

XVI. POPULATION, REFUGEES AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: A UNHCR PERSPECTIVE

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A. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to analyze the relevance of the Programme of Action of the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for refugees. In doing so, an effort is undertaken to identify refugee population aspects that are missing from the Programme of Action, but which could be useful in monitoring the MDGs. The paper provides a brief overview of recent policy initiatives taken by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with a particular emphasis on their relevance for the ICPD Programme of Action and the MDGs. First, however, a general overview of the global refugee displacement since 1994 is provided.

B. GLOBAL REFUGEE AND ASYLUM TRENDS, 1994-2003

The 1994 Programme of Action (United Nations, 1995) calls for the reduction of new refugee movements and for finding durable solutions to the situation of existing refugee situations (objective 10.22(a) and (b)). On the basis of global refugee trends, it may be concluded that significant progress has been achieved in meeting these objectives. Since 1994, the global number of refugees has dropped by some 40 per cent, from 15.7 million by the end of 1994 to 9.7 million by the end of 2003.¹ The number of countries from which more than 25,000 refugees originated fell from 43 in 1994 to 36 in 2003. The main reason for the decline in the global refugee population is that the number of refugees who repatriated to their home country during 1994-2003 (14.6 million) significantly exceeded the number persons who became a refugee (8.4 million). Each year, tens of thousands of refugees are granted citizenship by the host country, the final and decisive step towards the local integration of refugees. Over a quarter of a million refugees found a durable solution through resettlement in third countries during 1994-2003.

The duration of refugee situations, an important indicator for refugee well-being, has only recently received the attention it deserves. "The consequences of having so many human beings in a static state include wasted lives, squandered resources and increased threats to security."² Partly as a result of fewer refugee emergencies, the number of protracted refugee situations has increased dramatically. It is estimated that the average duration of major refugee situations in developing countries almost doubled, from 9 years in 1993 to 17 years in 2003.

The hosting of large refugee populations for an extended period of time is a considerable burden to the economies of low-income countries. The majority of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries. By the end of 2003, the developing countries hosted 6.5 million refugees, 67 per cent of the total refugee population. Some 2.5 million refugees, one-quarter of all refugees, are hosted by the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Sub-Saharan African countries provide asylum to 2.9 million refugees, 30 per cent of the world's refugees. It is essential, therefore, that refugee burdens and responsibilities are shared more equitably. Yet, refugees do not only present a burden to host countries. They also actively contribute to the economy as workers and consumers. Such contributions can only be fully realized, however, if refugees are allowed to integrate locally through access to gainful employment, land and other social, economic and legal rights. In recent years, UNHCR has published indicators on the refugee burden on host economies and societies by comparing the number of refugees with the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, the national population and the total land area. By using the concept of average refugee population during the past years, the duration of the refugee situation is taken into account.

The period 1994-2003 witnessed the arrival of an estimated 5.3 million asylum-seekers in the industrialized countries, putting a severe strain on asylum systems, particularly in Europe. Following a peak in 2001, the annual number of asylum claims has generally decreased to reach 468,000 in 2003. The leading countries of origin of asylum-seekers were Serbia and Montenegro (550,000), Iraq (360,000) and Turkey (300,000). While the number of conflicts producing new refugee outflows has decreased in recent years, receiving countries have also put in place restrictive measures. The erosion of the institution of asylum therefore remains a central issue for UNHCR (see ICPD Programme of Action objective 10.22(d)). Of those who seek asylum, only a minority are granted refugee status or allowed to remain on humanitarian grounds. The return of asylum-seekers not in need of international protection, while a main preoccupation of Governments, is difficult to quantify, however.

As a result of improved communications and transportation, refugee displacement has become a global issue, affecting most countries either as countries of origin, of transit or of destination. By the end of 2003, some 132 countries hosted more than 100 refugees, while there were almost 130 countries from which more than 100 refugees originated. Some 160 nationalities lodged over 100 asylum claims in the industrialized countries since 1994.

The sex and age distributions of refugees are a reflection of global demographic trends. Almost half of all refugees are female. The proportion of children under 5 is the highest in Africa, a function of the region's high fertility levels. Refugee women are over-represented in the higher age categories, reflecting their longer life expectancy.

Accession to international refugee instruments remains a key action of States to codify refugee protection. Since 1994, 22 countries have acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, while 21 countries have acceded to its 1967 Protocol.

During the past decade, refugee statistics have improved significantly (see ICPD Programme of Action chapter XII.A: Basic data collection, analysis and dissemination). One of the latest manifestations of this has been UNHCR's Statistical Yearbook. Over the past few years, significant investments have been made to improve registration, the main source of refugee statistics.

C. WELL-BEING OF REFUGEES

As was mentioned above, indicators are available to monitor aspects of the Cairo Programme of Action in the area of refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced persons. However, the Programme also refers to indicators for which systematic data collection has only started very recently. Since its inception, UNHCR has monitored the quality of protection and assistance (Programme of Action objective 10.22(c)) and the provision of adequate services to refugees (objective 10.22(e)). It is only since 2003, however, that UNHCR has started to put in place a global system to systematically collect and report quantifiable indicators pertaining to these and related areas.

