



## **International Assistance to Palestinian Refugees in a Human Security Perspective**

*Briefing note prepared by  
the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research,  
Harvard School of Public Health*

*for  
the UNRWA Conference on Humanitarian Assistance to Palestinian Refugees  
Geneva, June 2004.*

This note explores key aspects of the human security perspective on the protection of Palestinian refugees, with a particular attention to the specific developmental and social needs of this population.

Human security strategies offer interesting new avenues for addressing the needs of refugees by focusing on coping strategies as much as actual needs of the population. Refugees are taken in their social and economic environment and approached as individual actors in their own right. This approach then suggests a qualitatively different relationship between donor and recipients where individual agency of refugees is a central component of the strategic planning of aid. In practice, donor and relief agencies should maintain a constant exchange of information with the recipient population on the priorities and planning of assistance—offering opportunities for participation and empowerment. These efforts should include:

- The continuous gathering of information on issues such as food security, public health, educational needs, employment;
- Prospective analysis of the potential evolution of these needs over time, particularly in view of demographic and migration factors;
- Analysis of the dynamic relationships between the various sectors of assistance and the elaboration of recommendations to agencies in terms of planning;
- Regular evaluation of impact of international assistance on the refugee population.

Such an approach would considerably enrich traditional development planning tools as such tools tend to instead be supply-driven: i.e. focusing on immediate needs of the population and be limited by the logistical contingencies of the agencies/ authorities involved in the distribution of assistance.

This note has been drafted in preparation for a panel on human security strategies to address the needs of Palestinian refugees. In providing a brief overview on the topic, it draws on an extended body of human security literature and underlines some of the key components of human security approaches.

### **Understanding the challenges of human security**

Human security has gained increasing attention as a framework for understanding the broader factors that contribute to peace and security.

Traditionally, the goal of security was the protection of state borders from external threats. This approach assumed that if the state were secure, the security of the population would automatically be assured. The traditional approach has faced increasing criticism at a time when more than ninety per cent of wars take place within, rather than between, states. In this context, some states have not only failed to provide a minimum level of security for their people, but have become significant sources of human insecurity.

In this new framework, individuals, not states, are becoming the focus of security strategies. Human security seeks to protect the physical safety and integrity of individuals and communities, rather than to defend state borders from external threats. Human security strategies are proactive; they stress conflict prevention and peace-building rather than humanitarian response. Human security is thus both a measure and a determinant of state and global security.

Since refugees are subject to an ongoing process of dislocation, promoting their security involves protecting their communal identity and society. This means that for refugees, human security strategies must not only protect the displaced from violence or physical harm but also create the conditions for refugees to maintain and develop their social relationships as well as further their political and economic emancipation.

Like other human rights, the key elements of refugees' security in war-torn or unstable environments are interrelated and must be viewed holistically. For example, a refugee afflicted by communal violence in armed conflicts may become vulnerable to both disease and mental health problems. Such an outcome may in turn undermine his or her chances of maintaining proper social and family structure even once the conflict subsides.

### **Identifying threats against the security of Palestinian refugees**

Today's threats against Palestinian refugees take place in the context of the emergence of new conflicts in the Middle East, the maintenance and entrenchment of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the increased availability of small arms and light weapons among urban militias. The dislocation caused by these developments fragments families and isolates children. It further allows the radicalization of resistance movements and the spiraling of violence, particularly in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The changing nature of threats against Palestinian refugees, including political violence, social discrimination and economic deprivation has brought a new sense of urgency to the human security debate. When these threats converge in a crisis, the impact on the lives of refugees, particularly the youth, can be dramatic. In situations of instability and violence, refugees face direct threats to their safety. They also confront the possibility of loss, separation from family, friends and their extended social network, lack of access to critical health and social services and obstacles to educational and vocational training.

While few of these threats are new, their impact on the life and security of refugees has increased over the recent years. Palestinian refugees, especially the youth, have been forced to develop new coping mechanisms for their changed situations. They can no longer be viewed merely as powerless victims of war as they have assumed new roles as community leaders and social actors in peacebuilding efforts. They must become an integral part of conflict management and resolution efforts and be recognized as rights bearing individuals.

