



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

European Commission Communication on “Maximizing the Development Impact of Migration”

UNHCR Views¹

Introduction

UNHCR welcomes the Communication’s emphasis on the place of refugees in contributing to development of their host countries. Refugees are all too often portrayed as being solely a burden on host societies, neglecting important evidence to the contrary from States with a long tradition of receiving and integrating both refugees and migrants.

It is a fact that areas hosting refugees are rarely singled out as a ‘development priority’ by host States. Moreover, strict encampment policies, where they exist, perpetuate dependency, stifle initiative and, over time, have a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of the refugees. The Commission’s treatment of the subject is therefore refreshing, well argued, and well founded. It echoes the positions espoused by UNHCR for many years.

Focus of UNHCR’s comments

UNHCR would specifically wish to comment on the following passage and recommendation in the Communication.

Section 2.1 (p. 3) *“The large majority of the world’s total refugee population of over 15 million lives in developing countries, often in protracted situation, which represents significant challenges for host communities. But the presence of refugees and other forced migrants can also result in new opportunities and benefits for national and local economies through refugees’ human capital, including by providing labour skills and creating demand for goods and services. Measures to harness the potential of refugees to drive development improve their self-reliance, and thereby strengthen the quality of refugees’ protection to the benefit of also the host countries.”*

Section 6 (bullet 3) *In this bullet, the Commission highlights the need to take a more holistic approach to migration, including by, “Taking steps to integrate forced migration into the development-migration agenda and ensure that refugees and other forced migrants are included in long-term development planning. In particular, the Commission will work towards and advocate for the integration of protracted refugees situations into the development agenda to ensure that their situation and possible positive contribution is*

¹ COM(2013) 292 final, 21 May 2013

considered by host governments so as to prevent future displacements and strengthen efforts to find durable solutions.

UNHCR's views

UNHCR supports the view that the presence of refugees can also result in new opportunities and benefits to the country of asylum.

Measures which empower refugees to access work and sustainable livelihood opportunities, use skills acquired in the home country, and bolster self-reliance, are the only way to counter the dependency syndrome that goes hand-in-hand with open-ended humanitarian assistance, particularly in protracted situations.

A recently completed WFP-UNHCR report assessing the contribution of food assistance to durable solutions in protracted refugee situations bears out the negative impact of limited livelihood opportunities and prolonged dependency on food assistance.² Evaluations were conducted jointly by WFP and UNHCR through 2011-2012 in Bangladesh, Chad, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, to test the validity of an intervention logic which posited that the agencies' combined work would contribute to increased self-reliance. The results were sobering and found:

- Unacceptably high numbers of refugees remained food insecure. Women were more food insecure than men, often because they had more dependents.
- Rates of chronic malnutrition that reached or exceeded the high severity threshold in all four contexts.
- Very limited livelihood options, and generally weak support for livelihoods. Refugees did not have access to formal labour markets (except in Rwanda), or adequate land for agriculture (except in Chad). As a result, the most common type of work for refugees was unskilled day labour in poor and exploitative conditions, competing with local populations.
- In all four contexts, women's livelihood activities were especially precarious and often exposed them to risk. Transactional and survival sex were found to be common, as were domestic violence and sexual- and gender-based violence.

Two key common contextual factors stood out: donor funding policies and host government policies. Long-term support for protracted refugee situations fits uneasily with conventional donor funding modalities which differentiate between 'humanitarian' and 'development' assistance. A second factor, in all four contexts, is that host governments did not permit formal integration, mobility was restricted and insufficient land made available. Mobility and access to job markets are essential for self-reliance.

The above survey also confirms a number of points made by the Commission, including:

- The close link between lack of self-reliance and enhanced vulnerability to protection problems in the host country.
- The fact that refugees are not solely a 'burden'. Full enjoyment of their rights includes being empowered to lead productive lives and contribute to the economies of host

² Synthesis Report of the Joint WFP and UNHCR Impact Evaluations on the Contribution of Food Assistance to Durable Solutions in Protracted Refugees Situations, May 2013.

countries, when feasible, of countries of origin. Their status as refugees should not equate them as being ‘development-neutral’ or justify sustainable development policies being blind to the development challenges presented by hosting refugees and other categories of forcibly displaced.

- Humanitarian aid is not an end in itself, but must be buttressed by longer-term development interventions which empower refugees economically and socially and enable them to make contributions to development.
- Host Government policies that marginalize and disempower refugee populations cannot engender holistic and sustainable development policies.

Too many States Party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol maintain reservations to important articles of the Convention. The highest number of reservations relate to wage-earning employment (Article 17), self-employment (Article 18) public education (Article 22), and labour legislation and social security (Article 24). In many cases, such reservations are still applied decades after the time of ratification or accession. UNHCR encourages States to revisit and lift these reservations in the interest of giving new impetus to refugee empowerment and self-reliance.

In this regard, UNHCR hopes that refugees will also benefit from initiatives deriving from the Global Forum on Migration and Development process, such as readier validation and recognition of diplomas acquired abroad, innovative labour migration schemes which also benefit refugees, reductions in the transaction costs of making remittances, and similar positive measures.

UNHCR Headquarters, 13 June 2013