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Leveraging Women's Community Leadership: A Model for Outreach in Urban Refugee Populations

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Cities present unique operational challenges to those trying to assist the displaced. Urban refugee populations are highly fragmented—they are often dispersed throughout neighborhoods, or are staying with host families. Many refugees remain hidden to avoid identification by host governments or even compatriots—yet are able to move across cities or even borders. This makes it much more difficult for aid groups to find those they are mandated to serve and to identify their needs. It becomes impossible to reliably distinguish refugees from locals; collect accurate data (especially separated by sex and age); and document trends.

The urban setting also presents refugees with unique challenges. Though living in a city means they are physically close to economic opportunities, schools, formal legal services, and more comprehensive health care, this proximity does not guarantee them access. Discrimination can force refugees out of the legitimate job market into exploitative situations (as forced laborers or sex trafficking victims) and block their access to formal institutions and protections. Because they strain already burdened urban centers, refugees can become unable or unwilling to access local support services. They are at particular risk for detention or *refoulement*[1] but are unlikely to report abuse.

A successful outreach program is key to identifying and serving Iraqi refugees who blend into the neighborhoods of Damascus.
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When provided services, refugees may be perceived by locals as favored within the population, exacerbating tension and conflict. Deeper collaboration between aid agencies and local authorities could ease such tensions by reframing the services as community-based rather than solely for refugees, but working with local hierarchies and bureaucracies often delays services. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee recommends that aid groups run their programs through local authorities to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment, which is inevitable when the displaced population is singled out for support.[2] A 2009 report on missions for Iraqi refugees has gone even further, stating that community outreach in urban operations "is key to [UN High Commissioner for Refugees'] overall effectiveness."[3]

1 *Refoulement* is the forced return of refugees to situations in which their lives or freedoms are threatened. First laid out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, *non-refoulement* is a fundamental principle of international law so widely accepted it is regarded as a right from which no deviation is permitted.

2 For a discussion of humanitarian challenges in urban areas, including refugee protection, see: "Initial Strategy Paper: Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas," Inter-Agency Standing Committee, October 29, 2009. Available at http://www.unhcr.org/4b011dc19.pdf.

3 *Surviving in the city: A review of UNHCR's operation for Iraqi refugees in urban areas of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.* UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. July 2009: 30.

UNHCR's field office in Damascus has a promising model for improving aid agency interactions with urban refugee communities. The approach demonstrates that women are essential allies for those seeking to protect displaced populations. Often leaders in the refugees' efforts to help themselves, women have credibility in their communities derived from informal leadership. That credibility grants them unique access, enabling service providers with whom they work to better understand the population and its needs. By collaborating with women as liaisons, UNHCR has improved outreach, follow-up, service delivery, standing within the community, and the overall security environment.

The Challenge in Damascus

Since 2003, as many as 2.5 million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries, with an equal number displaced internally.[4] The crisis has built over time. Humanitarian operations created in 2003, as the United States ousted Saddam Hussein, were designed with only initial population movements in mind; those plans proved inadequate when twice as many Iraqis were displaced between 2006 and 2010 as had been between 2003 and 2006.

Now hosting many of the Iraqis who fled, Syria has one of the largest urban refugee populations in the world. UNHCR established a presence in Syria in 1991 to assist Iraqis displaced by the Gulf War and shifted operations from emergency response to longer-term refugee support. To date, UNHCR has assisted 280,000 of the several hundred thousand Iraqi refugees in and around Damascus. As of February 2011, UNHCR was still registering 1,800 additional refugees a month; 80 percent of those registrants were new arrivals in Syria.

Even with this expanding refugee population, refugee camps are rare in Syria. In their absence, Iraqis have concentrated in cities throughout the country, particularly in two resource-poor suburbs of Damascus. Despite the relatively high level of funding, international assistance is insufficient to address the scale of the need. Though financial constraints have been a limiting factor, operational challenges present the most complex difficulties.[5]

As volunteers raise the profile of UNHCR within the displaced population, refugees are likelier to come forward for registration.
© UNHCR/B. Heger, August 2007

The process of registration that the aid agency undertakes—locating, identifying, and documenting refugees—has proved enormously difficult in Damascus. This is an even greater problem when registering members of vulnerable groups such as women (who make up slightly less than half of the total refugee population) and adolescents (who compose 40 percent of the total).

Field workers in both camps and urban settings commonly lack a nuanced understanding of the displaced population's culture, which hinders their ability to offer protection, provide assistance, and gather feedback. The regional context and the nature of the Iraq conflict, however, have made these gaps particularly problematic in Damascus. Across the Middle East, *refugee* typically means *Palestinian*. Refugees and host populations therefore assume that agencies serving "refugees" are in fact serving Palestinians, and other refugees are reluctant to approach them for assistance. Non-Palestinian refugees are reluctant to come forward.

