

REFUGEE CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A PROGRESS REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its report to the thirteenth Meeting of the Standing Committee in September 1998, UNHCR provided an account on the action taken to implement a follow-up strategy to the United Nations Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (the Machel Study), as well as recommendations by the Inspection and Evaluation Section (IES) on management aspects of UNHCR's activities for refugee children (EC/48/SC/CRP.38).

2. This conference room paper describes UNHCR's continuing efforts in the context of the Machel Study follow-up strategy, and the IES recommendations. It also identifies a number of specific issues that are currently considered of particular importance in meeting the best interests of the refugee child. As highlighted in the resolution on UNHCR's work adopted at the recent session of the General Assembly¹, the dangers faced by child and refugee adolescents are grave: forcible exposure to risks of injury, exploitation and death, particularly in the context of armed conflict, or abduction with a view to forced participation in military activities. The resolutions called for concerted efforts by States and concerned parties in taking "*all possible measures to protect child and adolescent refugees, including, in particular, from all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse, forced military service, and to prevent their separation from their families*".

II. MACHEL STUDY FOLLOW-UP PLAN OF ACTION AND IES RECOMMENDATIONS

3. In line with UNHCR's comprehensive follow-up strategy to the Machel Study's recommendations (EC/47/SC/CRP.19), all field offices were requested as from July 1997 to draw up Plans of Actions. Detailed follow-up reports and strategic plans are now being submitted as part of the country programmes. This reporting and planning mechanism, now in its third year, has proved a useful tool to measure progress, or delays in implementing these plans, by country.

A. Mainstreaming

4. With increased emphasis on the mainstreaming of children's and adolescents' issues into all areas of work of the Office, it is aimed to apply child policies across the board, as part and parcel of all aspects of the organizations work. Reporting on specific child-related objectives, concerns and strategies is now part of Country Operations Plans. Efforts to integrate child rights-based performance objectives into the new Operations Management System (OMS) at both project and sub-project levels, are also underway. In order to inject child concerns into UNHCR implementing instruments for the year 2000, the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children within the Department of Operational Support (DOS) is reviewing selected field submissions. Wherever possible, a staff member experienced in children's issues takes part in OMS field workshops. The

protection of refugee children is also the subject of regular review in discussions between the Department of International Protection and Regional Bureaux.

5. While these various efforts were hampered in 1999 due to staff turn over and reductions, they are now receiving renewed impetus. Adequate human and financial resources will, however, remain indispensable for the successful implementation of mainstreaming activities, and to monitor their impact on UNHCR's overall protection and assistance programmes.

B. Regional Policy Officers for Refugee Children

6. Four Regional Policy Officer for Children posts were established in 1998 in West Africa, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. The establishment of these posts was made possible with an initial financial contribution from the United States Government, and subsequent financial support from the Canadian Government. Considering the importance of the Regional Policy Officers' function, which is to promote the strategic reorientation of UNHCR protection and programming on behalf of refugee children and adolescents, these posts have been absorbed into the 2000 Annual Programme Budget of the Office. Under the joint UNHCR /Save the Children Alliance programme for Separated Children in Europe created in 1998, an additional Senior Regional Policy Officer has been established, of which the work is described in a subsequent sub-section.

7. Benefits of the work of these Officers, both in fostering the implementation of child rights-based performance objectives and assisting in the design and implementation of policy and decision-making processes, are already felt. A review of their roles is planned in 2000 to assess how their impact on UNHCR's overall activities may be further strengthened and streamlined.

C. Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) training and capacity-building programme

8. Established in 1997 as a collaborative effort by UNHCR and the Save the Children Alliance, the Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) programme aims to increase the capacity of UNHCR, government and implementing partners' staff to protect and care for children in emergency situations through the development of a comprehensive training programme. In 1999, the ARC Steering Committee was expanded to include UNICEF and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

9. Following intensive preparatory work, a series of 13 "resource packs" were printed and distributed during the first half of 1999. Regional resource teams, with the UNHCR Regional Policy Officers for Refugee Children acting as focal points, benefited from ARC training-of-trainers' workshops in the pilot regions, i.e. East and West Africa, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Central Asia. The resource teams subsequently identified follow-up strategies to address critical issues affecting children. These activities have been expanded to include the Great Lakes region of Africa.

10. Through the ARC programme, seed funding has been made available to the regional resource teams to develop pilot activities on identified issues. Initiatives in 1999 included regional and country-specific workshops. In Pakistan, the resource team conducted further training to expand its network, which will soon be extended to include neighbouring countries in Central Asia. In Sudan, workshops including government and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been linked to projects implementing recommendations on community-based approaches, aimed at improving the situation of children in the refugee camps. In Uganda, local authorities have been involved in initiatives to increase the awareness and response by the community to critical issues affecting returnee children.

