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The cost of living: an analysis of the time and money spent by refugees accessing services in Nairobi

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Introduction

The primary goal of providing assistance to refugees is to stabilize their lives, but a critical component of stability – livelihoods – is indirectly and inadvertently undermined by a service delivery system that requires refugees to spend an excessive amount of time and money getting to the offered assistance, particularly in urban settings. Refugees are left with less time to seek employment or earn an informal income, and a small but noticeable percentage of the money they do manage to earn must be spent to access services. For refugees caught in this cycle, rather than working to achieve their independence, they are working just to maintain their dependence.

UNHCR and NGOs often think of refugees only in terms of outputs,¹ regardless of the inputs refugees must make to obtain the help being given. It is a protection model that conceives of refugees as passive recipients rather than active participants in the assistance transaction. Refugees are rarely “involved in any meaningful way in discussions about the best use of resources, or about effective modes of assistance delivery.”²

Yet, despite the tendency of agencies to overlook refugees’ opinions about the best ways to administer assistance, many observers have noted refugees’ complaints that the cost of transportation in Nairobi can make it difficult for them to access UNHCR and NGOs. A report on a 2010 participatory assessment in Nairobi noted that “the transport costs for many refugees to travel to UNHCR are very high.”³ Similarly, in its 2011 headquarters review of its urban policy in Nairobi, UNHCR acknowledged that traveling to its office in Nairobi “can be a complex, time-consuming, and expensive undertaking” for many refugees and that some refugees simply “cannot afford repeated visits to the UNHCR office.”⁴ The same is no less true for refugees who travel to NGOs to access services.

The principal aim of this paper is to quantify the time and money a typical refugee family must spend in order to access the services they need to survive and to frame those figures in relation to the family’s potential income and actual expenses. The paper focuses on Nairobi, where the NGO RefugePoint has its primary overseas presence.

A shifting background

The costliest step, in terms of both time and money, towards accessing services is registering for refugee status and acquiring legal documentation. Identification is critical for refugees seeking to stabilize their lives, helping them avoid arbitrary arrest and detention and other forms of abuse and harassment while at the same time facilitating access to livelihoods, healthcare, schools, and other services.⁵ Any delay in the process is an expensive and serious protection concern for refugees who must continue to spend time and money to obtain documentation and continue living without it in the meantime.⁶ “The importance of

¹Landau 2006

²DeVriese 2006

³UNHCR 2010

⁴Campbell et al. 2011

⁵Ibid.

⁶For a slightly alternative viewpoint – that ‘receiving refugee status...does not have a strong effect on welfare or security’ – see Landau 2011.

documents increases the significance of the agency responsible for issuing them,”⁷ and it also increases the costs refugees are willing to incur to get them.

Until recently, recognized refugees in Nairobi received a mandate certificate from UNHCR, commonly referred to simply as a mandate, though it is in the process of being replaced by the government of Kenya’s refugee certificate. Previously, asylum-seekers arriving in Nairobi were required to register directly with UNHCR. After registration, refugees were called back for a series of refugee status determination appointments, including interviews, photographs, and fingerprinting.

Due to a chronic lack of resources and a large number of new arrivals⁸, refugees often waited many months between appointments. Even then, many appointments were postponed, and refugees went home without advancing their applications⁹. At the end of the process, which for some applicants came years after the original application, individuals granted refugee status were given a mandate certificate, their primary form of identification in Kenya.

Under a new system, asylum-seekers must first register with the Kenyan government. The middle part of the process – the refugee status determination appointments – remains the same and is still administered by UNHCR. However, the final product for recognized refugees is soon to be a refugee certificate from the Kenyan government, not a mandate certificate from UNHCR.

Currently, very few refugees have the government’s refugee certificate, while most still have UNHCR’s mandate certificate. Consequently, very few respondents were able to relate any information other than what they have heard about the new process of getting a refugee certificate from the government of Kenya, while almost all respondents were able to describe in detail their experience getting a mandate certificate from UNHCR. Therefore, when referring to the cost of obtaining documentation, this paper focuses on the familiar process of obtaining a mandate certificate, though it would appear the new system will be no less costly.

Methodology

Potential respondents were identified at random from a list of all of RefugePoint’s clients, active and historical. Because where a refugee lives in Nairobi strongly affects the cost of accessing services from UNHCR and NGOs, whose offices are clustered in the Westlands and Hurlingham areas of the city, the list was sorted by location prior to contacting respondents, and the number of interviews scheduled for each location was proportionate to the number of refugees on the list actually living in that location.

