

The Nairobi Refugee Program 2005-2007:

**Working with partner agencies and refugee communities to
strengthen urban refugee protection**

**UNHCR Branch Office for Kenya
10 April 2007**

The Nairobi Refugee Program 2005-2007: Working with partner agencies and refugee communities to strengthen urban refugee protection

Beginning in 2005, the UNHCR Branch Office in Nairobi re-examined its urban refugee program, which was facing a number of challenges. Relations between the office and the many NGOs working with refugees in Nairobi were strained and characterized by mistrust. The corruption scandal of 2000-2001 had damaged the office's reputation and perhaps understandably caused the office to focus its attention on the reform of internal procedures rather than on outreach. Relations with refugee communities were similarly weak, as the office had a reputation for corruption and insularity. The Branch Office had very limited information about the situation of refugees in Nairobi, making it impossible to devise a protection strategy addressing refugees' most serious concerns. Though many NGOs in Nairobi were working with refugees, the lack of a coordination mechanism meant that potential synergies were unrealized.

By 2005 it was clear that UNHCR needed to re-evaluate its urban refugee program; however, it could not do so in isolation, but only with the input and collaboration of NGOs and refugee communities in Nairobi. A first step was to carry out a survey of NGOs working with refugees in Nairobi. To gather their perspectives, UNHCR launched a series of workshops and meetings which it called the Nairobi Initiative. The goal was to bring together the various NGOs working with refugees in Nairobi to share information about refugee communities, protection issues and who was providing which services. Several of these agencies also joined UNHCR to carry out a participatory assessment with refugee communities to learn about their protection risks, coping mechanisms and community structures. The participatory assessment involved staff members meeting with refugee men, women, girls and boys of the various nationalities represented in the city. Both the Nairobi Initiative and the participatory assessment marked the beginning of stronger relationships among UNHCR, NGOs, and refugee communities.

Strategies and Achievements in 2006-2007

In 2006-2007, the office took several steps to build upon the foundations laid by the Nairobi Initiative and participatory assessment. The strategy included the following components:

Identification of Persons/ Groups-at-risk in Urban Setting:

- **Strengthen inter-agency collaboration.** Two inter-agency working groups were established—one in the area of legal assistance and the other in community services. The working groups meet on a bi-monthly basis to exchange information and to work on a common agenda. In 2006, agencies collaborated on joint advocacy for the passing of the refugee bill, which resulted in Kenya at last adopting a law on refugee matters. Agencies also worked together to promote refugee children's access to free primary education and to advocate with local micro-finance institutions to allow refugees to access their services. In addition, UNHCR invited NGOs to visit the office and learn about its procedures during a number of open days. A newsletter of the inter-agency network allows groups to share information about their activities and best practices.

- **Inclusion of Refugee Communities in Planning and Implementation of Programmes.** Urban areas present challenges for facilitating the meaningful participation of refugees in defining protection risks and proposing solutions. The population is diverse, spread across many neighborhoods and without easily identifiable leadership structures. Instead of focusing on leaders who tend to hold strong political agendas and be factionalized, UNHCR cultivated relationships with community organizers and self-help groups—refugees who are taking an active role in promoting the protection and welfare of others within their community. These groups helped the multi-functional team to conduct participatory assessment with diverse persons. In order to build confidence of refugee communities and agency staff in the integrity of participatory assessment, it was imperative to include the findings in program planning. Participatory assessment must lead to concrete results, even if these are limited by funding constraints. Refugees have expressed their appreciation for even the small responses to the concerns they have identified. Many of the refugee community organizers are proving to be mature and constructive partners and have given UNHCR useful guidance in both the mid-year operational review and in the COP planning exercise.
- **Enhance our knowledge of the refugee community in Nairobi by gathering information from multiple sources.** In an urban setting, UNHCR has difficulty accessing refugee communities spread across a large area and understanding the issues affecting a diverse population. The office has tried to overcome this by gathering information from multiple sources. Regular inter-agency meetings provide the perspective of NGO staff. The participatory assessment in 2006 focused on reaching out to refugees with specific needs, many of whom do not approach the office regularly, including, for example, domestic workers, persons with disabilities, and children who work. Various legal, social and economic indicators from the country of asylum and countries of origin have been compared to data about the population registered with UNHCR to identify disparities. This has allowed us to identify several key issues. For example, while FGM rates are quite high in some of the countries of origin, no FGM case has ever been reported to the office. The office is now working with a partner to research FGM prevalence and practices within the urban refugee community.
- **Use ProGres to strengthen individual case management.** Without effective individual case management, UNHCR cannot build the trust of other agencies and refugee communities. ProGres is a vital tool in managing a large caseload of urban refugees. The Nairobi office has taken steps to utilize ProGres fully. Officers record in ProGres a numerical risk factor, as well as a numerical indication of their confidence in the source of information, for any individual bringing a concern to the office. This allows the office to identify quickly persons with a high level of confirmed risk and act on their cases expeditiously. All units in the office are recording information in ProGres in accordance with agreed-upon procedures, which has facilitated better sharing of information among units. ProGres is also instrumental in preventing fraud and abuse, which have proven so detrimental to the

Nairobi office in the past. Fingerprints and photographs are taken of all urban refugees to prevent identity fraud and other abuses.

