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Community-based protection

Summary

In previous years UNHCR has reported on "Community services." This paper is entitled "Community-based protection" in order to underscore the need to integrate community engagement into all aspects of the Office's protection work. The paper presents an overview of the progress made in strengthening the delivery of community-based protection and resulting adjustments to UNHCR's field-based protection workforce to merge the Community Services Officer and Protection Officer into a single function.

Contents

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction	1-2	3
II. Key areas of progress	3-12	3
A. Staff expertise, learning and training, and partnerships	4-8	3
B. Community-based protection	9-11	4
C. Field-based protection workforce review.....	12	5
III. The way forward	13-16	6
A. Protection workforce adjustment	13-14	6
B. Grounding protection within communities	15-16	6
IV. Conclusion.....	17	7

I. Introduction

1. UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) Policy¹ and its corresponding Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Framework² reflect UNHCR's strong commitment and continued investment in ensuring equal enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern. The fundamental tenet of AGD work is to adopt a community-based approach, effectively putting people of concern at the centre of all decisions that affect their lives, as well as those of their family members and communities. Community-based protection applies this approach in protection work by drawing on the knowledge, skills and experience of affected persons to identify and address key protection issues.

2. This paper presents an overview of the most recent progress made in strengthening UNHCR's community-based work, highlighting some of the key outcomes, as well as areas in need of further development.

II. Key areas of progress

3. In the last report to the Standing Committee on this subject³, UNHCR set out the activities it intended to pursue in the areas of staff expertise, learning and training, and partnerships. This section provides an overview of the progress that has been made in these and related areas of work.

A. Staff expertise, learning and training, and partnerships

4. In early 2013, UNHCR launched the AGD e-learning course. The course consists of two modules. The first module defines the AGD approach, while the second module details its implementation. The e-learning course is accompanied by two learning journals that provide additional resources and information. The course, which will become mandatory for UNHCR staff in 2013, is also open to UNVs, consultants and partner staff. Moreover, all staff members have access, through the UNHCR intranet, to a centralized listing with links to all policy and internal and external guidance material relevant to working with communities. The listing, which is updated regularly, currently contains links to some 50 key documents.

5. Participatory assessments with persons of concern have been firmly embedded into UNHCR's planning and programming. According to reporting in the 2012-2013 AGD Accountability Framework⁴, the outcomes of the participatory assessments were successfully reflected in the development of country operations' annual or emergency response budgeting, protection work and programme planning.

6. In recent years, UNHCR has intensified partnerships with national civil society organizations and networks, including faith and other community-based organizations to collaborate on issues ranging from the promotion of human rights to the provision of assistance to minority groups, persons with disabilities and other marginalised populations. Such partnerships are valuable in enhancing UNHCR's protection capacity, particularly when there are impediments to access to persons of concern or are areas of work in which partners have more extensive expertise.

¹ See Age, Gender and Diversity Policy : Working with people and communities for equality and protection, UNHCR, June 2011

² The Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Framework is recognized externally as a "cutting-edge tool". See An evaluation of the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Strategy, 2004-2009, PDES/2010/08, June 2010

³ Community Services: towards a community development approach, UNHCR , EC/62/SC/CRP.16 May 2011

⁴ See Groves 2013 'Global Analysis 2012-2013: UNHCR Accountability Frameworks for Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming'

7. UNHCR has partnered with a number of NGOs in developing guidance and training material, as well as in creating new learning opportunities, notably to enhance education about diversity in line with the AGD Policy. The following are examples this cooperation during the past two years:

- To support the implementation of Executive Committee Conclusion No.110 (LXI) (2010) and the Need to Know guidance note, *Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement* (2011), UNHCR collaborated with the Women’s Refugee Commission to deliver disability inclusion trainings for country offices and key stakeholders working on disability issues in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, and Uganda;
- Working with the Organisation for Refuge, Asylum and Migration, UNHCR coordinated the first two-day regional training event focused on the protection of LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers;
- In 2012, two further Need to Know guidance notes were issued, entitled *Working with Men and Boy Survivors of SGBV in Forced Displacement* and *Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement*. The former was developed in cooperation with the Uganda-based Refugee Law Project and the latter with HelpAge International. Both notes aim to enhance the capacity of UNHCR staff and partners to work inclusively with groups that often face marginalization within their communities and that are at risk of marginalization within humanitarian response if due care is not taken;
- In early 2013, UNHCR issued the sixth Need to Know guidance note, *Working with Urban Communities in Forced Displacement*. This note, based on a range of good practices from UNHCR and partners, provides humanitarian actors with a variety of tips on how to establish and maintain effective contact and cooperation with populations of concern residing in cities and towns; and
- UNHCR, working in cooperation with the Women’s Refugee Commission, documented the experience of UNHCR and partners in employing a community-based approach to achieve protection objectives. This project resulted in the issuance, in early 2013, of the Need to Know guidance note, *Understanding Community-Based Protection*. This note distils UNHCR and partner experience into a set of key elements for successful community-based protection interventions and highlights good practices.

