



# Community services at a cross-roads

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**T**he downward trend in funding and staffing of the community services function has reached the point where it has been rendered incapable of achieving its mandate or purpose within the organization... Without a strong financial and intellectual investment in community services as a core function of UNHCR, there is hardly any point in continuing with it at all." That is the stark conclusion of an independent evaluation of UNHCR's community services function, undertaken by a multidisciplinary five-person team engaged by CASA Consulting of Montreal, Canada.

Based on extensive interviews with UNHCR staff members in Geneva, a global questionnaire survey and visits to numerous field locations in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, the evaluation argues that the community services function has a significant role

to play in relation to UNHCR's central protection mandate, particularly the protection of refugee children and women.

Community services are also key to identifying and addressing field-level problems before they erupt into international scandals such as that witnessed in relation to the sexual exploitation of refugees by humanitarian and other international personnel in West Africa. And yet the function has been seriously weakened over the past decade.

"When we speak of weakness," says CASA Consulting, "we refer to the declining numbers of community services staff in the field, the wide range of responsibilities they are assigned, and the low level of authority and status of current community services staff." "Many community services staff," the evaluation continues, "have little control over their daily work programmes and do not have the profile, skills or resources required to carry out independent monitoring of UNHCR's implementing partners."

To address this disturbing situation, the evaluation presents a wide-ranging set of recommendations. According to CASA Consulting, UNHCR senior management must redress the neglect and decline of the community services function. Greater recognition must be given to the role that community services plays in addressing the social and community aspects of refugee protection. And UNHCR's efforts on behalf of refugee children and women should be better coordinated with - and even integrated in - its community services activities.

Finally, the evaluation calls upon UNHCR to carry out regular

'situation analyses' in the field, so that the organisation can better identify and address any threats to the well-being of refugees. "Professional community services staff with social science backgrounds and training in social and participatory research techniques are best placed to facilitate situation analysis... For the rationale for situation analysis is directly related to that of the community services function itself: to ensure that all groups and segments of the refugee population have access to appropriate protection, assistance and services."

## Recent resources on community services

The following reports can be accessed on-line at [www.unhcr.ch/epau/](http://www.unhcr.ch/epau/)

*The community services function in UNHCR: an independent evaluation* by CASA Consulting

*Review of CORD community services for Congolese refugees in Kigoma Region, Tanzania* by Shelly Dick

*Review of CORD community services for Angolan refugees in Zambia* by Oliver Bakewell

*Community services in refugee aid programmes: a critical analysis*, 'New Issues in Refugee Research', Working paper no. 82, by Oliver Bakewell

*Returnees from Mexico in northern Guatemala.*



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