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**Community Services: towards a community
development approach**

Contents

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I Introduction	1-3	2
II. Community services in action	4-9	2
III. Areas for improvement	10-14	3
IV. The way forward	15-26	4
A. Resources.....	16-18	4
B. Staff expertise, learning and training	19-22	5
C. Partnerships	23-25	5
D. Accountability.....	26	6
V. Conclusion	27	6

I. Introduction

1. As part of its protection policy, UNHCR pursues a community development approach. This is designed to enable staff to empower refugees and other persons of concern to the Office by working alongside them to identify and introduce measures that will make a positive difference to their life, as well as the life of their host community. The conference room paper, *Reinforcing a Community Development Approach* (EC/51/SC/CRP.6), presented to the 20th meeting of the Standing Committee in March 2001, emphasized the critical nature of this aspect of UNHCR's work, and highlighted in particular the important role of the Community Services (CS) function. UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy, developed in 2004, has therefore been designed with a robust community development component for the purpose of building on and enhancing work in this area. The overall goals are to ensure AGD equality and the enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern, while leveraging the rich range of capacities that exist within communities to help themselves.

2. Implementing a community-development approach necessitates a multifunctional team effort, bringing to bear a wide range of cross-sectoral skills in the course of the operation cycle. The CS function plays an important role in establishing a sound understanding of the situation of persons of concern on which to build effective and equitable protection strategies for all individuals and groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons and others with specific needs. This requires a specific set of skills and tools including, *inter alia*: communication, sociological mapping and analysis, and the development of practical strategies that support and strengthen the capacities identified within communities. Such work cannot be undertaken from behind a desk. CS staff must be regularly present and moving in the communities where they work in order to deepen their understanding of the dynamics at play and establish relationships of trust with individuals, groups and organizations.

3. Over the coming period, UNHCR intends to transition the CS function into one with a sharper focus on "community development". Building up a cadre of CS staff with the knowledge and skills needed to discharge this key role will require a number of steps which have already begun. This paper: provides a brief overview of some of the recent CS achievements in different regions of the world; sets out a number of challenges identified in relation to the CS function as it exists today; and describes the initiatives under way to achieve greater focus on community development and to strengthen the role of CS in UNHCR.

II. Community services in action

4. The following paragraphs briefly describe the particular contribution that CS staff make to the protection of persons of concern. This obviously needs to be seen against the background of broader protection strategies and the involvement of a wide range of staff. The design and execution of participatory assessment exercises and other community outreach activities demonstrate UNHCR's commitment to working shoulder to shoulder with persons of concern. The aim is to better understand and support the potential capacities of communities, while at the same time effectively addressing the protection-risk factors at play for diverse sectors of the population. The importance that the Office attaches to the CS function is reflected in the doubling of its CS workforce over the past decade, with a total of 235 staff in 2011 as opposed to only 100 in 2003.

5. The efforts of CS staff around the world, working closely with colleagues, partners and persons of concern, have enhanced considerably the Office's impact in promoting gender equality and the rights of women and children, as well as the rights of older persons,

persons with disabilities, and other individuals and groups that frequently face discrimination and marginalization.

6. Much work has, for instance, been initiated to collaborate with women and girls in order to strengthen the role that they are able to play at home and within their communities. In Africa, several initiatives are aimed at increasing the representation of women in leadership structures such as food distribution committees, refugee welfare councils, and peace and reconciliation processes, including those related to traditional justice. In the Asia and Pacific, and the Middle East and North Africa regions, initiatives designed to target women and girls have provided vocational and language training, general literacy training and programmes to increase awareness in relation to key health issues, including family planning, reproductive health and hygiene awareness. In the Americas, there is a strong tradition of engagement with refugee women dating back to the 1980s aimed at making programmes and protection strategies more responsive to the needs identified by them.

