

FOCUS NOTE

Leaving no one behind: graduation for refugees

Photo Credit: UNHCR

Helene Kuhle,¹ Alexi Taylor-Grosman ² and Andrew Mitchell³

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More people have been forced to flee their homes than at any time since the Second World War, and this number continues to grow: currently, more than 65 million people are forcibly displaced⁴ globally; among them, more than 21 million are refugees. Many refugees find themselves in protracted situations of five years or more with few prospects for attaining a solution to displacement because of shifting political landscapes and unending conflicts (UNHCR 2003; 2017b).

With the number of forcibly displaced persons caught in protracted displacement situations on the rise, it is increasingly evident that a humanitarian response focusing on the short term is inadequate. Accordingly, a growing global consensus recognises that displacement requires a joint humanitarian and development response, underpinned by long-term planning and programming for solutions. The response must involve a broad coalition of actors, including governments. Planning for solutions should include strengthening refugees' self-reliance and resilience, as these approaches can empower them to live more

"Displacement requires a joint humanitarian and development response."

1. UNHCR's Livelihoods Unit.

2. Trickle Up.

3. Operational Solutions and Transitions Section, UNHCR

4. 'Forced displacement' refers to situations where a person has been forced to move from their home—for example, due to armed conflicts or natural disasters. Forcibly displaced persons include refugees, internally displaced persons and asylum-seekers.

independently of external assistance; stabilise their means for living; and enable them to contribute to the local economy, while preparing them to take advantage of whatever solution ultimately becomes available. These insights are reflected in core high-level policy addressing forced displacement, including the ‘New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants’ (United Nations 2016a) and the ‘Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework’ (UNHCR 2016). Moreover, these policies link with, and build on, the Sustainable Development Goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—that no one should be left behind, and that those furthest behind should be reached first (United Nations 2016b).

The vast majority of refugees live in the developing world, and more than 4 million are hosted by countries where the average income of their own citizens is far below the extreme poverty line. Often, the socioeconomic situation of refugees matches that of the host community. As such, it is not surprising that in these contexts refugees often lack access to sustainable livelihoods and long-term support from host governments. Moreover, they often struggle with additional challenges pertaining to their refugee status: they may face legal or administrative barriers limiting opportunities to gain lawful and decent employment (Zetter and Ruaudel 2016), further compounded by discrimination from the local population, a lack of documentation necessary for formal markets, and a lack of language and skills that match the market opportunities in the host country.

In response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been enhancing collaboration with development actors to bridge the current gap between humanitarian and development efforts and ensure that refugees—in particular, extremely poor ones—are not left behind. UNHCR engages in efforts to strengthen self-reliance and resilience with the objective of equipping and preparing its persons of concern to respond to the protection risks they face and to take advantage of opportunities leading to solutions. How a displaced person fares in the future, whether in the country of asylum or origin or in a third country, depends on the skills, experiences and qualifications, mental and physical health, material assets and attitudes maintained and developed while displaced. These resources and qualities are beneficial not only to refugees but to their communities, including in areas of return or relocation, or in countries of settlement.

With support from Trickle Up, in 2013 UNHCR adopted the Graduation Approach as a vehicle to enhance international protection and improve refugees’ prospects for solutions. Through the Graduation Approach, UNHCR and its partners set out to increase self-reliance and resilience among refugees and host community members living in extreme poverty.

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UNHCR’s mandate for protection and solutions

UNHCR is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to work with others to provide international protection and seek permanent solutions for refugees and other persons of concern. Solutions are secured when refugees enjoy their rights, including access to national services and systems, at the same level as people they live among, without facing any discrimination—whether in their country of origin, country of asylum or a third country. It entails addressing four interrelated dimensions: economic, legal, socio-cultural and civil-political, to ensure sustainable solutions. Voluntary repatriation, local integration, resettlement and complementary pathways are all possible routes to attain solutions.

Source: UNHCR (2017a).

