

Angola 2000: A real-time assessment of UNHCR's IDP intervention

Background

In July 2000, UNHCR's Operational Review Board decided that UNHCR's IDP intervention in Angola, launched the previous month, should be subject to a 'real-time evaluation' in October 2000 in order to assess progress to date, and to make recommendations on the future of the programme. Responding to this operational imperative, and after consultations with the Assistant High Commissioner and the Africa Bureau, UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit fielded a mission to Angola (Luanda, Uige) and South Africa (Pretoria) (29 October – 11 November 2000). The Department of International Protection was unable to send a staff-member on the evaluation, but has nonetheless been involved in a consultative capacity. The mission was undertaken in collaboration with Danida, and UNHCR and Danida will produce a joint review of the Angola operation. This document, while it both derives from and feeds into the joint review, is nonetheless separate from it, and geared to meeting immediate ORB requirements.

Programme continuation

The evaluation was tasked with answering the following question:

Should UNHCR's Angola IDP operation continue into 2001, and if so, under what conditions and in what form?

The short answer to the first part of the question is yes, for the following reasons:

- momentum, and the negative consequences of not continuing: to withdraw after having made a visible entrée in this sector would seriously undermine UNHCR's credibility, and undo the foundation that has already been laid.
- impact: UNHCR's programmes have already had a definite and positive impact upon the humanitarian situation of thousands of needy persons; winding up these programmes would at this point be morally irresponsible, and leave these and future beneficiaries in the lurch.

Nonetheless, while the programme is both worthy and worthwhile, it faces a number of challenges that should be dealt with in next year's programme. The mission's findings and recommendations regarding the operational context, the effectiveness of the programme, and the role of UNHCR in a wider perspective are listed below. In summary, the recommendation of this real-time evaluation is: 'continue, commit, embed and phase out'.

Operational context: a commitment imbalance

A politicized decision-making process, internal UNHCR ambivalence, weak security and access commitments on the part of the Angolan government, donor scepticism and inter-agency suspicions conspired to create a shaky foundation for UNHCR's current involvement in Angola. The effects of this have been pervasive and negative. While UNHCR has launched an intervention, with all the expectations such a move entails, it has not been able to truly commit itself to it. Thus it staffs the programme with temporary personnel and plans under uncertain and short-term time horizons. If UNHCR is to operate an effective and credible operation in 2001, it must commit itself to ensuring stable and predictable staffing, funding and support, at least for the 12-month period.

At the same time, UNHCR must not over-commit. The situation in the areas of operation is not a 'traditional' emergency – some have termed it a 'structural emergency' – and the needs of IDPs are not always distinct from those of the population at large. Much of the required work in Angola is of a developmental or general human rights nature, and thus beyond the immediate ambit of UNHCR.

Findings

- The 'day one' phase of the operation was characterized by a highly politicized decision making process. This has meant that the decision to intervene was made on grounds other than UNHCR IDP criteria or resource considerations; as such, senior level support for the programme has been ambivalent.
- The current operation does meet some of the criteria laid out in the 6 March 2000 IDP policy, in particular the linkage with actual and potential repatriation movements. However, the Angola situation does not present itself as a natural, ideal case for IDP involvement, and might conceptually be more usefully considered as a unique and special programme.
- While UNHCR does have a relatively secure window in which to operate, staff security and access to affected areas remain of enduring and major concern.
- Given the widespread perception that Angola is a wealthy country (oil, diamonds, fertile land) that has chosen to misallocate resources, donor enthusiasm for funding relief and assistance programmes is lukewarm.
- The reaction of the international humanitarian community in Angola to UNHCR's intervention appears to have gone from disapproval to acceptance to guarded welcome.
- In light of the above (politicized decision-making at UNHCR, lack of firm security and access commitments by the host government, weak donor support and scant humanitarian solidarity), UNHCR's operation can be said to suffer from a commitment disequilibrium. It is in operation, and yet it has no posts, its resource situation is tenuous and even the duration of the programme is in doubt. This has had serious and detrimental consequences on programme delivery and organizational credibility.

