



**ANNUAL TRIPARTITE CONSULTATIONS ON RESETTLEMENT  
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**THE DURABLE SOLUTIONS PROJECT:  
IDENTIFYING VULNERABLE AFGHAN REFUGEES IN NEED OF RESETTLEMENT**

**I. Summary**

The Durable Solutions Project (DSP) in Pakistan is a joint initiative between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), funded with the generous assistance of the U.S. State Department and UNHCR. The pilot project endeavors to identify vulnerable “at risk” Afghan refugees for whom conditions of asylum are inadequate, and voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan is unfeasible. The project benefits those who have “fallen through the cracks;” refugees who, as a consequence of their vulnerability, are incapable of self-identifying to the UNHCR.

Essentially, the DSP is an outreach mechanism that draws upon the knowledge and experience of reliable local NGOs providing social services to extremely vulnerable refugees in Pakistan. The local NGOs are in an excellent position to know which refugees are struggling to live safely in Pakistan, and following a training course, participating NGOs are invited to refer cases to the DSP. The DSP conducts an in-depth interview and two unannounced home visits for each referral. If the DSP considers that a refugee case qualifies for resettlement pursuant to UNHCR’s criteria, the case is referred to UNHCR for a full refugee status determination and resettlement interview. About 75% of cases referred by local NGOs are eventually referred on to UNHCR. If UNHCR agrees that the best durable solution for the case is resettlement, UNHCR refers it to a resettlement country.

An expatriate lawyer coordinates the DSP, with the help of two national program assistants. The pilot project focuses on refugees residing in the Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Islamabad areas. The DSP strengthens UNHCR’s protection strategy in Pakistan by providing a *complementary* identification mechanism aimed at finding some of the most vulnerable refugees in Pakistan.

The DSP was started in October 2000. As of May 30 2002, it has referred 1214\* refugees to UNHCR. UNHCR has approved approximately 88% of those referrals. The target number of referrals for 2002 is 325 cases/1070 people. The project budget for 2002 is \$144,181. The cost ratio per refugee referred to UNHCR in 2002 is \$134.

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\* After an initial project set-up period, the DSP began referring cases in February, 2001. From February, 2001 through May, 2002, the DSP referred 352 cases/1214 people to UNHCR.

## **II. Background**

The DSP was conceived of in 2000, when the Taliban still controlled Afghanistan and Pakistan was awash with over two million refugees. Pakistan had been providing asylum for twenty years, and its resources were very depleted. Most refugees were not registered, there was no screening system in place, and those refugees with protection problems had to brave long lines in front of the UNHCR office in the hope of securing an appointment with a Protection Officer. UNHCR was reluctant to refer many refugees for resettlement due to a justifiable fear that they would be inundated with requests once word got out in the community that resettlement was available. NGOs working in Pakistan were frustrated because they knew refugees who needed help desperately, but no one seemed able to provide it. Women without effective male support were particularly at-risk of harassment and exploitation, and the local police were unable or unwilling to provide security.

The IRC and UNHCR conducted an initial assessment mission to determine if there was a way to identify vulnerable, at-risk refugees living in the midst of millions without starting riots or inviting massive fraud. The two agencies decided to create a multi-layered referral mechanism both to increase the scope of referrals and reduce the likelihood of fraud. The first front-line layer consists of local NGOs with a proven track record of providing assistance to extremely vulnerable refugees. Once trained, they are encouraged to refer the most serious cases to the DSP. The DSP Coordinator interviews each referral and conducts a surprise home visit (often two) to gauge their level of vulnerability and credibility. If the DSP Coordinator considers that the case meets UNHCR resettlement criteria, the case is referred to UNHCR for a mandate status determination and formal resettlement referral to a third country. At the same time, UNHCR permits refugees in need of protection to approach their offices directly. Thousands do so. In the event that the DSP does not consider the refugees to qualify for resettlement, the Coordinator often refers them to other NGOs for appropriate humanitarian assistance or services.

## **III. The DSP Model**

Since this model is new, UNHCR and the IRC limited its size and cost until the effectiveness of the pilot could be assessed. The IRC hired one full-time expatriate lawyer, who in turn hired two national project assistants, and opened two offices that are physically separate from the main IRC field office. There are no posted signs indicating that the offices belong to the IRC or that they are linked to UNHCR's resettlement program in any way. This was done to reduce any pressure on the IRC's humanitarian assistance operations, which were the largest in Pakistan at that time.

