

October 2016

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The role of community centres in offering protection: UNHCR and Al Ghaith Association in Yemen

Nicolas Martin-Achard and Al Ghaith Association

Community centres play an important role in offering protection for displaced communities, particularly for members of those communities who have specific needs. Somali refugees in Yemen formed the Al Ghaith Association and are now running their own community centres to support fellow refugees. Below, UNHCR and Al Ghaith discuss their approaches.

Community centres and their protection role

Nicolas Martin-Achard

In situations of forced displacement, the ties which hold a community together are often severely weakened or broken. Maintaining the social fabric of displaced communities and promoting their peaceful coexistence with host communities can therefore be highly challenging in the different settings refugees find themselves in – both in urban and in rural settings, where they either live alongside their hosts or in camps. Refugees may struggle to find safe spaces where they can gather, may lack information and help, and may not have access to work where they could use their skills and capacities to support themselves, all of which limit their ability to participate in decisions affecting their lives and to protect themselves as individuals and as a community. These challenges are particularly acute for marginalised groups and people with specific needs.

As part of its work to try to address these challenges, UNHCR works with local communities to support community centres or establish new ones – safe public spaces where women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds can meet for social events, recreation, education and livelihood programmes, information exchange, and other purposes.¹

While the preferred option is to ensure that refugees are able to access, use and meaningfully engage in existing local community centres, this may not always be possible (for example, where refugees live in remote areas). In such cases, refugees may be supported in initiating and running their own

community centres. In some other instances, such as during the initial stages of emergency responses, neither option may be feasible and UNHCR or a partner organisation – in consultation with the community – may have to undertake the initial management of the community centre; in this scenario, the plan would be to gradually hand over this task to local organisations or refugee groups, as in the case of Al Ghaith.

When Somali refugees first settled in camps in Yemen, UNHCR started running community centres out of former military buildings. The centres were later managed by partner NGOs. Meanwhile, some of the Somali refugees started organising themselves and initially provided computer classes for members of their community, with used computers they had acquired. They eventually created their own association, Al Ghaith, and gradually got more involved in running activities at the centres. When the partnership between UNHCR and the NGOs ended, Al Ghaith took over management of the community centres themselves, designing and implementing their own annual plans, with financial support from UNHCR.

Sustainability

Promoting sustainability is usually the main challenge faced by operations supporting community centres, which often incur high running costs, including rent, utilities and staffing. Some community centres managed by local NGOs or refugee groups have found ways to generate income in order to reduce

their dependency on external funding. In Egypt, a Syrian refugee women's association managing community centres is running a successful catering business for local Egyptians and Syrians alike. The food is prepared by women in the centre. In addition, the association charges a small fee for skills training and for the use of their kindergarten. Fees are waived for the most at-risk families. Similarly, a committee of persons with disabilities running a community centre in Kigeme camp in Rwanda generates income through screenings of football matches and renting of rooms for events.

Security and protection

At the heart of UNHCR's community-based approach to protection is mobilising and building on the capacities of refugee populations so as to preserve and promote their dignity, self-esteem, and productive and creative potential. Community centres can be a key resource in promoting peaceful coexistence through joint activities where both refugees and host communities come together. In Lebanon, for example, refugees and local people both serve on management committees of community centres. In Nepal,

early childhood development centres in the refugee camps are used by locals as well. In settings where host communities and authorities may be unwelcoming, the ability to gather gives refugees a sense of belonging and security, especially persons with disabilities, older persons, unaccompanied and separated children or others who may be particularly marginalised or at risk.

Having access to a wide variety of services and programmes that cater to people of different ages, genders and diversity profiles in the same location is particularly convenient for refugees whose mobility may be hampered by distance, transportation costs or security concerns. Community centres in some contexts also work closely with networks of community volunteers/workers, who can use the centres as their offices, and through their outreach work will spread information about the community centres – and the services provided – in remote areas and to persons with limited mobility.

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1. See the community-based protection practitioners section on UNHCR Exchange www.unhcrexchange.org/communities/9159

Knowing one's own community

Al Ghaith Association

As they say, "necessity is the mother of invention". "Necessity" inspired us to set up our refugee association, Al Ghaith. We, as refugees, observed that there was a gap, and to fill that gap we needed to play our role in serving our community. While UNHCR makes efforts to protect the refugees, it cannot cover all the needs of the refugee community in all aspects of life. It is based on this that we thought about forming an association. After long discussion and meticulous deliberation and planning, we founded Al Ghaith.

Our agreed objectives defined our targets and the categories of people we serve, not to mention the areas of community development on which we should focus our efforts. Being ourselves members of this community, we came to know our weaknesses and strengths

and worked together on a common task to meet the needs in our community. Through needs assessment and focus group discussions with different groups, we identified the need to support people with specific needs – including older persons, the very poor and orphans – as our main priority.

We furthermore manage the donations we receive to make sure we target these categories of people with the aim of improving food security while also focusing on education as a protection tool. We have also identified and recruited qualified members of the community to become teachers, guards and cleaners at our centres and facilities, thereby creating some sources of income.

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The main challenges we have faced with regard to sustainability were the budget constraints. As Al Ghaith members we are working with very limited resources. Despite the support of UNHCR we are still unable to meet all the needs of our community, and the lack of proper facilities or equipment affects our ability to organise some recreational activities in the community centres such as football, basketball and music or to provide spaces as gyms and playgrounds.

While Al Ghaith would technically be able to respond to the needs of the community in different sectors, funding those activities remains a challenge. This is why we are currently focusing our efforts mainly on capacity building of the refugee community.

Promoting harmony

The way the community has been given the opportunity to manage the centre is remarkable and has had a big impact. The list of our needs is long but, on the other hand, we have succeeded in continuing our social activities regardless of all the difficulties that we have encountered. We give everyone the chance to discover new, hidden talents and then improve them through indoor and outdoor activities – through games, music-making, workshops and awareness-raising sessions. And we have enabled our community to socialise at the community centres by encouraging affection and harmony among the community members.

Al Ghaith Association