7. The CS function has played an important role in terms of UNHCR's work with children and adolescents to enhance both their immediate protection and future prospects. In several operations, this has contributed to the systematic monitoring and follow-up of children-at-risk, including best interest determinations (BIDs) and identification of alternative care placements for unaccompanied children. Several operations have also designed community-based mechanisms for child protection (e.g. community groups for children and adolescents as well as support groups for foster families). Providing protection through education remains a high priority. Efforts in this area have focused on community mobilization to increase enrolment in primary and secondary schools, supporting training programmes to improve teacher quality, raising awareness, and ensuring safer school environments with separate water and sanitation facilities. Multiple non-formal education initiatives for young people are also being supported, varying from literacy programmes to computer and vocational skills training.

8. In a number of operations, steps have been taken in recent years to systematically enhance capacities to identify and work with people with specific needs. In some cases, this has resulted in the drafting or amendment of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and/or the strategic use of the newly-revised Heightened Risk Identification Tool (HRIT). This has entailed working closely with persons with disabilities and older persons to better understand the risks they face, address their specific needs and identify ways to make optimum use of their capacities. The overall aim has been to improve their independence and participation in family and community life. For instance, ground-breaking work has been undertaken in the Syrian Arab Republic, where the CS team and partners have established a pilot outreach counselling centre run by some 130 trained refugees. The centre provides support to refugees with varying degrees of mental health and disability issues, including those that are related to aging.

9. In several other operations, risks to persons with disabilities and older persons have been mitigated through targeted inputs, ranging from assistive devices to inclusion in vocational training and other types of livelihood support initiatives. Through the use of deployment agreements with Save the Children Norway, Save the Children Sweden, and HelpAge International, CS experts have been deployed to a number of operations to assist in addressing protection needs for children, persons with disabilities, older persons and others with specific needs.

III. Areas for improvement

10. A number of reviews related to the CS function have been carried out over the past decade. Although the reviews vary in detail and scope, it is possible to identify four key common observations.

11. The first is that the role of the CS function is not clearly defined. This has led to confusion among staff, partners and persons of concern as to the areas of responsibility of CS staff and, on occasion, unrealistic expectations and workloads. In 2008, the Division of International Protection carried out an internal review of the CS function to map the areas and activities that CS staff are commonly expected to assume. This review was based on interviews and a field questionnaire, and 21 areas and activities were identified.

12. The second common finding is that, over the past two decades, there has been a steady decline in professional CS posts, with a tendency to create posts at the junior level. In 2002, the then Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit carried out a review: *The Community Services Function in UNHCR, An independent evaluation*, CASA Consulting (EPAU/2003/02). This evaluation noted that, between 1990 and 1994, international staff made up between 35 and 37 per cent of all CS staff. This declined to 29 per cent in 1995 and 21 per cent in 2002. As of 2011, this figure stands at 14 per cent. While the overall number of existing posts has more than doubled, the trend towards creating posts at a more junior level has continued.

13. The third common finding, linked closely to the second, is that the CS function is not accorded the same importance as other core UNHCR functions. When staff costs are being cut, CS posts are often amongst the first to be eliminated.

14. The fourth finding, linked to the lack of clarity regarding the CS function, is that CS staff are generally not fully equipped to perform the core functions expected of them. The work of CS staff has evolved over the years away from a one-to-one “social worker” model of individual counselling towards a more holistic approach to working with individuals and communities. Gaps have therefore emerged in existing skill sets.

IV. The way forward

15. In order to sharpen the focus of the CS function on community development, a reform process has been initiated. In line with the High Commissioner’s protection capacity and delivery strategy, this process aims to address four key themes: resources; staff expertise, learning and training; partnership; and accountability.

A. Resources

Focusing on core CS competencies

16. In 2011, a series of focus group discussions with senior CS, Protection and Programme staff across the world will examine the list of CS areas and activities with a view to identifying:

- areas of potential overlap with other UNHCR functions, in particular other protection and field functions; and
- areas where partners may be better positioned, under UNHCR monitoring and guidance, to undertake specific areas and activities currently seen to fall within the CS function responsibility.

17. This will help develop a new functional profile and revised standard job descriptions, and enable the functional title to be changed to better reflect the updated, streamlined role of CS. The review may also result in revisions to the existing job descriptions of other field functions in UNHCR.

