

Mainstreaming livelihoods support: the Refugee Livelihoods Project

by Carrie Conway

In May 2003 UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) launched the Refugee Livelihoods Project to improve understanding of how refugees construct their livelihoods, to assess the nature and extent of UNHCR's involvement in supporting refugee livelihoods and to facilitate wider information exchange.

As UNHCR and other agencies move away from their former depiction of refugees as helpless victims of circumstances dependent on the charity of others, the term 'livelihood' has entered the discourse of refugee assistance. This has been accompanied by a new degree of interest in protracted refugee situations and self reliance. Academics and practitioners alike now stress refugees' 'productive capacity'. Like High Commissioners before him, Ruud Lubbers has reminded the world of the need to respect refugees and their potential.

The articles in this edition of FMR illustrate the vast amount of research and work on the theme of refugee livelihoods. We now need to shift from high-level abstract dimensions of development towards a focus on the refugees themselves and how they seek to construct their own livelihoods. All too often, organisations have developed programmes for refugees with little or no understanding of their capabilities and strategies.

Initiated by Jeff Crisp¹, the Refugee Livelihoods Project (RLP) has two main areas of activity - country/thematic case studies and the Refugee Livelihoods Network.

From its work in protracted refugee situations, EPAU has discovered that there is a considerable body of literature on refugee livelihoods strategies and how they may be supported by humanitarian and development agencies. While UNHCR reports daily on its work with over 20 million refugees in over 120 countries worldwide, it has rarely focused on gathering baseline information on livelihood security

strategies. The RLP seeks to fill this gap in information provision. A series of country and thematic case studies has been underway since June 2003. Commissioned by EPAU and conducted by staff members and qualified consultants, case studies have been completed, or are underway, in Ecuador, Ethiopia, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and the Ukraine. Researchers are adopting a differentiated approach to the analysis of refugee livelihoods, paying particular attention to the issues of gender, age and physical capacity - including the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on refugee livelihoods.

The Refugee Livelihoods Network is an interactive electronic network designed to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and papers among UNHCR staff, consultants and staff of other agencies, academics and research institutes. Although there is a number of relief and development networks and e-discussion fora, there has not previously been a discussion mechanism focusing specifically on refugee livelihoods. By putting practitioners and researchers in touch, the network aims to facilitate information exchange in order to improve policy planning and programming. The network currently has over 240 subscribers worldwide. This positive response demonstrates that there is a wide range of practitioners and researchers who wish to see the issue of refugee livelihoods be given much greater prominence in the international discourse of human displacement.

As the number of uprooted people in the world continues to rise, the international community is faced with mounting challenges on how best to assist refugees in need. Understanding people's livelihood strategies is a prerequisite to assisting them. The Refugee Livelihoods Project aims to understand these realities through the facilitation of information sharing and lessons learned.

For further information on the Refugee Livelihoods Project and to access reports, visit the EPAU section of UNHCR's website at www.unhcr.ch/epau. To subscribe to the network's monthly newsletter, email hqep00@unhcr.ch.

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1. Jeff Crisp, the former head of EPAU (and frequent FMR contributor) is now Director of Policy and Research with the Global Commission on International Migration (www.gcim.org)

*Eritrean refugees
in south east
Sudan*