- While needs are great, the situation in the selected areas of operation is not an emergency.
- While it is possible to distinguish between IDP and non-IDP needs, and while those of the former are more acute (particularly in the domain of settlement rights), other needs are common to both groups.
- The numerous constraints that affect this programme are largely recognized by persons involved in the operation. Viewed from a pragmatic and realistic angle, involved staff members have been doing a solid job of turning a sub-optimum operating context into an opportunity to make a difference, and to forge a new model of UNHCR IDP involvement.

Recommendations

- UNHCR should commit itself to continuing and supporting its Angola IDP operation through 2001.
- Operationalizing this commitment requires senior management to guarantee a stable staffing situation and an adequate financial one.

Short term staff assignments and shaky financial foundations have been the banes of this operation. The programme was designed and activated in a high-profile, politicized climate. In old UNHCR terminology, this is a 'special programme' and, as such, it should benefit from special funding (possibly separate from the unified budget) and expedited procedures.

- Given the unstable and risky operating environment, UNHCR must be unstinting in the domain of staff security.

Angola can be a dangerous place to work in. UNHCR is largely operating in line with existing security parameters, but it should do even more to ensure that staff working in Angola are not exposed to unnecessary risk. Measures that could be taken in this regard include working closely with UN security advisers, and equipping offices and residences with appropriate safety devices.

Effectiveness

UNHCR has used relief and material assistance programme to make an immediate impact upon the plight of the targeted beneficiaries, and to establish itself in Angola. These programmes have plugged important gaps, and have already improved the situation of thousands of IDPs and others. Nonetheless, as both UNHCR and other actors recognize, UNHCR's comparative advantage lies in its protection expertise, and it must accentuate this aspect of the programme.

Findings

- UNHCR relief and assistance activities have already had solid, visible and positive effects upon the targeted communities. These activities have been effected in a comprehensive (multi-sectoral) manner, have filled significant gaps,

and have enhanced the rights situation of IDPs and other affected communities. They also appear to have galvanized national actors into undertaking or collaborating on a wider range of humanitarian programmes for affected populations.

- Despite the clear positive effects of the material assistance programmes, UNHCR's comparative advantage lies in protection, and it is this element that will have to be bolstered in the medium and long term.
- UNHCR protection activities in the domain of attaining a right to settlement, and in the domain of national guideline setting have been effective. The effectiveness of other protection activities, such as sensitization workshops, is more difficult to assess. While it could be argued that, in a situation of warfare and a culture of impunity, their effect can only be limited, a number of actors have seen them in the light of introducing a new human rights culture in the country, that will serve it well in the post-conflict era.

Recommendations

- UNHCR's added value in Angola derives from its protection expertise, and future operations should exploit this.

This fact is recognized in UNHCR's planning documents, and has for the most part been welcomed by international and national actors in Angola. By making a serious effort to sharpen and embed its protection function in an IDP situation, UNHCR would be filling an immediate and glaring gap, and would build up valuable expertise for future IDP operations.

- It is imperative to ensure stable protection staffing, as the nature of the work is such that heavy turnover will not enable meaningful relationships and confidence levels to be established.

Coordination and sustainability

Given the circumscribed and time-bounded character of the intervention, and given also the characteristics of the IDP caseload, UNHCR must ensure that all its programmes can be handed over and 'owned' by other stakeholders by the end of the 2001.

Findings

- UNHCR is in the odd position of planning to phase out of a programme that has scarcely begun. When staff members are able to escape from reacting to immediate programme survival concerns, this situation is being seen as an opportunity to for the Office to make an innovative and meaningful difference to the plight of a non-mandate, but needy population.
- UNHCR has made an effort to adhere to common programming modalities. Nonetheless, it is still perceived to be a somewhat independent team player. Given the short time-frame of the operation, greater integration and self-effacement may be a wiser course.

Recommendations

- UNHCR should strive to embed its programmes into national and UN structures, while at the same time bolstering its operational and advisory protection role.
- Given the need to begin phasing out of the programme, and the current, dramatically inefficient staffing system, UNHCR Angola could be run with a lighter, but more stable and predictable, staff complement.

If a choice has to be made, then it is more important to have fewer, but more stable staff. This is particularly true in protection matters.

- UNHCR should begin de-emphasizing its material assistance projects. One means of doing this would be to highlight the government's name in site signs, and shrink UNHCR's.
- Given the possibility of a positive improvement in the war situation, UNHCR Angola should retain enough operational flexibility and capacity to cope with sudden returnee and refugee emergencies in its areas of operation.

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