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Mind the gap! UNHCR, humanitarian assistance and the development process

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Introduction

Anyone who has used London's underground railway system will be familiar with the warning to "mind the gap" which is broadcast across the platform when passengers are preparing to board or alight from a train. The same phrase provides an apposite title for a review of UNHCR's efforts to link humanitarian assistance with the development process in less prosperous regions of the world. For the discourse on this issue has been dominated by references to the different gaps - institutional, financial and conceptual - that have obstructed the organization's efforts in this domain over the past four decades.

This article provides a review of those efforts, looking initially at UNHCR's involvement with the 'refugee aid and development' initiative of the 1970s and 1980s, and subsequently at the organization's 'returnee aid and development' activities in the 1990s. The article concludes with some reflections on the 'Brookings process', UNHCR's most recent attempt to address the elusive relationship between humanitarian assistance and the development process.¹

Early approaches to refugee settlement

In the early years of the UNHCR, when the majority of the world's refugees were to be found in the industrialized countries, refugees and development were perceived as two distinct issues, with relatively little bearing upon each other. The geographical limitation of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which restricted the refugee definition to people displaced as a result of events occurring in Europe, as well as the decision to exclude the Palestinian refugee population from the mandate of UNHCR, merely served to reinforce the notion that refugee questions were primarily a concern of the world's more prosperous regions. At this time, moreover, the very concept of development was still in its infancy, and did not even feature in the UN Charter.

While development issues were soon to assume a more prominent place on the international agenda, the institutional arrangements of the United Nations and its member states served to separate those issues from the question of refugee assistance. The clear division of labour between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Development Program (established in 1966) was replicated in many donor states. Thus in the USA, for example, refugee relief was entrusted to the State Department's Bureau for Refugee Programs, while a separate entity, USAID, was given responsibility for development assistance.

Notwithstanding these bureaucratic boundaries, the intimate nature of the relationship between displacement and development became increasingly clear in the late 1960s, when UNHCR and its operational partners began for the first time to launch large-scale refugee relief programmes in Africa and other low-income regions of the world. These programmes generally conformed to a standard settlement model. As Barbara Harrell-Bond observed in *Imposing Aid*, her seminal critique of refugee assistance programmes:

¹ This paper was originally prepared for a Center for Migration Studies conference in New York on 'UNHCR at 50', and is to appear in a special conference issue of the *International Migration Review*.

There are three stages to the settlement programme. First, refugees are given relief aid and transported to camps, to inhabit houses built for them or which they are expected to build for themselves. During the second stage they are provided with and, tools and seeds, and primary education is organized. During this period refugees are expected to be motivated to work and get on their own feet quickly, by being told that there will be a gradual reduction in their food rations after the first harvest. In the third stage, aid is withdrawn, on the grounds that the refugees should by then be 'self-sufficient' and 'integrated' into the local community. (Harrell-Bond, 1985: 10)

With international expenditure on refugees steadily growing, it did not take long for the obvious question to be posed: why not use the assistance provided to settlements in poor countries as a basis for development activities that would bring long-term benefits to both the refugees and the local population? Thus by the mid-1960s, international organizations and governments in Africa had begun to think in terms of an 'integrated zonal development approach' to refugee assistance which incorporated this principle. In practice, however, few efforts were made to implement this approach, and those which were undertaken did not meet with great success. As a result, and in the words of Robert Gorman, "the zonal development concept languished in relative obscurity for over a decade." (Gorman, 1987: 14).²

As the 1970s progressed and the global refugee population grew (from 2.4 million in 1975 to 4.6 million at the end of the decade) the limitations of the international community's established approach to refugee assistance and settlement began to attract renewed attention, particularly in Africa. For instead of becoming self-sufficient, many refugee camps and their inhabitants continued to rely upon international assistance.

By the end of the 1970s, the states most directly concerned with the refugee problem in developing regions were beginning to consider the need for alternative models of assistance. Countries of asylum, many of them affected by the related ills of political instability, the global recession and economic mismanagement, stressed the need for 'international burden sharing', so that they could cope with the adverse impact of refugees on their economy, environment and infrastructure. Donor states, many of whom were keen to limit their overseas aid expenditure, were becoming increasingly reluctant to devote their resources to open-ended 'care and maintenance' programmes for refugees in low-income countries.

The international community's response to this situation, formulated in a series of meetings during the late 1970s and early 1980s, became known as the 'refugee aid and development' strategy. In contrast to the established model of refugee relief, this approach stipulated that assistance should be development-oriented from the outset, and thereby enable beneficiaries to move quickly towards self-sufficiency. Rather than focusing specifically on refugee camps and communities, the new strategy also emphasized the need for a focus on refugee-populated areas. International assistance, it was agreed, should be used not to provide open-ended relief but to promote sustainable

² For a more detailed account of the zonal development approach and its demise, see Kibreab, 1983: 123-140. Neither Gorman nor Kibreab provide a complete explanation as to why this approach was discarded so readily.

development. And both refugees and the local population should benefit from that process.

Several different types of activity were envisaged under the refugee aid and development rubric. These included, for example, projects to provide agricultural, wage-earning and income-generating opportunities to both refugees and local people; initiatives to strengthen the physical and social infrastructure in areas where large numbers of refugees had settled; and new efforts to combat the environmental degradation damage resulting from the long-term presence of large-scale refugee populations.

The refugee aid and development approach was an ambitious one, not only in aims, but also in its envisaged scale. Thus at the Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa ('ICARA II'), held in 1984, 128 different refugee aid and development project proposals in Africa were presented to the donor community. The total amount requested for these projects amounted to some US\$362 million - an average of just under US\$3 million per project and almost as much as UNHCR's total global expenditure the previous year, which had amounted to \$397 million.