11. A key objective in year 2000 is to finalize and distribute the ARC training material. An extensive review is currently under way by the Steering Committee involving members of the Sub-group on Refugee Children and Children in Armed Conflict which is part of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, based in Geneva.

12. A second objective is to foster ownership of the ARC programme within UNHCR as well as by partners concerned through increased awareness-raising and mainstreaming efforts. These include contributing to the development of relevant learning programmes for UNHCR staff, and integrating the ARC training material into the ongoing protection training workshops run by the Department of International Protection. Other objectives include expanding the ARC programme to other regions including Central America, South East Asia, the Balkans and southern Africa, strengthening inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and ensuring refugee representation in awareness-raising activities and in addressing children's needs.

13. The ARC programme has undoubtedly contributed to increased attention and capacity within UNHCR and concerned partners, both at regional and headquarters levels, to address issues relating to children. However, the recent ARC Steering Committee considers that a more qualitative analysis of the programme's impact is now warranted. An inter-agency evaluation is planned in 2000, which will analyze the programme's impact, document lessons learnt and recommend future actions, including strategies to ensure long-term sustainability of this initiative. The continued financial support of the Governments of Denmark, Norway, South Africa, Sweden and the United States, has enabled the ARC programme to reach this new phase. Continued support will, however, be essential in order to pursue the programme's aims.

D. Separated Children in Europe programme

14. The joint UNHCR/Save the Children Alliance programme on behalf of separated children in Europe aims to promote the rights and best interests of separated children and adolescents who have come to or across Europe, by establishing a shared policy and commitment to best practice at national and European levels. Activities include capacity-building and advocacy, as well as remedial actions where the rights of separated children are not duly respected. As part of this process, the programme has developed partnerships with NGOs and other organisations working with separated children in Europe. UNHCR's share of the programme, which is funded primarily through a financial contribution from the Government of Norway, came into effect with the appointment of the Senior Regional Policy Officer in September 1999.

15. Under the auspices of the Programme's Implementation oversight group, a statement of good practice was developed setting out the policy and practice on which the programme's work is based. Key objectives for 2000 include disseminating information and training on rights and needs of separated children in Europe, completing and evaluating the 1999 country assessments of policies and practices undertaken by national NGO partners, as well as increased advocacy efforts on behalf of such children at both national and European Union levels.

III. SPECIFIC ISSUES

A. "Separated children"

16. In the 1994 UNHCR Guidelines on Protection and Care of Refugee Children, an unaccompanied child is defined as one who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so. However, experiences notably in the Great Lakes region of Africa highlighted that even in emergency situations, not all children are found to be unaccompanied as defined above, even though many have been separated from their previous legal or customary caregiver. Such children, although living with extended family members, may face similar risks to those faced by unaccompanied refugee

children. Consequently, the term "separated child" is now widely used to draw attention to the potential protection needs of this group. "Separated children" are thus defined as children under 18 years who are separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver.

17. To ensure that all such children are entitled to international protection under a broad range of international instruments, and that they benefit from efforts to trace and to reunify them with their previous caregivers, UNHCR, together with UNICEF, the Save the Children Alliance and other actors involved, is adopting the broader term of "separated child" as basis for its action. It seeks support for a global acceptance of this broadened principle in order to highlight the possible protection needs of these separated children and adolescents.

18. Intense and concerted efforts have been made recently, notably in the Horn of Africa. They have included giving emphasis to these issues in the ARC training, the engagement of two consultants working solely on these issues, and a regional meeting in November 1999 on unaccompanied minors which also addressed the potential risks facing separated children. An intensified region-wide tracing initiative for all outstanding cases of unaccompanied children, and where needed of separated children, is planned to begin in March 2000. Protection, health and community services staff are taking a multi-sectoral approach to ensure that decisions taken are in the best interests of the children. These efforts are linked to action on a broader range of issues that include the prevention of recruitment of children.

19. While the amended terminology encourages an increased awareness of the potential risks faced by all separated children, their needs can only be addressed to the degree that resources are available. It follows that unaccompanied minors remain the priority in tracing and family reunification activities, in view of the likelihood of their greater vulnerability. [2](#)

B. Adolescents

20. The rights and needs of adolescents differ considerably from those of infants and younger children, and range from reproductive health, educational and vocational training, to income-generating opportunities and acquisition of life skills. Adolescents also face the risks of recruitment into armed groups. While programmes for adolescent refugees remain inadequate, some progress has been made particularly since the Machel Study. One of the ARC resource packs focuses on adolescents. In Pakistan, the 1999 budget for vocational training was increased in spite of organization-wide budget cuts. In collaboration with other organizations, UNHCR provided assistance in 1999 to demobilized soldiers, notably in Liberia and Uganda, under reintegration programmes.