- **Use GIS technology to identify groups-at-risk:** The availability of a digital map of Nairobi has facilitated the use of GIS to map where refugees live, utilize services and encounter protection risks. Refugees approaching the office provide information about where they live and where they have faced protection problems, such as the location of a crime or detention. The office analyzes this information to understand where certain groups of refugees (e.g., female headed households) reside so that services can be better targeted.

Protection Responses:

- **Develop Community-based Protection Responses.** The office's Community-Based Protection Response Panel comprising various functional units meets on a monthly basis to share information on issues affecting refugee communities and consider how to build community-based responses. The goal is to empower refugee communities to provide protection to their own members. For example, one current activity is to provide paralegal training to refugees who are active in their communities. With a greater knowledge of Kenyan law and institutions, they will be able to provide basic legal assistance and advocate for their community members. Together with a partner, UNHCR is also beginning to work with religious and educational leaders, as well as community groups, to advocate for FGM abandonment, as well as to organize mutual support for families who choose not to circumcise their daughters.
- **Community Outreach.** Together with its partners, UNHCR is establishing a visible presence within a densely populated refugee neighborhood. An implementing partner has several outreach workers who focus on women's and children's health issues, such as vaccination campaigns, response to SGBV, and reproductive health. They also conduct trainings for groups of women on these matters. A female lawyer conducts a weekly legal aid clinic in the refugee neighborhood; this is particularly important for refugee women who may not have the time or money to travel across town to seek legal assistance. A new initiative in this refugee neighborhood is to start training and literacy program for refugees serving as domestic workers, giving them the skills and confidence to seek employment under fair working conditions.
- **Improve Delivery of Protection Information to Refugees.** The information acquired through the GIS project allows the office to identify patterns in crime and detentions, which then helps us to guide refugees about places to avoid for their own security. Also, the office shares information with refugees in written form. The brochure for urban refugees was developed in collaboration with a wide network of NGOs in Nairobi, and provides comprehensive information about available services. Finally, since urban refugees incur significant expense in traveling to the office for services, UNHCR is exploring new ways of providing non-confidential information to refugees (e.g., the list of numbers of persons required to approach the office,

which is normally posted on the office's outdoor notice-board), such as a call-in center with limited operating hours or even the internet.

- **Promote refugees' access to public services.** UNHCR can provide very limited assistance to refugees in the urban setting, especially since available resources in Kenya are focused on the two camps. Instead, it is in line with the host country's international responsibilities for refugees to have access to necessary public services. UNHCR worked with an NGO partner and the City Council's Health Department to establish outreach to the refugee community in one city council health facility. As a result, refugees in one neighborhood are now receiving low-cost medical services on an equal basis with the host community; refugee women can even deliver in a maternity ward at the low cost of 20 Kenyan shillings (35 cents). UNHCR has also built a coalition including the City Education Department, NGOs, and refugee communities to advocate for the enrolment of refugee children in the city's free public primary schools. As a result, one thousand more non-Kenyans enrolled in primary schools in the targeted district in early 2007, according to the City Education Department.
- **Training of government officials.** In order for refugees to enjoy police protection and access public services, government officials must understand the basic principles of refugee protection and be sensitive to refugees' particular needs. The office has an ambitious program of training police trainers, judges, children's officers, and members of the provincial administration. This intensive training program with government officials at various levels has improved understanding of refugee law and refugees' lives, preparing them to protect and assist refugees. In addition to training, officials in the Refugee Affairs Department need to build up a network of contacts with refugee communities, and the next challenge is to capacitate the government to adopt a community-based approach to working with urban refugees. As a first step, one government official is based on a part-time basis at the UNHCR office and has started participating in outreach activities.
- **Support the development of refugee communities.** UNHCR launched a competition for small capacity-building grants for self-help groups and community-based organizations. In 2006, twelve groups received support, including: materials for a girls' toilet for a school run by and for Sudanese refugees; desks and benches for an Ethiopian literacy project; sporting equipment for a Somali youth football league; and sewing machines and materials for a Congolese tailoring center. In collaboration with other agencies, UNHCR has begun to form a network among the many successful self-help initiatives in Nairobi, and is launching a series of trainings in community development for refugee community activists. These trainings are designed to help small, motivated self-help groups to develop skills for community mobilization and organization. It is important to note that the office took the decision not to focus its community work on self-identified leaders. While the office meets with these leaders as a matter of courtesy, the real work of community development is focused on numerous grassroots groups that render services to the refugee community.

