

Community Services in Refugee Aid Programs: The Challenges of Expectations, Principles, and Practice

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'Community services' is a hybrid term for one of the sectors of the international aid response to refugee crises coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Community services used to be known as social services and focused on caring for refugees who were unable to meet their needs with the basic provisions offered in refugee camps. Over the past decade community services' remit has expanded significantly, moving it to the forefront of UNHCR's shift towards a community development approach in its programs.

Despite its expanded role, the community services sector is not as much of a priority in the field or in funding as the life support sectors of food, health, water, and sanitation. As the terms of reference for UNHCR's recent evaluation of community services stated:

The community services function is a relatively neglected aspect of UNHCR's work with refugees, attracting significantly less international attention than many other of the organization's activities. And yet it is a function which seeks to meet some of the most essential needs of refugees, especially those who are at greatest physical and psychological risk.

This paper introduces some of the guidelines and principles for community services that have been drawn up by UNHCR and are expected to be applied in the field. These guidelines suggest that community services programs should take a developmental approach that empowers refugees and enables them

to rebuild a self-generating community. Drawing on experience from fieldwork and literature, especially in Zambia, the paper argues that community services

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are unlikely to succeed within the current refugee aid regime because there are conflicting expectations of what community services are expected to deliver, the principles for community services are somewhat confused, and there are practical problems in operationalizing these principles.

Many of the examples given here are drawn from my experiences as a consultant and non-governmental organization (NGO) worker in community services programs in Africa. In particular, I draw on the findings of a recent review of one NGO's community services program in Zambia¹ and a parallel study of the same NGO conducted in Tanzania.² The findings of these reviews were consistent with UNHCR's global evaluation of community services functions, which was carried out at the same time.³ This suggests that the points raised in this paper may have wider applicability to the community services sector.

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The next section outlines the idealized role of community services and how it actually works out in program practice. The following three sections look at the confusion arising from the different expectations of the sector and problems with the principles and practice of community services. The paper concludes

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that UNHCR is not yet ready to adopt the principles and approaches used within community services across all its programming. Rather, the paper suggests that it may be more productive first to look at the more fundamental issue of moving from needs-based to rights-based approaches in UNHCR's work.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

In past refugee emergencies, the focus of UNHCR's social services department was on ensuring that the needs of unaccompanied children, elderly people, the disabled, the chronically sick, and others who were socially or economically disadvantaged were met. The NGO responsible for this sector tended to employ social workers who would move through the refugee community identifying needs and arranging the distribution of appropriate resources, such as blankets, plastic sheeting, cooking pots, or other items. Concerns about the refugees' own mechanisms for dealing with social problems or engaging refugees in the delivery of resources were left for the 'care and maintenance' phase after the emergency. Likewise, the development of refugee livelihoods and income generation were areas that were not prioritized during emergencies.

It was increasingly recognized that refugee emergencies were rarely resolved quickly, and that when the social welfare approach continued over an extended period it tended to erode existing social systems. This gave rise to a concern about so-called 'dependency' and a drive towards more community-based approaches to meeting social needs. For

example, interventions aimed at helping refugees reestablish livelihoods of some sort—such as vocational training or micro-credit—were brought forward rather than being left for the end of the emergency. The Rwandan crisis in 1994 was one of the earliest emergencies where UNHCR put considerable resources into all areas of community services from the start of the program.

This shift in emphasis was reflected in the change of name from "social services" to "community services" in 1989.⁴ Revised guidelines drawn up over the last decade (see Boxes 1 and 2)⁵ emphasize the role of the sector in working with existing social structures to ensure that aid programs meet the needs of all the refugees. Where appropriate structures do not exist, the community services programs are expected to facilitate their development.

BOX 1: UNHCR COMMUNITY SERVICE GUIDELINES: BASIC PRINCIPLES AND GOALS⁶

Basic Principles

Community Services activities are based on certain fundamental principles about human beings. They are:

1. The dignity and worth of individual human beings.
2. The capacity of persons to change no matter how desperate their situation.
3. Inherent desire of all human beings to belong to and contribute to a larger supportive community.
4. Every person has a right to live a full human life, and to improve his circumstances.
5. Persons are entitled to help when they are unable to help themselves.
6. Others have a duty to help those who are unable to help themselves.
7. The ultimate goal of Community Services is self-help.

The Goals of Community Services

- *Individual*—to restore the refugees' sense of being human and enable them to take decisions and start living again in self-respecting way.
- *Community*—to restore a sense of security, create a sense of belonging, and rebuild a self-generating community.

BOX 2: UNHCR EMERGENCY HANDBOOK: OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES OF RESPONSE AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES⁷

Objectives

- To provide for the welfare of the whole refugee group and to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees have equal access to basic goods and services.
- To support the re-establishment and development of refugee community structures which can be used in the management of the assistance programme and which can also minimize longer-term problems of dependency.
- To ensure that the assistance provided is appropriate for the refugees.

