

Comprehensive solutions: a ‘whole-of-government’ approach

Adèle Dion

In response to the complex nature of protracted refugee situations, the Government of Canada is developing a ‘whole-of-government’ approach built on its specific areas of expertise and policy priorities.

The issues surrounding refugees and forced displacement are complex, and cut across a number of sectors, including development, humanitarian policy, peacebuilding, diplomacy and immigration. Responsibility for developing appropriate policy and programming to meet the needs of refugees is therefore shared between a number of departments within the Government of Canada – Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). Each department plays an important role in refugee protection.

The pursuit of durable solutions for displaced persons has long been part of Canada’s dialogue on refugee issues and in February 2007 an Inter-departmental Working Group on Protracted Refugee Situations was formed to help Canada respond effectively to these situations. Since its inception, the Working Group has looked at the broad range of tools that Canada has at its disposal. Although not all of these are available or useful in each situation, it was felt that an inventory of tools would assist Canada in participating in comprehensive solutions for specific protracted situations. The Working Group also reviewed past efforts to resolve protracted refugee situations in order to learn from their successes and shortcomings. Academics and civil society representatives have brought valuable expertise and perspectives to this discussion and will continue to be important stakeholders. With this information, the Government of Canada is building a broad-based, whole-of-government approach to inform Canada’s response to protracted refugee situations.

Understanding Canada’s tools

This approach has allowed the Government of Canada to reflect on its areas of expertise in three key areas – diplomacy, development and refugee resettlement, which are inter-related elements of a Canadian contribution to comprehensive solutions for protracted refugee situations.

Diplomacy: DFAIT is mandated to ensure that Canada’s foreign policy reflects Canadian values and advances Canada’s national interests. As protracted refugee situations are characterised by protection risks, human rights violations and basic human dignity issues, promoting durable solutions for refugees in protracted situations is consistent with Canada’s long-standing humanitarian interest in protecting and assisting refugees. Efforts to promote a rights-based approach and encourage countries both of origin and of asylum to respect their obligations under international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law comprise a fundamental aspect of Canada’s foreign policy. Canadian officials have actively sought to highlight protracted refugee situations internationally. They have emphasised that securing durable solutions to these long-standing situations should be of paramount importance, while democracy, human rights and rule of law should be at the heart of long-term efforts to prevent massive refugee outflows and be central components of their eventual resolution.

Canada pursues diplomatic dialogue on refugee issues with host governments and with the countries of origin on return and reintegration, has taken a leadership role in core groups focused on specific

protracted situations (including the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal¹), and has highlighted protracted refugee situations in the UN General Assembly and within the Organization of American States. It also actively engages in UNHCR’s Working Group on Resettlement. Canada recognises that diplomatic dialogue can increase the focus on protracted refugee situations in multilateral discussions on peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction, early recovery, development and human rights, as well as its importance to supporting reform within the UN, encouraging improved collaboration of humanitarian response and addressing the gap between relief and development.

Development and humanitarian assistance: CIDA is Canada’s lead agency for development and humanitarian assistance, and in this context provides core funding to support UNHCR’s mandate, including the pursuit of all three durable solutions – voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement. Recognising that many of the current operations managed by UNHCR rely on donor funding to meet the basic needs of refugees, these are included within the humanitarian assistance budget, which is also used as the main funding source when UNHCR has specific operations for return and reintegration, or when developing a comprehensive approach.

DFAIT’s Global Peace and Security Fund provides both financial and operational resources for conflict prevention, crisis response, peace operations, civilian protection and stabilisation in fragile states. This fund is particularly useful in the context of addressing some of the immediate causes of refugee flows and creating the conditions to promote successful return and reintegration. Key programming areas include support to peace processes



IOM/Kari Collins 2009 - MNP0069

Resettlement can be one aspect of a comprehensive solution. IOM is assisting these Bhutanese refugees to resettle in Canada and other countries.

and mediation efforts, transitional justice and reconciliation initiatives, building peace enforcement and peace operations capabilities, promoting civilian protection strategies, and reducing the impact of landmines, small arms and light weapons.

Finally, within the more traditional development realm, Canada focuses its support for sustainable development in developing countries on a limited number of countries in order to allow for deeper engagement. Refugee-hosting countries do not necessarily include refugees as part of their development priorities, given the range of other issues to be addressed. Canada encourages the inclusion of refugee-hosting areas in poverty reduction strategies to allow for assistance that benefits both host communities and refugees, and supports the host country in fulfilling its responsibilities under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Resettlement: CIC facilitates and manages legal migration to Canada and is also responsible for Canada's domestic asylum system and related refugee protection issues, including resettlement. Canada has a long tradition of offering protection to refugees through asylum and resettlement and, with other states, has been exploring how resettlement can be used more strategically in the context of protracted refugee situations. The international community has defined the 'strategic use of resettlement' to mean its planned use in a way that leads to direct or indirect benefits to persons other than those actually being resettled – to those refugees not being resettled, to the state hosting the refugees or to the broader protection regime.

Non-government tools: In the search for comprehensive solutions to

protracted displacement situations, Canada can also draw on the strength of its own civil society both at home and abroad, the number of active and engaged diaspora communities from protracted refugee situations living in Canada, and the diversity of Canadian private sector actors.

Principles for engagement

In shaping its contributions to comprehensive solutions, Canada has examined current and past practice in addressing protracted refugee situations – and has identified certain key principles that should be included in the processes that Canada looks to support:

Range of actors: For an approach to be successful, it must be multilateral and multi-sectoral, involving different types of partners – multilateral institutions, states, academics, civil society and NGOs – and engage a wide range of peace and security, development, humanitarian, diplomatic and resettlement actors.

Type of approach: The approach taken for each comprehensive solution should be collaborative, inclusive and participatory, involving a range of actors including the refugees themselves and – as durable solutions need time for implementation – with a multi-year commitment.

Prerequisites: It is important to assess when situations are 'ripe for resolution'. Some of the prerequisites for comprehensive solutions include: UNHCR leadership to help identify, plan and move the comprehensive solution forward; the availability of one or more durable solutions that can be accessed by the population; responsibility sharing by donors; political will or state leadership and state responsibility in countries of origin and/or asylum; protection

concerns and/or an absence of ready solutions making them a greater priority for resolution; as well as external factors which may help to facilitate a solution, such as Tripartite Commissions, political change or peace processes.

While each situation will benefit from following these principles, every protracted refugee situation also requires context-specific tailoring. One size does not fit all.

Conclusion

In the same way that no one actor will be able to resolve a protracted refugee situation, no one government department in Canada possesses all of the tools required to contribute to an effective response. The 'whole-of-government' approach has set in motion a process that allows Canada to look at its tools for engagement in protracted refugee situations drawing upon the mandates and strengths of various departments depending on the issues at play.

The current momentum in efforts to find comprehensive and durable solutions for protracted refugee situations is exciting and needs to be supported. Refugees overcome extraordinary odds. Their self-sufficiency, strength, courage and determination are a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Despite this strength, those who are displaced need assistance to find durable solutions. To this end, those Canadian government departments mandated to protect and assist refugees remain deeply committed to working in collaboration with UNHCR and other partners to find ways in which Canada can contribute to finding and implementing comprehensive solutions to protracted refugee situations.

Adèle Dion is Director General, Human Rights and Democracy Bureau, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, and Chair of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Protracted Refugee Situations. For more information please email jessie.thomson@international.gc.ca.

1. The Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal comprises UNHCR, Canada, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the US.