Responding to a growing challenge - protecting refugees in towns and cities

UNHCR’s re-focus in policy spotlights the challenge of protecting a growing refugee population living in towns and cities, and calls for states, municipal authorities and mayors, humanitarian agencies and civil society to join forces in building and rolling-out new strategies and new responses to this challenge.

Rapid urbanization is one the most significant mega-trends confronting our planet. As urban populations have grown, so too has the number of refugees living in towns and cities, with indicators pointing to both trends accelerating in the coming decades. Of the 10.5 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate worldwide, an estimated 50 per cent now live in cities and towns while just one third live in camps.

UNHCR’s new policy1 spotlights this marked shift in the distribution of refugees, outlines the new challenges that result, and calls for states, municipal authorities, communities, humanitarian agencies and civil society to recognize this new reality – and to work together in formulating and rolling-out new strategies in response. In setting out measures designed to maximize protection both for refugees themselves and for the humanitarian organizations on the ground that support them, the UNHCR policy underlines the primary role of national and local authorities in providing refugees with protection and calls for a renewed commitment to international solidarity and shared responsibility. It reminds us that towns and cities are legitimate places for refugees to reside and to exercise their basic rights as human beings – regardless of their status under national legislation, and regardless of how they arrived in the country.

UNHCR calls for new skills and resources to be unlocked, for extensive partnerships and support across many sectors of society to mount effective, adequate responses to this emerging global challenge. Much of this response needs to be built within communities – with municipal authorities and mayors having a particularly important role to play. UNHCR looks to this constituency in particular to show leadership in helping build a spirit of understanding and cooperation and in helping foster good relationships not only between different refugee groups but also between refugees and the local population.

Global trend
Abidjan, Amman, Bangkok, Bogotá, Cairo, Damascus, Juba, Johannesburg, Khartoum, Nairobi, and Quito, are just some of the cities now hosting significant refugee populations. In Sudan Khartoum is thought to now accommodate at least 1.75 million displaced people and refugees, some 30 per cent of the total population, while Bogota in Colombia and Abidjan in Cote d’Ivoire have both absorbed around half a million victims of armed conflict. According to recent estimates, Kabul has grown sevenfold since 2001.

Towns and cities: promise versus reality
Towns and cities are a logical draw for refugees. Fleeing homelands beset by any of a range of dangers – armed conflict, political violence, lawlessness, natural disasters – they see towns and cities as offering the promise of more security and more opportunity – better public services, higher living standards, the possibility of earning a living. The reality is frequently different.

1 ‘Refugee protection and solutions in urban areas’ – UNHCR policy paper published September 2009.
URL: www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.html
Refugees often arrive having lost all of their assets. As they seek to establish themselves, they may not have the basic skills and knowledge to survive in their new environment. Secure housing and supportive social networks will be lacking, as will basic identity documents that could help with access to food rations, educational opportunities and health services. Importantly, they may be formally excluded from the formal labour market.

In towns and cities they will be vulnerable to a long list of dangers – with women, children and the ageing being particularly at risk. These include xenophobia and violence, forced eviction, expulsion, harassment, extortion, arbitrary arrest and detention, refoulement, discrimination, rape, AIDS infection and human trafficking. In addition, they may become targets for organised crime.

Conversely, the towns and cities which now play host to increasing numbers of refugees are impacted on many fronts. There is additional pressure on infrastructure and environment, on housing and social services as well as longer term challenges for local economies, administration and urban planning. In many instances, such towns are already unable to meet the needs of the urban poor. This in turn creates tensions between local and refugee populations – and can fuel xenophobia with catastrophic results as witnessed in South Africa in 2008.

Reaching out to refugees in towns and cities – a special challenge
UNHCR pro-actively reaches out to as many refugees as possible to determine needs and to identify the most vulnerable amongst them. But in towns and cities, this is complex and difficult – and the impediments to making contact are many. In some countries UNHCR is not able to operate as freely as it would wish and authorities ensure that refugees keep as low a profile as possible. Where refugees are not welcomed by the local authorities and population, they prefer not to make themselves known, fearing detention and eventual expulsion. Some refugees might not even be aware of UNHCR, while others may be confined to their homes as a result of disability or sickness. Sometimes basic logistics get in the way – with refugees often widely dispersed throughout a city, confined to slum areas, shanty towns or suburbs, a long distance from UNHCR or community centres. The ‘invisibility’ of this population hampers UNHCR in its efforts to extend them protection – and to build an accurate picture of the refugee population.

To maximize reach, UNHCR communicates widely to communities through traditional as well as new types of media – bill posters, radio, TV, internet and SMS messages, through cultural events and neighbourhood meetings – and on occasion organizes mobile registration teams to engage with refugees in their homes, neighbourhoods and community centres. The organisation also uses trained outreach volunteers – themselves refugees – to keep in daily contact with the refugee community and to spread the word. UNHCR staff members make periodic visits to neighbourhoods and facilities frequented by refugees. They also pursue opportunities to visit and work together with local police, immigration authorities, detention centres and prisons, as well as human rights and civil society organizations. UNHCR is establishing Field Units and Field Offices in cities and countries with especially large, dispersed refugee populations. To improve understanding of refugees’ living conditions, attitudes, intentions and aspirations in urban settings UNHCR designs, commissions and undertakes regular on the ground research including polls, and surveys.