In intellectual, institutional and economic terms, the refugee aid and development approach appeared to make a great deal of sense. It met the concerns of both host and donor states. It promised to bring tangible benefits to refugees and local populations alike. It represented a far more cost-effective use of resources than the maintenance of extended refugee relief programmes. It provided UNHCR with the opportunity to launch a high-profile international initiative. And it offered an opportunity to bridge the longstanding gap between those organizations concerned with refugee relief and those mandated to promote development.

In a limited number of cases, such expectations were at least partially fulfilled. During the early 1980s, for example, more than three million Afghan refugees crossed the frontier into Pakistan, imposing a heavy strain on the fragile economy, ecology and infrastructure of the country's border regions. In an attempt to mitigate such problems, to create a range of durable assets in refugee-hosting areas and to alleviate the poverty of both the Afghans and their local hosts, the Income-Generating Project for Afghan Refugees (IGPAR) was established.

Undertaken jointly by the Pakistani government, the World Bank and UNHCR, this US\$86 million programme provided more than 21 million person-days of employment between 1984 and 1994, more than three-quarters of which benefited the refugee population. At the same time, IGPAR allowed the completion of nearly 300 separate projects in three of Pakistan's border provinces, mainly in areas such as reforestation, watershed management, irrigation, flood protection, road repair and construction. Throughout the programme, emphasis was placed on providing training to the refugees, so that they could acquire the skills and experience needed to reconstruct their own country if and when repatriation became possible.

At a global level, however, the refugee aid and development approach proved to be seriously flawed. As a UNHCR review concluded:

The efforts made to date in the area of refugee aid and development have had limited results, mainly due to a lack of funding. Paradoxically, the projects which have not been funded are mainly those in Africa, where large numbers of refugees are to be found in some of the least developed countries of the world, and where the presence of a large concentration of refugees in care and maintenance situations is regarded as an important impediment to development. (Stevens, 1991)

The very limited achievements of the refugee aid and development approach can be ascribed in large part to the essentially ambiguous nature of its objectives. As Barry Stein asked in a paper prepared for UNHCR, was its purpose to promote the settlement and eventual integration of refugee populations in countries of asylum? Or was its aim to ameliorate the situation of refugees, the host community and state, pending the day when those refugees returned to their country of origin? (Stein, 1994)

According to Stein, the latter objective took precedence in the eyes of most asylum countries. Their principal interest in the refugee aid and development approach was to promote the principle of international burden sharing and to be compensated more generously for the costs they were incurring by admitting refugees to their territory. Host governments were generally much less interested in allowing those refugees to attain the full range of social, economic and legal rights enjoyed by citizens of their country, as the solution of local integration demands.

By way of contrast, the donor community was much more interested in finding lasting solutions to refugee problems than they were in the principle of burden sharing or the notion of compensation. Their aim, in simple terms, was to reduce the number of refugees on the international community's books. They certainly did not want to invest very large sums of money in refugee camps and settlements which were going to remain dependent on external assistance for an indefinite period of time. Nor did they want to pour resources into settlement areas if the refugees concerned were going to leave their country of asylum and return to their country of origin.

Thus the donors felt that the refugee aid and development concept was being used as a means of mobilizing additional development funding for some hard-pressed (and in many cases badly governed) states, instead of constituting a genuine effort to resolve refugee problems. This suspicion was reinforced by the somewhat grandiose scale of the projects which they were asked to finance and the limited capacity of the countries concerned to make effective use of such large resource allocations.

To explain the death of the refugee aid and development concept, two additional factors have to be taken into account, one of them contingent and the other contextual.

The contingent factor is to be found in the drought, famine and population displacements which ravaged many African countries in 1984 and 1985 - events which came to light just weeks after the ICARA II conference was convened. At a time when UNHCR and its partners had expected to be focusing their efforts on development-related activities, they were obliged to turn their attention to large-scale emergency relief programmes.

The contextual factor is to be found in the international community's changing perception of refugee problems and the way in which they should be resolved. For at the time when ICARA II and the refugee aid and development approach were being formulated, there was a common assumption amongst UNHCR, host and donor states that a large number of the world's refugees would remain in their country of asylum for extended periods of time, and that a significant proportion of them would settle their indefinitely.

By the time the African drought and famine had ended, however, this was no longer the case. Indeed, with the cold war coming to an end, repatriation (normally but not necessarily on a voluntary basis) was increasingly perceived as the only effective solution to refugee situations. It was therefore not surprising that by the end of the decade, UNHCR had turned its back on refugee aid and development, and had started to turn its attention to another dimension of the displacement-development nexus: the reintegration of displaced populations who were returning to their countries and communities of origin. As a 1991 UNHCR paper observed: "returnee countries should be given emphasis at this time, in view of the recent world trends favouring the return of refugees." (Stevens, 1991) The paper continues:

Experience has shown that the rehabilitation of returnee areas which have been devastated by war could be a determining factor for the return of refugees. It is thus of interest to UNHCR, in its promotion of durable solutions, that rehabilitation and development of returnee areas be indeed undertaken, with UNHCR playing the catalytic role... Donor governments are generally more enthusiastic to fund such projects as they are likely to lead to the most preferred durable solution - voluntary repatriation, thus putting an end to indefinite dependence on care and maintenance.

"It is clear that in order to enable returnees to resume their economic lives," the paper concludes, "projects with immediate impact should be promoted, pending longer-term development efforts." UNHCR's efforts to implement this strategy are discussed in the following sections of this article.

