

Outcome of the Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming Participatory Assessment(AGDM)

An assessment conducted by refugees, UNHCR, Japan Association for Refugees (JAR), the Catholic Tokyo International Center (CTIC), International Social Service Japan (ISSJ) and Refugee Assistance Headquarters (RHQ) and with the participation of Japan Evangelical Lutheran Association (JELA).

In order to get a deeper understanding of refugees' living conditions and protection problems, it is essential to consult them directly and listen to them. It is particularly important to allow the participation of refugee *women and men, young and old and from diverse backgrounds* in the definition of problems and the design of programmes for their benefit.

To that effect, UNHCR and NGOs have conducted a series of assessments with 61 asylum seekers and refugees in the greater Tokyo area who were selected randomly. The assessments were done as part of the *Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming Participatory Assessment*, a methodology that is applied by UNHCR all over the world, in campsites but also in urban context. This assessment helped better understand *the reality faced by refugees* living in Japan. **This is not a survey**, but rather a method of **analysis of the refugees' protection risks**.

From May to October 2006, several teams composed of UNHCR and NGOs met with the refugees in small groups and discussed with them about their every day life. The teams met with women between 25 and 60 year-old (Myanmar, African continent, Latin America), men of the same group age (Turkey, Vietnam, Myanmar, African continent), and adolescents. The meetings were conducted in a friendly atmosphere. Refugees were able to speak openly about their life and were assured that their name and personal story will be treated with full confidentiality.

The discussions covered all aspects of refugees' life, such as, **livelihood, housing, health, community participation, education** for the youngsters and the adults, and **safety**. The discussions also reviewed the existing **capacities among refugees and within the local communities** to cope with the problems faced by refugees.

The findings of each team were eventually analyzed during a **workshop** held with the NGOs and a few refugees on 26 October 2006. The following comments are the result of the workshop discussion. This is not an exhaustive report, but an overview of the main findings and recommendations for collective action.

Livelihood

- Asylum seekers, that is, persons who are awaiting the outcome of their asylum request, expressed deep concern about their **precarious living conditions**. The main difficulty is to find a way to live decently during the entire duration of asylum procedure. Since they are not allowed to work and cannot earn an income that would enable them to pay a rent, buy food and pay medical expenses, they rely on the **State assistance**. The problem is the current disconnect between the asylum procedure – several months, sometimes years - and the assistance available, which is in principle granted for 4 months. As a result, asylum seekers face a **situation of indigence which generates a lot of stress, including health problems**.
- Overall, men and women seeking asylum felt that they would rather contribute to the society and earn an income instead of being dependent on limited assistance.
- Refugees with a legal permit face difficulties in finding well-paid jobs due to the lack of qualification or insufficient language abilities. They are often compelled to accept dangerous and underpaid jobs which put their health at risk.
- UNHCR, its partner NGOs and asylum seekers concluded that if the right to work is not granted, the situation of asylum seekers would need to be considered in a comprehensive manner so that the assistance is provided during the entire duration of the asylum procedure.
- NGO participants suggested the creation of **vocational training** programs and **partnerships with private companies** to support the recruitment of refugee.

Housing

- Due to the cost of living in Tokyo area, **finding proper housing** facilities remains a major challenge for many of the refugees we met. In addition, refugees are often unable to find a guarantor as a pre-condition to sign the lease.
- The very few asylum seekers who could get accommodation through RHQ (state-funded) were requested to vacate the premises as the 4-month limit approached. They relied on the help of NGOs to find a place to rent or tried to find an apartment on their own.
- The participants of the workshop recommended the creation of additional **RHQ accommodation places and the NGO shelters** in the form of sustainable accommodation, such as refugee guesthouses. Indeed, this would require funding from private or public sources.

Physical and psychological safety

- The refugees met during the assessment were generally **very satisfied** with the **physical security** they were enjoying in Japan.
- Nevertheless, they were concerned about the **discrimination, racism and xenophobia**, especially towards non-Asian individuals, in the area of work,

school, as well as interaction with public institutions and with the local community.

Culture shock, Isolation, and Lack of Information

- While many refugees make restless efforts to learn Japanese as soon as they arrive, the **language barrier** constitutes a major problem.
- The **culture shock** encountered by many refugees newly arrived in Japan is aggravated by the uncertainty of their situation from a material and legal point standpoint. There is a need for comprehensive **orientation courses** to help refugees understand Japanese culture, customs and language. This could be done by the government, NGOs and volunteer groups, with the support of UNHCR.
- Many men and women suffer from **loneliness** and cannot make friends within their new environment. Women in particular, especially if they are separated from their family, are very isolated and at risk of various forms of exploitation.
- While NGOs, such as JAR and CTIC for example, were often cited as helpful contact points, access to basic information is usually a major challenge. Finding **free of charge language classes**, for instance, has been a recurrent problem for many refugees.
- The establishment of **Japanese language learning programs**, fully adapted to the asylum seekers and refugees' needs. In this regard, participants suggested the creation of **volunteer groups** of Japanese people and refugees with a good command of Japanese, as well as NGOs, to teach Japanese to asylum seekers and refugees.

Health Care

- Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their asylum request have **no access to medical insurance**. As an alternative, medical bills are sometimes reimbursed by a state-funded agency (RHQ) but people can hardly advance the payment and often renounce getting necessary medical care in order to address other priorities such as housing and food. This has serious consequences on their health and well-being.
- The AGDM participants recommended the establishment of a **voucher system** issued by RHQ so that asylum seekers would get urgent and basic medical care. **Public medical institutions**, as well as social services, could also improve the medical assistance to refugees by providing **free of charge urgent medical services**.
- As for refugees with a legal permit, those with part-time jobs and very low income cannot afford the health insurance contribution and as a result, do not get proper medical care.
- Refugees have also expressed difficulties in communicating with the medical personnel. This seems to be an issue of language, as well as excessive medication, whereas refugees may need more professional therapeutic psychological support.

- Overall, social services, in particular counseling adapted to refugees needs, are insufficient, although NGOs provide a tremendous support in this area. Nevertheless, there is a need to link the assistance to refugees with the **medical and social services available for Japanese nationals**.

Coping Strategies

- When asked how they managed to cope with the various problems they face on a daily basis, asylum seekers responded that **NGOs** have been particularly helpful in providing **legal counseling** (there is no state-funded legal counseling for asylum seekers) as well as **support in housing and social issues**. Some received financial aid and temporary housing support from **RHQ** but expressed their anxiety over the uncertain future after RHQ's assistance is ceased while the asylum procedure continues. As regards urgent medical care, urgent **free medical services** are provided by a network of NGOs. Overall, depending on their nationality, refugees have managed to get fairly well organized around **community groups** functioning as a solidarity network. The problem is more acute for individuals with no community support in Japan, such as people from the African continent for example.

The way forward

- The findings of the AGDM Participatory Assessment and the solutions proposed by the participants will inform UNHCR programme and advocacy strategy. The AGDM is an on-going process and the consultation with refugees is always necessary to ensure their full participation in the design of solutions.
- The issues and possible solutions that were identified during the AGDM assessments also showed the need for the **collaborative effort** of all parties concerned, refugees themselves, UNHCR, NGOs, volunteer groups, companies, media, and public agencies in order to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees enjoy basic human rights, take charge of their own destiny and live in harmony within the Japanese society.

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