Principles of Response

- Refugee community participation (including both men and women) should be promoted in all sectors, by building on the community's own resources as much as possible and encouraging individual, family and group self-reliance;
- Special services for the vulnerable should, as far as possible, be provided by the refugee community itself;
- Services should be decentralised but within a structured plan, and must reach those in need;
- Community services should be developed in co-ordination with and in support of the priority life support sectors and should be an essential component of the overall assistance operation.

Action

- Assess community problems, needs and resources. Help refugees to identify and establish the services which will meet their needs in all sectors;
- Ensure prompt identification of and support to the most vulnerable;
- Develop appropriate community management structures including mechanisms to ensure participation of women in decision-making and ensure that all groups within the population are appropriately represented. Identify community workers who can help the vulnerable, spread relevant information and support other sectors;
- Take immediate action to prevent family break-up and reunite families as soon as possible.
- Identify and provide care for all isolated vulnerable individuals, especially unaccompanied minors. Spontaneous groupings, if already bonded, should be kept together;
- Establish communication links with the refugees to ensure good two-way communication between the refugees and those assisting them;
- Build the capacity of the community by identifying training needs and by helping to organize practical and hands-on training in community work.

These principles and guidelines suggest that community services should have a pivotal role with respect to needs identification and the establishment

of services in all sectors. Examples cited in the emergency handbook include site planning and shelter, where community services should ensure that those refugees who cannot build their own house receive assistance, ideally from other refugees.

Another cross-cutting role envisaged for community services is in establishing community management structures, such as refugee committees, to facilitate refugee participation in aid programs. The NGO implementing community services is expected to establish good communications across the refugee population to ensure that the views and needs of the whole population are heard.

These principles underlying community services suggest that it may be better regarded as an approach rather than a particular sector. It is therefore not surprising that NGOs involved in community services have been at the forefront of promoting a community development approach, which has recently been adopted by UNHCR as formal policy for all its activities. This approach aims at:

- Strengthening refugees' initiative and partnership, resulting in ownership of all phases of program implementation;
- Reinforcing the dignity and self-esteem of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR;
- Achieving a higher degree of self-reliance; and
- Increasing the cost effectiveness and sustainability of UNHCR's programs.⁸

As the paper presented to the Standing Committee of UNHCR's Executive Committee in 2001 recognizes, "a generalised application of the community development approach will take time and require some adjustments of attitudes within the organization."⁹ This was acknowledged as the main challenge to implementing the new policy according to the minutes of the meeting.¹⁰ The term 'community services' may well be a halfway stage in the move from social services to community development.

Given this broad agenda, the look of a community program may vary considerably from place to place. Two examples of the aims and objectives of community services are shown below for programs with Rwandan refugees in Tanzania (Box 3) and Angolan refugees in Zambia (Box 4). The areas of intervention might be crudely summarized as:

- *Social services*: ensuring that assistance is given to those with special needs that are not met by

the basic goods and services provided in the camps (for instance, foster care for unaccompanied children and care for the disabled or elderly who cannot manage alone).

- *Community development*: activities that encourage the refugees to live and work together and participate in the running of the camp. This might include establishing refugee committees and youth activities such as sports.
- *Livelihood development*: activities that improve the refugees' prospects for generating income, such as vocational training, literacy, micro-credit, and supply of seeds and tools for farming.

Other areas of intervention that are often associated with the community services sector and may be incorporated with the programs include primary and secondary education, reproductive health, and sexual and gender based violence. The NGO responsible for community services is expected to have very close contacts with the community and, as a result, the NGO is often involved in highlighting protection issues that arise in the camps.

BOX 3: GOAL TANZANIA, KITALI HILLS REFUGEE CAMP 1995¹¹

In March 1995 the objectives of the Community Services department for the next year were:

- empowerment of refugees
- provision of services for all ages, especially women and children
- provision of income generating opportunities and skills
- adoption of community approach to limit dependency
- support of unaccompanied minors and their foster families

Future aims after the initial emergency were to:

- encourage community and income generating projects
- develop home-based care for vulnerable groups
- develop community based services (day care, pre-schools, recreation groups)
- continue and develop tracing and monitoring of unaccompanied minors
- develop the women's movement to participate in camp decisions
- develop and motivate the youth
- vocational training
- promote environmental awareness

BOX 4: CHRISTIAN OUTREACH, RELIEF, AND DEVELOPMENT (CORD) ZAMBIA, NANGWESHI REFUGEE CAMP 2002¹²

Goal

Refugee community is working together in taking initiatives to improve their socio economic situation.

Purpose

Refugee community undertaking a range of activities to improve skills and income, boost access to basic goods, care for vulnerable members, and improve recreational opportunities.

Objectives

- Improved access to adult technology/vocational and English training, especially for recent school leavers.
- Increase in self-help initiatives which generate income and/or improve access to more varied food and non-food items.
- Vulnerable members of the community identified and assisted by community initiatives and through targeting by refugee communities of external aid.
- Increased recreational activity, especially to reduce boredom among youths.
- Continuation of HIV/AIDS awareness in conjunction with the reproductive health program.
- Continuation of specialist training for staff and refugees.
- Agency co-ordination, improve the effectiveness of the programs through a co-ordinated approach.