Implementing returnee aid and development

The role of UNHCR in the return and reintegration of refugees and displaced populations has changed significantly since the organization was established in 1951. For the first 30 years of its existence, such issues played a relatively small part in the organization's activities, due in large part to the fact that most of the world's refugees came from communist states. It was consequently considered both inconceivable and undesirable by the western powers (UNHCR's principal donors) that those refugees should choose to go back to their homes.

This situation began to change somewhat in the 1960s and 1970s, when the focus of the global refugee problem began to shift from Europe to Africa, Asia and other developing regions. Even so, repatriation remained a relatively low-priority issue, as most of the states which admitted large numbers of refugees during this period were still willing to grant them asylum on an open-ended basis. When refugees did go back to their homes in significant numbers, as they did in the case of countries such as Angola, Mozambique and

Zimbabwe, it was generally in the context of successful anti-colonial struggles or after a fundamental change in the political situation in their homeland. In such circumstances, returnees were considered to be the responsibility of the authorities in the country of origin, supported as necessary by development agencies, rather than a refugee organization such as UNHCR.

These considerations led UNHCR to play a clearly circumscribed role in the repatriation and reintegration process. As far as protection was concerned, the agency's primary function was to verify that refugees were returning to their own country on a voluntary basis, and to encourage countries of origin to establish and respect amnesties for returning refugees. With regard to assistance, UNHCR regularly provided refugees with transport to their country of origin, as well as an individual or family-based repatriation assistance package, usually consisting of items such as foodstuffs, blankets, cooking equipment and tools.

Occasionally, the organization helped to establish credit schemes, income-generating projects and short-term rehabilitation programmes in the areas where returnees had settled. But in general, UNHCR did not become involved - nor was it encouraged to become involved by its major donors - in reintegration activities. This principle continued to hold sway until the beginning of the 1990s. In 1989, for example, when UNHCR helped some 45,000 refugees to return to Namibia, in the first of the large-scale repatriation programmes that followed the end of the cold war, the organization's role was confined to the transportation and initial reception of the returnees. The following year, a UNHCR policy paper stated that the organization's post-repatriation protection and assistance activities "should not be envisaged as extending beyond three to six months." (UNHCR, 1990)

This very cautious approach to the issue of repatriation and reintegration was soon brought into question and was eventually discarded, as demonstrated by UNHCR's expenditure patterns. While the available statistics are not totally reliable, it would appear that the proportion of UNHCR funding spent on repatriation-related activities increased from an average of just two per cent of the organization's total budget prior to 1984 to some 14 per cent in the period 1990-1997. In 1996, UNHCR allocated some \$214 million to reintegration programmes, almost twice as much as its expenditure in 1994. In terms of evaluation and policy formulation, this period also witnessed a sharp rise in the amount of attention which the organization gave to repatriation, reintegration and development issues.³

The rapid transformation of UNHCR's repatriation and reintegration policy in the early 1990s resulted from a number of converging trends.

First, the late and post cold-war period witnessed some fundamental changes in the international community's perception of and response to the refugee problem. As a result (and in words that the author of this article has explained more fully elsewhere) UNHCR ceased to be an organization that was 'reactive', 'exile-oriented' and 'refugee-specific', and became increasingly 'proactive', 'homeland-oriented' and 'holistic' in its

³ For a partial list of relevant policy documents produced in this period, see the bibliography to Macrae, 1999. For evaluations of UNHCR reintegration programmes see the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit page on the UNHCR website, www.unhcr.org

orientation. (UNHCR, 1995: 19-55). As a result, UNHCR was transformed from a refugee organization into a more broadly-based humanitarian agency. Under the leadership of a new High Commissioner, Sadako Ogata, who was prepared to exercise her mandate in a liberal and even expansionist manner, reintegration activities in countries of origin were no longer out of bounds for the organization. Indeed, they became a central feature of UNHCR's new strategy of 'prevention, preparedness and solutions'.

Second, these changes in the international refugee regime must be seen in the context of some broader trends in the international aid paradigm. As Joanna Macrae has explained in a paper commissioned by UNHCR, the aid establishment has been confronted with two serious problems since the beginning of the 1990s: diminished political and financial support from key donors in the aftermath of the cold war; and a mounting intellectual critique which suggested that aid, especially when it was provided in war-affected regions, could have the effect of provoking and perpetuating conflict, thereby doing as much harm as it did good. According to Macrae, these developments "placed the aid establishment on the defensive and in need of re-establishing the rationale for international assistance. This has been done in part by claiming, or rather reasserting, that international assistance can play a role in the prevention and resolution of conflict." (Macrae, 1999: 10)

UNHCR's justification for its expanding role in the area of reintegration was certainly consistent with this analysis. In a 1992 report to her Executive Committee, for example, the High Commissioner observed that "given the number of countries involved, the magnitude of the numbers returning and the fact that their successful reintegration is critical to any national reconciliation and reconstruction process, the issues are not simply humanitarian. International security is at stake." (UNHCR, 1992)

A similar argument can be seen in a 1998 paper on 'UNHCR's role in the prevention of refugee-producing situations', which states "there is a growing consensus that UNHCR can contribute most effectively to the prevention of refugee-producing situations through its efforts to consolidate the durable solution of repatriation and reintegration in countries of origin, thereby reducing the risk that violence, armed conflict and population displacements will recur." (UNHCR, 1998)

As demonstrated by another quotation from the same paper, UNHCR's understanding of its role in the area of reintegration was by the late 1990s an increasingly ambitious one, light-years away from the highly restrictive perspective of the policy statement issued at the beginning of the decade:

The notion of reintegration cannot be restricted to returning refugees. When a civil war or communal conflict comes to an end, many other groups of people (some of whom may not be of direct concern to UNHCR) are also confronted with the task of rebuilding their lives and communities: displaced and war-affected populations, demobilized soldiers and the victims of ethnic cleansing. The reintegration process must not only address the situation of these different groups, but must also promote peaceful and positive interactions between them, thereby contributing to the process of social and political reconciliation. (UNHCR, 1998)

Third, while UNHCR's new interest and involvement in the task of reintegration can to some extent be interpreted in terms of geopolitical change and organizational expansion, it also derived from the changing number, situation and needs of the world's returnees.