The registration process – a foundation for protection
UNHCR is now deploying tools and processes in towns and cities designed to maximize protection both for refugees and for partner humanitarian organizations. The cornerstone process is to identify, register and document refugees/asylum seekers – and then to use the acquired information to determine refugee status. Such processes are vital protection tools, and help give refugees access to basic rights and services they might not otherwise have. Where government authorities are unable to do so, UNHCR issues its own documents to refugees, confirming their identity and status, while seeking to ensure that such documents are formally recognized by the authorities. The documents are especially important in situations where
refugees in towns and cities come into contact with police and security personnel, with local government officials, workplace and marketplace inspectors – as well as with healthcare and education providers. In addition, the process can identify those refugees with urgent needs, helps reunite refugee families, and can aid progress in the pursuit of durable solutions.

While the registration process is a lifeline for refugees, it is also strategically important for UNHCR in assessing needs, programme planning and in profiling refugee populations in towns and cities globally. In addition, it helps provide an accurate understanding for host states as to just who is within their territory, and how and why they arrived there.

Focusing on the most vulnerable
UNHCR places special priority on identifying and engaging with the most vulnerable individuals within an already vulnerable population, and has specialized tools which identify this important set of individuals.

The organisation works closely with UN and national child protection agencies, with NGOs and specialized civil organizations to identify, locate and protect unaccompanied children at high risk of becoming exploited and abused ‘street children’. The organisation also runs programmes that offer refugee women and girls positive alternatives to damaging survival strategies such as prostitution. UNHCR is also ensuring that victims and potential victims of gender-based violence and human trafficking can report these crimes confidentially and safe from reprisal – and ensures they receive appropriate clinical support and counselling.

Building refugees’ self-reliance in towns and cities
In 70 per cent of operations worldwide, UNHCR is engaged in protecting and promoting refugee livelihoods – and with an increasing focus on towns and cities. There are powerful arguments in favour of building increased refugee self reliance. As individuals, they retain dignity, contribute socially in their communities, and are better prepared to shape their own future. In addition, refugees enjoying a livelihood in towns and cities reduce pressure on national services and welfare systems while making an important step along the path to an enduring solution – whether this be in the country of origin, a resettlement country or the country of asylum.

Where possible, UNHCR works closely with local authorities, development agencies, microfinance organizations, banks, the private sector and civil society to support self-reliance, through employment or self-employment. In parallel, UNHCR is putting in place vocational training, skills development and language programmes as well as livelihoods programmes tailored to address local challenges and opportunities.

UNHCR programmes are helping on a number of specific fronts – grants and loans to kick-start small-scale enterprises, training on business skills, and practical skills like tailoring, carpentry, electrics, vehicle repairs, livestock husbandry. Vocational and technical training are also provided.

While difficulties remain in those countries where refugees are formally barred from the labour market, UNHCR remains committed to help refugees in towns and cities through education and training, lobbying governments and municipal authorities to enable refugees to enjoy livelihoods. In such countries options remain limited and barriers to securing official employment can be formidable. Refugees are often forced to compete in the informal economy with their local neighbours for hazardous and badly paid jobs, with some employers even preferring to employ refugees because they are less likely to complain or seek redress if treated unfairly.
UNHCR Media Backgrounder

**Ensuring access to healthcare, education and other services**

Refugees will access with difficulty – if at all – healthcare and education services that are often already overstretched. In addition they often lack the community support systems that help poor nationals survive. UNHCR calls for refugees in towns and cities to have access to such services at limited or no cost and with partners monitors the health, nutrition, living conditions and general welfare of refugees, to help ensure these do not fall below acceptable standards. When funding is available, UNHCR is working to increase the capacity of health and education services by engaging with donors and development agencies to create development and poverty-reduction programmes to include refugees. UNHCR prioritises services for refugees in most need – for example pregnant women, children under five, unaccompanied children and victims of torture and violence. As a further priority, UNHCR ensures that children receive primary school education.

UNHCR focuses on reinforcing existing health and education services as the most efficient use of limited resources – an approach that encourages authorities and the local population to recognize the benefits that urban refugees can help bring to the cities where they have settled.

Where refugees are excluded from national welfare programmes, UNHCR will support special arrangements – for example the provision of subsidized food.

**Pointing to the future – solidarity across Latin America**

Latin American countries are addressing the challenges of refugee protection across the region with the help of the 2004 Mexico Plan of Action, a concrete plan designed to help governments and non-governmental organisations to develop further their asylum systems and their ability to protect refugees. Importantly the Plan looks to build durable solutions through self reliance and integration.

Within the Plan is the *Cities of Solidarity* programme which works to support refugee self reliance and integration and the *Borders of Solidarity* programme designed to stimulate social and economic development in border areas to benefit both refugees and the local population. A further programme *Resettlement in Solidarity* looks strategically at resettlement across Latin America in order to ease pressure on countries receiving large numbers of refugees.

The Mexico Plan of Action has made considerable progress in areas such as legislation, refugee status determination, resettlement, capacity-building and protection in border areas. It constitutes a giant step forward in extending protection to refugee population and finding durable solutions and is a powerful model for responses to the challenge.

**Pointing to the future – Jordan, Lebanon and Syria**

In the Middle East, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are providing sanctuary for over two million Iraqis who have fled sectarian violence. Many have taken up residence in cities, including Amman, Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus. The generous admission policies of these countries together with US and international interest in the Iraqi situation have helped enormously in building an adequate response to this huge and sudden influx.

As a result, UNHCR and its partners have been able to scale up operations rapidly, deploying high-quality teams and substantial resources on the ground – and all in urban settings. Efficient registration and reception systems were put in place, and effective community outreach and communications undertaken. New technologies have been harnessed and creative external relations and public information programmes launched. With support from the host governments, a large refugee resettlement programme is in progress and – importantly – refugees alongside nationals can enjoy access to nationally provided services like education and healthcare.