4 Although UNHCR has used these official statistics, they are not without controversy. Neighboring host government reports put the number of Iraqi refugees around 2.5 million, with Syria reporting about 1 million within its borders. Refugees International has put the number within Syria closer to 0.5 million.

5 For these and other data on displaced Iraqis and the programs serving them, see *A Tough Road Home*. Available at http://www.theirc.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRC_Report_02_18_ToughRoad.pdf. See also *UNHCR Syria Update*, Winter 2010. Available at http://un.org.sy/forms/publications/files/Winter_Update_2010.pdf.

Trauma specific to Iraqis makes aid workers' lack of cultural expertise particularly crippling. Paranoia brought about by years of Saddam Hussein's corrupt single-party rule, and random violence following the US-led invasion, have spread fear and isolation. Both have encouraged suspicion and tension within the community and with outsiders.

Field workers who venture into communities find that unaccompanied women and girls, who are at greatest risk for sexual violence, trafficking, forced marriage, and poverty, are sometimes unapproachable to all but family. Though this taboo is not more pronounced in Damascus than in much of the region, unaccompanied women are prevalent there.

As a result of these obstacles, few refugees seek assistance. Those who should receive specialized care for trauma suffer the most. According to UNHCR's 2010 Syria update, more than 30,000 registered refugees were tortured or sexually abused; seventeen percent of those survivors now suffer from severe mental health problems.

UNHCR also faces a rapidly changing operational environment. As economic conditions have worsened, more refugees have joined the ranks of the impoverished and exploited. This drives refugees and others to cross borders at will in all directions, seeking opportunity elsewhere in the region, including by returning to precarious lives in Iraq.

The Damascus Program

To address these challenges, UNHCR field workers in the Damascus office started a community outreach program in 2007. They decided to identify community leaders who would volunteer to serve as intermediaries with populations of concern and locate the most vulnerable individuals. Because they believed that women would be best positioned to access vulnerable groups, UNHCR staff held focus group meetings to collect the names of women refugees with professional backgrounds, respect in their communities, the ability to contribute consistently to the volunteer effort, and the ability to broadly represent the more than six ethnicities and six religions coexisting in the growing Iraqi refugee community.

The displaced Iraqis possessed an unusually high level of education and professional experience in a variety of fields. Among them were many skilled women who were unemployed and available for volunteer work; they had been involved in their own volunteer efforts, demonstrating a commitment to serving their communities. They also could move through the city facing less risk of detention by the government. Eight women were chosen as the first outreach volunteers in 2007. By October 2010, the program had begun including some non-Iraqi women volunteers and had grown to 130 women volunteers addressing 6,000 refugee support cases every month.

After volunteers were selected but before they began to work, outreach coordinators organized an intensive introductory meeting, briefing the volunteers on UNHCR's objectives and challenges in registering refugees and gaining access to their communities. Volunteers were tasked with:

- Recording information about the refugees residing in and around their own neighborhoods;
- Documenting refugees' most pressing needs;
- Monitoring residents and their needs to enable a more responsive UNHCR operation;
- Referring assistance cases to the appropriate UNHCR field worker, outreach volunteer, or other actor;
- Providing counseling and home visits to those with special needs; and
- Teaching and tutoring in such subjects as English and computer skills at one of the six community centers run by UNHCR and partner organizations.

Prior to carrying out these sensitive duties, volunteers were required to sign letters of agreement outlining a code of conduct covering impartiality, confidentiality, and integrity. The letters also emphasized commitment to the project. UNHCR reciprocated, showing its commitment by providing ongoing training on effective communication and on methods of engaging with individuals receiving services.

Outreach volunteers also agreed to meet with field workers at least twice a month. Volunteers would update staff on emerging security threats and on concerns such as the economic hardship pushing refugees to return to Iraq, the presence of disabled persons needing specific support, and the rise of child labor as a source of family income.

These meetings also provided time to more systematically discuss cases the volunteers referred to UNHCR staff. For example, when a refugee reported the need for legal aid or other robust intervention, volunteers would refer the case to the field office. UNHCR provided feedback on each referral, explaining why field staff could or could not respond to a given request.

Similarly, UNHCR staffers used meetings to familiarize themselves with the individual volunteers' expertise so they could refer cases to the outreach group more appropriately and efficiently. UNHCR also described operational developments during these updates, enabling volunteers to provide more timely and relevant advice on community priorities.

In 2009, UNHCR's field office drafted a plan to alleviate the pressure on the organization's overburdened psychosocial services, which served 1,600 families in 2009 in collaboration with partner organizations. Outreach volunteers were identified as a resource in this effort because they had shown they could respond rapidly to urgent psychosocial needs. The new Psycho-Social Support Group therefore includes outreach volunteers and is run from the community services section of the field office. Ten women lead the support group.

