

**Global Forum on Migration and Development  
(Brussels, 9 - 11 July 2007)**

**Forced migration and development**

**Introduction**

UNHCR welcomes the decision to establish a Global Forum on Migration and Development and hopes that the first meeting of the Forum in Brussels will mark the beginning of a process that enables states and other members of the international community to maximize the gains to be derived from the relationship that exists between migration and development.

UNHCR's interest in the issue of international migration and development may not be immediately apparent. The High Commissioner's Office has always insisted that refugees constitute a legally distinct group of people by virtue of the fact that they have left their own country in response to serious threats to their life and liberty. On this basis, UNHCR has stressed the dangers of blurring the line that separates refugees from migrants who have moved from one country or continent to another for economic or social reasons.

In addition, the key elements of the current discourse on international migration and development would appear to have a very limited relevance to the situation of refugees. While the primary motivation of most international migrants is to find work, earn a better income or to learn new skills, refugees move in order to seek asylum and find protection in another state. While migrants increasingly move backwards and forwards between their country of origin and destination, refugees are unable to participate in such forms of circular migration. And while there is growing evidence to suggest that refugees and asylum seekers are both senders and recipients of remittances, the amount of money involved in such transactions is very modest in comparison with the much larger sums transferred by economic migrants.

Even so, there is a need for the international community to recognize the important linkages that exist between forced migration and the development process, and to ensure that such linkages are fully addressed in the effort to establish coherent and constructive approaches to the issue of migration and development. This brief paper focuses on three of those linkages: the developmental dimensions and potential of large-scale refugee populations; the contribution of forced migrants to the process of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction; and the way in which failed and flawed development processes contribute to the root causes of forced migration.

## **Refugees and development**

Refugees constitute a significant proportion of the people who live outside their country of origin: some 14.1 million in total, including those of concern to UNHCR and UNRWA added together. More significantly, the majority of those people are hosted by African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries that are currently experiencing a variety of important development challenges and constraints. The international community would be doing a serious disservice to refugee-hosting countries, and would be missing an important opportunity, if its approach to migration and development were to ignore the presence and impact of refugees in these parts of the world.

UNHCR recognizes that refugee populations, especially when they are large in size and concentrated in specific locations, can have negative consequences for the development of host countries and communities. Refugee influxes and refugee assistance programmes can, for example, damage the environment, place a strain on local infrastructure, deprive government bodies of skilled personnel and disrupt ongoing development activities. At the same time, UNHCR believes that if such influxes are addressed in an appropriate manner, refugees (and the international assistance which their presence often attracts) can contribute to the process of local and national development.

First, the international community must make development aid available to refugee-populated areas – assistance that is *additional* to the development aid that the countries in question would normally receive.

Second, multilateral organizations and NGOs specializing in humanitarian relief and longer-term development must be prepared to work more effectively together than has been the case in the past, so as to bridge the longstanding gap between these activities.

Third, UNHCR encourages host countries to ensure that refugee-populated areas are properly incorporated into the development planning process, and to establish an environment which supports the efforts of refugees to establish their own livelihoods. Experience has shown that when refugees are confined to camps for years on end, when they are kept in isolated and insecure areas, when they are excluded from the labour market and have no access to banking or credit facilities, they are unlikely to become productive, self-reliant and contribute to the development of the local economy.

## **Returnees and the peace-building process**

UNHCR considers that a coherent and constructive approach to the issue of migration and development must give due recognition to the role that forced migrants have to play in the process of peace-building and reconstruction in conflict-affected states.

In recent years, a number of longstanding armed conflicts have either come to an end or have diminished significantly in intensity, enabling millions of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons to return to their own countries and communities. Such situations represent both a developmental opportunity and a developmental risk.

Large-scale repatriation movements provide national and international actors with an important opportunity to promote the establishment of new livelihoods opportunities, to reconstruct infrastructure that has been shattered by armed conflict, to initiate a process of reconciliation between groups of citizens who were formerly at war, and to underpin the transition from anarchy or autocracy to democratic forms of government.

But when large numbers of refugees and other displaced people go back to their place of origin in a short space of time, there is also a risk that they will return to a situation where they find it impossible to establish an income, where they are deprived of adequate shelter, where they do not have access to clean water, and where groups of people who were previously involved in violent conflicts are obliged to compete against each other for scarce services, such as health and education. In such circumstances, there is a very real threat of renewed social unrest and political instability, prompting another round in the cycle of violence and population displacement. Indeed, the United Nations Secretary-General has noted that over 50 per cent of all countries slide back into conflict within five years of a peace deal, since most of the underlying causes simply remain unaddressed.

A coherent and constructive approach to the issue of migration and development is one that seeks to minimize these threats and to maximize these opportunities. More specifically, UNHCR considers it essential for the international community to offer immediate and extensive assistance to the return and reintegration of refugee and displaced populations, ensuring that such support is linked to the processes of early recovery and longer-term development.

At the same time, UNHCR underlines the importance of engaging all citizens, including refugees, displaced populations and members of the diaspora, in the reconstruction of their homeland. If it is to be sustainable, moreover, this reconstruction process must not be confined to the economic sphere, but must also involve reinstating respect of human rights and the establishment of effective and equitable judicial systems, as well as provision for restitution and reparation for harm suffered.

### **The root causes of forced migration**

UNHCR encourages the Global Forum to take due account of the way in which failed and flawed development processes give rise to situations in which people are forced to abandon their homes, to leave their own countries and to seek refuge in other states. In that respect, UNHCR considers it essential to interpret the notion of development in a broad and rights-based manner, rather than using it as a synonym for increased productivity, output and economic growth.

According to the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, “the right to development is an inalienable human right, by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.” It is precisely because they have not been able to realize their human rights and fundamental freedoms that so many people have felt obliged to seek protection outside their country of origin.

UNHCR wishes to underline the limited impact and adverse consequences of asylum and refugee policies that focus exclusively or excessively on the issues of cost and control, but which do not seek to address the root causes of forced migration. In this context, the Global Forum could consider in due course how the international community might address the armed conflicts and human rights violations that prompt people to leave their own country and to seek protection in other states. An essential principle in the formulation of a more effective approach to migration and development is that citizens of all countries should be able to live safely and securely in their country of origin.

**UNHCR Headquarters, Geneva**  
**28 June 2007**