CONFUSION OF EXPECTATIONS

The wide remit of community services implied by these overall principles and objectives suggest that there are great expectations of what the approach should aspire to deliver. Unfortunately, different stakeholders have different expectations. Refugees, aid agency staff in other sectors, and community services staff all have diverging views of how community services should work. As a result, there is a danger that community services programs may fail to succeed from anyone's perspective.

First and perhaps most critically, it is not at all clear that refugees in camps and settlements have a particular interest in the community development aspects of community services. NGOs expect that community services should deliver assistance to those who are the most vulnerable to absolute destitution

and social isolation. For refugees, however, the measure of success in community services is the volume of goods delivered.

Two detailed reviews of one NGO's community services programs in Tanzania and Zambia highlighted the fact that refugees' expectations of the NGOs focused on the delivery of material resources.¹³ While the NGO and UNHCR community services staff were concerned about notions of community development, capacity building, and so forth, the refugees were concerned about the goods they received, such as plastic sheets, materials for starting

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a business, and incentives for building a school. When asked about the work of community services, the majority of refugees responded that the goal was primarily to provide direct assistance to 'vulnerable' people. Most did not mention self-reliance, except a few who had received training in community development or worked for the NGO.

This is not to say that refugees are not interested in securing their autonomy or establishing their own livelihoods. Rather it suggests that refugees may not see community development and empowerment being delivered through the existing refugee aid regime. What refugees tend to conclude about the drive towards self-reliance (community services) is that UNHCR and NGOs are refusing to provide resources for fear that they might engender 'dependency.' From a refugee's perspective, the community development approach is likely to be read as way of saving money on refugee aid. This viewpoint might well be justified. Second, there is a confusion of expectations among the aid agency staff on the ground, where there is also limited understanding of what the role of community services should be. At one extreme, some expect community services to take care of any social needs that arise within refugee camps, such as distributing materials and caring for

individuals who cannot manage to look after themselves. This is the most common view held by UNHCR, governments, and agencies in other sectors. At the other extreme, a community development approach suggests that the role of the agency is to facilitate refugees' self-reliance. In the reviews mentioned above, on the one hand, governments and other NGOs complained that the community services NGO was not providing sufficient wooden poles to build shelter for new arrivals who could not collect their own. On the other hand, camp management staff complained that community services staff were referring people to them for extra support without doing enough to promote self-reliance.

Finally, those involved in community services and other sectors also have great expectations of refugees. This was recognized in a participatory appraisal for community services in Mayukwayukwa refugee settlement in Zambia:

How will the [community services NGOs] ensure that even those without relatives are taken care of by the community within which they live? The community members expect NGOs to provide help while NGOs expect the vulnerables to be taken care of by the community. The real challenge is how to bridge or reconcile the variance in expectations.¹⁴

NGOs expect refugees to look after those who are struggling. As the UNHCR basic principles (Box 1) state, "others have a duty to help those who are unable to help themselves." B.E. Harrell-Bond characterized this optimistic view of behavior as the "over-socialised concept of man."¹⁵ In the extreme circumstances that are typically found in refugee camps, refugees often appear to fail in this duty as they focus on looking after their immediate families.

CONFUSION IN PRINCIPLE

Apart from these different expectations, the UNHCR principles do not give clear guidance for implementation. Three areas of confusion are highlighted here: questions about how to reconcile community structures with international standards of protection; the flawed assumption of dependency; and different understandings of how to build on refugees' resources.

The Limits of Participation

The principles of community services suggest that

any intervention should be based on participatory approaches that fully involve the refugees in planning and implementation. "Refugees should be the reference point for determining felt needs and in identifying priority groups and individuals."¹⁶ Moreover, the interventions should be based on existing community structures "as far as possible."¹⁷

At the same time, UNHCR is required to uphold international standards of protection and humanitarian principles. It does not take long to find examples

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where the refugees' community mechanisms for dealing with social issues may fall below such standards or run counter to them. This can be illustrated by the situation of unaccompanied children in Zambia.

Throughout large areas of southern Africa it is common for children to be cared for by people other than their parents, especially relatives but also friends. However, once within a refugee camp or settlement, this largely informal system of guardianship is incorporated within the more formal requirements of UNHCR, which requires reporting and fostering agreements to ensure that the children receive care and are protected from abuse. This is intended not only to ensure their protection while they are in the camps, but also to facilitate any chance of family reunification.

This monitoring and reporting on children's placement tends to create an expectation that material assistance will be forthcoming for those who take in children. In western Zambia, for instance, small grants are being made to foster families that take in children who arrive in the camps as unaccompanied minors. However, there is the danger that such a response may result in demands for a similar grant to be given to those who foster other children when needs arise within the camps (for example, through parental death, abandonment, or repatriation). Is it appropriate for the community services NGO to differentiate between those children who need fostering because of the circumstances of becoming a refugee,

for example those who lose parents in flight, and those whose needs arise because of the normal cycle of life within the camp or settlement? Does the same responsibility for protection fall on both? Is this system of fostering undermining the community mechanism for caring for children?