8. The material in the Need to Know guidance note series has had an impact beyond building the capacity of field staff and partners. It has been used by other actors, including governments, for training purposes. In addition, it has helped strengthen the “diversity” approach in existing UNHCR guidelines in different areas, as well as in the development of new policies and materials. Work to develop self-study modules for each of the Need to Know guidance notes is ongoing. These modules, the first of which are expected to be issued in 2013, will include audio and video interviews with practitioners to bring the key principles in the guidance to life through examples of field practice.

B. Community-based protection

9. UNHCR has long understood, by virtue of first-hand experience, the value of a community-based approach in enhancing the effectiveness of its work with refugees, including its protection interventions. By way of example, efforts in a number of countries to reduce the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) would only be effective with people from the communities driving the initiatives. Activities designed to engage with traditional circumcisers have led to the identification of alternative livelihood options for them, and in some cases, have resulted in these individuals becoming among the most active anti-FGM advocates in their communities. Similarly, SGBV prevention initiatives have been significantly strengthened in communities where men and boys became actively involved and spoke out. In another example, initiatives to address the risks faced by children have proven more effective when staff are trained and invest the time to listen to children articulate the risks that they are facing at home and in their communities, as well as ways these might be reduced. During emergencies, UNHCR operations continue to

develop protection programming models which build on pre-existing partnerships with communities.

10. UNHCR also recognizes the specificity and opportunities of community-based protection work in IDP situations. The fact that IDPs remain within the borders of the countries in which they are displaced means that there is greater potential in IDP contexts for sustainability and a firmer solutions orientation to community-driven initiatives than in refugee situations. Conversely, IDPs sometimes continue to be directly affected by the root causes of displacement, which means that conflict-sensitive approaches to community-based work often need to be employed. UNHCR actively advocates for mechanisms of participation or consultation with IDPs in high-level fora, including in the drafting and adoption of laws and policies which affect them.

11. UNHCR has also actively supported the critical role played by advocacy groups formed from within stateless populations. In several situations around the world, sustained advocacy by such groups has played a major role in highlighting their plight and, in some cases, resolving their issues.

C. Field-based protection workforce review

12. The community services function has been a key driver at the field level of community-based protection work. As such, an important part of the process of strengthening this aspect of UNHCR's work has been a careful internal analysis of the role that community services function plays within the context of the broader UNHCR field protection workforce. This analysis involved interviews in 2012 and the beginning of 2013 with some thirty field-based P2 and P3 Protection Officers and Community Services Officers working in geographically and contextually diverse operations. Three key issues emerged in this analysis:

(i) The protection activities undertaken by field-based Community Services Officers and Protection Officers vary widely from operation to operation. Both functions are seeking to address key protection issues at the field level, with thematic emphasis dictated by operational context. In locations where both the Community Services Officers and Protection Officers are present in the same office, the division of labour for protection work between them varies from office to office. Where a Community Services Officer or Protection Officer is alone in a given location, they take on the responsibility for the full range of protection issues;

(ii) The majority of the field-based protection staff has some degree of direct contact with communities of concern. However, of those staff members interviewed, the Community Services Officers seem to have a clearer understanding than the Protection Officers that working with communities is integral to maximizing the positive impact of their protection work and is something for which they are functionally responsible;

(iii) A number of the Protection Officers interviewed are, for a number of reasons, not spending as much time in the field as would be optimal. Coordination and interagency work, as well as reporting, are the main tasks they cite that keep them from spending more time in the field. This has a direct impact on their ability to build the relationships and networks within communities which are so important to successful protection outcomes. In some instances this imbalance between office and field work appeared to be a result of limited human resources for protection work in light of the ever-increasing demands for coordination between the multiplicity of actors in the field. In other scenarios, the fact that Protection Officers were not able to spend more time in the field appeared to be a function of the way priorities were set and work divided within an office.

