

Developing guidelines for the protection of older people in humanitarian emergencies

by V Vijayakumar

The international community's recent commitment to addressing the issues facing older people, reflected in the designation of 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, has begun to influence the work of humanitarian agencies.

UNHCR, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Red Cross Movement and HelpAge International are among those who have attempted to incorporate programmes and policies directed towards older people, to develop training modules and best practice guidelines and to consult older people in programme design.

UNHCR's policy has been formulated in the hope that 'future efforts on behalf of older persons will have become so well integrated into all aspects of protection and programme planning and implementation that a separate policy on Older Refugees will cease, in time, to be necessary'.¹ It can be argued that policy responses arising from the recognition of the needs of older refugees have only taken a few relevant variables into consideration. Have best practice guidelines been formulated only on the basis of one or two studies? Is UNHCR's policy on Older Refugees therefore misconceived?

An effective and meaningful policy perspective for international agencies, national governments and NGOs can be developed only by analysing individual population movements and by addressing the specific needs of the older people under those conditions. There is a need to consider:

- older refugees in protracted refugee situations
- older immigrants in developed countries
- older IDPs
- older people in other humanitarian emergencies.

Protracted refugee situations and resettled refugee situations provide the best opportunities to meaningfully identify and address the needs of older refugees. Needs to be identified may include: i) psychosocial well-being; ii) post-traumatic stress disorder; iii) failing health and medical assistance; iv) opportunities to practise religious beliefs; v) education vi) language skills; vii) transportation; viii) caregivers; (ix) malnutrition; (x) leisure and recreation; (xi) involvement in community work, and others. Agencies need to go beyond the 'basic needs approach' and address empowerment issues by enabling older people to participate in decision making and use their skills in income-generating projects and day-to-day camp management.

Particular responses to older refugees within a restricted right conferred under Article 24(1)(b) of the Convention on the Status of Refugees and other older people under Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as under Principle 4(2) of the Guiding Principles (developed by the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons) could be meaningfully

addressed only under these circumstances. It may also be possible to invoke other international Human Rights instruments to protect the rights of the older displaced people.

While it is necessary to address the special needs of older refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers, it is the protracted nature of long-term refugee and resettlement situations which allows sufficient time to properly get to know older people, their needs and capacities. We need a holistic approach which takes into consideration the importance and relevance of all players, including the refugee communities. Comparative analyses are required to identify common factors and ways of addressing them and in developing good practices.

What is needed is a much wider consultation process involving international agencies, national governments, academics and the media. This would, in turn, facilitate the development of more appropriate public policy by resettlement states, international agencies and the NGOs, prevent duplication and promote more effective cooperation and coordination.

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1. 'Older Refugees: Looking Beyond the International Year of Older Persons', UNHCR, 7 February 2000, Standing Committee Document symbol: EC/50/SC/CRP.8. Also see www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/print?tbl=EXCOM&id=3ae68d0f8

- resettled older refugees in developed countries and their needs
- repatriated older refugees in their country of origin