
ROBNC Sweden
(Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia,
Lithuania)

COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN
2003

Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Themes

The Nordic countries constitute a continuous source of political, moral, financial and material support to UNHCR, and to the asylum regime in general. Nordic contributions to UNHCR in 2001 totalled \$ 125 million, representing some 18% of the Office's income. Norway, Sweden and Denmark ranked among the top seven donors to UNHCR in absolute terms, while Finland ranked 14th. In contrast to most other donors, Nordic contributions were either non-earmarked, or lightly earmarked, thus giving UNHCR a greater degree of flexibility. In 1999, Sweden introduced a special formula of pledging and disbursing funds at the beginning of the year, by signing an MOU with UNHCR. The MOU, which provides for flexibility in allocations, has developed into a multi-year agreement in 2002. It can be used as a model for other countries.

The overarching goal and basic rationale of UNHCR's presence in the Nordic countries is to maintain and enhance this support base and to positively influence the overall direction of national policies, legislation and practice. UNHCR's Regional Office for the Nordic and Baltic Countries (ROBNC) does this by close and continuous involvement in legal/protection issues while ensuring continued political and financial support by governments, NGOs, media and the public at large. The Nordic region is not immune to anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments in some quarters and the tendency by governments to substitute temporary and other forms of subsidiary protection for Convention status.

The ROBNC's programmes are protection oriented with special emphasis on a wide range of capacity building activities in refugee law, both in the Baltics and Nordics, which have close historical ties and are seen as important regional partners. In all its activities throughout the eight countries covered, ROBNC accords high priority to gender issues and children in the asylum process.

In 2003 and 2004, ROBNC will continue to emphasise the need for a liberal and generous policy towards refugees within the framework of Nordic EU presidencies, and will work towards further enhancing the role of the office as a regional resource centre. ROBNC will complement Headquarter's efforts to increase Nordic government funding level and widen the links with Private Sector funding sources.

To achieve its goals with limited staff and no presence in four (Iceland, Finland, Norway and Denmark) of the eight countries covered, ROBNC works with a number of Government departments and agencies, NGOs and legal networks in all countries and in particular with the following specific institutions:

During the ten-year period 1992-2001, the region has accepted as refugees or granted resident permits on humanitarian or other grounds to some 282,100 persons, normally allowing approximately 40% of all asylum seekers the right to remain. Four of the 10 countries with longstanding annual resettlement quotas are Nordic States: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Iceland also accepts around 20–30 refugees annually. In the field of assistance during emergencies, the region accounts for a significant proportion of UNHCR's standby arrangements.

The Nordic governments and NGOs continue to provide UNHCR with invaluable support in the pan-European asylum debate over harmonisation of policies and procedures. In 1999 Finland played a key role during its EU presidency, ensuring at the key Tampere meeting, that refugee rights took precedence over immigration control mechanisms. When Sweden in January 2001, assumed its EU Presidency, asylum issues were high on the agenda. The first EU asylum-related directive was adopted during the Swedish presidency, taking due account of UNHCR's concerns. Despite the introduction of measures aimed at tightening asylum legislation and closely regulating the entry of immigrants into the country, Denmark remains an important supporter of UNHCR.

In **Denmark**, the ROBNC's key partners are the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and Department of International Co-operation, responsible respectively for policy and funding in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, the new Ministry for Refugees, Migrants and Integration, which is responsible for asylum policy, as well as the Danish Immigration Service, dealing with first instance decisions and durable solutions. The Danish Refugee Board handles appeals. ROBNCe also maintains close contacts with a number of NGOs, in particular the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Centre for Human Rights.

In **Finland**, ROBNC's key partners are the Political Department dealing with refugee policy and human rights and the Department for International Development Co-operation which handles funding in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On domestic asylum matters, ROBNC works with the Ministry of Interior responsible for policy issues, the Directorate of Immigration dealing with first instance decisions as well as with the Helsinki Administrative Court responsible for appeals. On resettlement, integration and repatriation the Office deals with the Ministry of Labour. ROBNC's key NGO partners are the Finnish Red Cross, the Finnish Refugee Council with whom it has official agreements and the Refugee Advice Centre.

In **Iceland**, ROBNC's key governmental partners are the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs handling human rights issues and funding. On the domestic front, the Directorate of Immigration is responsible for first instance decisions, the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs for asylum policy and appeals. The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for resettlement and integration. In the NGO community, ROBNC's main counterparts are the Icelandic Red Cross and the Human Rights Centre. ROBNC signed an official co-operation agreement with the former in September 2001.