The principle of refugee participation and ownership of community services interventions also runs into difficulties when faced with the different priorities of UNHCR and the international aid agencies. The initiative for HIV/AIDS education activities that are now a standard component of community services come from UNHCR and aid agencies, greatly facilitated by designated funds from donors. Likewise, as sexual and gender based violence affecting refugees has been highlighted, community services agencies have been at the forefront of new programs to address these issues, again assisted by designated donor funds. Although the need for such activities becomes clear over time and the services provided may be well used, it is open to question if they would have been a priority for many refugee communities. Certainly, in the Zambian case, HIV/AIDS awareness was not raised as a priority in the participatory appraisal, which was carried out before the community services program started. In Tanzania, the main participants in the reproductive health program were the youth, and parents viewed the resultant HIV/AIDS campaign as shocking and culturally inappropriate.

Clearly, the principles of participation and refugee 'ownership' of community services activities (or the whole UNHCR operation under the commu-

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nity development approach) have boundaries. But these boundaries are not yet marked out. It needs to be clear to all concerned that where the cultures and

social structures of the refugees run counter to wider principles of human rights and international humanitarian law, the latter should prevail.

A similar point could be made about any community development program that is supported by an external agency. However, a development agency has very limited power over those with whom it works. It may not agree in principle with the way the community operates, but all it can hope to do is influence attitudes and behavior over time. A development agency must negotiate its presence, and if it pushes against the prevailing culture too strongly it is likely to be rejected. In contrast, UNHCR has a mandate from the host government and international community and it does not need the refugees' agreement to work among them.

Assumed Dependency

A major objective for promoting refugee involvement is to avoid dependency. As the guidelines for community services put it:

It is important to involve the refugees in the provision of assistance and allow the community to share the responsibility of caring for itself and its vulnerable members. This minimizes dependency and encourages self reliance. *The approach used during the emergency period will determine the whole pattern of behavioural response of refugees towards external assistance.*¹⁸

The notion of dependency is frequently used by the staff of UNHCR and NGOs working with refugees as an explanation for the refugees' lack of cooperation or excessive demands for assistance. People who have been refugees for a long time are perceived as having lost their natural means of coping and being reliant on aid agencies to provide all their needs. They do not take the initiative and do not take responsibility for the care of the poorest people within their midst. Communal action is only undertaken with the support of aid agencies, and those who participate are likely to demand payment for their labor. Moreover, according to UNHCR and NGOs, rather than working, refugees exploit the system to obtain extra ration cards and other resources from aid agencies. For example, among Rwandan refugees in Ngara, Tanzania in 1994, the refugees in Lumasi camp were widely regarded as

more difficult because a large proportion had been 'spoiled' by living in camps for displaced people inside Rwanda for some time before fleeing to Tanzania.¹⁹

This underlying assumption that refugees are prone to dependency is a major weakness in the way that community services have been conceptualized. There is no research to support the claim that the approach taken in an emergency will set up a pattern of behavioral response, as UNHCR's guidelines sug-

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gest. In fact, there is a growing body of research that rejects the idea of the dependency syndrome and sees the observed behavior as a greater reflection on the aid agencies than the refugees. Many have noted that refugees are highly skilled at adapting to their difficult circumstances and taking the best advantage of their situation.²⁰ When faced with a set of external interventions that can provide them with benefits, refugees will receive what they can. If provision is based on need then people will present themselves as needy, and when providers are foreigners, it is particularly easy to appear 'vulnerable.' However, in taking advantage of the situation, refugees are not exhibiting dependency so much as a great capacity for adapting their livelihood strategies to their circumstances. They have to appear dependent to receive resources, but this does not mean they have forgotten how to survive by themselves.

Humanitarian aid becomes a component of the refugees' resource base, which they use to further their interests. Aid, however, is not necessarily the major part of their resource base. Indeed, many groups of refugees have been observed to make strenuous

efforts to avoid being dependent on humanitarian aid and to preserve their limited autonomy and control over their lives. Sometimes this may take the form of avoiding going to official settlements²¹ or diverting the aid they are offered to further their own interests and priorities.²² Refugees go to great lengths to preserve their lifestyle and earn extra incomes where they can.²³

In Zambia in early 2000, I visited newly arrived Angolan refugees who were described as dependent because they did not participate fully in building camp facilities. However, I found very few people sit-

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ting idly in the plastic covered shelters that formed their new houses. Far from refusing to work, these Angolan refugees were out laboring in local farmers' fields to supplement their rations, which they complained were inadequate. This is still the case today as people continually move out of the camp looking for odd jobs, firewood, and opportunities to trade. Refugees are too busy using their time and energy to improve their living conditions. They do not have the time to work freely on what they see as aid agency projects.

The assumption that refugees become dependent on humanitarian aid casts the refugees as helpless victims who represent a problem for both aid agencies and host governments. This runs counter to any notion of refugees as agents of development underlying UNHCR's community services principles and the community development approach. This concern about the rhetoric of dependency has been picked up by the Community Services evaluation, which concluded:

We find many of the concepts, terminology and articulation of the CS function to be singularly unhelpful because they repeatedly "problematize" the refugee, rather than focusing on the role that UNHCR's own management and operating procedures play in creating 'dependency' and narrowing

the scope of refugee self-sufficiency and 'self-reliance.' Clearly refugee dependency is also the product of host government regulations limiting freedom of movement and the right to work or engage in economic activity.