Graduation: building self-reliance in refugees

Efforts to build self-reliance aim to enable refugees to meet essential needs and to enjoy human rights in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Participants in graduation programmes are supported to progress along a set of objectives, including establishing food security, building self-confidence and agency, increasing resilience through sustainable, stabilised income and savings, and establishing access to networks and services that will continue after the end of the project. The following components are included in UNHCR’s Graduation Approach:

“Building the resilience of people living in extreme poverty is necessary to ensure that progress towards self-reliance is not eroded or reversed in the face of shocks or crises.”

Coaching: Intensive weekly or biweekly 20–30-minute coaching sessions throughout the programme implementation period facilitates a smooth transition as the participant navigates the multi-staged programme. The coach also helps establish links to relevant networks and service providers that will remain available after the project ends.

Self-reliance and resilience

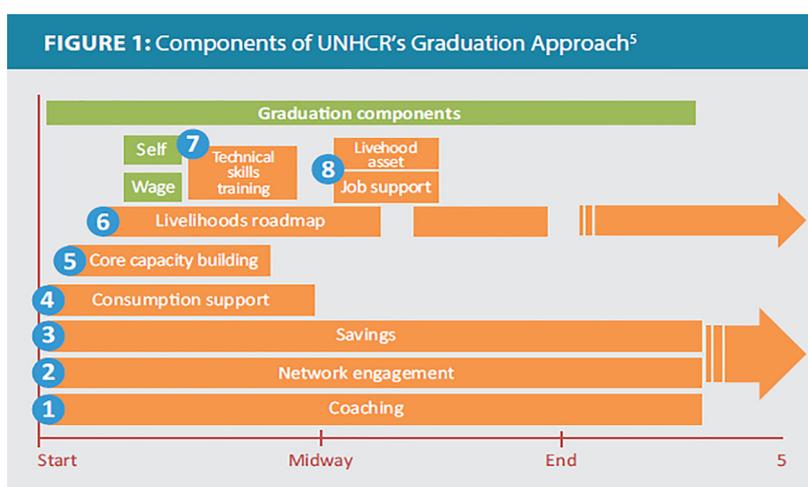
Network engagement: UNHCR encourages its graduation participants to interact with other programme participants, refugees and host community members alike, either through savings groups, social gatherings or group training. This helps refugees overcome the very common sense of isolation and reinforces social capital, both within the refugee community and with the host community, which is essential for self-reliance.

Self-reliance refers to the ability of an individual, household or community to meet essential needs and to enjoy human rights in a sustainable manner and with dignity.

Savings: Saving, whether in a formal financial institution or in an informal group setting, is a vital tool for risk management. Regular saving helps participants build assets and instils the habit of saving. In addition to helping overcome unexpected shocks, these assets can be used for investment and productive risk-taking activities.

Resilience refers to the ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions, systems and societies to prevent, absorb and recover from shocks, while positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term stresses, change and uncertainty.

Consumption support: Often poverty and food insecurity inhibit households from taking on any meaningful longerterm livelihood strategy.



Source: Authors' elaboration.

5. This image is used to highlight the components and sequencing being used by UNHCR in the design and implementation of the Graduation Approach with persons of concern.

UNHCR provides food and/or cash assistance, often in collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP) or other pre-existing safety net programmes, for a fixed period. With this support, participants' basic needs are met, allowing them to engage in programme activities and more proactively focus on livelihood activities that increase their self-reliance.

Building core capacities: Many refugees arrive in their host country without documentation or knowledge of what services exist to support them. UNHCR offers capacity-building on legal rights, cultural norms and integration, and other core skills such as household financial management which support engagement in successful income-generating activities in the country of asylum. By building core capacities, refugees are supported to better claim their civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights (UNHCR 2017c).

Livelihoods roadmap: Coaches work closely with their graduation participants to develop and implement appropriate and decent livelihoods strategies, both through selfemployment and wage employment mechanisms, depending on the context. To ensure that the roadmap offers a sustainable path for income growth and self-reliance, it must be based on market opportunities, build on participants' financial resources and skills, and leverage participants' agency to seize these livelihood opportunities. When refugees do not have access to legal employment, UNHCR and partners inform refugees about their rights, monitor refugees and their employers to ensure protection, advocate on the behalf of employees for those rights that do exist, and work on the regulatory environment to help build more formal opportunities.