With the cold war over, the number of refugees returning to their country of origin and in need of reintegration assistance increased appreciably. Thus at the beginning of 1996, UNHCR announced that no fewer than nine million refugees had gone repatriated during the preceding five-year period - a substantial increase over the figure recorded for the years 1985-1990, when around 1.2 million refugees repatriated. And in the following 12 months, an additional two million refugees went back to their country of origin.

The conditions under which these repatriations took place reinforced the need for UNHCR to go become actively involved in the reintegration, rehabilitation and development processes in countries of origin. There is, of course, a well-established international principle that refugee repatriation should take place on a "wholly voluntary basis" and in "conditions of safety and dignity." But as the 1990s proceeded, a growing number of refugees found themselves repatriating under some form of duress. And such duress was in many instances deliberate, exercised by host governments, host communities and other actors, with the specific intention of forcing refugees to go back to their homeland.

In other situations, refugee returns were induced by a more general deterioration of conditions in the country of asylum, whether as a result of social and political violence, declining economic opportunities or reductions in international assistance. In such situations, there was an evident need for an international presence to monitor the welfare of the returnees and to facilitate their reintegration into the social, economic and legal structures of their country of origin.

Whether returning voluntarily or involuntarily, most of the refugees who repatriated during the 1990s arrived in countries which were characterized by high levels of physical, material and psychological insecurity: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Rwanda, for example. These were all countries where villages had been razed to the ground; bridges blown up; field and roads mined; irrigation systems left to decay; and where schools and health centres had been left in ruins. They were also countries where brutal armed conflicts, widespread human rights violations and deliberate population displacements had left a terrible legacy of social division and political instability.

While not the best-known or perhaps even the most extreme case, the repatriation of refugees from Somalia to Ethiopia in 1992 provides a good example of the problems which confronted refugees upon their return. According to a UNHCR report on that movement:

Ethiopia was in a state of acute societal disorder. The past governance system had failed and considerable uncertainty, social strife and lawlessness continued. Severe and repeated drought was contributing to acute food scarcity for the general population. Continuing conflict was creating new displacements and hardships, as well as hampering aid efforts. Developmental efforts in the returnee receiving areas were virtually non-existent. In addition to causing distress among the local population, such

conditions obstructed opportunities for the successful reintegration of returnees. (UNHCR ,1995: 172-73)

In the circumstances described above, the very modest amount of assistance which UNHCR traditionally provided to returnees - a package that has been dismissively but not altogether unfairly described as 'a cooking pot and a handshake' - began to appear inadequate. Governments and organizations involved with refugee problems were concerned that refugees who returned to their own country might subsequently be unable to survive and would once again be in need of humanitarian relief.

Additionally, it was feared that returnees might feel obliged to join the existing stream of rural-to-urban migrants, thereby compounding one of the most pressing socio-economic problems confronting many less-developed countries. In a worst case scenario, it was felt, the sudden arrival of a large returnee population in a devastated and impoverished area might lead to a resumption of tension and conflict and renewed population displacements.

A fourth and final consideration which had a determinant influence on UNHCR's evolving policy in the early 1990s was its comparative advantage in the area of reintegration. In the war-torn states to which refugees were returning, central governments and local authorities were evidently not in a position to assume full responsibility for the welfare of returnees and others.

International development and financial institutions were also poorly placed to respond to the immediate needs of people in returnee-populated areas, given the tendency of such organizations to work on the basis of long-term plans and programmes, to function in close cooperation with central government ministries, as well as their propensity to invest in areas with economic potential, rather than the more distant and marginal border areas typically affected by refugee and returnee movements.

UNHCR, by contrast, had a number of important assets at its disposal in terms of reintegrating returnees and rehabilitating the areas where they settled: a knowledge of the people concerned, derived from its protection and assistance efforts in countries of asylum; a strong field presence and logistical capacity; the ability to mobilize financial resources and to establish assistance programmes in a speedy manner; its membership of the UN system; and an established working relationship with NGOs, many of which had considerable experience in both relief and development activities.

It was in the context described above that UNHCR began to develop its new strategy of 'returnee aid and development' - a strategy that was founded on five basic principles:

- that UNHCR has a responsibility to assist with the reintegration of refugees, not simply to organize or facilitate their repatriation;
- that reintegration assistance is most effective and equitable when provided on a community-wide basis, bringing benefits to the entire population of areas where returnees have settled;

- that reintegration assistance should be provided in a way that discourages dependency and which contributes to the development of local competence and capacities;
- that the successful reintegration of returnees and other displaced people does not occur automatically, but is dependent upon the resumption of development activities in areas of origin; and,
- that to maximize the impact and sustainability of any reintegration efforts, a smooth interface must be established between the short-term assistance provided by UNHCR and the longer-term programmes of the host government and international development agencies.

The genius of the returnee aid and development strategy was that it promised to avoid the pitfalls which had undermined the notion of refugee aid and development. It was unambiguously intended to promote and consolidate the solution of voluntary repatriation. It promised to bring benefits to countries of origin, many of which had an economic and political interest in seeing the successful return and reintegration of their exiled citizens). It had something tangible to offer to the donor states, who were keen to promote the stabilization of war-torn societies and to witness a reduction in the number of refugees requiring international assistance. And while some countries of asylum had a vested interest in keeping refugees on their territory, the majority were only too eager to promote the speedy and lasting repatriation of such populations.