In the field we heard numerous references to the need to get refugees to stop being so 'dependent', as opposed to a focus on creating appropriate conditions for refugee self-sufficiency. This occurs despite the fact that our findings and a consistent body of evidence from other research and evaluations confirm that in all settings, refugees are actively engaged in every possible type of productive work, based on the opportunities and resources at their disposal.²⁴

The evaluation rightly recommended that "references to dependency should be purged from the UNHCR lexicon" and argues that its rhetoric, training, and working practices should be re-orientated to acknowledge refugees as potential assets.

Building on Refugees' Resources

The community services guidelines and UNHCR's community development approach rest on the idea

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that people will work together for their community to improve conditions, whether by building schools, teaching adult literacy, or overseeing the operation of grinding mills. However, as noted above, given the value that people put on their time it is difficult to expect particular individuals to dedicate themselves to such community work as volunteers, especially when there is no personal gain.

The problem becomes more acute when the activity is directed towards assisting others in the neigh-

borhood who are facing particular difficulties—whether helping people build houses, supporting foster families, or collecting firewood for people who cannot gather it themselves. Such support may be available within a well-established community but it is typically limited. It is even less likely to be forthcoming among new arrivals when people are staying among strangers and everybody is starting from scratch to establish themselves in a camp. Under such conditions, refugees struggle to look as far as their extended family, let alone take care of others.

This emphasis on building on refugees' resources and encouraging self-reliance means that 'handouts' becomes a dirty word for community services agencies—as it often is for development programs. However, with the desperate conditions that refugees may face, especially on first arriving in a country of asylum, an input of material resources is required to ensure that all the refugees are able to meet their basic needs. In Zambia, refugees did not have enough to support their neighbors; as a number of refugees put it, "We have the will to help, but we do not have the means." A community development approach cannot address these basic problems unless it can deliver appropriate material support. Unfortunately, in Zambia these resources were not forthcoming from UNHCR, which cited its concern about undermining self-reliance.²⁵

The statements published by UNHCR in its community services guidelines and the more recent community development approach appear to be positive steps away from the technocratic, top-down delivery of assistance to refugees that dominates aid operations. However, when these principles are worked out in practice, it is too easy for the focus to shift to saving money. For example, the phrase "building on the community's own resources," can be interpreted in two ways: narrowly and broadly. A narrow understanding of material and human resources lends itself to a calculus of filling in the gaps—refugee aid tops off what cannot be provided by refugees themselves. Like any welfare system, this will tend to create a poverty trap where recipients have to show they are poor to receive any help. They are also discouraged from improving their own situation since their gains will be offset against any grants. This perpetuates situations where refugees present themselves as poor and aid agencies claim that refugees

are caught in the dependency syndrome.

A broad interpretation of 'resources' includes refugees' social structures and cultural practices, which they can employ to improve their lives (their capacity to manage activities and goods, for example). This is the interpretation suggested by UNHCR's guidelines and its community development approach. Unfortunately, until these principles move beyond community service ideals and are adopted by program officers and others who control the purse strings, the narrow view is likely to dominate.²⁶

CONFUSION IN PRACTICE

A further obstacle to working to the community services guidelines is the clash that arises between the outlook of community services and the management practices and attitudes that are found in refugee aid programs in the field.

The Tyranny of the Vulnerable

Refugee aid programs throughout Africa are littered

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with the term 'vulnerable,' which is used so indiscriminately as to have almost completely lost any meaning. It has effectively become a bureaucratic label for a set of people who are presumed to have a certain set of—largely material—needs that they cannot meet for themselves. The standard list includes unaccompanied minors, single-parent households, the elderly, and those who are chronically sick or affected by a physical disability or mental health problems. They are conveniently referred to by the appalling shorthand term, 'the vulnerables.' One of the major tasks of community services in the field is to ensure that the basic needs of 'the vulnerables' are met.

Refugees understand the term well and know

that those who are deemed to be vulnerable should be eligible for some extra assistance. For example, when asked why they were receiving assistance from the community services NGO to establish an income-generating activity, a group of Angolan women in Zambia responded that they were vulnerable because they were all widows or looking after orphans. On further inquiry, it was clear that there were considerable variations in their situations. One widow had a daughter and son-in-law in the camp and had been helped by the son-in-law to build her house. Another was recently widowed and still reliant on plastic sheeting for a roof. Another widow said that she had received help in building a house from an amputee. Who is the most vulnerable refugee among these?

This use of the term 'vulnerable' presents problems of both principle and practice. In principle the

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idea of ascribing a set of stereotypical needs to people and then setting out to meet them seems contrary to community services' aspirations to empower refugees and recognize their potential for improving their own situation. It also runs counter to a community-based approach. In practice, the definition of 'vulnerable groups' is so broad that it does little to help with targeting assistance.

