Hosted ‘the enemy’

Harry Jeene and Angel Rouse

In 2009 in Goma town, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), CARE International supported conflict-displaced families who were being hosted in the houses of resident families. The assistance was for both the host and the displaced families.

We noted that, in line with previous experience, most families were hosted by relatives or friends, albeit sometimes distant. A pre-existing relationship formed the basis for the hosting relationship. However, we also found a number of cases of hosting of complete strangers. Most were within the same ethnic group but we identified five cases of hosting across ethnic and linguistic barriers. The story below is one such example:

“I had been to the kiosk just before dark to buy some palm oil and flour. I met some people who asked the way to a refugee camp. They looked very tired and frightened. I told them it was still a long way and to be careful, because there was shooting going on.”

“Then I just said: “Come with me. You can stay at my house, and go to the camp tomorrow.” I came to Goma in the war of 1996, and I was displaced again in 2002 by the volcano so I guess that’s why I said it.”

“When we got home there turned out to be 18 of them in all. One of my sons grumbled about sharing the little food we had with so many but I told him to be quiet. The next day our neighbours brought food and water, and even some clothes, so our guests stayed for a few more days.”

Well, that was nine months ago, and they are still here. It is not easy; the house is very crowded, they speak a different language and do things differently, food is expensive and work is hard to find, but what can you do?”

We thought this quite remarkable, as the longstanding conflict in the area is largely fought along ethnic and linguistic lines, with horrendous abuse of civilians by all parties.

This form of positive deviant behaviour, of ‘hosting the enemy’, might help us understand more about the dynamics of urban displacement during conflict, and possibly provide us with a new way of building peace from the bottom up. We would be very keen to hear from others who have observed a similar situation.

Harry Jeene (harry@ralsa.org) is Director of RALSA Foundation (http://www.ralsa.org) and Angela Rouse (angela.rouse@co.care.org) is programme manager in CARE International DR Congo (http://www.careinternational.org).

“Legitimate” protection spaces: UNHCR’s 2009 policy

Alice Edwards

UNHCR’s revised urban refugee policy has moved on from its outdated predecessor – but is it fit for purpose?

UNHCR’s latest Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas, issued in September 2009, responds to the phenomenon of refugee urbanisation, partly mirroring the global trend towards urbanisation but also reflecting sub-standard care and protracted stays in refugee camps in which freedom of movement is restricted, self-sufficiency or employment opportunities are limited, and access to full human rights is far from assured.1

The new policy follows over ten years of discontent expressed by many NGOs and others about the predecessor 1997 policy, and a host of consultations on that document about how to make progress. In many ways, therefore, the release of the 2009 version, revising the 1997 policy, must be seen as a protection triumph. It is no easy task to reconcile, or at least attempt to reconcile, competing interests – both inside and outside UNHCR – and to produce a statement that aims to shift the working ethos of the organisation from being camp-focused to recognising that seeking protection in urban spaces is “legitimate”. So what does this new policy provide, and what does it tell us about the priorities of and challenges facing UNHCR?

Rights and protection

The policy is based on the principle that the rights of refugees are not affected by location, their means of arrival or their status (or lack of status) in national legislation (para. 14). Neither are UNHCR’s mandated responsibilities affected by these factors. The policy covers many of UNHCR’s areas of concern, including reception conditions, registration and data collection, documentation, refugee status determination, community outreach, fostering constructive relations with urban refugees, security, a zero-tolerance policy in respect of improper behaviour, strategies of self-reliance and access to livelihoods, access to health care, education and other services, durable solutions, and the question of freedom of movement.