While recognizing all of these advantages, UNHCR was not oblivious to the difficulties that might be encountered in the implementation of the returnee aid and development strategy. For example, a draft UNHCR policy paper of March 1992, titled 'Returnee aid and development: the challenge ahead', identified two specific factors which threatened to obstruct the organization's new attempt to link humanitarian assistance with the development process. (UNHCR, 1992a)

First, the paper pointed to potential difficulties in the relationship between UNHCR and the development agencies, especially UNDP. Such agencies, it pointed out, had their own plans and priorities, usually developed in close cooperation with government. And those plans and priorities often excluded the relatively small and remote returnee-populated areas that were UNHCR's primary concern. At the same time, the paper noted the "divergence of institutional requirements, jargon and culture separating UNHCR and the development agencies." "While UNHCR has traditionally looked at the immediate needs of individuals, families and groups," it observed, development agencies "look at broader problems and policies. The clients, concerns and mechanisms are radically different." On the basis of this analysis, the paper concluded that "the expectation of UNHCR 'handing over' responsibility for returning refugees to UNDP is unrealistic."

Second, the UNHCR paper pointed to the funding problems that were likely to arise if the organization sought to link its short-term reintegration activities with longer-term development efforts. "Significant investments will be required to render returnee areas again or newly suitable for sustained habitation," it pointed out. But "generating additional funds for specific projects is not a strength of UNDP or some other

agencies.” Consequently, “energetic fund-raising by all concerned parties will still be required.”

Reintegration in practice

By the time that UNHCR headquarters had produced its draft policy paper on returnee aid and development, the first steps had already been taken in the field to operationalize this new approach. The location for this experiment was Nicaragua, where 70,000 returnees had arrived, following the end of a decade-long civil war. The form which the experiment assumed was the introduction of ‘Quick Impact Projects’ or QIPs.

According to an explanatory booklet produced at the time, QIPs were “an attempt to step beyond UNHCR’s traditional assistance activities in countries of return,” and constituted “a community-based programme with the goal of anchoring repatriation as a durable solution by maximizing returnees’ chances of significant reintegration into their communities.” “In addition to having a direct and measurable impact on returnee communities,” the publication explained, “a central feature of the QIP concept was that they would also become a ‘bridge’ to sustainable development efforts outside the scope of UNHCR’s mandate.” (Bonifacio and Lattimer, 1992)

In more concrete terms, the QIP programme in Nicaragua was a package of some 250 micro-projects, providing support to returnee-populated communities in areas such as health, education, training, infrastructure, transportation, crop production, livestock and income-generation. A typical QIP involved the rehabilitation of a school or health centre, the purchase of a communal rice thresher, the repair of a ferry or bridge, the installation of an irrigation system or the provision of seeds to a group of farmers.

While there was nothing revolutionary about the QIP concept, the Nicaraguan initiative was packaged and marketed in a highly sophisticated manner, with an emphasis on four specific (and donor friendly) features of the programme.

First, QIPs were to be identified on the basis of widespread community participation, and would be used as a means of encouraging returnees, the resident population and former political adversaries to work closely together. Second, the projects would be small in scale and rapid to implement, making maximum use of local resources and requiring only a one-time allocation of resources. Third, the programme placed special emphasis on gender equity, requiring all participating agencies and organizations to adhere to a contract intended to ensure the active participation of women and an equitable distribution of benefits between females and males. Finally, and in keeping with the ‘bridge to development’ notion, the QIP programme was to be established on the basis of new institutional linkages established between UNHCR, UNDP, bilateral development agencies and government bodies at central and local level.

So attractive were these principles, and so successful was the Nicaragua programme in mobilizing funds (primarily from the USA), that QIPs soon made an appearance in almost every UNHCR repatriation programme: Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Somalia and Sri Lanka. While the basic principles devised in Nicaragua were not necessarily maintained or respected by these

other programmes, QIPs had become a standard UNHCR reintegration practice by the middle of the 1990s.

While QIPs formed the core of UNHCR's efforts to implement the returnee aid and development approach, it would be wrong to give the impression that they constitute the only activity undertaken by the organization in the area of reintegration. UNHCR has, for example, become substantially involved in the rehabilitation and construction of houses and shelter facilities, particularly in countries which have experienced ethnic cleansing.⁴ It has established a number of special gender-focused protection and assistance programmes in countries of origin, such as the Women's Initiatives established in Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda and the Children's Initiative in Liberia. The organization has expanded its activities in the areas of protection monitoring, as well as legal and judicial capacity building. And it has started to adopt a more active and systematic approach to the issues of land tenure and property rights in returnee-populated areas.

What lessons can be learned from the efforts which UNHCR has made to implement the returnee aid and development approach? On the basis of studies undertaken by the author of this paper and other analysts, three general observations can be made.

First, there is little doubt that UNHCR's reintegration efforts have had some very positive consequences, especially in the immediate post-repatriation period.

In brief, UNHCR's reintegration programmes have met with widespread appreciation from the beneficiary populations concerned. They have provided communities with urgently needed resources which government bodies and development agencies were unable to offer. They have helped to boost the morale, motivation and living standards of returnees, thereby encouraging them to rebuild their livelihoods in their areas of origin. They have helped to reconcile and reintegrate groups of people with different interests and political allegiances. And they have contributed to the revitalization of local economies by removing some of the constraints to production and exchange.