III. The way forward

A. Protection workforce adjustment

13. The ambiguity in roles between the field-based Community Services and Protection Officer functions has become increasingly pronounced over the past decade and has, in some instances, led to confusion within UNHCR offices and among partners. The one factor which continues to distinguish Community Services staff from other protection functions is their understanding that the protection work they undertake starts with communities, from the identification of needs and solutions, to the design, monitoring and evaluation of interventions. More understanding among P2 and P3 field-based Protection Officers and leadership structures is needed to ensure systematic prioritization of this aspect of their work is essential to maximizing the positive impact of protection interventions. This situation suggests that the global application in UNHCR of a community-based approach to protection needs reinforcing.

14. To address this situation, a number of steps will be taken in 2013, including:

- Field-based P2 and P3 Community Service Officer and Protection Officer functions will be merged into a single function, with the new title Protection Officer (Community-Based Protection). New job descriptions will be created for these posts and recruitment profiles for field-based protection staff will be adjusted accordingly;
- The job descriptions of managers supervising field-based protection staff will be revised to reflect the Accountabilities, Responsibilities and Authorities for community-based protection as they relate to their function;
- The core elements for staff guidance and learning in the area of community-based protection are already in place and will continue to evolve as UNHCR and its partners gain further expertise. These guidance documents and the relevant self-study modules⁵ will form the core orientation package for Protection Officers (Community-Based Protection).

B. Grounding protection within communities

15. The investments that UNHCR has made in recent years in new guidance and learning opportunities, as well as in changes to its protection workforce, are intended to more firmly ground UNHCR's protection work within the communities that the organization seeks to protect. This is expected to have a number of positive and interrelated effects, including:

- more effective and sustainable protection outcomes by identifying protection gaps through consultation and strengthening the community's capacity to address them;
- strengthened exercise of agency by individuals, families and communities of concern, contributing to the restoration of dignity, well-being and the enjoyment of human rights;
- avoidance of programmes that inadvertently exclude or cause harm to individuals, groups or communities; and
- more creative approaches to solutions.

⁵ E-learning courses: a) Age, Gender and Diversity Approach; b) SGBV; c) Best Interest Determination of the Child (BID). Essential guidance: 1) Age, Gender and Diversity: UNHCR AGD Policy; 2) The Heightened Risk Identification Tool (HRIT) and the User Guide; 3) Need to Know Guidance series (five notes); 4) Gender: UNCHR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls; 5) SGBV: Action against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: an updated Strategy; 6) Child Protection: Field Handbook for the Implementation of UNHCR BID Guidelines; 7) Education: UNHCR Education Strategy 2012-2016; 8) Community participation and mobilization: a) Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations; b) Community-Based Approach in Operations; 9) Urban areas: UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas.

16. There is also an emerging imperative to address the scenarios in which humanitarian workers are not able to engage directly with communities. Chief among these have been the security realities in a number of contemporary conflicts that place severe restrictions on humanitarian access. These situations pose enormous challenges to working in partnership with communities of concern and point to the need to develop innovative strategies to augment, often remotely, the ability of communities themselves to effect positive changes in their own environments. This work will need to include partnerships with a range of actors, including academia, to better understand the dynamics at play within communities. One of the key areas of investigation is to explore how to work with children and expand on the resilience that they often demonstrate during conflict and displacement. UNHCR intends to prioritize this area of work in the period ahead combined with the development of approaches for improving communication with communities of concern to strengthen UNHCR's Participatory Assessment methodology.

V. Conclusion

17. UNHCR is committed to partnering with the persons, families and communities who are in need of international protection. This paper has highlighted some of the most recent initiatives to strengthen the organisation's community-based work, and recognizes that this area requires on-going focus. Creating guidance and learning opportunities, revising job descriptions and changing functional titles are important steps in the right direction. However, ensuring that these changes yield the desired impact will take a concerted and sustained effort on the part of senior managers, both at headquarters and in the field, to ensure that community-based protection continues to be prioritized, which may necessitate the redistribution of tasks within offices to ensure that field-based protection staff are spending more time building the networks and relationships within communities that make community-based protection possible.