In **Norway**, the Regional Office liaises closely with the Department of Human Rights, Humanitarian Assistance and Democracy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealing with refugee policy, funding, emergency aid and assistance. On the protection front, ROBNC deals with the Directorate of Immigration responsible for first instance decisions, resettlement, repatriation and integration and with the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, which in 2000 assumed responsibility for

asylum policy from the Ministry of Justice. From 2001, an independent Immigration Appeals Board is handling appeals. In the NGO community, ROBNC collaborates with Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS), which provides legal assistance and counselling, as well as involves in some public awareness raising activities, and with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an umbrella organisation focussing on public awareness and Norwegian involvement in international refugee assistance activities. ROBNC has a formal agreement with the NRC.

In **Sweden**, ROBNC works closely with the Department of Migration and Asylum Policy and the Department of Global Co-operation, both located in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The former covers asylum policy and the latter is responsible for funding of UNHCR. The Office works closely with the Swedish Migration Board which is responsible for first instance refugee status determination, reception, resettlement and repatriation. ROBNC also works closely with the Aliens Appeals Board in Stockholm, which handles second instance decisions. Given the lack of a UNHCR presence in half of the countries under its purview, the Office relies heavily on the co-operation of the aforementioned NGOs and other partners.

The **Baltic** countries are in the process of establishing full-fledged asylum regimes and are making considerable progress in this regard.

A few UN agencies, such as UNIC, UNDP and UNICEF, are present in Copenhagen. ROBNC maintains a close working relationship particularly with UNIC. There is no UN Resident Co-ordinator in the Nordic countries.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

The ROBNC activities are built around the two related themes of strengthening asylum, and enhancing regional partnerships to protect the institution of asylum and increase support for refugees.

Strengthening the asylum system

the ROBNC will promote access to the territories of European States for persons in need of international protection, as well as access to fair effective and efficient asylum procedures in accordance with international standards for asylum-seekers. The ROBNC will promote the respect of refugee rights and seek effective durable solutions for them; and also ensure that public opinion is more tolerant and supportive of refugees' needs.

RONBC will carry out a varied number of activities to achieve the above-mentioned goals. These include public awareness raising, lobbying and advocacy on legislative developments, policy directives at both the national and regional levels, training and workshop activities with decision-makers, NGOs and other actors, and intervening in individual cases which have precedent value and/or are inconsistent with UNHCR's protection policies. Providing legal opinions and advice on case and policy-related issues is another mainstay activity. Special attention will be given to improve RSD practice and to find a better balance between the grant of Convention refugee and subsidiary protection status.

To the extent time permits, and in view of staffing constraints and other office priorities, the ROBNC will continue to be involved in humanitarian training exercises which serve to link the Office's objectives and operational requirements with

humanitarian contributions from the Nordic countries, including major peace-keeping and humanitarian operations. ROBNC will increase its association with academic, policy development and research institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, in order to ensure that the Office's views and positions are heard and shared in a timely manner.

To ensure that public opinion is supportive of refugees and to diminish xenophobic trends in favour of increased tolerance, ROBNC will seek to adopt a higher profile on controversial domestic issues related to refugees and asylum seekers. It will also carry out professional surveys and polls to target audiences, in order to coin appropriate messages, and identify allies and hindering forces, as well as to be able to target key constituencies and interest groups. Naturally, ROBNC will also actively participate in NGO/Government campaigns to raise awareness and promote tolerance, to build community relations and restore confidence, disseminate targeted public information materials, including various targeted information kits.

ROBNC will further enhance its catalytic role with regard to the media, by not only providing timely information but also directing media attention to refugee issues, both national and international, capitalising on high profile emergencies, as well as to UNHCR's policies.

Enhancing partnerships

The ROBNC will work towards increasing political and financial support to UNHCR operations among Nordic governments, regional and national organisations as well as private individuals and corporations. ROBNC is constantly refining its systems and procedures in order to function as a regional resource centre, providing support and assistance to its network of partners and other interested parties on all aspects of UNHCR's work.

ROBNC has had an increased role to play on the harmonisation agenda in light of the Swedish and Danish EU Presidencies in 2001 and 2002. Active participation in discussions, advocacy and meetings with relevant authorities on UNHCR's positions on refugee and asylum issues will help balance the states' interests. UNHCR's broader objectives will further develop under the presidencies and well beyond.

UNHCR will continue its close co-operation with the NGO communities in the Nordic countries, as well as the regional NGO partners, notably NOCRE/ECRE, for important outreach activities. Similarly, the various tripartite (governments-NGOs-UNHCR) networks will continue, such as the ones for Nordic asylum workshops, Nordic repatriation workshops, Nordic Baltic Consultative Committee, the Nordic Global Compact Group as well as other topical networks created and maintained as appropriate, are important channels for highlighting UNHCR's concerns. Educational institutions, teachers and academia will continue to be of special focus for ROBNC.

ROBNC will further enhance its catalytic role with the media, by not only providing timely information but also directing media attention to refugee issues, both national and international, as well as to UNHCR's policies. In this regard ROBNC will enhance its network of Nordic and Baltic media contacts providing services, which also would include ROBNC prepared information kits, as well as training workshops directly targeting journalists.