The result is that the data should be strongest for the areas of Nairobi where the greatest percentage of refugees lives. Once sorted, an online random number generator was used to determine which respondents in each area were contacted for interviews.

⁷Jacobsen 2006

⁸10,068 refugees from 16 countries registered in Nairobi during the first 9 months of 2011 alone. As of the end of September 2011, there were 45,589 registered refugees in Nairobi, with an additional 8,210 asylum seekers pending a decision. See UNHCR 2011.

⁹For a fuller examination of refugees’ “grievances” with UNHCR’s mandate process, see Campbell et al. 2011.

In the end, 76 households representing 504 refugees were interviewed.¹⁰ They live in following general areas of Nairobi, by percentage of households: Eastleigh (37%), Kayole (21%), Kasarani (18%), Kawangware (9%), Kitengela (5%), Hurlingham (4%), Kangemi (4%), and the Central Business District (1%).¹¹ The average household size was 6.5 people, on an average of 2.3 mandates per household.

These figures do not exactly reflect the distribution of where RefugePoint's clients actually live, primarily because refugees living in certain areas were more likely to not show up for scheduled interviews than refugees living in other areas. For example, 6 of the 35 families who agreed to be interviewed in the Eastleigh area of town did not answer their phones at the actual time of the scheduled interview, whereas all 4 of the families scheduled in Kitengela were interviewed. This had the effect of diminishing the proportion of interviews conducted in Eastleigh while exaggerating the proportion in Kitengela.

Timing was likely the reason for the skew. The interviews were conducted during the three weeks immediately after the Kenyan military invaded Somalia, in October and November of 2011. Many Somali refugees, who tend to live in the Eastleigh area of the city, expressed heightened fear and suspicion. Congolese, who are more likely to live in Kitengela, did not voice any additional strain.

The nationality of respondents was not taken into account when planning the distribution of interviews. This means that the results do not consider any additional costs that refugees of some nationalities may have to pay if for any reason they tend to travel to UNHCR and NGOs more often than refugees of other nationalities. By focusing on the location where a refugee family chooses to live, the results objectively reflect the direct relationship between where a refugee family lives and what it costs them to access services.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the amount of time and money it costs them to: obtain their first mandate certificates; obtain their most recent mandate renewal; complete any other mandate applications, such as merging two mandates into one (a process known as family reunification) or adding a newborn baby; access other UNHCR services; and access NGOs services. Costs were defined as the price of round trip travel by public transportation (except for a small minority of respondents who travel by taxi) from the respondent's home to UNHCR or the NGO and back.

Most respondents claimed that when visiting UNHCR, which is often overwhelmed by the number clients it must see in a day, they are required to report early in the morning and usually are not able to leave until late in the afternoon. On the other hand, when visiting NGOs, which generally have far fewer clients to attend to, they usually do not stay long and are able to return home much faster. For this reason and for the purposes of simple, consistent math, each trip to UNHCR was calculated to take one full day, whereas each trip to an NGO was calculated to take half of one day.

For all questions except those pertaining to original mandate applications, only information from 2010 and 2011 was gathered. Because the interviews were conducted at the end of 2011, and because mandates in Nairobi expire after two years, the timeframe considered by the questions included respondents' most recent mandate renewal. Focusing on only the most

¹⁰The data from an additional 1 household of 5 refugees was discarded as an outlier.

¹¹Figures do not equal 100% due to rounding.

recent two years also reduced concerns that respondents would have a difficult time accurately remembering older information.

Not every member of the household must travel each time a family visits UNHCR or an NGO, so respondents were asked about the number of paying travelers on each visit. In addition to being critical for determining the exact cost of each trip, this number was also used as a proxy for the number of ‘adult days’ worth of work the family sacrificed each time a trip was made to UNHCR or an NGO.

Many respondents also claimed that their children struggle to make it through a day of waiting at UNHCR without food (and less often at NGOs, where refugees tend not to wait as long to be seen), so parents feel compelled to purchase a small snack for them. Given that UNHCR and most NGOs are located in nicer parts of Nairobi, even street food generally costs significantly more than it does in the areas where refugees tend to live. For that reason, respondents were also asked about this expense when calculating the cost of a visit to UNHCR or an NGO.

Additionally, respondents were asked a series of questions about their typical income and expenses in order to compare the time and money they spend accessing services with how much money they could have earned had they been free to work those days and what the spent money could have purchased had they not needed to use it on travel.