In many cases, UNHCR's reintegration activities have promoted and facilitated voluntary repatriation by providing refugees with an incentive to return and by opening up the roads and transport routes needed for them to go home. At the same time, they have had a positive impact in terms of protection and human rights, by ensuring an international presence in returnee-populated areas and by mitigating some of the tensions which threaten to disrupt the reintegration and reconciliation processes.

Second, and despite the positive achievements described above, UNHCR's reintegration activities have encountered a number of persistent operational difficulties. QIPs, for example, have often been implemented on the basis of inadequate planning, data-collection and project identification processes, and in isolation from the efforts of

⁴ In Bosnia, for example, UNHCR rehabilitated almost 25,000 houses in 1996-97 alone, at a total cost of some \$100 million. During the same period, UNHCR provided material for the construction of houses for around 75,000 Rwandan families in almost 175 different sites. Housing and shelter programmes have also been established in countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kosovo.

national and international development actors. UNHCR has not always worked with the most appropriate or reliable implementing partners, and the technical standards of the projects it has financed have sometimes been inadequate.

In general, the organization has had more success with infrastructural QIPs than with projects designed to enhance the productive capacity of beneficiary communities. The organization's stated commitment to community participation and gender equality has also been questioned, with critics within and outside of UNHCR suggesting that such principles are readily sacrificed in the haste to disburse funds and implement projects.

Such difficulties have begged the question as to whether UNHCR is institutionally well equipped for the task of reintegration. As a number of studies have pointed out, UNHCR staff frequently lack appropriate skills and experience in relation to community-based rehabilitation efforts. When refugees begin to return in large numbers to their country of origin, those staff members are often so preoccupied with the logistics of repatriation and reception that they are unable to focus on reintegration issues.

Moreover, while UNHCR has undertaken and commissioned many evaluations of its reintegration programmes, those reviews have tended to take place at a time when large numbers of projects have been implemented and when the organization appears to have had a very substantial impact. By failing to undertake follow-up reviews, when the organization has withdrawn from a returnee-populated area or scaled down its presence, UNHCR has been unable to assess the longer-term consequences of its interventions. As a result, an important opportunity for institutional learning has been missed.

Third, the experience of the past decade has raised some deeper issues concerning the returnee aid and development approach, as well as the role of different actors in the reintegration process and the linkage between relief and development in war-torn societies. These are complex questions, which have spawned a very large (and largely unreadable) literature.⁵ The following discussion seeks to present only those issues which are of most direct concern to UNHCR, and to present them in the most accessible manner possible.

During the past few years, UNHCR's apparent inability to achieve its reintegration objectives has become a source of mounting concern, particularly at the highest levels of the organization. Those objectives are twofold: first, to act speedily in the aftermath of major repatriation movements, so as to meet the short-term reintegration needs of returnees and other members of the population; and second, to ensure that the reintegration activities initiated by UNHCR are sustainable in the longer-term, and thereby contribute to the processes of development and peacebuilding.

In practice, UNHCR has found that it has the capacity to implement reintegration activities with considerable speed. But achieving the organization's second objective has been a far more elusive task. Indeed, a recent seven-country evaluation concluded that UNHCR's reintegration activities had generally not proven to be sustainable, nor

⁵ 'Unreadable' because of its relentlessly abstract and technocratic nature.

had they acted as an effective bridge to rehabilitation and development. (UNHCR, 1997)

To provide some concrete examples of these difficulties, UNHCR has in some cases provided returnee-populated areas with significant numbers of boreholes and handpumps, only to find that these resources quickly fell into disuse due to inadequate maintenance and shortages of spare parts. In other situations, the organization has financed the rehabilitation of schools and health centres, but those facilities have been unable to function effectively as a result of the government's inability to meet the recurrent costs of teachers, nurses, books and medication. Elsewhere, UNHCR has assisted returnees and others to resume and expand agricultural production, but the ability of the beneficiaries to produce a surplus has been seriously constrained by an absence of storage, transportation, marketing and banking facilities.

Responding to such scenarios, UNHCR has in certain instances - such as Rwanda - sought to prolong its involvement in countries of origin, staying longer than the two or three year period normally scheduled for a reintegration programme. But donor states have generally not welcomed or supported such initiatives, regarding them as an attempt on UNHCR's part to extend its humanitarian mandate into the realm of development.

The difficulties which UNHCR has encountered in its attempts to forge a bridge between humanitarian assistance and the development process are to some extent a result of the organizational and operational weaknesses identified in the preceding section of this article: weak planning and project design; the selection of implementing partners with poor technical standards; inadequate community consultation and participation. And UNHCR has generally been quick to acknowledge such failings. But it has also been at pains to point out that the frequently unsustainable nature of its reintegration activities derives more fundamentally from the two constraints that were identified in 1992, when the organization began to implement the returnee aid and development approach: the problem of institutional relationships, and the problem of funding.

The following quotation from an internal paper issued in 1999 neatly summarizes this argument. "In many situations," it states, "the sustainability of UNHCR's reintegration activities has been jeopardized by the fact that they have not been adequately linked to the longer-term reconstruction efforts of national and international development agencies." "Moreover," the paper continues, "UNHCR's reintegration programmes have normally been undertaken in marginalized areas of poor and conflict-affected countries which are unable to attract significant development assistance." (UNHCR, 1999a) It was on the basis of this analysis that UNHCR launched its latest initiative in the realm of reintegration and development: the 'Brookings process'.