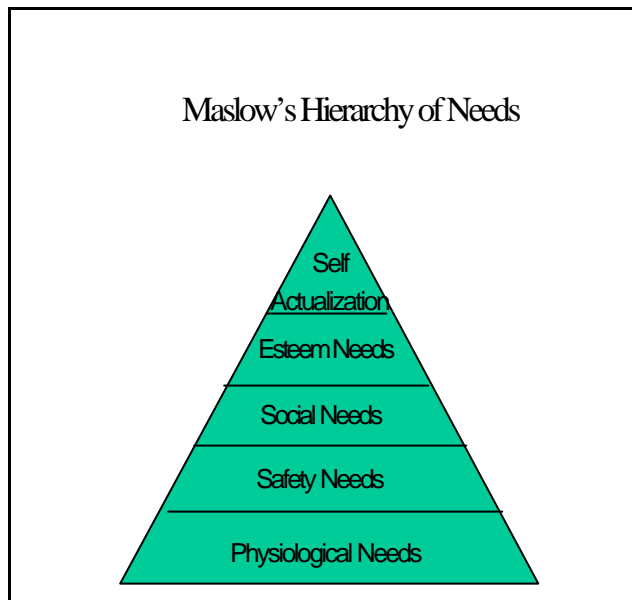
Realizing the rights of Palestinian refugees is about much more than ensuring their basic right of return. A human security approach provides an important starting point for understanding the core threats to the life, survival and development of these refugees. Far from distracting from the issue of return, it repositions the analysis of the refugees' needs in an individual and communal framework. The prioritization of the refugees' needs should take into account the individual's rights and coping strategies in addressing actual threats in his/her social and economic environment.

What exactly are refugees' security needs? A useful model can be developed from Abraham Maslow's early writings on basic human survival needs.<sup>1</sup> Maslow's 'basic needs' model is often invoked in debates concerning interventions on behalf of refugees and other populations in difficult circumstances. Maslow argued that there is a hierarchy of human needs – the most important and basic are survival needs: food, water and shelter. Basic safety needs follow – sufficient security to permit the satisfaction of the 'higher order' needs of love, belonging and ultimately, esteem and self-actualization.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about Maslow's work, please see <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/regsys/maslow.html> and <http://web.utk.edu/~gwynne/maslow.HTM>

## Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Maslow's hierarchy places basic physiological needs for food, water and shelter at its base, as these are essential for survival.

Second are those safety needs that provide the security necessary for higher forms of development.

Above safety needs, Maslow placed emotional needs such as those for love and belonging.

The highest points represent the need for esteem and self-actualization.

Such a model can be used to categorize the security needs of Palestinian refugees, in particular those living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Like Maslow, one may stress the importance of fundamental physiological needs in terms of investment of resources (e.g. in projects targeting food, water, and shelter). On the basis of the provision of assistance to such needs, further programs need to be developed to address the need for personal safety and integrity, which lie at the core of the human security agenda. These two basic conditions are central, but by themselves they do not sufficiently establish the security of refugees. The life of refugees is also characterized by dependence on others for survival. Under social needs, connection, belonging, and relationships with others are an essential component of the survival and development of any individual. Furthermore, refugees particularly need a sense that they have a viable future and opportunities for self-sufficiency (Esteem and Self-Actualization). For adolescent refugees for example, prospects for educational and vocational opportunities are vital components of their security, development and emancipation.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is far more than a model for the prioritization of assistance. On the contrary, it aims to demonstrate the coherent nature of human needs and underlines the importance of addressing all these needs in a systematic manner. Programs of assistance that provide food without safety, safety without social interactions, social interactions without development opportunities, or development opportunities without the promotion of the refugee's identity and culture are simply doomed to fail in their security objectives. In this context, assisting Palestinian refugees is much more than a charitable

endeavor, it is participating in their development and emancipation as Palestinian individuals and communities, and contributing to the rebuilding of a nation.

### **Final observations**

Human security strategies may offer interesting avenues to analyze prospective needs of the Palestinian refugee population. This note aimed to present an outlook of some of these avenues in view of the discussion at the UNRWA Conference on International Assistance to Palestinian Refugees. Evidently, such an approach needs to be explored in depth and its ramifications in the various areas of assistance need to be fully surveyed. It is hoped that such note will help launch the discussion among the participants at the Conference.

Cambridge, 30 April 2004.

#### *Note on the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR)*

*The Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research is a research and policy program based at the Harvard School of Public Health in Cambridge, MA. The Program is engaged in research and advisory services on humanitarian operations and the protection of civilians in conflict areas. The Program advises organizations such as the United Nations, governments and non-governmental actors and focuses on the protection of vulnerable groups, conflict prevention, strategic planning for human security, and the role of information technology in emergency response. The Program was established in August 2000 in close cooperation with the Government of Switzerland and the United Nations.*

*The main objective of the Program is to promote a professional and innovative approach to research and policy making on conflict prevention and the protection of civilians in times of war. The Program attempts to provide new and thoughtful insights into policy and academic debates that will enhance the capacity of governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and the private sector to address all the dimensions and implications of conflict that affect people in such situations.*

*The Program takes a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the humanitarian consequences of conflict situations as part of a new understanding of security and humanitarian requirements known as "human security." The Program promotes the development of adequate strategies to respond to humanitarian and security crises in a comprehensive manner, engaging both local and international actors in concerted efforts to minimize the impact of armed conflict on the civilian population. The Program's fields of research cover various domains, including international law, international relations, political science, sociology, history, and public health. A major sector of the Program's activities is the impact of new information technologies on the work of governments and international organizations.*

*For more information on the Program, please visit: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hpccr>*