An unavoidable and unfortunate irony of the interview process was that many respondents had to skip at least a few hours of work to be interviewed, and many also had to spend extra money to travel back from a worksite. Most interviews were conducted in the respondents’ homes, and many times they turned on lights just for the duration of the interview, using costly electricity. Interviews were scheduled and coordinated by telephone, requiring respondents to use their prepaid airtime minutes. To answer questions about spending time and money accessing services, they had to spend their time and money. The process reinforced the sacrifices that refugees make to accommodate the agencies that are assisting them.

Finally, a small number of informal meetings were held with representatives from UNHCR and several NGOs in order to clarify and corroborate the background information provided by refugee respondents and to solicit recommendations for improvement from informed practitioners.

The quantifiable costs of accessing services

On average, it takes 7.6 visits to UNHCR over the course of 13 months to obtain one new mandate certificate, a necessary first step to accessing most of the services available to refugees in Nairobi. At an average of 2.3 mandates per household, it takes a typical household 16.8 visits to obtain all of its mandates, and 33.2 adult days are spent on these visits. Ignoring location, the approximate travel costs of obtaining one mandate is 2,800 Kenyan shillings (about \$28 USD at the time of interviews). Again, at an average of 2.3 mandates per household, it costs the average respondent’s household 6,100 Kenyan shillings (\$61 USD) to obtain original mandates for everyone in the household.

In 2010-2011, the average respondent’s household visited UNHCR 9.1 times for all mandate-related activities, including original applications, renewal applications, and other mandate

applications, at a total cost of 3,100 Kenyan shillings (\$31 USD) and 15.3 adult days. Also, in 2010-2011, the average respondent's household visited UNHCR 4.3 times to seek assistance beyond their various mandate applications, at an average cost of 1,400 Kenyan shillings (\$14 USD) and 5.8 adult days. Adding together the cost of seeking assistance from UNHCR and the cost of obtaining and maintaining a mandate, the average family visited UNHCR 13.4 times in 2010-2011 at a cost of 4,500 Kenyan shillings (\$45 USD) and 21.1 adult days.

During the same time period, the average respondent's household made 23.2 visits to 1.7 different NGOs, at a cost of nearly 4,000 Kenyan shillings (\$40 USD) and 13.7 adult days, though because all respondents were either current or past clients of RefugePoint the results most likely reflect a subset of the population with a greater tendency to visit NGOs than the overall refugee population in Nairobi. Combined with the costs associated with visiting UNHCR, in 2010-2011 the average respondent's family made 36.6 trips to UNHCR and NGOs at a cost of 34.8 adult days and nearly 8,500 Kenyan shillings (\$85 USD).

Beyond mandate applications, respondents gave the following reasons for seeking assistance from UNHCR, by percentage of visits for each reason: medical (32%), seeking resettlement (25%), protection (17%), food (11%), education (9%), and rent (5%). Refugees give slightly different reasons for visiting NGOs: medical (29%), food (28%), education (13%), protection (10%), seeking resettlement (10%), rent (6%), psychosocial counseling (3%), and livelihoods (2%)¹².

Medical care is the most common reason for seeking assistance, whether from UNHCR or from NGOs. However, the second and third most common reasons for seeking assistance from NGOs are food and education, whereas from UNHCR they are seeking resettlement and protection, suggesting that refugees see UNHCR as a better source of legal assistance and NGOs as a better source of material assistance. Similarly, some NGO staff reported that many refugees have the perception that only UNHCR is capable of providing certain services, in particular services related to security.

The cost of visiting UNHCR and NGOs varies greatly by location. Residents of areas of Nairobi relatively near Westlands and Hurlingham pay as little as 40 Kenyan shillings (\$.40 USD) per person for round trip travel, and some are even able to walk. Round trip travel from areas where refugees more commonly live, such as Eastleigh, costs anywhere from 150-200 Kenyan shillings (\$1.50-2.00 USD) per person. Residents of Kitengela (which can be considered an exurb of Nairobi) pay approximately 300 (\$3 USD) Kenyan shillings per person per round trip.

The average respondent's household has a total monthly income of about 12,500 Kenyan shillings (\$125 USD) and total monthly expenses of almost 14,000 Kenyan shillings (\$140 USD). Most families explained any shortfall between income and expenses by saying they typically have unpaid debts, and indeed the average respondent's household borrows about 1,000 Kenyan shillings (\$10 USD) each month, typically from friends and neighbors. The average respondent's household also receives approximately 3,000 Kenyan shillings (\$30 USD) in gifts each month, whether from friends and neighbors, local churches or mosques, or in the form of remittances from family and friends outside of Kenya. The rest of the average respondent's household income is from work, approximately 8,000 Kenyan shillings (\$80 USD) per month.

