

REINFORCING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper reflects the evolution in UNHCR's approach to the delivery of its assistance and protection activities. It sets out the broad policy outline of a community development approach in UNHCR's work with refugees and people of concern to UNHCR. This approach seeks to empower refugees and people of concern in shaping their destinies. The community development policy defined in this paper highlights the fact that refugees should be "subjects" in the search for durable solutions and be considered as resourceful and active partners, rather than "objects" or passive recipients of assistance. A draft conclusion endorsing this policy outline is contained in annex for consideration by the Standing Committee.

II. BACKGROUND

2. UNHCR's programmes often tend to focus on individual service delivery to refugees, and omit engaging and building on the capacities of the refugees themselves and their communities. Such an approach limits refugee partnership and participation, and invariably produces dependency; this has proved to be limiting, resource-demanding and too problem-focused.

3. Recently, the Office has moved to place greater emphasis on a community perspective. This is already reflected in UNHCR's programmes in relation to refugee women, gender equality, children/adolescents, the elderly and the environment. A community approach also permeates other initiatives in progress, in particular, the development of the Operations Management System (OMS) and Project Profile which aims to give the Office better information on refugees and their communities.

4. Since 1998, UNHCR together with several key non-governmental organizations mainly working in the community services sector (Community and Family Services, Dutch Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Save the Children Norway/Sweden, International Catholic Migration Commission, Norwegian Refugee Council) have constituted a Working Group which has undertaken a thorough and critical review of services delivered to refugees, analysing how they might profit from a greater emphasis on the dynamics of a community development approach. In the course of its study, the Working Group observed that many of the limitations of these services could be overcome by empowering refugees, treating them as resourceful and active partners in all assistance and protection activities.

5. Refugee communities harbour a wealth of social and cultural traditions, of religious practices, neighbourhood associations, work experiences and of political experience. However, a refugee situation brings with it many dramatic changes in lifestyle, social and economic status, gender roles and in life expectations. As a result of these changes, refugees frequently rely on external agents for the provision of basic needs such as food, shelter, health services, water, etc. While meeting these needs, it remains essential to bear in mind that in any emergency situation, factors such as belonging to a caring family or community and maintaining well-known traditions and culture are equally crucial to sustaining the community.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

6. Set out below are the broad policy outlines for promoting a community development approach in all of UNHCR's activities. The approach represents a synthesis of best practices. It aims at:

- Strengthening refugee's initiative and partnership, resulting in ownership of all phases of programme implementation;
- Reinforcing dignity, self-esteem of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR;
- Achieving a higher degree of self-reliance; and
- Increasing cost effectiveness and sustainability of UNHCR's programmes.

IV. ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

7. Community development promotes a better quality of life based on the initiative and active participation of the entire refugee community. Such participation is fostered through a number of specific techniques: awareness-raising and community mobilization that focuses on and enhances ownership. Training in life skills and raising awareness of AIDS among refugee youth is one example.

A. Planning

8. In planning all relevant activities, UNHCR will ensure that:

- Refugees are the key players in any refugee situation, and should therefore be involved in the planning of services. The refugee community, represented by all groups (women, men, children, the elderly, minorities, etc.) should be actively involved in assessment, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these services.
- A community development approach will be applied from the very early stages of operations, whether an emergency or not, and continue until and including the durable solution phases, such as voluntary repatriation and reintegration.
- Identification and distribution of food and non-food items should be done in consultation with the refugees and people of concern to UNHCR. Distributed items (food items, cooking utensils, school books, sanitary napkins, etc.) should reflect the cultural habits and needs of the refugee communities.

9. Planning must necessarily take account of the specific circumstances of a wide variety of refugee situations.

- In general camp situations facilitate and favour the implementation of the community development approach. UNHCR should encourage the election of female and male representatives using transparent and culturally acceptable procedures. Likewise, UNHCR should develop contacts with all community groups since the risk of manipulation by self-appointed refugee representatives can be obstacle to such procedures.
- Urban refugees are frequently dispersed and isolated in the host population with whom they have no social, cultural or language ties. Living conditions are usually difficult and there may be a lack of leadership and traditional community structures. In these circumstances, the implementation of community-building activities involving all groups of refugees, as well as the host population and authorities, is essential. Activities can include *inter alia* the establishment of community centres, measures to facilitate a dialogue between various groups, as well as those to ensure the availability of relevant information for each refugee group in the appropriate language.
- Voluntary repatriation and reintegration require confidence, skills, and a high degree of community mobilization as essential conditions for the creation of a safe environment and a sense of security. Such longer-term needs must be present when planning the community development approach during exile in order to help prepare the refugees for the challenge of rebuilding their communities and countries upon return.