Assumptions

Many have noted that UNHCR’s 1997 urban refugee policy included a number of questionable assumptions, which impacted on work with urban refugees in Nairobi. Under the new urban refugee program, assumptions have changed dramatically.

Previous assumptions	New assumptions
Urban refugees tend to be single young men.	Urban refugees are a very diverse population, including women and men, girls and boys, and people with a variety of specific needs.
Urban refugees are passive; they are waiting for UNHCR to solve their problems.	Urban refugees have developed a variety of coping mechanisms to protect themselves and establish livelihoods in the urban setting.
Urban refugees want resettlement and engage in manipulative behavior to get it.	While resettlement is attractive, many refugees have built their lives and communities in the country of asylum.
Urban refugees are aggressive, meaning that UNHCR staff must take additional security precautions when visiting refugee communities.	Urban refugees welcome interaction with UNHCR staff in their own communities, and it is generally safe to visit them using the precautions usual for Nairobi.
UNHCR already knows everything it needs to know about urban refugees.	UNHCR can use multiple sources of information, including mapping, indicators, and community work, to learn about refugee communities in greater depth, giving particular attention to persons who may not approach the office regularly.
Urban refugees come to UNHCR if they have problems.	Many of the most vulnerable refugees are unable to approach the office at all, while others approach infrequently.

Necessary Conditions for Change

A number of conditions needed to be in place for UNHCR Nairobi to implement these new strategies and a deep change in assumptions. These conditions included:

- **Accessibility and transparency vis-à-vis operational partners and refugee communities.** The office needed to open its doors to operational partners and be much more transparent about its procedures—including both strengths and weaknesses. The office also had to make it a priority to give timely, thoughtful replies to the queries of partners and refugees.
- **ProGres.** Only the advanced, office-wide use of ProGres can ensure high-quality, efficient individual case management.
- **Senior management’s vision and good inter-unit collaboration.** All staff members working with individuals and communities need to share the common assumptions and collaborate on the overall strategy. Senior management played a crucial role in articulating this vision. It was particularly important for Protection and Community Services staff to understand this vision and to develop management structures for their smooth cooperation, since much of the strategy focuses on working with refugee communities to enhance protection.

- **Commitment to participatory assessment.** Participatory assessment is an opportunity for staff to forge a common understanding of the main issues affecting urban refugees, as well as to see them in their own neighborhoods and community spaces, rather than in the UNHCR office. To be a credible exercise, the office must commit to following up the participatory assessment with specific actions and results.
- **Small amounts of additional financial support.** UNHCR in Kenya must devote most of its resources to camp-based refugees, leaving little flexibility in the urban budget. However, small amounts of money from outside sources (e.g., Strengthening Protection Capacities Project) can have a significant impact. For example, a grant of \$30,000 allowed the office to organize programs together with the city's education authorities, and as a result they have made a strong commitment to enrolling refugee children in free primary education.
- **Openness to change.** The new program has required a willingness to take risks and to revise assumptions and projects as lessons are learned. The support and flexibility of managers have empowered staff to innovate.

Conclusion

UNHCR Nairobi has developed an urban refugee program based on core principles of outreach, transparency, refugee participation, community development, and effective management of data and information. The office's assumptions about urban refugees have changed dramatically.

In one year, the office was able to make significant progress in the protection of urban refugees. The training of police officers has reduced the number of reported cases of urban refugees being detained by police for illegal stay by more than 50% between 2005 and 2006. There has been significant progress in helping refugees to access public medical care and free primary education. A dozen community groups have received support and training from UNHCR empowering them to assist refugees in their neighborhoods with obtaining education and establishing livelihoods.

The new direction has greatly improved the reputation of the office. Meetings with NGOs are no longer strained affairs where information is shared cautiously. Instead, the atmosphere is warm and encouraging, which creates the opportunity to share information and explore ideas freely. While it takes longer for work with the city's diverse, scattered refugee population to bear fruit, refugees have commented positively upon the fact that UNHCR staff members are more frequently seen in refugee neighborhoods. A number of refugee-led community-based organizations now work closely with UNHCR and help to share more positive messages about the organization.

Working in true partnership with the government, NGOs and refugee communities has helped the office to fulfill its protection mandate vis-à-vis urban refugees within a modest budget. Moreover, this partnership shows due respect for the capacities of other actors and empowers them to take a greater role in refugee protection. UNHCR Nairobi is placing urban refugee protection on the path to sustainability.

UNHCR Kenya, 10 April 2007