¹²For both sets of percentages, figures do not equal 100% due to rounding.

The average respondent's household spends 30 days working per month; that this number so exactly matches the number of days in a month is coincidental, as most households included more than one worker. The average daily wage is 273 Kenyan shillings (\$2.73 USD). Multiplied by the number of adult days that the average respondent's household spent visiting UNHCR and NGOs in 2010-2011, the average household lost as much as 9,500 Kenyan shillings (\$95 USD) worth of wages seeking assistance during the past two years.

The largest single monthly expense is food, which costs the average respondent's household nearly 7,000 Kenyan shillings (\$70 USD) per month. Rent costs on average 4,500 Kenyan shillings (\$45 USD) per month. Lesser expenses include cooking fuel, electricity, water, education, clothing, and other incidental expenses, each of which costs the average respondent's family between 200 and 1,000 Kenyan shillings (\$2-10 USD) each month.

Therefore, by comparing the amount of money spent traveling to and from UNHCR and NGOs to average monthly expenses, it can be said that in the past two years the average respondent's household spent more than a month's worth of food accessing services. Similarly, by comparing the number of adult days spent visiting UNHCR and NGOs to average daily income and average monthly expenses, it can be stated that for the sake of accessing services the average household sacrificed potential earnings worth more than 2 months of rent.

Qualitative findings

Though on average households traveled to NGOs more often than to UNHCR in the past two years, respondents generally voiced stronger opinions about the mandate process than any other type of interaction that they have with either UNHCR or NGOs. Their opinions ranged from criticism – “it's a big problem” – to fatalism – “how can I oppose?” – to appreciation – “it's not a problem because it's worth it to have the documents to survive in Kenya.”

Almost all respondents, however, stated a desire for the process to be streamlined so that fewer family members would have to travel to UNHCR less often. At the same time, respondents asked that NGOs communicate more accurately and honestly regarding the services that are available, rather than referring refugees from one agency to another without actually providing any assistance.

Raising funds to pay travel costs

Small, short term loans are the most common method refugees use to overcome a lack of money to pay for transportation. Numerous respondents stated that “you have to borrow money to go to UNHCR,” and indeed, one respondent stated the refugees incur debt “mostly to go to UNHCR.” He continued to say, “To respect their appointments, you borrow money. Otherwise, you will be given a later appointment.” Many respondents have also borrowed money to visit NGOs, though less often than UNCHR because refugees generally have more control over when to travel to NGOs and can sometimes wait until it is affordable.

Unfortunately, for a refugee the cost of borrowing money can often be usurious. One woman who borrowed 1,000 Kenyan shillings (\$10 USD) from a local Kenyan businessman is paying 300 Kenyan shillings (\$3 USD) each month until she fully repays the loan. Two months after taking the loan, she had repaid 500 Kenyan shillings (\$5 USD), yet she had

incurred 600 Kenyan shillings (\$6 USD) in fees, leaving her 1,100 (\$11) Kenyan shillings in debt.

Other refugees cannot get credit at all, typically because as refugees they lack the documentation that lenders often require. It is a conundrum for refugees who cannot access credit without a mandate but cannot get a mandate without access to credit. Some refugees beg instead of borrow in order to get money for transportation. “The only reason I have to beg is to get the fare to go to UNHCR, sometimes as often as 2-3 times per month. UNHCR is the only place I can get help, but to go there I have to beg.”

Many refugees prefer to skip a day’s worth of food rather than miss an appointment with UNHCR or an NGO. Indeed, many refugees very clearly and instinctively associate transportation and food costs, perhaps because the daily cost of food for the average respondent’s family, about 250 Kenyan shillings (\$2.50 USD), is very similar to what it costs for one or two paying family members to travel across town and back to visit UNHCR or an NGO.

One respondent explained, “The days my kids need food, I work. If we have food, I go for help. I know I can work on the weekend because they are not taking clients.” Numerous refugee families regularly make the same tradeoff, skipping meals to pay for the cost of transportation to access services from UNHCR or an NGO. One respondent admitted that when she needs money for transportation she has to sell some of the food aid she has been given by an NGO. Another respondent inverted the equation, saying that after spending money on transportation she has to borrow more to buy food.

