



Evaluating child protection

Recent allegations concerning the involvement of humanitarian workers in the sexual exploitation of young people in West Africa have underlined the need for more effective approaches to the protection of refugee children.

A new and independent evaluation of UNHCR's efforts in this area, commissioned by the organisation's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) a year before the allegations of sexual exploitation hit the headlines, identifies the challenges which lie ahead.

According to the evaluation, which was undertaken by a multidisciplinary and multinational team of experts, UNHCR has introduced strong policies and guidelines on the protection of refugee children. The agency has also created a specialised unit and a variety of posts which are dedicated to children's issues, established standby arrangements with agencies such as the Norwegian and Swedish chapters of Save the Children, and introduced a comprehensive follow-up strategy to the Graça Machel Study on the impact of armed conflict on children.

Despite these efforts, the report explains, UNHCR's operational performance in relation to the protection of young people continues to be inconsistent at best. As the report concludes, "children, half of the organisation's population of concern, are often overlooked and considered on the sidelines of core protection and assistance work."

How, then, has this situation arisen?

The evaluation team, which visited nine different field operations in the course of a year-long review, acknowledges that UNHCR often works in very difficult operational environments, and that it has had to contend with chronic funding constraints. At the same time, the evaluation report sug-

gests that a number of organisational issues have impeded the effective implementation of UNHCR's policy.

Accountability. Previous evaluation recommendations relating to the protection of refugee children have not been utilised. While refugee children have been designated a 'policy priority', this has not always been reflected in operational terms. And too many other policy priorities compete for the attention and resources of the organisation's field offices.

Mainstreaming. There continues to be an assumption that UNHCR's traditional sectoral activities address the needs of refugee children. The community services and education functions, which have particular relevance to refugee children, have been undersupported. Training in child protection issues has not reached the frontline national staff who have the most regular contact with refugees.

Protection in practice. There is a limited understanding of the way that UNHCR can operationalise the rights of the refugee child. More situational analysis is required to identify and address the protection problems that arise in specific locations. And the social aspects of child protection, as opposed to the more familiar issues of legal and physical protection, require more systematic attention.

Addressing these constraints to the effective protection of refugee children promises to be a challenging task for UNHCR. Indeed, the evaluation presents no fewer than 43 recommendations, involving a wide range of organisational issues: policy dissemination, management account-

ability, training, capacity building, the role of specialised staff and partnership with other organisations.

The report also makes proposals for change in relation to specific aspects of child protection: the registration of refugee children, sexual violence and exploitation, formal and non-formal education, the prevention of military recruitment and the situation of unaccompanied and separated children.

UNHCR's Senior Coordinator for Refugee Children has been undertaking a detailed review of these recommendations, which will be incorporated into a plan of action. At the same time, a senior staff member has been assigned to ensure that the agency's response to the evaluation on refugee children is effectively coordinated with its follow-up to two other important reviews: an assessment of the implementation of UNHCR's policy and guidelines on refugee women, and an independent evaluation of the community services function in UNHCR.

EPAU will bring you further news of these initiatives in forthcoming editions of Forced Migration Review.

1. 'Meeting the rights and protection needs of refugee children: an independent evaluation of the impact of UNHCR's activities' by Valid International, May 2002. The report can be accessed at the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Page of the UNHCR website, www.unhcr.ch, or can be ordered in hard copy from hqep00@unhcr.ch.

2. The first of these reports was undertaken by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, with support from the US and Canadian governments and EPAU. It is available at www.womenscommission.org/reports/pdf/unhcr2002.pdf. The latter will be published by EPAU later in 2002.

This is a regular page of news and debate from UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU). For further information, or suggestions regarding this regular feature, contact Jeff Crisp, head of EPAU. Email CRISP@unhcr.ch