

Unity in diversity – the One UN, UNHCR and Rwanda

by Tim Maurer

Rwanda is one of eight countries chosen to pilot the 'One UN' concept. In an impoverished nation shaped by displacement, there are currently 16 UN agencies. The challenges of 'Delivering as One' – and tackling inefficiency, fragmentation and inter-agency competition for resources – are daunting.

'Unity in Diversity' is the slogan and guiding principle of the One UN team in Rwanda. In April 2007 all resident and some non-resident UN agencies signed up to an ambitious schedule for the implementation of 'One Programme', 'One Budgetary Framework', 'One Leader' and 'One Office' endorsed by the Government of Rwanda.¹

What does this mean for the people of concern to UNHCR in a country hosting some 50,000 refugees – predominantly Congolese – and still facing the challenge of its refugee past and the aftermath of the turbulent events triggered by the 1994 genocide?

Once the 'One UN'/'Delivering as One' reform has been implemented,

there are a number of outcomes that could significantly enhance refugee protection. The creation of national asylum systems, effective returnee monitoring mechanisms and prevention of new refugee movements are fields where the One UN reform has significant potential. In protracted refugee situations such as Rwanda the link between development and refugee issues is obvious. Prospects for durable solutions, in particular local integration, could be enhanced by long-term strategies. A stronger link between development projects and refugee assistance might reduce the kind of discrepancies between services available to refugees and surrounding communities which often have potential to stir up xenophobic resentments. One

Programme could forge closer coordination and cooperation among UNHCR and other agencies. Property restitution – always a destabilising factor in post-conflict post-displacement situations – could be more coherently tackled by a One UN thematic group bringing together several UN agencies such as UNDP, FAO and UNHCR. In crosscutting sectors such as water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS, the environment or education, the One UN reform offers opportunities for agencies such as UNHCR to focus on the value added by each agency's individual specific expertise and to avoid duplication.

The UN family in Rwanda already has a common security policy. Using synergies by sharing fuel, travel, garage, office and transport facilities has been identified to further enhance effectiveness. At present, resources cannot be used jointly since the UNHCR office in Kigali is located a few kilometres away from the other UN agencies. Having joint premises and sharing resources in the capital

*Kigeme
refugee camp,
Rwanda, 2006.*



and in the field would increase effectiveness, reduce overheads and mainstream teamwork into everyday work. Reduction of duplication and transaction costs would enable greater transparency, harmonisation of procurement, administration and finance, and a better performance of a results-based management.

Might 'One UN' endanger protection?

There are a number of potentially negative outcomes of the One UN reform, particularly for principles of impartiality and neutrality. In the case of UNHCR, this concerns its special mandate based on the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol and its independence of action

“ownership, comparative advantage and maximum effectiveness and accountability.” To what degree will a One UN be able to take into account the rights reserved for specific groups such as refugees and asylum seekers? It is not clear how safeguards such as the principle of *non-refoulement* can continue to be guaranteed given that the process is government-owned, -signed and -driven.

In order that government ownership does not compromise the impartiality and neutrality of the UN, the systematic integration of the principles outlined in the UN Charter, international conventions and international law will be crucial. The One UN Concept Paper in Rwanda

takes the lead in representing the UN system. Ultimately, the neutrality of the UN is preserved by reminding governments of their primary responsibilities and obligations derived from international treaties as well as international customary law.

When the UN speaks with one voice through One Leader, advocacy could be more effective than when a single UN agency raises issues of concern with governments. In the case of the Security Council's denunciation of repeated recruitment of refugee children from Rwandan camps, for example, a strengthened 'One UN' system might be more effective in producing results on the ground.

Given the chequered history of the UN in Rwanda, successful roll-out of the One UN reform would project a strong signal and a step forward not only for Rwanda but the entire troubled Great Lakes region. The reform has the support of the donor community which is now united in calling – via the Paris Declaration process² – for more accountability, transparency and effectiveness in the aid system. Expectations are high. Success will depend on the in-house capacity and willingness to view this process as an opportunity for the UN system as a whole rather than to the advantage of a single agency only. Particular caution ought to be exercised in regard to the integration of human rights. It is up to the UN to prove if it is capable of Delivering as One or if the danger of becoming marginalised will prevail. The success or the failure of the One UN reform is first and foremost in the hands of the UN itself.

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to guarantee the protection of people at risk of *refoulement*. In the greater picture these concerns centre on a rights-based approach. Moustapha Soumaré, the UN Resident Coordinator in Kigali, stated during the signing ceremony of the One UN Concept Paper that the reform is based on principles of

outlines its vision that “The UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the seven core conventions, provide overall guidance to the UN system in Rwanda.” Much will depend on how the One Leader role is implemented and what role human rights will play once the Resident Coordinator

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the UN.

1 'One UN: 'Delivering as One' in Rwanda; Concept Paper', Office of the Resident Coordinator, April 2007. www.undg.org/docs/7100/0One%20UN%20Concept%20Paper%20-%20Signing%20version.pdf

2 www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html