The cost of food is also a dilemma for refugees after they have reached UNHCR’s office, while they are waiting to be called for an appointment. Food in the upscale neighborhood outside of UNHCR’s office is much more expensive than it is in any of the areas of Nairobi where refugees tend to live, so many refugees consider it an extra sacrifice to have to purchase food there. Adults tend to go the whole day without eating, but “when you go with children you incur a lot of expenses because they must have food and water. They can’t resist.”

Poorer refugee families spoke of a social pressure to buy snacks for their children when they are at UNHCR. One respondent said, “Sometimes children cry because they see other children eating and you are obliged to buy something for them.” Some families take food with them and thereby avoid the additional costs associated with buying prepared food outside UNHCR, but other families explained that they have to get up so early in the morning to travel to UNHCR that it is difficult to prepare anything to take with them.

Because visiting NGOs does not take as much time on average as visiting UNHCR, families generally do not have to spend additional money while they are there to buy snacks for their children. On the other hand, most NGOs are located in parts of the city just as expensive as where UNHCR is, so when families do feel compelled to buy food it is no less expensive.

Some respondents were pleased to note that some NGOs have opened satellite offices in parts of the city where refugees tend to live, though so far the services available at the satellite offices have been disappointing, “because staff there are not able to assist as they lack the authority.” Finally, NGOs also sometimes subsidize travel for refugees who cannot afford it, but respondents say subsidies are rare and are given only to refugees who are willing to specifically ask for them.

Alternative travel

For those refugees who cannot use public transportation, it is even more difficult or expensive to travel. A number of respondents cited medical reasons that prevent them from traveling by public buses. One otherwise healthy man was shot in both of his legs in Somalia, an injury that has never been properly treated. He feels severe pain whenever he bends his legs, which he would have to do to fit in one of Nairobi's cramped public buses, so he pays for a taxi when he has to travel. Each round trip from his home to the parts of town where UNHCR and most NGOs are located costs him 2,000 Kenyan shillings (\$20 USD).

The family of a sick, elderly Congolese woman pays the same amount whenever she travels to UNHCR or an NGO, while the family of a young man with a history of violence apparently related to a mental disorder pays even more. A teenage boy and his five younger siblings, who receive 30,000 Kenyan shillings (\$300 USD) each month in remittances, travel by taxi because the boy fears losing his younger siblings if he tried to take them all on public transportation. One family, receiving 50,000 Kenyan shillings (\$500 USD) a month in remittances, takes a taxi simply because they worry about getting lost if they take the wrong bus. All respondents who use a taxi say that much of the total charge is a waiting fee they have to pay the driver to stay to take them home.

Other respondents who cannot take public transportation also cannot afford to hire a taxi, so they walk to and from all of their appointments. One young man walks to UNHCR the evening before an appointment, sleeps outside the compound's gate, and walks back after his appointment that day, avoiding the cost of bus fare by walking in both directions. Typically, families who walk start well before the sun rises in the morning, often as early as 4AM, and they do not return until after dark in the evening, sometimes as late as 9PM.

All mentioned that walking when it is dark is a serious security risk in Nairobi, and several families added that they have been robbed or have had money extorted from them by corrupt police officers when travelling after dark, adding to the cost of accessing services. Even families who can afford to take public transportation have similar concerns, as many try to travel very early in the morning or later in the evening to take advantage of cheaper fares.

One woman says she is too embarrassed to ride in public transportation because for over a year she has been suffering from a vaginal infection that causes her to bleed and involuntarily urinate. Even when she leaves her home as early as 4AM she sometimes fails to arrive at UNHCR before the gates are closed, and the guards refuse to admit her. When she does arrive early enough to be admitted, she does not make it back home in the evening until as late as 9PM. Her mandate expired in July of 2011 and she has traveled to UNHCR six times since then, but because she continues to arrive late she has not yet managed to complete the renewal process.

Many respondents stated they had missed at least one mandate appointment with UNHCR specifically because of lack of money for transportation. In the words of one respondent, "There are days we have to pass our appointment date because we cannot afford the bus fare." Another respondent is aware that his family's mandates are approved, printed, signed, and ready to be picked up, yet he has not returned to get them because he does not have money for the bus fare.

Larger families take turns traveling to UNHCR for mandate appointments, one paying adult going each time the family has the funds to pay for it. As one respondent explained, "We

cannot afford for all of us to go at one time.” Though it strains her financially, one mother reported that when her family must travel together, she buys an independent seat on the bus for her adolescent daughter who is embarrassed to have to sit on her mother’s lap.

