

Strengthening the voices of refugees in UNHCR planning

by Leslie Groves

Diversity among refugee and IDP populations is often overlooked. Through its Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Strategy, UNHCR is working to ensure that persons of concern receive equal opportunities to access UNHCR services, regardless of age, sex and background.

When communities are displaced, women, young people, the elderly and minorities are often marginalised. They seldom get a chance to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives, which can put them at greater risk of harm.

Three evaluations of UNHCR's work with refugee women and children and UNHCR's community services concluded that the agency did not have enough direct, systematic contact with persons of concern. They reported low participation by refugees in UNHCR programmes, particularly among women and children, a lack of coordination

among protection, programme and community services staff, an absence of analysis with partners and an overall lack of accountability. Programmes were fragmented and age and gender issues not addressed in an integrated way.

UNHCR accepted the need to discuss directly with refugee women, men, girls and boys the protection risks they face, the underlying causes and proposed solutions and the capacities of the refugee community to address these issues and to ensure these discussions helped shape UNHCR's response strategies. In 2004, UNHCR introduced a pilot gender

and age mainstreaming project in 14 countries which included:

- participatory assessment with groups of refugee/internally displaced girls, boys and women of different ages
- workshops with staff and partners to integrate findings into organisational planning
- use of multi-functional teams – bringing together programme, community services and protection staff – to implement policies on refugee women and children through a rights- and community-based approach
- placing accountability for in-country age and gender mainstreaming with the Country Representative, UNHCR's most senior staff member in-country.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence specialist Beth Martin sensitising IDP women on sexual violence, Garsila camp, West Darfur.



In April 2005, the pilot project was evaluated with assistance from staff from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and Jesuit Refugee Services. They recommended that mainstreaming continue in the eight countries evaluated and be rolled out widely across UNHCR. Their recommendations have been acted upon. The methodology has been broadened to cover diversity of background, as well as age and gender. Annual participatory assessment exercises have been made compulsory. Responsibility for the roll-out of the methodology to all UNHCR country operations is gradually being handed over from technical specialists to staff of UNHCR's regional bureaux. Fifty-five UNHCR and three NGO staff, trained as facilitators, will train country staff who will in turn facilitate in-country participatory assessments, follow-up workshops and age, gender and diversity analysis in their own country operations.

By April 2006, multi-functional teams in 52 countries – joined, in most cases, by government, UN and NGO partner agencies – had conducted participatory assessments with separate groups of males and females aged 10-13 and 14-17, 18-40 and over the age of 40. Discussion focused on education, livelihoods, security and protection risks. Analysis of findings is underpinning formulation of UNHCR's Country Operations Plans and includes targeted action to protect the rights of groups suffering from discrimination. An electronic 'community of practice' enables staff to discuss challenges, share good practice and get support from colleagues. An accountability mechanism is also being developed.

Impact

Although some countries were already working on gender awareness issues, a large number of staff report that they now look at issues affecting women, men, girls and boys more systematically. By jointly analysing the causes behind the protection risks facing persons of concern, as well as identifying their capacities and skills, the multi-functional teams have been better able to prioritise

responses and find appropriate solutions in a participatory manner.

Some concrete examples of impact on work practices are:

- Improved protection and programming, including advocacy: In Colombia, planning modules have been modified to incorporate differences by age, gender and other determinants of diversity. In Colombia, Greece, India, Syria and Venezuela, age, gender and diversity mainstreaming has been added to staff work objectives. In Kakuma, Kenya, refugee men report that they have noted "a lot of changes" since the initiative, notably in terms of improved camp security and follow-up on reported security concerns. In Ecuador, a community income generation initiative – established as a result of the assessments – has given refugees a sense of empowerment: "Now we can earn a living and show that we are not just taking from society but giving and creating jobs. This helps combat discrimination."
- Improved partnership and team-working: In Ecuador, government counterparts now employ women to interview women asylum seekers and implementing partners are required to consider age and gender mainstreaming within their proposals. In Syria, a partner reports that they no longer decide 'for' but 'with' refugees.
- Greater engagement with people of concern: Staff in India, Zambia and Benin have held more meetings with women and report that more women have been encouraged to take on leadership roles.
- Improved communication and outreach: In India and Syria, reception centres have been altered to allow greater privacy for different groups; in India, separate reception areas have been built for women, children and elderly people. Persons of concern interviewed in different countries said that they now have a better awareness of UNHCR's mandate and capacity.
- Greater awareness of protection risks, domestic violence and

sexual exploitation (particularly of adolescent girls) and the need to improve protection for the physically and mentally disabled and minority groups and to improve information and communication flows.

UNHCR has also learned the:

- value of learning by doing: instead of age, gender and diversity issues being seen as an 'add-on' or as the domain of specialists, the methodology has placed the voices of diverse persons of concern directly at the centre of the annual planning cycle. Staff have been able to see for themselves the impact of age, gender and diversity power relations.
- need to simultaneously use interlinking and mutually reinforcing mechanisms
- need to engage senior management support: support from the High Commissioner downwards has been crucial in the prompt response to the evaluations, facilitating roll-out and ensuring that participatory assessment with diverse groups became a mandatory country planning requirement
- importance of enthusiastic, committed and skilled staff who value the participatory assessment tool as a way to re-connect with persons of concern
- importance of partnerships: sustained donor and NGO interest has been vital in monitoring the process and providing financial and technical support.

"UNHCR's age and gender mainstreaming process is a historic opportunity to ensure refugee women and children's place in the decision-making process from the beginning. They are the experts on what will work best to improve their lives and protect their rights and we applaud UNHCR for taking this important new step. We look forward to seeing real changes in the lives of refugee women and children worldwide." Dale Buscher, director of the Women's Commission protection and participation programme.

Challenges

UNHCR's age, gender and diversity mainstreaming initiative involves massive organisational change, the difficulties of which should not be underestimated. Issues such as children's rights, women's empowerment, education, livelihoods, security and rights-based and community development approaches are being addressed, not with case studies and theories but directly as colleagues come together – often for the first time – to discuss concepts and practices in a non-hierarchical framework.

The initiative is additionally attempting to strengthen relations between UNHCR and persons of concern and between UNHCR and partners, to address the organisation's fragmented working methods – both in Geneva and in the field – and to improve accountability and leadership.

Key challenges are:

- ensuring resources are available to support the recommended five-day participatory assessment and to sustain the multi-functional team approach – in a context where a) staff cannot even meet the immediate needs of the daily queues of persons of concern, let alone find out what the additional needs of diverse groups may be or b) sweeping funding cuts are being implemented across UNHCR
- incorporating the approach into immediate post-emergency work
- regularly reinforcing staff members' understanding of the complexities of the root causes of discrimination, in order to transform working practices in a sustainable manner
- ensuring follow-up and consolidation of learning without using scarce resources on further workshops and training

- sustaining the engagement of partners and persons of concern through participatory planning, feedback and regular engagement.

It is still early days but it is clear that the initiative has brought UNHCR staff closer to UNHCR's persons of concern, improved staff understanding of issues, provided a structured approach which has helped prioritise action, strengthened cooperation among staff and with partners and made UNHCR leadership more accountable. Sustained support from senior management, donors, NGOs and all UNHCR staff is now needed to overcome the many obstacles to consistent, committed and effective mainstreaming of age, gender and diversity principles.

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