The term 'vulnerable' needs to be qualified. People are vulnerable *to* some risk or other situation. Without knowing what a person is vulnerable *to*, it is impossible to know how to improve the situation. Rather than targeting labeled groups of people, a more helpful guide to program design may be an assessment of the type and scale of the risks facing refugees. This might aid in identifying those who are in the worst position as well as the nature of the assistance they are likely to need. For example, many refugees may be able to build their own houses, but some may face great difficulties in making adequate

shelter. Assistance in building houses could then be directed to those who have no means to build their own house, rather than aiming to help those—the amputee mentioned above, for example—who may be able to look after themselves. The aim should be to support people in the aspect of life in which they are vulnerable and recognize the other aspects of life where they are not vulnerable.²⁷

Caseloads and Reporting Systems

Another discontinuity in the interface between the world of aid agencies and that of refugees is the notion of caseload, which is prevalent in the reporting systems recommended by UNHCR. A community services NGO is expected to identify the vulnerable people within the refugee population and report on how they have responded to their needs. The NGO is open to criticism from UNHCR if it cannot produce this information, resulting in reporting systems focused on identifying the caseload, naming individuals, and giving details of their age group, nationality, and cause of 'vulnerability' (single-headed households, elderly, and so on).

This type of reporting militates against a community development approach. The process of collecting the data suggests that the community services NGO is taking on responsibility for the support of those recorded on the forms and that the NGO will deliver the required resources.²⁸ This system does not facilitate the delivery of assistance from one refugee or group of refugees to another. Community services NGOs may aspire to support groups of refugees helping each other and others in the community, but this will never happen if their progress is measured by what assistance the NGO has given to individuals. It will be hard for refugees to assert ownership of activities if every detail has to be recorded by an NGO. It is difficult to envisage such a system of registering people in need of assistance being used in a community development program outside the refugee camps.

The system as it stands is geared towards ensuring accountability to UNHCR, with a one-way flow of information out of the camps. It is a long way from a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation that involves the whole refugee community. As noted above, refugees may have a very vague idea of what community services are about and tend to assess it on the basis of what it is delivering for them.

Community services NGOs may have objectives that are concerned with the development of community organizations, enabling the community to care for the 'vulnerable' within their midst, increasing economic activity, and so forth. To some extent the work of a community services program that successfully

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adopts such a development approach will be largely invisible—the facilitator should not be the focus of attention. The community services NGO will evaluate its work more positively if the community feels it is doing things for itself rather than ascribing all progress to the NGO. Such an evaluation may not be read so well by UNHCR and other donors who expect reports to detail how many refugees its implementing partners are assisting.²⁹

Sectoral Divides

The division of refugee aid programs into sectors presents a further challenge in coping with the interface between the international refugee aid regime operating in the camps and the lives of the refugees. The aid program in refugee camps and settlements tends to be divided into sectors, one of which is community services, and each aid agency (and at times the host government) has responsibility for one or more sectors. This helps to establish a clear division of labor between the different actors in the camps and makes co-ordination easier. NGOs are very familiar with thinking in terms of sectors and their staff will be trained accordingly. However, refugees, or any other population for that matter, do not divide their lives up so neatly.

Community services programs are expected to work across the sectors and often act as a referral point directing refugees to available resources and identifying areas of need to be tackled by other sec-

tors. This is very difficult to put into practice as it relies on a degree of co-operation and coordination rarely found among agencies working in refugee camps. Each sector has its own expertise. Encroachments from others suggesting where the sector should work or how it should engage with the community are not welcome. Stated bluntly, to put the community services principles into practice in the field would require a shift of power between UNHCR departments and NGOs, which is unlikely in the extreme.

Managing Participation

UNHCR's policy documents and guidelines are emphatic about the need for refugees' participation in all areas of its programs. The introduction to its *Handbook for Emergencies* states, "UNHCR is committed to the principle of participation by consulting refugees on decisions that affect their lives," and, "It is important to encourage refugees' participation at all stages of planning and implementation."³⁰ Unfortunately, it is difficult to see these principles being worked out in the field.

For example, in western Zambia, when UNHCR planned to open a new housing site for recently arrived refugees it did not consult with the refugees about the design and planning for the new extension. UNHCR regarded this phase as a technical matter and therefore neglected to include refugees in the process. The refugees were simply informed of what

To some extent the work of a community services program that successfully adopts such a development approach will be largely invisible—the facilitator should not be the focus of attention.

was happening; their involvement would start when they moved to the site. After being asked about this lack of participation, a rather embarrassed member of UNHCR's field staff acknowledged that they had not thought of encouraging refugees' participation at the planning stage.

The management systems of UNHCR and many

of its implementing partners further limit the scope for participation. A community services NGO may conduct a participatory appraisal to set the direction of its work and aspire to respond to the refugees' initiatives throughout the program. However, the NGO may have limited autonomy to do this, especially if it is dependent on funds from UNHCR. An NGO can develop plans in consultation with the refugees, which inevitably raises expectations, only to have those plans cut back by UNHCR in a one-sided negotiation process where budgets are rationalized according to UNHCR's priorities.³¹ Budget lines are

It might be tempting to conclude that community services has been set up to fail.

specified in great detail and NGOs are expected to adhere closely to them and explain any deviations in sub-project monitoring reports. If new initiatives develop or priorities change in the field, the NGO can only respond after going through a laborious bureaucratic procedure to get a budget revision. This may take months and lead to delays in the field.