Similarly, the most common reason given by respondents for being unable to access services from NGOs is a lack of money for transportation to go and seek assistance. “Because of our problems getting transportation, we cannot afford to go ask for help,” one respondent said. Another respondent specifically stated a need for medical assistance, but he cannot access healthcare “due to the high cost of transportation.” A number of respondents explained that because NGOs tend to be located in parts of town that are far from where refugees live, the bus fares are prohibitively expensive. “The long distance to seek services means high bus fares, so we have to skip seeking services.”

Seeking assistance is ‘like a job’

A number of respondents explicitly said that getting a mandate and seeking assistance is ‘expensive’ and makes it difficult for a household to establish livelihoods and support itself. One used the expression, “Going to UNHCR is like a job.” Another said, “We wake at 5 in the morning to get there on time.” Another added that “when you go to UNHCR, you don’t expect to leave before 4[PM].” A third explained how difficult it is after a long day of traveling and waiting to be called for an appointment to return to home with enough positive energy to take care of her family.

The primary criticism that respondents expressed about the time and money they spend visiting NGOs focused on the low success rate for actually getting assistance. In particular, a number of respondents voiced frustration about being referred back and forth between different NGOs without ever receiving services. “NGOs kept referring me to other NGOs which kept referring me to other NGOs endlessly.” Refugees rarely travel with more money than the minimum they need, so if a visit to one agency results in a referral to another agency, the referred refugee typically does not have the money to go to the second agency the same day. Returning home and traveling again another day costs additional time and money.

One man said he has stopped seeking help from NGOs because it costs too much money and takes too much time. He had calculated that he spends more resources seeking assistance than he actually receives for the effort. The process “makes refugees feel like they are throwing away money they don’t have.” One respondent blamed it on miscommunication, a failure on the part of agencies to explain what assistance they provide and under what circumstances. “There is a breakdown in communication,” he said, “since refugees don’t know what to expect from agencies.”

While it may be difficult to access NGOs initially, respondents generally said that the NGOs providing them assistance are timely and efficient. NGOs tend to keep appointments, allowing refugees to come and go quickly so that instead of losing an entire day they only have to sacrifice a few hours. When visiting NGOs, “I eat at home in the morning, go there, finish everything, and come back quickly.”

Most refugees in Nairobi do not have regular jobs, and they only get paid for the days they actually work, if they find work at all. Whenever they sacrifice a day traveling to UNHCR or an NGO, they do not earn any money. In the words of a respondent speaking about his daughter, who works as a housekeeper, “She has to take days off from work to go and seek

services, and she is only paid for days she works.” Refugees who earn their income in the form of gifts from friends and neighbors are similarly affected by lost income on days they travel to visit UNHCR and NGOs.

One respondent claimed that when he travels to seek assistance he is unable to visit his social support network – here he specified his church and friends – and, “I am likely to be unable to provide food for my family that day.” Numerous respondents reiterated a similar tradeoff between working and traveling to access services. One respondent said it most directly, “Going to access services leads to lost income.” A minority of refugees have regular jobs and get paid by the month, such that they are able to keep their job and get paid even for days when they have to miss work to visit UNHCR or an NGO.

Another respondent has found a creative way to take advantage of all the time that her friends and neighbors must spend visiting UNHCR and NGOs. Her primary source of income comes from substituting for others on the days that they are forced to miss work or abandon businesses that they own in order to visit UNHCR or an NGO. It is not a lucrative business, since she is only paid a wage and not a cut of the profits, but that such a business niche exists highlights how common it is for refugees to be pulled away from their work to pursue assistance.

On the other hand, though seeking assistance can be like a job, respondents recognize that obtaining a mandate can lead to increased livelihood opportunities. Without a mandate, said one respondent, refugees have “no access to employment.” While refugees are not allowed to work in the formal economy in Kenya, with or without a mandate, respondents explained that having one makes it much easier and safer to establish informal ways of earning an income.

For example, a number of respondents explained that selling goods in the market is difficult without a mandate. One said, “I used to sell tea and snacks, but I had to stop due to licensing problems with the city council.” Another explained, “I am unable to get work due to a lack of documents to get a trading license.” Those who try to sell in the market without the necessary permits regularly suffer from police harassment and just as regularly have their merchandise confiscated by city council officials. One respondent said simply, “It’s impossible to get work without a mandate.”