B. Implementing Activities

10. In implementing programmes, UNHCR promotes the following principles:

- All support and activities should be designed to enable beneficiaries to achieve self-reliance as soon as realistically feasible. Assistance should be provided until the beneficiaries are competent and confident enough to work towards improving their own situations. For example in Angola, a micro credit scheme is enabling female headed households to achieve an improved standard of living and reduced degree of dependence. The project began with training in small business management. An integrated approach was sought to promote empowerment through awareness-raising in the area of reproductive health and literacy.
- Capacity-building should be an integral part of all assistance programmes so that refugees increase their capacity to make informed choices and can initiate and actively influence the contents of programmes. This will result in increased ownership and sustainability of such programmes. There are many examples where this can be implemented: vocational training in practical skills of benefit to the community; the training of community health workers leading to improved sanitation and health; water management schemes in accordance with the customs and perceptions of needs as expressed by the refugees themselves. The "forced exile" may thus be turned into an opportunity to acquire skills, knowledge and good practices.
- Practices which may be new to the refugees such as registration or immunization, should be introduced in a culturally sensitive manner. When traditional practices (e.g. female genital mutilation) among the refugees are in violation of universally recognized human rights, necessary changes must be preceded by awareness-raising activities, education and discussions on the impact of such practices.

- The impact of psycho-social and mental health disorders and their effect on community participation must also be recognized and carefully assessed. In cases of very severe trauma such as endured by refugees from Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone, re-establishing the sense of self and the capacity to play an active role in rebuilding their lives must be supported. In such cases, an assessment needs to be made as to how soon and to what degree this will be feasible.

V. OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

11. It is anticipated that a generalized application of the community development approach will take time and require some adjustments of attitudes within the organization. However, a number of tools – some of them already available - can assist in the process, as outlined below:

A. Commitment and partnership

12. Inter-sectoral and inter-agency coordination and cooperation are key elements in the success of a community development approach. Achieving a uniform approach will also require active support at management level and shared commitment of actors in the various sectors. The Country Operations Plan provides a useful framework to define objectives and strategies for the realization of the community development approach, as well as detailed operational mechanisms for each sector.

B. Training

13. Training at various levels of the organization as well as for implementing partners is another vehicle that can assist in operationalizing this approach. Guidance on relevant training activities has been provided to field offices for this purpose in the form of *Guidelines on the Implementation of Decentralized Staff Development*¹.

14. Two specific learning programmes using UNHCR's recently introduced strategic approach to learning based on key competencies in specific areas, will also provide useful vehicles. They are UNHCR's Operational Learning Programme and Gender Awareness Training. Best practices derived from the community development approach will be integrated into these programmes, aimed at ensuring that a critical mass of staff is effectively sensitized to the community development approach.

C. Monitoring tools

15. Some monitoring tools already exist within UNHCR's operational management system. However, additional monitoring mechanisms are required to allow systematic analysis and sampling of refugees' perception and satisfaction with relevant activities and services. Such tools should facilitate the re-orientation and adjustment of activities that may be required at various operational stages of programmes.

D. Staff

16. To reinforce the cross-sectoral community development approach, community services staff and their partners should continue to work directly with the refugee communities. Moreover their responsibility for inter-agency and inter-sectoral coordination needs to be strengthened, and a direct link established between community services and the management of operations

¹IOM/FOM 02/2001

VI. CONCLUSION

17. The adoption and operationalization of a community development approach to UNHCR's operations should mean not only a more effective use of limited resources, but also, and most importantly, the involvement of refugees and their communities in shaping their future and in their ongoing search for a solution to their plight. The draft conclusion appearing in annex, for consideration by the Standing Committee, is based on this goal.

DRAFT CONCLUSION

The Standing Committee,

Welcomes the policy outline contained in EC/51/SC/CRP.6 aimed at reinforcing a community development approach in addressing needs, in partnership with those of concern to the Office;

Endorses the objectives and essential elements of this approach with respect to its planning and implementation;

Requests UNHCR to proceed further in its efforts to operationalize this policy approach in all of its activities, and ensure its promotion among its implementing partners.