For all its rhetoric about participation, UNHCR's systems and management structure do not facilitate the participation of refugees or even its implementing partners in the field. An organization that has not developed a participatory, empowering management structure cannot run a participatory program. The way things are organized in the offices will have an impact on the operations on the ground. In short, management styles matter.

CONCLUSION

This paper paints a gloomy picture of the prospects for community services being able to live up to their principles and guidelines. Some of these problems arise from muddled thinking and a failure to ensure that principles and guidelines are grounded in the environment in which community services will have to operate. Other obstacles are related to the lack of resources, both financial and human, which reflect the limited commitment to community services by UNHCR. Established management structures and practices also present barriers to implementing pro-

grams using developmental approaches.³²

The rhetoric of the community service guidelines and principles is appealing and demonstrates that steps towards developmental thinking are taking place within UNHCR. However, this approach is far from being absorbed by the mainstream. As a sector, community services tends to be sidelined and 'put upon' within refugee aid programs as the depository for tasks that do not fit within other sectors. This is made easier as long as its role remains unclear.

It might be tempting to conclude that community services has been set up to fail. As the main area for exploring a developmental approach, so far it appears wanting. There is a danger that piloting such approaches in a marginalized sector may tend to hide the continued operation of top-down and at times oppressive humanitarian aid regimes in the mainstream. Before UNHCR begins experimenting with a shift towards community development approaches, it needs to put considerably more thought into the one area in which it has been trying to implement the shift. Early dissemination may simply mean that the approach is undermined and we can return to business as usual. At this stage, pushing the community development approach as a general policy that builds on the failing model of community services will not work—it will be unclear and under-funded. Its failure to deliver results is likely to cause a reversion to top-down responses.

Perhaps that is what is required by the political and security conditions in many refugee situations. If that is the case, it may be better to acknowledge that refugee camps are not places where human rights are respected in the same way as they are outside. Tinkering at the edges through inflated ideas of what is achievable in community services may simply waste time and effort, not to mention money. It may help satisfy the desire of humanitarians to live up to the standards to which they aspire, but is it actually in the best interests of the refugees?

If it intends to sow a community development approach with any chance of success, UNHCR needs to do a lot more preparation of the soil. This echoes the findings of the community services evaluation, which concluded that the community development approach should not be "mainstreamed":

Overall, our assessment is that while crucial in the medium to long-term, it is a strategic error under

current circumstances to attempt to ‘mainstream’ a community development approach at this time—making all staff responsible and ‘accountable’ for implementing techniques, practices and approaches that they do not adequately understand.³³

Instead, the evaluation argues that UNHCR should take a more strategic approach of disseminating the core concepts in the community development approach: “Through a trained, experienced staff and the strategic involvement of partners and external consultants, the CS function should model and transmit to others the use of community development methods and techniques for enhancing refugee protection.”³⁴ As a step along the way, it recommends that UNHCR should routinely employ “situation analysis” as an assessment tool for planning and monitoring, moving beyond the narrow needs-based

The more radical agenda of transforming the relationship between aid agencies and refugees is one worth pursuing.

approach that dominates in current programming. Situation analysis can be distinguished from the assessment methodologies in current use by its focus on analyzing the situation at the level of the individual, the refugee community, and the wider social and political context of the host society and country of origin. Moreover, it explicitly investigates the refugees’ capacities and resources rather than positioning them exclusively as the source of needs and problems.³⁵

This is a practical recommendation that will start to improve the soil. Is there scope to take things even further by re-orientating UNHCR’s programs towards a rights-based approach? Ironically, given its focus on protection and rights guaranteed to refugees with respect to host states, UNHCR has yet to adopt a clear human rights framework for its humanitarian aid activities and still operates largely within a needs-based approach to assistance.³⁶ It has made efforts to

raise the profile of protection issues among its implementing partners, especially the rights to physical protection and personal security, to tackle problems of sexual and gender based violence and abuse of children.³⁷ The focus of this has tended to be on community services but it has yet to reach across into other sectors. The discourse has remained focused on protection and beneficiaries, which keeps the refugees firmly in their place.

The issues addressed in the community development policy are consistent with the adoption of a rights-based approach. Starting from questions about rights may be more productive for disseminating the approach beyond the community services enclave, as it may avoid getting caught up in the development/relief debate, which neglects the more fundamental issues of rights and empowerment. There are still many important questions to be addressed about the idea of a rights-based approach: there is a very real danger that it can remain at the level of rhetoric rather than transforming the relationship between aid agencies and those they serve.³⁸ A number of NGOs have declared that they are adopting a rights-based approach to programming, but this approach is still in its infancy and it is not yet clear what concrete benefits it might deliver, especially in programs with refugees. Moreover, any shift in programming is likely to be highly circumscribed and possibly resisted by the policy framework of the host and donor governments.