Frustrations with the previous mandate process

UNHCR has continued to make improvements to its mandate system even as it has ceded some its role to the government of Kenya. As of last year, only the adults in a family are required to return to collect mandates, cutting down on costs and allowing children to stay in school. To initiate renewals, refugees are now allowed to drop an application in a box at UNHCR’s office, as opposed to the previous requirement that the entire family had to appear in person.

Yet overall, refugees in Nairobi share such a ubiquitous sense of frustration with how cumbersome the mandate process can be that there appears to be a common lowering of expectations. For example, one respondent stated, “I didn’t go so many times, just 8 times” in 13 months. Another woman, who visited UNHCR 15 times in 12 months to get her mandate, said, “I was lucky.”

Most refugees, however, express exasperation. Some refugees say that the process of obtaining a mandate is so difficult it discourages them from trying. Respondents stated that a lack of information and a feeling of powerlessness are particular sources of anxiety. One said, “Every time I think about going for my mandate it gives me a headache. After fleeing the war I went through, am I really going to die here without identification?”

A small number of respondents have given up on getting a mandate, saying they have become too exasperated to continue trying. For rejected cases, the appeals process can be even more frustrating than the original mandate application. “I can’t imagine going back there after wasting two years just to be rejected.” Some refugees never visit UNHCR for any reason other than to obtain their mandate, not because they do not need additional assistance but because they are too frustrated after the mandate process to want to go back.

One respondent last went to UNHCR in 2006, when she gave up on appealing her rejected mandate application. A single woman from Rwanda, she currently works as a group counselor at a private hospital. Some of her clients are refugees, but most are Kenyan nationals. In many ways, she was the most integrated of all respondents.

The changing status determination process

In the past, asylum-seekers reported directly to UNHCR, after which the entire registration and status determination process was conducted by UNHCR, culminating in the issuance of a mandate certificate to successful applicants. Under the current system, asylum-seekers must first report to the government’s Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) to register and get an appointment letter referring them to UNHCR for status determination and, eventually, a mandate certificate.

In the near future, new asylum-seekers will first report to the DRA to register, then to UNHCR for status determination, then back to DRA to collect a refugee certificate, the government document intended to replace UNHCR’s mandate certificate. Currently, refugees attempting to renew an expired mandate still report directly to UNHCR, while it remains unknown what the validity period of the government’s refugee certificate will be. All of the changes have implications for the amount of time and money refugees must spend to access assistance.

Refugees who have received a mandate certificate from UNHCR currently have the option to return to DRA to collect a government refugee certificate, but few do. An NGO representative explained that the durable solution refugees are most interested in pursuing determines which of the two documents they value most. Refugees hoping for resettlement value the UNHCR mandate certificate most because it is required to be eligible for a resettlement referral. Refugees more interested in establishing stable, self-reliant lives in Nairobi, however, tend to value the government’s refugee certificate more because it provides them with greater security as well as legal access to banking and credit services.

Despite efforts by the government, UNHCR, and NGOs to publicize the shift, most respondents stated they are unaware that the registration system is changing. One who had heard about the change said that refugees are currently hearing more rumors than factual, useful information. “I don’t know why the government is taking over”, she said. “It is like a big secret.” One respondent feared that because the government does not actually provide any

direct services to refugees, the new process will effectively put another barrier between refugees in need and the services they are seeking.

Similarly, many respondents said that despite their complaints about the way UNHCR has managed the status determination process, they prefer working with UNHCR rather than the government. For most, it was not a judgment so much as a very frank observation about the priorities of each entity. One respondent explained simply, “UNHCR exists for refugees, but the government is for the Kenyans.”

Other respondents expressed optimism that the new system will be an improvement over the old one. In particular, some refugees think that a government issued identification document will carry more clout when dealing with other branches of civil society and business, such as the police, the city council, and the banking industry. “Documents from the government help men avoid the police and are also good for getting work and getting a bank account,” said one respondent.

Another respondent noted that unlike UNHCR, the DRA’s office for registration is in an area of town much more accessible for most refugees, making it an easier, less expensive commute when attending appointments. However, respondents observed that if the new system requires visits to both the government and UNHCR, it risks creating an additional layer of bureaucracy in an already cumbersome system, which would require refugees to “waste extra money on transport to fulfill an unnecessary extra step.”

Recommendations from respondents

Many of the refugees who were interviewed volunteered recommendations for ways to improve the process of obtaining documentation and accessing services.