Program Impact

Outreach volunteers have proven instrumental in passing information between UNHCR and the refugee community. As members of the community better understand the services provided, they increasingly come forward with cases that would otherwise go unresolved. New families spontaneously reach out to volunteers, where before they existed in the margins, undocumented and unassisted. Often, volunteers address such cases themselves or, by mobilizing the community to make material contributions, they lighten the workload on an already stretched UNHCR field office.

In an illustrative story, one volunteer approached a new family to welcome them to Damascus. She demystified the registration process, took them to UNHCR to document their status, and brought them to a temporary shelter. She then engaged the community in collecting material support such as food and clothes, organizing activities for the children in the family, and coordinating access to medical care. Case by case, through community mobilizing efforts such as this one, UNHCR has observed refugees' confidence in the refugee agency grow.

The volunteers' deep familiarity with the community enables them to recognize potential sources of instability and intervene. Tensions over food or financial resources are diffused by volunteers who draw on the community's willingness to find provisions or who inform refugees of international aid options, such as receiving cash through ATM cards. (This is a new approach that has considerably streamlined UNHCR's cash assistance program but that requires broad community outreach to implement.) Unlike most UNHCR offices worldwide, Damascus has never faced refugee protests. Staff members credit the volunteers with rapidly improving UNHCR's profile.

UNHCR's reputation has also benefited from its responsiveness to volunteers' recommendations. For example, when volunteers reported that refugees were considering returning to Iraq for jobs—and identified specific job opportunities in Iraq—UNHCR adjusted vocational training to target those job opportunities.

Most important, since the program's inception in 2007, outreach volunteers have engaged those in need of training. While vocational training reached about 1,500 individuals during the program's first year, it helped more than 3,000 in 2010. UNHCR estimates that improved community outreach and needs assessments by the volunteers will enable them to train 10,000 refugees in 2011.

A reporting officer in Damascus notes that UNHCR initially worked with women "because it was convenient." As the best-educated and most respected candidates put forward, choosing them "was the only way to start off." UNHCR continued the partnership because of the impact: The quality of coverage and scope of services improved. Other aid agencies serving refugees in Damascus took notice. "We wouldn't be able to do anything without the women. The first thing agencies do is talk to them."[6]

6 Carole Laleve, Interview, September 2010.

Replicating Successful Community Outreach

Key to Success: Select the right women.

→ **Recommendation:** Establish a focus group to identify formal and informal community leaders.

→ **Recommendation:** Select women already mobilizing in communities to build on their momentum.

→ **Recommendation:** To ensure a broad applicant pool, design an outreach program publicizing the agency's mandate and services and emphasizing where community expertise is essential and how women can contribute.

→ **Recommendation:** Recruit women from the different refugee groups, including representatives of the various religions, ethnicities, and tribes.

→ **Recommendation:** Hold regular meetings that are open to community organizers.

→ **Recommendation:** To heighten interest and to compete with the few other employment opportunities, provide incentives such as stipends.

Key to Success: Ensure that outreach volunteers are committed to maintaining confidentiality of all case information.

→ **Recommendation:** Document organizational standards and expectations relating to codes of conduct.

→ **Recommendation:** Organize a briefing to review standards and expectations.

→ **Recommendation:** Require volunteers to sign confidentiality agreements to protect beneficiaries' privacy.

Key to Success: Equip volunteers with skills and knowledge to succeed.

→ **Recommendation:** Orient volunteers to the aid organization as a whole, the specific field operation, and the programs in which they have outreach responsibilities.

→ **Recommendation:** Set clear expectations for casework (e.g., number of persons reached or referrals provided).

→ **Recommendation:** Understand the skills volunteers require and offer relevant training.

→ **Recommendation:** Mentor volunteers by reviewing their case referrals and casework and providing feedback.

Key to Success: Establish frequent and consistent check-in meetings involving staff and volunteers.

→ **Recommendation:** Set the clear expectation of face-to-face meetings at the field office.

→ **Recommendation:** Maintain scheduled meetings, making them a reliable part of the work process.

Key to Success: Involve volunteers in shaping the outreach program.

→ **Recommendation:** Solicit their feedback on the program and working relationships.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure volunteers are aware of the relevant aid agency's capacities and limitations.

Key to Success: Use volunteers' insights to help shape refugee support operations.

→ **Recommendation:** Provide volunteers with background on operational mandates, document their recommendations, and communicate their ideas to the organization's decision makers.

→ **Recommendation:** Demonstrate a commitment to addressing the volunteer's concerns and advice.

Key to Success: Create and implement a formal evaluation mechanism.

→ **Recommendation:** Identify measurable indicators of success for the outreach program and set targets for achievement.

→ **Recommendation:** Survey a representative cross section of refugees in a given population, documenting their experience of women's outreach work.

→ **Recommendation:** Invite key women to participate in ongoing dialogue about needs assessment and implementation review.

→ **Recommendation:** Communicate evaluation findings to outreach coordinators.

→ **Recommendation:** Disseminate reports to donors and organizations seeking to replicate such programs.

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