Increasing professional staff in the CS workforce

18. In 2011, a five-year strategy will be developed to incrementally increase the proportion of professional posts in the CS workforce. This will be achieved through a combination of limited post creations in the Field (including at the regional level) and possible reorientation of existing field posts. Where external recruitment is appropriate, UNHCR will seek candidates with the necessary background and appropriate experience.

B. Staff expertise, learning and training

19. At present, there is no consolidated guidance material available for CS staff. To rectify this and identify any gaps, in early 2011, UNHCR began collecting all existing guidance relevant to the CS function. This will be reviewed against the new role foreseen for CS, consolidated and made available to staff in electronic form in 2012.

20. In 2010, UNHCR developed guidance on working with communities in an urban context which offers tips on cooperating with national authorities, national NGOs and other national civil society entities, international NGOs, and UN partner agencies. This will soon be supplemented with detailed modules on the education, health and livelihoods aspects of working in an urban context. This guidance will be issued in the course of 2011.

21. In 2010, UNHCR began developing a *Need to Know* booklet series on *Working with Diversity*, in partnership with external entities. These pocket-sized, concise guidance booklets aim to give further definition to the “diversity” aspect of the AGD approach, by setting out the essential aspects that field workers need to take into account when working with persons with disability, indigenous persons, as well as ethnic and sexual minorities. The first volumes in the series will be issued in 2011.

22. Work will begin in June 2011 to document good practices in the area of community development. These will be shared with all operations and will help build guidance on community development approaches. In 2012, UNHCR’s Global Learning Centre (GLC) will develop a course for CS staff to help sharpen their skills and knowledge of community development.

C. Partnerships

23. UNHCR will continue to expand its partnerships with different actors having relevant expertise. In developing diversity guidance material, for example, the Office has been cooperating with a range of partners, including Handicap International, HelpAge International, Minority Rights Group International, the Organization for Refugee Asylum and Migration, and several other specialized organizations. UNHCR currently has formal partnership agreements with the social services departments of two universities: The University of Texas in the United States of America and the Katholische Stiftungsfachhochschule München University of Applied Sciences in Germany. Both agreements have led to the temporary placement, as advisors, of Masters programme students in select UNHCR operations. UNHCR will actively pursue similar cooperation with other universities with expertise and innovative thinking, notably in developing countries.

24. In order to implement the 2010 Executive Committee Conclusion on persons of concern with disabilities,¹ UNHCR has been exploring options with an NGO partner with

¹ Conclusion on refugees with disabilities and other persons with disabilities protected and assisted by UNHCR, October 2010 (A/AC.96/1095, para. 13)

specific expertise in this area. It is anticipated that under a pilot scheme, an expert will be deployed to one or more operations to provide training and guidance on mainstreaming disability issues into operational planning and implementation. Using as a basis the paper entitled: *Working with Persons with Disability in Displacement*, issued by UNHCR in May 2011, the expert would focus on assisting operations to involve all sectors in mainstreaming disability throughout the operation cycle. Collaboration would be strengthened with older displaced persons and those with disabilities, as well as with national actors focused on disability issues, including national organizations. This should help develop an incremental strategy to strengthen UNHCR's mainstreaming of disability issues into operations globally.

25. National NGOs possess a wealth of expertise in the area of community development. In 2011, UNHCR will work to identify national NGO partners and other national actors who could cooperate in developing guidance and learning materials. The Office will also seek further cooperation on community development work with organizations such as UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA and the World Bank.

D. Accountability

26. UNHCR's AGDM strategy, in place since 2006, holds senior managers accountable for ensuring that an age, gender and diversity sensitive approach, including the community development dimension, is systematically applied in all operations and by all staff. This includes ensuring that CS staff are fully supported to undertake their role in developing an in-depth understanding of the populations with whom they work, and ensuring that this knowledge drives planning and implementation.

V. Conclusion

27. The work of CS staff around the world is key to UNHCR's efforts to build sound and equitable protection strategies for all individuals and groups of people of concern to the Office. Investing resources to refine and strengthen the CS function is therefore a strategic move to enhance the overall quality of the work of UNHCR and its partners.