If these issues can be tackled—and we have yet to see if they can—a rights-based approach would offer a more solid and consistent base for bringing community services principles into the mainstream in the longer term. Attempting to graft the community development approaches onto the needs-based outlook that dominates UNHCR operations is likely to be a very frustrating exercise, one that will remain on the margins of refugee aid programs. For now, it may be the only practical option available, given the many constraints facing UNHCR and its implementing partners, but the more radical agenda of transforming the relationship between aid agencies and refugees is one worth pursuing. ■

NOTES

- 1 Oliver Bakewell, Review of CORD Community Services for Angolan Refugees in Western Province, Zambia (Geneva: UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, 2002).
- 2 Shelly Dick, Review of Community Services for Congolese Refugees in Kigoma Region, Tanzania (Geneva: UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, 2002).
- 3 CASA Consulting, Towards Community Based Solutions: Evaluation of UNHCR's Community Services Function (Geneva: UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, 2002).
- 4 For a brief history of community services see CASA Consulting, Towards Community Based Solutions: Evaluation of UNHCR's Community Services Function, Appendix 6.
- 5 UNHCR, Refugee Emergencies: A Community Based Approach, Community Service Guidelines Volume 1 (Geneva: UNHCR, 1996) and UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, 2nd ed. (Geneva: UNHCR, 1999).
- 6 UNHCR, Refugee Emergencies: A Community Based Approach, 9, 14.
- 7 UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, 96.
- 8 Reinforcing a Community Development Approach, 20th Meeting Standing Committee, UNHCR Executive Committee 52nd Session. EC/51/SC/CRP.6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Report of the 20th Meeting of the Standing Committee, UNHCR Executive Committee, 52nd Session. A/AC.96/945.
- 11 Cathy Lennox-Cook, Kitali Camp, Ngara, Tanzania : A Study (draft), 1996; A year in the life of a Rwandese and Burundese Refugee Camp February 1995 - February 1996 (unpublished report).
- 12 CORD Project Document 2002, unpublished.
- 13 Shelly Dick, *Review of Community Services for Congolese Refugees*; and Oliver Bakewell, *Review of CORD Community Services for Angolan Refugees*.
- 14 Hodi Participatory Assessment Report: Mayukwayukwa Refugee Settlement, Kaoma District, Western Province (2000), 9.
- 15 B.E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 16 UNHCR, Refugee Emergencies, 14.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, 97 (emphasis in original).
- 19 Johan Pottier, "Relief and Repatriation: Views by Rwandan Refugees; Lessons for Humanitarian Aid Workers," *African Affairs* 95 (1996), 411.
- 20 G. Kibreab, "The Myth of Dependency among Camp Refugees in Somalia 1979-1989," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6, no. 4 (1996), 321-349; and S.R. Waldron, "Working in the Dark: Why Social Anthropological Research is Essential in Refugee Administration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, no. 2 (1988), 153-165.
- 21 A. Hansen, "Self-settled Rural Refugees in Africa: The Case of Angolans in Zambian Villages," in A. Hansen and A. Oliver-Smith, eds., *In Involuntary Migration and Resettlement; the Problems and Responses of Dislocated People* (Colorado: Westview Press).
- 22 S.R. Waldron, "Working in the Dark."
- 23 G. Kibreab, "The Myth of Dependency."
- 24 CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, 70.
- 25 Oliver Bakewell, *Review of CORD*.
- 26 A similar point is made by the UNHCR community services evaluation which compares a narrow economic notion of 'self-reliance' meaning that refugees are economically independent of UNHCR, 'off the dole,' and a broader view of 'self-help' referring to refugees capacity to organise themselves collectively to improve concerns at the community level. See CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, 71.
- 27 For a more detailed discussion of the use and abuse of the term 'vulnerable' in community services see CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, Chapter 4.
- 28 Although at times there may only be sufficient resources to identify the 'vulnerable' but nothing available to assist them—e.g., in Zambia. See Oliver Bakewell, *Review of CORD*; and CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, 43.
- 29 A counter argument is that UNHCR cannot be aware of how people fall through the cracks in the aid provision if it does not know about individual stories. Without that knowledge it cannot fill the cracks. See CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, 50. However, this could be addressed through case studies or other methods, without the need for advising UNHCR of all cases.
- 30 UNHCR, *Handbook for Emergencies*, ix, 7.
- 31 According to the UNHCR community services evaluation, the community services budget (three percent of UNHCR's overall budget) tends to be a pool that includes many items which do not fit elsewhere. UNHCR community services staff have little control over this budget and this must reduce the chances of community services' priorities being recognized. See CASA Consulting, *Towards Community Based Solutions*, 21.
- 32 Jeff Crisp, *Mind the Gap! UNHCR, Humanitarian Assistance and the Development Process* (Geneva: UNHCR).
- 33 See CASA Consulting, *Toward Community Based Solutions*, 69.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 100 and Appendix 6.
- 36 Karen Kenny, "When Needs Are Rights."
- 37 Valid International, *Meeting the Rights and Protection Needs of Refugee Children*.
- 38 See Peter Uvin, "On High Moral Ground: The Incorporation of Human Rights by the Development Enterprise," *Praxis: The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies* 17 (2002), 19-26.