The Standards and Indicators Project will allow UNHCR to monitor and report more systematically about the quality of programmes and the well-being of refugees. During 2003, a baseline for some 50 indicators was established for over 120 refugee camps. In 2004, the project will be rolled out to non-camp situations with a view to gauging the needs of refugees more globally.

D. REFUGEES, "CAIRO" AND THE MDGS

The 1994 Programme of Action contains, in Chapter X (International Migration) a special section (D) on refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced persons. In the MDGs, there is no specific reference to the issue of displacement. The annual report of the Secretary-General on the MDGs makes reference to 'protecting the vulnerable', however.

In a way, refugees are a microcosm of the world's population. It could therefore be argued that the importance of the Programme of Action is not limited to Chapter X, but that other Chapters are equally relevant. Just like non-refugees, refugees should benefit from poverty eradication (Chapter III), they should enjoy gender equality (Chapter IV), the protection of their families (Chapter V), access to sustainable population growth (Chapter VI), have reproductive rights (Chapter VII) and enjoy access to health care (Chapter VIII).

The same observation can be applied to the MDGs. Although none of the eight current MDGs deals specifically with refugees, most, if not all, have direct relevance to their plight. In the words of the High Commissioner: "Displaced populations should be included in the MDG projects as a way to strengthen protection and durable solutions for them. Through [the United Nations Development Group] and UN Country Teams, UNHCR will participate in the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, such as combating HIV/AIDS, achieving universal primary education, and promoting gender equality/empowerment of women, by ensuring the application of agreed standards and indicators as well as in the preparation of guidelines."

As was noted above, refugee protection entails more than refugees' physical well-being. Monitoring the quality of refugee protection and pursuing durable solutions should be an essential part of the MDGs. It can be envisioned that, along the lines of the 1994 Programme of Action, special attention should be devoted, in the context of the MDGs, to the plight of the displaced, including those who have not crossed an international border. One way of capturing this is by developing and systematically monitoring key indicators for a section on refugees under the header of "protecting the vulnerable". Examples of such indicators were provided above.

One practical limitation of the UNHCR indicator data on the well-being of refugees is their coverage. Currently, baseline data have been collected on the well-being of refugees in camps, who are generally dependent on international assistance. Considering the limited assistance programmes for many of the non-camp-based refugees, detailed information on the condition of these refugees is expected to remain limited in the near future.

E. RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR ACHIEVING MDGs

UNHCR's Agenda for Protection (AfP) was endorsed by States in UNHCR's Executive Committee in 2002, following a global process of consultations. The AfP's Programme of Action identifies six goals, each with accompanying activities. These goals are:

- (1) Strengthening the implementation of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol;
- (2) Protecting refugees within broader migration movements;
- (3) Sharing burdens and responsibilities more equitably and building capacities to receive and protect refugees;
- (4) Addressing security-related concerns more effectively;
- (5) Redoubling the search for durable solutions; and
- (6) Meeting the protection needs of refugee women and children.

This paper has provided a number of indicators that allow for the monitoring of these goals. Closely linked to the AfP is the promotion of "Convention Plus" agreements among states, aiming to build upon the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol relating to refugees. These agreements aim to clarify responsibilities and to promote better burden-sharing among States, notably in the context of mixed migratory flows, implementing durable solutions, and targeting development aid.

Another recent policy is UNHCR's Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern, which consists of three tools: Development Assistance for Refugees; the "4 Rs" (Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction); and Development through Local Integration. The integration of refugee and returnee assistance into development planning, currently

underway in a number of countries, was already envisaged in the Cairo Programme of Action (objective 10.22 (f)).

F. CONCLUSION

UNHCR's ability to assess each of the MDGs or targets in the light of the ICPD Programme of Action is hampered by the fact that refugees are not explicitly addressed in the MDGs. This paper has argued, however, that many of the MDGs have a direct relevance to the plight of refugees. Moreover, there is currently a multitude of data available allowing for the reporting on progress concerning established objectives, ranging from the 1994 ICPD Programme of Action to the 2002 Agenda for Protection. UNHCR has recently embarked on a multi-year process to monitor the well-being of refugees. In addition to their socio-economic well-being, it is important to note that protecting refugees and finding durable solutions is a key responsibility of Governments and the international community.

NOTES

¹ UNHCR's mandate covers all refugees, except Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. By the end of 2003, an estimated 4.1 million Palestinian refugees were under care of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

² *Protracted Refugee Situations*, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 10 June 2004 (EC/54/SC/CRP.14), p. 2.

REFERENCE

United Nations (1995). Programme of Action of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, in *Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994*. Sales No. E.95.XIII.18, chap. I, resolution 1, annex.