDM Participatory Assessments have resulted in more substantial protection improvements:

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| Bulgaria | The government has conducted several nationwide awareness campaigns to combat xenophobia and create a more welcoming environment for refugees. |
| Czech Republic | Legislation is being changed in order to make it easier for elderly refugees to benefit from state retirement plans. |
| Ireland | A survey of refugees has identified four priority areas in the integration process, which have then been incorporated in the Ministry of State for Integration Adult Refugee Programme. |
| Poland | In only five years, Poland has moved from the lowest school enrolment of asylum-seeking children in Central Europe to a textbook example of educational support. |
| Slovakia | Access of asylum-seekers to the labour market has improved through language and vocational training and the proactive support of employment agencies. |