



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

PROMOTING AND ENABLING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FOR REFUGEES AND RETURNEES

A Statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at the World Summit on Sustainable Development

(Johannesburg, 30 August 2002)

Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to extend to this important meeting the best wishes of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Ruud Lubbers, who would have been here in person except for very pressing concerns relating to the mass voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees which necessitated that he undertake a visit to Afghanistan at this time.

Sustainable development is an issue central to the work of UNHCR as it seeks solutions to the tragic situations of millions of the world's refugees. Lack of development contributes, to varying degrees and in various ways, to refugee outflows. The prospect of development makes return to one's country of origin more attractive; basic development initiatives can anchor that return in a climate of hope.

At the beginning of 2002, the number of people of concern to UNHCR stood at some 19.8 million persons. The issues of particular focus of this Conference, namely, health, water, sanitation, energy, agriculture and conserving biodiversity are of utmost relevance to these refugees as well as the local populations hosting them.

By the end of 2002, we expect the number of refugees who have returned to their countries of origin to have increased significantly, thanks to the massive repatriation of Afghans, which began earlier this year and, to date, exceeds 1.6 million returnees. Likewise, in Africa - to give another example - the prospect of return movements both to and within Angola, after some thirty years of conflict, are quite promising. One third of Angola's 13 million people are internally displaced and another 435,000 Angolans have fled the country.

As you fully appreciate, sustainable development cannot be achieved without the active involvement of the very people for whom the programmes are designed. In this process,

however, refugees can so easily be dismissed as an issue peripheral to development. But the reality is that sustainable development will be very difficult to achieve if the productive capacities of huge refugee populations are ignored.

Peace building, conflict prevention, and sustainable development in countries such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Angola, Sri Lanka, to name a few, will not be possible without the engagement of millions of refugees and IDPs returning home. Their productive capacities and human capital are crucial.

We need to see refugees, not simply as the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, but as potential contributors to sustainable development – both in their countries of asylum and upon their return home.

In working towards durable solutions, the High Commissioner for Refugees has sought to build partnerships with other interested actors in an attempt to create an effective transition between emergency relief and longer-term development. Such a strategy relates both to the increased self-sufficiency of refugees in countries of asylum, contributing to local economy and sustainable development and to the reintegration of refugees when they return to their own countries.

While UNHCR's primary concern is the safety and well-being of refugees and returnees, it relates also to the other issues being discussed at this Summit, namely practising and promoting sound, natural resource management. The tragedy of forced human displacement must not be compounded by further damage inflicted on the environment of those countries that so generously give a home to the refugees. Environmental management is therefore a policy priority at UNHCR and is relevant in all phases of our work, from emergencies to restoring the environment when a camp or settlement is closed.

From raising awareness and delivering environmental education to schools, to promoting and enabling practical field-based projects, to providing training and capacity-building, our work, and that of the many organisations which share this task, remains practical and appropriate. Our activities are largely community-based, benefiting not only refugees and returnees, but also local people living close to camps and settlements, and is geared towards developing and enabling a sustainable livelihood for those with whom we work.

UNHCR's strategic programme for promoting and enabling sound environmental management in refugee-related operations is based on principles emanating from the 1992 Earth Summit. This inspirational gathering has given us focus, motivation and the means to intervene appropriately, thanks also to support from a small group of donor agencies. However, despite the considerable advances that have been made, we are still only scratching the surface. We need to increase and sustain the momentum developed over the past decade, to use the experience gained and deliver this to other countries and communities in need. To help achieve this goal, we strongly urge governments to look afresh at the many occasions for development presented during refugee-related programmes, to recognise refugees as "agents of development" rather than a burden or threat. Many good opportunities have been wasted by inappropriate policies and legislation, depriving regions and countries of important opportunities for their own development. These stumbling blocks need to be removed.

The five major themes of this Summit are wholly relevant to UNHCR's programme of natural resource management. So too are partnerships, and here we especially encourage development agencies to join us in this work, as we strive to encourage and enable a more favourable environment for sustainability. International frameworks, including the recently enacted NEPAD, and the commitment of the G8, in particular their calls for support for the countries hosting refugees, give us opportunities for action, allowing us to tackle the serious concerns that surround refugees and the environment: what is needed is an openness by leaders and individuals to enable and support this process.

Thank you.

Bemma Donkoh
UNHCR Regional Representative