21. In East and West Timor, UNHCR is currently assessing, in coordination with other organizations, how to best help the large number of youth gain access to formal schooling or vocational training. In West Timor, UNHCR and other agencies are also working with former youth militia members to help them come to terms with their past and establish realistic new plans and priorities.

22. In support of UNHCR's efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence, the Office was awarded a \$ 1.6 million grant from the United Nations Foundation, which allocates Ted Turner funds. Programmes addressing sexual and gender-based violence against adolescent refugee girls are currently under way in Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the United Republic of Tanzania. UNHCR also received a \$ 2 million grant from this Foundation as part of a larger contribution to UNHCR and UNFPA, intended for a three-year, multi-sectoral programme to strengthen the reproductive health of young people in refugee communities, especially in the area of HIV/AIDS. Projects for young people in the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Horn of Africa and West Africa are currently being developed.

23. A draft protocol raising the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and direct participation in armed conflict to 18 years, was recently adopted by the Working Group on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. This constituted an important and positive development.

C. Education

24. Access to education is a fundamental human right of all refugee children, and serves as an important protection tool on the ground. Supporting refugee education and vocational training is particularly vital in promoting the rehabilitation of war-affected refugee children and youth. The strategic use of education can, moreover, help prevent conflict, and provide a positive alternative to joining armed groups.

25. Increasing the access of refugee children to schooling, particularly for girls, remain UNHCR's main priority. Improved educational response during emergencies and enhancement of the quality of the teaching, requires providing more textbooks and classroom learning materials, better teacher training and strengthening the capacity of UNHCR's implementing partners in education. Attention to these qualitative issues will also increase the retention rate of refugee children in school.

26. Despite funding constraints, some progress has been made in refugee education since the Machel Study. The attendance rates of girls in refugee schools in Pakistan have improved. In Armenia, a revolving textbook project, in which UNHCR participates together with UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank and the Norwegian Refugee Council, has helped reduce dropout rates among both local and refugee school children. Liberian refugee children still in Côte d'Ivoire have been successfully integrated into local primary schools. In a number of countries, interdisciplinary, cross-curricular educational programmes are offered to refugee children, in peace, human rights and environmental education. Vocational training for refugee youth is expanding in several countries.

27. While UNHCR endeavours to ensure access to primary schooling for all refugee children, fewer possibilities are available for children at the secondary level. The High Commissioner therefore selected education at post-primary level as one of the issues on which UNHCR will focus on the occasion of its 50th anniversary this year. To make a lasting impact, the establishment of a major refugee education fund has been proposed. To increase the availability of education in emergencies, UNHCR is collaborating with UNICEF in seeking additional financial support from Ted Turner funds through the United Nations Foundation.

28. Access to secondary and tertiary education is made possible for some refugees through scholarship schemes, such as those offered by the Albert Einstein Academic Scholarship Programme for Refugees (DAFI), funded in 1999 by the Government of Germany, the Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize Scholarship programme and the Windle Trust. Those institutions provide academic scholarships to refugees as a component of human resource development and self-reliance.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

29. Children and adolescents under the age of 18 account for approximately 10 million out of the world's 21,5 million refugees and other persons of concern. Safeguarding their rights and well-being is central to the fulfilment of UNHCR's mandate. Refugee children thus continue to be one of the policy priorities of the Office, as endorsed by the Executive Committee. Addressing children's concerns requires a shared effort, however, and cannot be achieved in isolation. UNHCR is therefore putting increased emphasis on inter-agency collaboration with other United Nations partners, NGOs and other relevant bodies concerned with children issues.

30. Within UNHCR, mainstreaming children's issues requires close coordination among the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Children, the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women/Gender Equality, and staff of relevant sections of the Division of Operational Support. Close collaboration will also continue with the Department of International Protection. Additional support will nonetheless be required to maintain the mainstreaming process.

31. The implementation of a rights-based approach to refugee children issues will, however, ultimately be possible only with the support of governments through their respective national legislation and practice. Governments are therefore encouraged to deal with refugee children issues in accordance with accepted international legal standards in this domain.

Notes

1. A/RES/54/146

2. See also the report by the Secretary-General to the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly on Assistance to unaccompanied refugee minors (A/54/285).