The DSP Coordinator created a variety of standardized project documents, including a referral form that must be completed and faxed to the DSP office, and an NGO Participation Agreement explaining rules of confidentiality and referral parameters (i.e. the case must come to their attention during the course of their regular work, and cannot be a relative or friend of any of the participating NGO staff.) UNHCR and the IRC also created standard referral forms, case criteria, and procedures for scheduling interviews and home visits. It was agreed that the DSP could only refer cases that had not previously registered with UNHCR for an interview.

After meeting with over a dozen local NGOs to discuss the goals of the project and their views (some refused to get involved, citing concern about corruption), the DSP Coordinator created a training manual. The manual includes chapters on refugee law, the DSP procedure, how to identify and limit corruption, etc. The Coordinator offers training sessions to the participating NGOs. UNHCR and the DSP decided against translating the manuals into the local language for

fear that it would be leaked into the community at large, complicating the identification and interview process. To reduce fraud, the DSP does not initiate a case file until a local participating NGO submits a written referral, including a basic description of the case. Referrals are only accepted from pre-approved local NGOs; the DSP will not take referrals from NGOs based outside of Pakistan. In addition, the DSP takes photos of every refugee at the interview stage, and keeps them on file. These photos are available to verify identity at a later point in the referral process, if necessary.

#### **IV. Challenges During Implementation**

A number of challenges have arisen since the inception of this project. It has been difficult to attract competent and well-situated local NGOs to identify refugees in need of resettlement. Many are afraid that community pressure will jeopardize their ability to provide basic services to refugees. They worry, too, that their staff may succumb to bribes, although the DSP requests that each participating NGO name only one point person with whom it will communicate. The point person is usually the Director. Some participating NGOs have a difficult time grasping the project criteria and continue to refer inappropriate cases despite repeated meetings with the DSP coordinator. At the beginning of the project, only one home visit was considered sufficient. Since February 2002, however, the DSP has conducted two home visits per case in an attempt to satisfy concerns about corruption. Simply finding houses and scheduling interviews with refugees who live in houses lacking proper addresses or telephones is extraordinarily time-consuming. Differing standards and criteria used by the UNHCR-Islamabad office and the UNHCR-Peshawar office also presented problems and reduced the DSP's efficiency.

Security has been a major challenge. The IRC had to evacuate the DSP Coordinator for almost two months following the September 11 attacks. Even now, the security situation in Pakistan is tenuous. The DSP Coordinator spends a considerable amount of time in extremely impoverished areas, accompanied only by her assistant and driver. She limits her exposure by dressing and behaving in a culturally appropriate way, and avoids speaking English while on the streets.

Perhaps the biggest challenge has been the reduced capacity (and in some cases, the unwillingness) of resettlement countries to continue accepting Afghan cases submitted from Pakistan.

#### **V. Profiles of Typical Cases**

Although conditions are changing in Afghanistan, it is still far too early to declare that it is safe for all refugees to return. At the same time, asylum conditions in Pakistan are deteriorating for many. Police round-ups, extortion, and evictions are becoming more and more common, thus exposing refugees to a dangerous level of insecurity.

The DSP applies UNHCR's resettlement criteria. In Pakistan, it focuses on women-at-risk that left Afghanistan some time ago. These are women without effective male support, who are struggling to survive in Pakistan because they risk sexual harassment, exploitation, and are experiencing serious problems trying to support their children. They cannot return to Afghanistan because conditions there remain unstable, and present security problems for women without effective male support.

Other categories include men and women who were tortured or sexually assaulted in Afghanistan, especially during the Mujahadeen years, who are still experiencing trauma. They lack effective support and counseling in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Children or adults with a number of medical

problems or disabilities that cannot be addressed in Pakistan are also referred, principally because there are insufficient resources in Pakistan or the refugees cannot afford the medical fees (note: basic medical care is not available for most non-fee-paying refugees in Pakistan).

## **VI. Total Project Costs**

October – December 2000: \$77,000\*

January – December 2001: \$143,000

January – December 2002: \$144,000

## **VII. Statistics**

Total number of cases submitted to UNHCR:

2001 \*\*: 267 cases/960 people

2002 (projected) \*\*: 325 cases/1070 people.

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\* This includes the cost of purchasing a vehicle, and other one-time only start-up costs.

\*\* The DSP staff was evacuated from mid-September through October 2001. Consequently, it was not able to refer any cases during that time.

\*\*\* The DSP slowed its case referrals in February 2002 while it devoted resources to investigating allegations of corruption lodged anonymously against a participating NGO. Despite a thorough review of files, repeat home visits, interviews with various actors involved in the process, the DSP could not find evidence supporting the allegations. The matter was thoroughly discussed with officials from UNHCR and one of the resettlement governments.