Brookings and beyond

The second half of the 1990s witnessed an upsurge of international interest in what have become known as 'post-conflict' issues. This trend had a significant impact on UNHCR, which has effectively abandoned the notion of 'returnee aid and development', preferring instead to talk of 'post-conflict reintegration'. The World Bank has also been affected by (and has contributed to) this upsurge of interest, and in 1997 established its

own Post-Conflict Unit. On the basis of their mutual interest in post-conflict issues, UNHCR and the World Bank have started to work more closely together, and in January 1999 co-sponsored a round table at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC, on 'the gap between humanitarian assistance and long-term development'. In addition to the sponsoring organizations, the meeting was attended by representatives of other UN agencies, the IMF and OECD, a number of donor states, an NGO (Oxfam) and one 'recipient' country (Mozambique).

In a joint paper presented to the meeting, the High Commissioner for Refugees and President of the World Bank identified the obstacles to peace and development in war-torn societies, and then went on to focus on two issues: "how can we better organize ourselves for a more fluid response to such complex situations, i.e. the institutional arrangements; and how can we improve the funding of mixed humanitarian-developmental interventions, i.e. the funding systems." In conclusion, the paper stated:

The challenge is to develop a more comprehensive approach that would address the specific needs of people in war-torn societies, thereby helping to reduce the recurrence of violence and displacement... We believe that the starting point for a more integrated humanitarian-development response (with an international political-military dimension when necessary) is a more coherent, co-operative planning process that utilizes organizations' particular strength in particular situations. This, in turn, could drive, and be driven by, more coherent funding arrangements. (Ogata and Wolfensohn, 1999)

According to a report of the meeting, all participants agreed that the institutional and funding gap identified by UNHCR and the World Bank was not new. "But in spite of years of discussions and attempts to tackle it through different approaches... a practical solution was yet to be found." Significantly, western governments were reluctant to address the funding gap by establishing a new post-conflict trust fund, because such a proposal "would be difficult to promote under the prevailing political circumstances." "Donors insisted that the priority from their viewpoint was to improve and rationalize the coordination of agencies implementing post-conflict assistance programmes." (UNHCR, 1999)

A second meeting of the Brookings round table took place in July 1999 in Paris, the principal objective of which was to examine a discussion paper prepared by UNHCR and the World Bank, in consultation with an ad hoc working group established by the initial gathering in Washington. In the technocratic language employed by the Brookings process, the proposal called for "a global voluntary, loosely-knit tiered coalition for post-conflict stability" which "aims to mobilize all those key players who share the Brookings 'spirit', the 'gap' concerns and who are determined and committed to work together towards addressing the gaps, including in situations with low donor interest." (UNHCR, 1999b)

"What is proposed," the report of the meeting emphasized, "is not another coordinating mechanism, nor a global trust fund. It is an action and field-oriented coalition formed on a voluntary basis and aimed at ensuring a more predictable coherent, flexible and timely response of the key players in a given post-conflict situation." The first of these situations to be examined was Sierra Leone, which in February 2000 received a high-

level mission from UNHCR, the World Bank and UNDP, intended “to explore and propose commonly agreed operational responses to strengthen the continuum between security, humanitarian assistance and early reconstruction and development.” (World Bank, 2000)

The Brookings process is still in its infancy, and any assessment of its achievements or potential would be premature at this stage. Even so, it should be noted that the process, and the principles on which it is based, have already come under critical scrutiny. The remaining pages of this article present three related critiques.

A first critique (which is directed at the Brookings approach rather than the process per se) raises doubts about the ‘post-conflict’ concept, believing that its application to countries such as Sierra Leone, which self-evidently have not attained any kind of stability, masks the true intentions of the world’s most prosperous countries (and, by implication, the international financial institutions) As the author of this article has written elsewhere, "if donor states want to spend less on humanitarian relief; if they want to disengage from crisis-affected countries; if they want to suggest that the situation in those countries has ‘normalised’; and if they want to impose the rigours of structural adjustment on the world’s poorest and most devastated countries, then what better way than to suggest that such states have entered a ‘post-conflict’ phase?" (Crisp, 1998)

David Moore, an academic who has contributed to UNHCR’s policy research activities, goes further in his criticism. Observing that it is becoming "the key institution for the hegemonic spread of global capitalism," Moore holds the World Bank responsible for creating the very conditions which have led to such high levels of conflict and human displacement in Africa. He also pours scorn on the potential achievements of the alliance envisaged by the Brookings process. Amidst the carnage of contemporary Africa, he writes,

“The notion of ‘post-conflict’ has emerged and taken flight within humanitarian and development discourse, as if by linguistic fiat a ‘sustainable’ peace will ensue and the traditionally separate realms of western third world-aiding agencies can come together and reconstruct war-torn societies in their image. The humanitarian dispensers of ‘relief’ can, it seems, join with the long-term implementers of ‘development’ in the long march from conflict to peace, if only they can cooperate to work out the division of labour which has separated them in the past. (Moore, 2000)⁶

A second critique argues that in its efforts to contribute to the tasks of reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction, UNHCR has raised expectations that it cannot hope to fulfil and assumed responsibilities that more rightly belong to other actors. That is the clear conclusion of an unpublished paper on ‘repatriation, reintegration, development and the peace process’, prepared by a senior UNHCR staff member during the preparations for the first Brookings meeting in January 1999.

⁶ This paper has now been published in the *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 83, 2000.

The paper argues that “it is doubtful whether UNHCR should be involved in something as complex and difficult as the long-term development process.” And it asks “whether the organization should not limit itself from the start to providing returnees with the assistance required to make the successful transition from asylum country to country of origin, ensure that the returnees are reintegrated into the national system of protection and leave their social and economic reintegration to relevant national actors and their international counterparts.”

Challenging the assumption that UNHCR’s reintegration activities are needed to ‘anchor’ returnees in their country and community of origin, the author states that “there is very little evidence to suggest that difficult economic circumstances lead to renewed flight. There is more evidence to the contrary, i.e. evidence that suggests military and political factors influence the decision to leave, rather than economic circumstances.” And addressing military and political issues such as the demobilization of combatants or the establishment of representative forms of government, the paper argues, clearly lie beyond the competence and mandate of UNHCR.