Technical skills training: Following the roadmap, technical skills training is offered to graduation participants to equip them to successfully engage in the self- or wage employment opportunities identified. Technical skills training is often critical for refugees to be able to meet the demand in the local market; for example, it is not uncommon for former city-dwellers to arrive in rural areas or for farmers to settle in urban areas. Graduation participants who are engaged in the self-employment track receive entrepreneurship training as well as technical training linked to their specific livelihood activities. Examples of technical training may include food hygiene, good practices in animal rearing or local agricultural best practices. Graduation participants engaged in the wage employment track receive employability training and vocational training, which is often provided by the employers.

Livelihoods asset transfer/employment support: Finally, those participants who will start their own enterprise receive an asset transfer to start their livelihood opportunity. This is most frequently offered in the form of cash, linked to the purchase of a specific asset, though it may also be offered in-kind. In Burkina Faso, for instance, participants who planned to create artisan bowls used their seed capital to purchase raw metal, leather sheets and tools required to fashion the artisan products. In the UNHCR setting, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas where the wage

employment track is pursued, participants are also linked to employment opportunities. In Cairo, UNHCR and partner staff work closely with local employers to understand their needs, and screen refugees, to better link candidates with potential employers. When possible, these programmes also leverage UNHCR's or governments' existing employment linkage programmes. In Costa Rica, for example, UNHCR staff use a network of private-sector actors to offer training on refugee employment to human resources offices; then they map vacancies with private-sector companies to share with refugees.

Ensuring sustainability through resilience

Building the resilience of people living in poverty is necessary to ensure that progress towards self-reliance is not eroded or reversed in the face of shocks or crises and longer-term trends (such as climate change). By instilling the habit of saving, ensuring that productive assets consider the risk of natural hazards, and building participants' capacity to proactively address fluctuating markets and changing ecosystems, the Graduation Approach contributes to strengthen the capacity of refugees and host communities living in extreme poverty to cope with shocks. While more long-term research is required to measure how participants confront these types of challenges, it is expected that the increased economic and social assets that participants acquire through the Graduation Approach will better position them to confront common household and individual-specific shocks, such as illness, loss of income, negative coping mechanisms and protection abuses.

In UNHCR, the Graduation Approach may furthermore address unequal power dynamics that drive vulnerability to risk, such as the subservient role of women in families and communities and the exclusion of non-nationals and extremely poor people from community development and local government processes. For example, coaches are trained to address intra-household conflicts, either by working with the household to mitigate them or by referring the household to necessary and appropriate services. In addition, by building confidence and facilitating joint planning and economic activities within families, marginalised families are more likely to participate in social and economic opportunities in the wider community.

A key aspect of the Graduation Approach in UNHCR is to ensure that participants are linked to relevant services and social support structures, ensuring sustainability after graduation and empowering people to take advantage of government services. In Ecuador and Costa Rica, UNHCR is exploring arrangements with the government to incorporate graduated participants into social services, including social protection, training and job placement programmes. Coaches may also refer participants to psychosocial counselling or legal services, if needed, or accompany participants to health clinics or to schools to register children. By linking participants to existing structures and services, the Graduation Approach helps address the multiple constraints of refugees living in

Integrating resilience into programming means enhancing three forms of capacities:

An absorbance capacity protects people against household, individual and widespread shocks.

An adaptive capacity allows people to use new ways of managing (and adapting to) changes in shocks and direct impacts of long-term trends.

A transformative capacity enables people to become the agents of political and economic change to tackle underlying issues of power at the heart of vulnerability to shocks and change.

extreme poverty, ultimately strengthening their transformative capacity and assuring a life of well-being with dignity—both while in displacement and once a solution becomes available.

Preliminary results

While UNHCR and Trickle Up are still learning about how best to adapt the Graduation Approach to the specific needs of refugees in different contexts, initial economic and social results have been promising. In Egypt, 1,275 households, including Syrian refugees in the emergency context, Africans living in a protracted refugee status, and poor Egyptians, were enrolled in the pilot. At the time of the mid-term evaluation, UNHCR Egypt found that the average income earned per person per month increased by 27 per cent for participants in Alexandria and 18 per cent for participants working in Cairo. Six months into implementation, 68 per cent of participants on the wage employment track had been placed in a job. For participants engaged in the self-employment track, 97 per cent of participants in Cairo and 78 per cent of participants in Alexandria had started a business. This is particularly noteworthy, since legal access to work for refugees is limited. More research on longer-term job retention is needed (Beit Al Karma Consulting 2016).

