



# Building on the past, rebuilding the future: older refugees and the challenge of survival

by Jacinta Goveas

Refugee movements project vivid images of people, all their worldly possessions being carried, sad tired faces, swollen feet, dragging themselves along a long road to an uncertain future. Less often seen are the thousands of exhausted older refugees<sup>1</sup> struggling to keep up, tense and bewildered. What does their absence say about what we see and how we see them? What are the consequences when we ignore the contributions which older refugees can make?

According to UNHCR's report to the Standing Committee in 2000, entitled 'Older Refugees: Looking Beyond the International Year of Older Persons', older refugees form a much larger proportion of the UNHCR caseload than is usually acknowledged, ie approximately 8.5% of the overall population. This figure may even be higher than 30% for some caseloads.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these older persons are women.

When 1999 was declared as the International Year of Older Persons agencies scrambled to demonstrate that older people were represented in all aspects of their work. Beautiful photography and artwork, policies and best practices appeared to remind us that crises know no age barrier. As a result of the work done during that year, the UN finally developed a Policy on Older Refugees, recognising that though they were always present in refugee crises they were rarely visible.

When it comes to addressing the needs of older refugees, programming options are often limited. Most agency staff are conscious of the shortage of time, the enormity of the issues facing refugees, scarcity of funding, and pressure from donors and host governments to show results. UNHCR has developed the People-Oriented Planning framework,<sup>3</sup> which is meant to reveal a snapshot of refugee communities and their gender and age composition in order to ensure that programmes effectively address needs

while reflecting refugees' traditions and cultural practices. However, emergency situations tend to put all the best of intentions on the back burner. *Ad hoc* arrangements tend to become the norm.

In order to ensure that immediate needs are met effectively, community structures emerge. These structures are generally set up by the aid agencies in order to facilitate easier distribution of material assistance. They are usually not the structures that the refugee communities themselves use. Field surveys in several refugee situations attest to the fact that these structures even fail to ensure that the needs of all refugees are met equally. Predictably it is the most vulnerable, especially those who are unaccompanied, who get marginalised. Older refugees and those who are alone are very aware of the vulnerability of their situation. However, like most other refugees they hesitate to seek help or complain, or to report theft of property, their concerns

*Older teacher keeps a group of Saharawi refugee children busy in Samara Camp, Tindouf, Algeria.*

about security or their health needs, fearing that to do so would reflect on their communities.

There is a major tension between maximising results (and writing them up in reports) and actually using principles set out in agency documents and best practice guides. These manuals require that all staff must first learn about the community: their age, gender and ethnic characteristics, the causes of their displacement, their survival strategies and what binds them as a community.

### Agency assumptions

A kind of neo-colonialism permeates the delivery of assistance and protection. International agencies tend to import their own organisational and cultural practices. Most staff either come from or are trained in countries far from those where refugees originate or have sought refuge. The concept of 'field work' is as ambiguous and foreign as the language and cultures of the people they work with. This attitude is also reflected in how older refugees are perceived in terms of tangible and measurable social 'usefulness'. Western emphasis on utility is at odds with the new and emerging consciousness of the need to 'be', a dominant feature of most non-Western cultures, particularly with regard to older people.

Refugee situations are often seen as opportunities to introduce new practices (such as empowerment of women, livelihoods skills and new health practices) and to challenge such harmful old ones as female genital mutilation. While agencies acknowledge that initiatives are more likely to be sustainable if communities are involved at all levels, it is common to perceive all older people as obstacles to change. The basic premise underlining this attitude is that anything old will keep the community from progress; only new ways will move them forward and will signify progress.

Another common assumption is that nothing is possible without the benevolent presence of international and national agencies. While this may be true when it comes to the provision of material assistance and protection, there are many other ways in which communities are able to sustain their sense of self. In the endless succession of agency reports and surveys

focusing on capacity building it is rare to find any recognition that refugees belong to communities with histories, traditions, beliefs and practices.

Also of concern is what I would call the 'racialisation of emergency responses'. The refugee crises which brought older refugees onto agency radar screens were in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Here there were people with lifestyles and expectations very different from those of the 'traditional' African or Asian refugee. They were used to receiving more institutional assistance and were more clearly able to articulate their needs and demand assistance. Resources were made available to assist them and agencies were willing to speak up and ensure that their needs were identified and addressed. As a result of this interest and level of funding, the special needs and concerns of specific groups of refugees were brought to the attention of the donor community and service providers.

### Towards consultation, inclusion and empowerment

If refugee agencies are genuinely committed to partnership with older refugees there are many questions they need to ask themselves. How do we interpret needs? Who interprets for whom? What form does consultation take? Who consults whom? How? Who is included? In what? Who decides who needs to be included? Who decides who is left out?

Agency staff need to realise that, while most cultures venerate older people as founts of wisdom and repositories of knowledge, those who work in refugee situations can all too readily assume that old people are a burden, one more worry for the community to have to contend with. Agencies need not only to stop looking for ways to 'deal' with the 'problem' of older refugees but also to cease regarding them as 'very vulnerable', a group of incapable people who need to 'be taken care of' and 'managed'.

How can we put refugee communities in the driving seat? The most effective way would be to use the basic principles of community development, to examine the capacity of communities to identify their own concerns, issues and needs, and to work with agencies. Effective community-building initiatives must acknowledge that the

refugee situation is not 'normal' and that older people have a crucial role to play in re-building 'community'.

Agencies can support refugees in maintaining their traditions and culture in order to create better conditions for the refugees to return home to. If refugee agencies are sincere in their desire to use community development principles, there must be changes not only in the attitudes of individual staff but also in organisational culture. The role and place of every community member, and refugees' inherent right to determine the path of their own lives, have to be acknowledged and celebrated.

The loss of community, history and tradition leaves people without a context within which to exist. In situations of uprootedness a community-based focus which builds on their history and knowledge not only maintains well-being but also enables refugees to draw on traditions to sustain their sense of self and hope for the future. Older refugees should play a key role in this process. They have the knowledge, skill and ability to hold communities together. They can draw on many past experiences and memories to remind their people that they have surmounted other difficulties and survived. To exclude them or minimise their contributions is a loss not just to the communities but also to agencies which claim to be helping them.

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1. The World Health Organisation definition of an older person is a person over 60 years of age. However, given the different circumstances of people's life situations, the application of the UNHCR policy respects factors such as life expectancy and cultural norms that differ from region to region.
2. UNHCR statistics usually focus on recognised, registered refugees and, in some instances, on IDPs. In reality, however, there are a fair number of legitimate refugees and internally displaced who may not get counted.
3. UNHCR developed a framework for working with refugees called People-Oriented Planning (POP) in the early 90s, primarily to ensure that issues related to gender were recorded and addressed. However, the framework is a useful tool to develop an effective snapshot of the entire refugee population and can be adapted and expanded quite easily to include other areas of relevant information. Over the years, hundreds of UNHCR, partner agency and government staff all over the world have been trained both in the principles and practice of POP and in training others in its use. The framework has been going through a revamping over the last few years.