In its conclusion, which deserves to be quoted at length, the paper restates such arguments more boldly, challenging the basic assumptions of the reintegration strategy currently pursued by UNHCR.

While a number of practical suggestions can be made to improve UNHCR’s implementation of reintegration projects and its cooperation with development organizations in order to ‘bridge the gap’, the question should be raised as to what extent it can leave this task from the start to more experienced development agencies in conjunction with the national authorities and NGOs...

Sustainable development and long-term development impact are, if not outright alien to most UNHCR staff, concepts that do not figure very prominently in the vocabulary of UNHCR, and are not part of the implementation and achievement-oriented operational culture of UNHCR. If the CEO of Ford Motor Co. would one day decide to get into the production and marketing of baby food, his shareholders and outside investors would seriously question the wisdom of the decision, and the market place would be quick to react... To some extent the same argument can be made against UNHCR’s involvement in the development issue. This is not the area of UNHCR competence and it does not have any comparative advantage.

That is not to say that UNHCR should not be concerned about the long-term welfare of returnees. It should. But it should concentrate its efforts on what it does best: providing protection and emergency assistance. It should resist the temptation to branch out into other fields, for which it has only limited expertise.

Interestingly, the thrust of this conclusion has been echoed by members of UNHCR’s Executive Committee, which in a September 1998 meeting on reintegration observed that “UNHCR’s specific contribution should be limited to the initial or ‘transition’ phase,” which would reflect both the specific nature of its mandate and its experience in implementing short-term quick-impact projects.” (UNHCR, 1998a)

A third (and more complex) critique of UNHCR's latest attempts to link humanitarian assistance with the development process suggests that those efforts are based on a number of misunderstandings. This is the view articulated by Joanna Macrae (1999), whose analysis can be summarized in the following way.

Rather than being in a 'post-conflict' situation, most of the countries which have experienced large-scale repatriation movements in recent years are in the grip of chronic political emergencies. They are "quasi-states", whose governments are "deficient in the political will, institutional authority and organized power to protect human rights or provide socio-economic welfare."

This has serious implications for any attempt to link 'relief' with 'development'. For while the former is normally provided on an unconditional basis and outside of governmental structures, the latter is channelled through the state and is conditional. In some countries, development aid will be withheld because of the state's unacceptable behaviour, or because the state has effectively disintegrated. And even if such aid is provided, it will be in the context of extreme institutional weakness, financial scarcity and political volatility.

"Redressing these trends," Macrae argues, "is neither easy nor quick." Establishing effective state structures and the institutional framework required for markets to function is likely to take "decades rather than years." Ensuring that the economy in war-torn societies starts to function in support of the public good, rather than private and military gain remains "a formidable policy challenge." Demilitarization tends to be a protracted process, if it occurs at all, "and is thus slow to yield major changes in the allocation of resources to non-military actors." And there is no guarantee that the phasing out of humanitarian assistance will be paralleled by a concomitant rise in development aid. "Many aid operations responding to chronic political emergencies have been experiencing sustained declines in their funding over recent years."

In such circumstances, Macrae's analysis suggests, sustainable reintegration - and the sustainability of reintegration programmes - must be regarded as elusive and very long-term objectives. Moreover, one should not assume that those objectives will be attained by means of UNHCR's latest efforts to bridge the institutional and financial gaps in the administration of aid:

From 1992 onwards there has been consistent recognition of the problem of identifying effective partners which will sustain UNHCR's interventions. In particular, there has been disappointment with the performance of UNDP. This has driven UNHCR to seek alternative developmental partners, and in particular to solicit the support of the World Bank for the reintegration agenda. While clearly an important strategic alliance, the move to work more closely with the Bank implies that it does not share many of the structural features of UNDP which precluded the latter sustaining reintegration projects initiated by UNHCR. Arguably, however, all official development assistance agencies suffer from an inability to work effectively in quasi-states. This structural problem derives both from the uncertain legitimacy of many governments in conflict-affected states, their weak public institutions and the absolute poverty of the formal economy.

On the basis of this analysis, Macrae reaches a conclusion which is strikingly similar to that of the internal UNHCR paper cited earlier in this section. “Humanitarian agencies,” she says, “might do well to reassert their particular competence and mandate with regard to protection and human rights. Uncritical adoption of developmental and peace-building objectives risks compromising not only the technical quality of UNHCR’s work, but also its mandate for protection.”

Conclusion

The issues of repatriation, reintegration and reconstruction have rightly consumed a great deal of UNHCR’s time and attention during the past decade. Rightly so, given the number of refugees who have returned to their countries of origin and the difficult conditions which they have had to endure upon their arrival.

Looking to the future, however, it might be asked whether the organization should not establish a renewed focus on the development dimensions of refugee situations in countries of asylum. For while it is true to say that large numbers of refugees have repatriated (both voluntarily and involuntarily) in recent years, it is equally true to say that many refugees have been obliged to remain in exile for long periods of time. And increasingly, they are obliged to spend those years without access to educational, income-generating or wage-earning opportunities.

While the political climate might not be propitious for such an initiative, it is now time to reconsider the wisdom of using scarce international resources to feed, shelter and generally ‘warehouse’ refugees who are deliberately prevented from establishing livelihoods and becoming self-sufficient. Notions such as ‘integrated zonal development’ and ‘refugee aid and development’ may be forgotten or discredited. But the principle on which they are based - that refugees should enjoy productive lives and contribute to the development of the areas where they have settled - could usefully be revived.

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