UNHCR Ecuador piloted the Graduation Approach with 180 urban refugees, most of whom hailed from neighbouring Colombia. Just eight months after services commenced, participants reported an overall increase in average household and per capita monthly incomes. Moreover, 35 per cent of participants reported generating an income of at least the national poverty line of USD82 per capita. At the time of the study, 61 per cent of participants reported access to a formal savings account, compared to 1 per cent at the beginning of the programme. This is especially significant given the challenge faced by refugees in opening a bank account in Ecuador, and came as a result of considerable effort by the UNHCR Ecuador team to ensure financial inclusion (UNHCR and Trickle Up 2016).

In Costa Rica, UNHCR's 200 pilot participants included refugees from Colombia, many of whom had been in the country for years, and Costa Rican women who were at risk of sexual and gender-based violence. In its final evaluation, UNHCR Costa Rica reported that unemployment rates of its graduation participants decreased from 36 per cent to 4 per cent, while self-employment increased from 24 per cent to 59 per cent. The percentage of participants who had a monthly household income equal to or greater than the national minimum wage increased from 15 per cent to 79 per cent. The percentage of households that reported saving money increased from 14 per cent to 68 per cent. Fifty-eight per cent of participants reported increased emotional well-being (UNHCR Costa Rica 2017).

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Going forward

Since adopting the Graduation Approach in 2013, UNHCR, with technical assistance from Trickle Up, has piloted the methodology with refugees in Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Egypt. In each context, UNHCR targets at least 25 per cent of local community members living in extreme poverty, to build buy-in and help foster social cohesion. In addition to blazing the trail for selecting refugees for the Graduation Approach, these pilots have innovated in serving urban populations through it and incorporating wage employment opportunities.

As part of its Global Strategy for Livelihoods Programming 2014–2018, which focuses specifically on enhancing the economic inclusion of refugees, UNHCR, in collaboration with Trickle Up, is in the process of designing and implementing the Graduation Approach in at least five more countries in 2017, including Argentina, Mozambique, Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe. By the end of 2018, UNHCR expects to expand the implementation to more than 20 country operations. Through these efforts, UNHCR will continue to explore how the Graduation Approach can contribute to the protection of refugees. This begins by ensuring that efforts are systematically linked with national systems and development plans to ensure sustainability. Of course, there are limits to the scope of the Graduation Approach. On the one hand, it is a time and resource-intensive intervention that targets those living in extreme poverty, rather than those who are better off; at the same time, it requires that a participant be able to engage in livelihood activities, excluding some of the most vulnerable. These limitations may, however, be mitigated by targeting participants whose graduation from extreme poverty will enable them to better care for more vulnerable family members, thus expanding protection dividends to the wider community. In addition, other types of livelihoods and protection programmes may be applied to benefit those not engaged in graduation programmes.

For its part, Trickle Up, with support from the US Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, is supporting the effort to improve the economic well-being of refugees through continued technical assistance and staffing support to UNHCR. Trickle Up is also seeking to engage other graduation practitioners in the inclusion of refugees, and to engage organisations focused on refugees to integrate lessons from graduation into their livelihood programming.

For UNHCR, the importance of the linkages between protection, solutions and development endeavours that are inclusive of refugees, internally displaced people, returnees and stateless persons is clear. By committing to the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's aim to leave no one behind, States and international actors promise to proactively address the needs of persons often excluded based on their legal status, displacement or their recent return to homes and communities damaged by conflict.

UNHCR is hopeful that its efforts will be one of many. With 192 signatories, the New York Agreement from September 2016 provides a global framework for convening development actors, governments, private sector actors and UN institutions in a collective response to the global refugee crisis. The Graduation Approach could represent a global good practice that might enable governments and development actors to bridge the gap between humanitarian and development efforts and take over what UNHCR and partners started by including refugees in regional, national and local development plans.

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