

Local integration: a durable solution for refugees?

by Ana Low

UNHCR supports local integration as one possible solution for refugees who cannot return home. Experience in Mexico, Uganda and Zambia indicates that integration can benefit refugee-hosting communities as well as refugees.

Economically integrated refugees contribute to development of the host country rather than constituting a 'burden'. They become progressively less reliant on state aid or humanitarian assistance and better able to support themselves. Social and cultural interactions between refugees and local communities enable refugees to live amongst or alongside the host population, without discrimination or exploitation and as contributors to local development. Local integration policies can grant refugees a progressively wider range of rights and entitlements generally commensurate with those enjoyed by local citizens. These include freedom of movement, access to education and the labour market, access to public services and assistance, including health facilities, the possibility of acquiring and disposing of property and the capacity to travel with valid documentation. Over time the process should lead to permanent residence rights and perhaps ultimately the acquisition of citizenship in the country of asylum.¹

In all three countries host governments have worked with UNHCR to promote self-sufficiency, legal integration and repatriation for:

- the 46,000 Guatemalan refugees fleeing military persecution who arrived in Mexico in the 1980s.
- many of the estimated 230,262 refugees (80% of them Sudanese) living in Uganda. In 1998 a Self-Reliance Strategy in three of the eight refugee-host-

ing districts was launched to improve the standard of living and access to services of both refugees and members of host communities. It was expanded in 2004 and is to be reviewed in 2007.²

- the large populations of refugees from Angola, DRC, Burundi and Rwanda living in Zambia. [The Zambia Initiative was described in FMR24.³]

The Mexican government did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention



During activities organised by UNHCR and partners, refugee children draw to express what they like and don't like about living in Mexico.

until 2000 and had no strategies for integrating refugees locally into the population. However, the government did grant nationality to a large number of Guatemalan refugees and refugee children born in Mexico. In contrast, both Uganda and Zambia designed strategies – with UNHCR, implementing partners and donor countries – to foster the development of both refugee and host communities, allowing a certain amount of local integration for refugees through contact with the host community. Neither country, however, has a legal framework for integration or allows refugees to gain citizenship.

Nevertheless, both Uganda and Zambia have prepared draft legislation which offers the possibility of naturalisation for refugees who cannot return home.

In Mexico, refugees arriving in the state of Chiapas were offered land if they agreed to relocate to refugee settlements in other states where services could be provided. In most cases the refugees became at least partially self-reliant. In the case of Uganda, government provision of land enabled a move from refugee camps to refugee settlements, allowing refugees to become self-reliant and selling produce in local markets. Locals have been given access to services in the settlements, fostering social interaction and integration. Zambia also provided arable land for refugees. As in Uganda, they produce enough food for themselves and to sell on the open market, thus building economic links with the local communities.

In Mexico, refugees have the right to work but only once they have either immigration or naturalisation documents. Microfinance was available but only within settlements. In practice refugees often worked illegally on nearby farms and the government turned a blind eye. Uganda allows refugees free access to the employment market. While jobs are scarce for everybody living in Uganda, refugees now have a better chance of becoming self-reliant and locally integrated than those dependent on credit schemes or services provided in camps and settlements. Zambia does not generally allow refugees to work but allows skilled workers access to the national labour market.

Mexico's revolving communal credit schemes – Cajas Comunales de Crédito (CCC) – were particularly successful. Many refugee

beneficiaries applied for credit which they used to set up income-generating projects within their local communities. Zambia has supported agricultural micro-finance schemes. A scheme initiated in 2003 has provided credit to some 120,000 refugees and locals, allowing for a 25% increase in the amount of land cultivated per family. By investing their loans and through their own hard work, the community – refugees and locals – now produce enough food for domestic consumption plus a surplus which they market. Not only has the community become self-reliant but it also earns three times more money than before the initiative.

In Mexico refugee children had their own primary schools in the settlements. Integration was not fostered through joint schooling although older refugee children could attend local high schools. In Uganda, the Jesuit Refugee Service is responsible for running schools in refugee settlements to which local children also have access. Integration is facilitated as refugee children come into contact with local children and locals have improved access to educational services. In Zambia, refugee chil-

dren have unrestricted access not only to primary schools but also – a rare thing in refugee situations – to secondary and tertiary education. Under the Zambia Initiative, UNHCR and bilateral donors provided significant financial support to the education sector, enhancing access to education services from which both local and refugee communities benefited

Participatory approach

A key element of programmes to promote local integration in the three countries has been provision of space for refugees to articulate their needs. In Mexico, refugees chose community representatives who liaised with the government, UNHCR and donors. They facilitated their own return to Guatemala through negotiating the demilitarisation of several conflict zones. Uganda's Local Governments Act encouraged participatory decision-making and led to the establishment of Refugee Welfare Councils to identify and respond to development needs of refugees. In Zambia the participatory approach was taken a step further with the creation of 22 Local Development Committees – with elected refugee and community members – to

identify, implement and manage community development projects.

Conclusion

Repatriation is generally regarded as the preferred solution for refugee populations but other viable options need to be considered when repatriation is impossible. Local integration is one such option. It allows those refugees who cannot or do not wish to repatriate the possibility to enjoy the freedoms and livelihood they would have in their home countries. While there have been implementation problems, the governments of Mexico, Uganda and Zambia should be commended for their efforts to protect and assist refugees by all-inclusive assistance programmes and their commitment to including refugees in national development strategies.

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1. Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern, UNHCR, Geneva, May 2003
2. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect/opedoc.pdf?tbl=PROTECTION&id=41c6a19b4
3. See M Watabe 'The Zambia Initiative', FMR24, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR2442.pdf