

# The Zambia Initiative

by Masaki Watabe

*In rural Zambia refugees and host communities are working together to move from relief dependence to self reliance. Could UNHCR's Zambia Initiative (ZI) be a model for other countries struggling to cope with the protracted presence of refugees?*

Zambia currently provides refuge for around 175,000 refugees from Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere. Despite its poverty, Zambia has been a generous host and has not put pressure on those Angolans who do not wish to repatriate. In cooperation with UNHCR and a range of donors, the government launched the ZI development programme in 2002. ZI is based on recognition that the living conditions of some of the host communities in western Zambia are poorer than of those they are sheltering and that it is vital to promote harmonious co-existence between them.

Addressing the multifaceted aspects of poverty in the Western Province, Zambia's poorest region, ZI has boosted crop production and improved access to health, education and veterinary facilities. Some 400,000 refugees and residents have seen positive benefits. Rural health posts, basic schools, communal grain bins, hand-dug wells, nurseries and feeder roads have been built through local procurement of materials and labour contributions. A credit scheme has expanded access to seeds, fertilisers and agricultural tools. Crop productivity has increased from 1.5 mt per ha to 3.5 mt per ha as a result of ZI inputs and improved agricultural extension services. A total of 120,000 refugees and locals benefited from credit loans in 2003-04. Over 500 tons of maize has been sold to the World Food Programme and the proceeds reinvested into expanded maize production, turning the area's refugees and locals from recipients of food aid into suppliers of food.

ZI is in accordance with UNHCR's Agenda for Protection which calls for a more comprehensive search for

durable solutions and equitable sharing of the burden of hosting refugees. ZI is at the heart of emerging good practice and conceptual innovations such as Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) and Development through Local Integration (DLI) - part of UNHCR's Convention Plus initiatives. While DAR emphasises that the nature of assistance should be developmental - rather than relief-focused, DLI is more proactive in showing how refugees can and should play positive roles in the broader context of local development. ZI is an example of how UNHCR is seeking to move beyond purely humanitarian funding in refugee-populated areas and to sensitise donors to the need to provide development funding.

ZI has the support of the Zambian government and the politicians and traditional leaders who previously gave voice to the resentment of local people who perceived that refugees received a disproportional share of international assistance. Evidence that Zambians in refugee-affected areas are now receiving additional development aid has transformed attitudes towards refugees. Local communities have been empowered to participate in decision making by ZI's community-based implementation mechanism. Co-existence with refugees has been incorporated into national and regional policy discourse.

## Challenges ahead

In 2005, ZI was expanded into North-Western Province. In Western Province, a technical assistance programme with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was initiated to strengthen the management of local development committees through participatory

village planning. The future growth of ZI will depend on:

- incorporating ZI into Zambia's national development plan
- improving the government's implementation capacity: expenditure controls imposed by Zambia's Poverty Reduction Strategy have led to cuts in staffing and transport budgets which have made it hard to supervise and monitor sub-projects
- better coordination between programmes, particularly to ensure that refugee children are able to remain in school when their sponsorship is cut
- greater focus on the special needs of women and children, the elderly and those affected by HIV/AIDS
- tackling the legal restraints on refugees' freedom of movement and access to the formal labour market
- recognition that DAR/DLI programmes, unlike the short-term relief or quick impact projects with which humanitarians are familiar, require systematic planning, long-term commitment and development of performance and impact indicators

*it is the attitudes of the humanitarian community... which most need to change*

- joint UNHCR-host government advocacy with donors to ensure stable and predictable long-term financial contributions.

ZI has demonstrated that it is the attitudes of the humanitarian community, rather than those of refugees and their hosts, which most need to change. We owe it to refugees and underprivileged hosting communities to make burden sharing a reality.

**Masaki Watabe is an Associate Programme Officer with UNHCR in Lusaka, Zambia. Email: watabe@unhcr.org. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the UN.**