Multiple respondents noted that UNHCR recently has developed the capacity to send mass text messages. While driving to an interview, the cell phones of the two interpreters present, both of whom are refugees, rang simultaneously. They had just received a message alerting them that the UNHCR office was to be closed that Thursday and Friday and the following Monday. Respondents suggested that UNHCR could use the technology to alert refugees when their appointments have been scheduled and when they must be rescheduled.

Respondents also suggested the use of noticeboards, not just at UNHCR’s office but also at secure locations in the areas of the city where most refugees live. This would preclude the need for refugees to travel across town just to find out when they will have to travel back across town for their appointments. Respondents who made this suggestion noted, however, that confidentiality and security could be a concern when posting such information publicly.

One respondent suggested that UNHCR should provide bus fare to refugees who come for a scheduled appointment that in the end is cancelled. In the words of one respondent, “repeated appointments cost a lot of money and are discouraging after waiting for the whole day.” Another suggested that UNHCR should provide snacks and water for small children who have to spend too long at UNHCR’s office. Also, one respondent explicitly requested that NGOs “stop the endless referrals to other agencies.”

Other recommendations

UNHCR and NGO staff made a number of recommendations as well, many of which overlapped in promising ways.

One NGO staff member suggested that simple community outreach could resolve much of the frustration that refugees currently feel about the process of getting mandates. Refugees themselves stated that some of their anxiety comes from the powerlessness of not understanding why appointments are canceled and why the process as a whole can take so long. Effective channels of communication could help to reduce stress among the refugee population, while also streamlining the process by helping inform refugees how to work with the system.

UNHCR staff cited a need to publicize existing services that allow refugees to get case status information without travelling across town. They mentioned that refugees may write to a general email address or telephone the office's radio room, though they also acknowledged security concerns about giving out information through such insecure channels. Similarly, they mentioned that refugees should be made more aware of UNHCR's online system for checking whether mandate certificates are ready to be collected, though they also suggested that improvements need to be made to the system before it is fully operational.

UNHCR and NGO staff alike recommended that, as UNHCR's role in the process of issuing mandate certificates diminishes, it should consider expanding its coordinating role among the NGOs providing direct services to refugees. UNHCR has been increasing its coordinating capacity in Nairobi in recent years, and hopefully resources that are currently dedicated to processing mandates can be redeployed to help capacitate local partners and improve coordinated service delivery. Similarly, UNHCR could refocus its resources on its advocacy efforts with government bureaus such as the police and the city council.

UNHCR and NGO staff nearly unanimously recommended that UNHCR consider outpostting staff to NGO offices in areas of Nairobi that are more accessible to refugees. They acknowledged there would be concerns about managing the increased flow of traffic to these NGO offices as well as ensuring that security systems – both for personnel and for data – are as rigorous as required by UNHCR guidelines.

Some staff pointed out that many of UNHCR's implementing partners already have the required systems in place, though several wondered about the potential technological challenges of activities, like taking fingerprints, that require specialized equipment. UNCHR staff recognized that outsourcing their staff to NGO offices would put them in a better position to screen vulnerable refugees for protection concerns and to make appropriate interventions. Some NGO representatives recommended taking the idea a step further, suggesting that UNHCR should establish one or more sub-offices within Nairobi. Similar recommendations were made in UNHCR's 2011 review of the implementation of its urban refugee policy in Nairobi¹³.

Similarly, some NGO staff recommended that NGOs themselves decentralize their service delivery and provide as much assistance as possible in the communities where refugees live, instead of requiring refugees to travel to NGOs' offices for assistance. While not all services can be separated from an office infrastructure – for example, it can be costly to provide

¹³Campbell et al. 2011

mobile healthcare – some services, like providing food aid and cash for rent, can be delivered directly to refugees’ homes, thus reducing travel costs for the recipients.

Conclusion

When UNHCR and NGOs report on the services they provide to urban refugee families, they understandably report only that which they have given to their clients. They do not attempt to quantify that which their clients must spend to get it. This reporting convention gives the impression that assistance is like a deposit into a refugee family’s overall stock of resources, when in reality a more complex transaction involving a simultaneous withdrawal of resources is being made. Effectively, a percentage of the resources given to a refugee family is nullified by making them deplete other resources to get it.

By quantifying the amount of time and money refugees spend accessing services, UNHCR and NGOs can better understand the ways in which their programs might in practice be impacting a family’s efforts to establish livelihoods and become self-reliant.

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