

August 2007



Rebuilding Lives: Refugee Economic Opportunities in a New Land

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children



Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
122 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10168-1289
tel. 212.551.3088
fax. 212.551.3180
wcrwc@womenscommission.org
www.womenscommission.org

© August 2007 by Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 1-58030-066-9

Mission Statement

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents. We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection. We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced. We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions. We join with refugee women, children and adolescents to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest councils of governments and international organizations. We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children was established in 1989 to address the particular needs of refugee and displaced women and children. The Women's Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. The Women's Commission receives no direct financial support from the IRC.

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Dale Buscher, Director, Protection Program at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, and Board members Hazel Reitz and Ria Kulenovic. Board Co-Chair, Glenda Burkhart, also participated on the trip delegation. The report was edited and designed by Diana Quick, Director of Communications. The International Rescue Committee – San Diego provided all arrangements and logistical support for the trip. Special thanks go to Bob Montgomery, IRC Regional Resettlement Office Director and his staff. The Women's Commission's livelihood project receives generous funding support from the U.S. State Department – Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

© Photographs by Hazel Reitz.

Introduction

“Life is hard in the U.S., especially in the beginning, but life in a refugee camp is not a life.”

—Refugee resettled in San Diego, July 2007.

While only a small percentage of refugees from around the world get resettled to a third country¹ each year, much can be learned from them about the services that were available to them during displacement and how those services assisted or failed to assist with integration and adjustment to their new country. Many of the lessons learned and services provided as part of the resettlement and integration process may also be applicable in situations of displacement, as well as in cases of return/reintegration to the country of origin or local integration in the country of asylum.

During a July 2007 field visit to the International Rescue Committee’s² (IRC) resettlement program in San Diego, California, a delegation from the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Women’s Commission) visited program services, met with IRC program staff, interviewed resettled refugees, visited refugee businesses and met with refugee employers. Findings concentrated on two areas—service provision during displacement and services post-resettlement. Both focused primarily on the provision of and/or preparation for economic opportunities.



Employment Readiness and Economic Opportunities During Displacement

“I was just trying to survive in the refugee camp; trying to earn \$1 for daily bread. I had no time for school.”

—Somali refugee woman, San Diego, July 2007.

IRC program staff and employers working with resettled refugees had many suggestions for services they would like to see implemented overseas, specifically, more vocational training programs, more language instruction, especially English as a Second Language, and more realistic cultural–orientation programs as preparation for resettlement. Resettlement program staff were, in general, surprised at the limited services available in refugee camps and often unaware of the harsh realities of life for refugees living in camps or in urban areas overseas.

Interestingly, few refugees interviewed had reflected on their refugee experience and on the services provided or the lack thereof. Many talked only about their struggle to survive, the constant hunger and food shortages and never being able to move beyond basic survival needs. The lack of adequate and predictable food provisions significantly impacted refugee participation in education and training programs amongst those refugees interviewed.



Many of the resettled refugees were not even aware of the services provided in the camps and urban areas where they had been hosted. While the majority of refugees interviewed were displaced for an average of 10 years, they had little to show for those years in terms of skills developed or knowledge acquired. Many, in fact, when asked, concluded that the years were largely wasted. The refugees, of course, had no way of knowing that their displacement would extend year after year and, hence, may not have made the best use of their time to take advantage of available opportunities.

The majority of refugees interviewed were Somali and Somali Bantu coming from the Dadaab and Kakuma camps in Kenya and from the capital city, Nairobi. Few services were reportedly available to them in these settings to acquire new skills, to upgrade existing skills or even to prevent the erosion of existing skills. This near lack of economic and skills development opportunities in situations of displacement impacts not only the successful resettlement for those few refugees who have access to this durable solution, but impacts the success of all three of the durable solutions and refugees' ability to successfully move forward with the rebuilding of their lives, wherever that may be.

Post-resettlement Services

“ I have to have a job. I don't know what I can do. I am an old woman with no skills. ”

—Somali refugee woman, San Diego, July 2007.

Employment and integration services provided to resettled refugees are seldom assessed for applicability in refugee settings in countries of first asylum, where refugees first seek safety. A continuum of care—that is, programming and service delivery—has not been applied to the entire cycle of displacement from initial displacement in countries of first asylum through to the attainment of a durable solutions. Looking at programming needs in the context of resettlement may provide insight into the development of a continuum of care model and assist with program design and delivery during displacement.

The IRC in San Diego provides a broad range of services to promote employment readiness and economic opportunities which go far beyond the initial reception and placement services mandated. The IRC San Diego office has assisted more than 20,000 refugees since 1975; current populations include refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Burma and Burundi.

The post-resettlement services provided by the IRC in San Diego and their potential applicability in refugee settings are as follows:

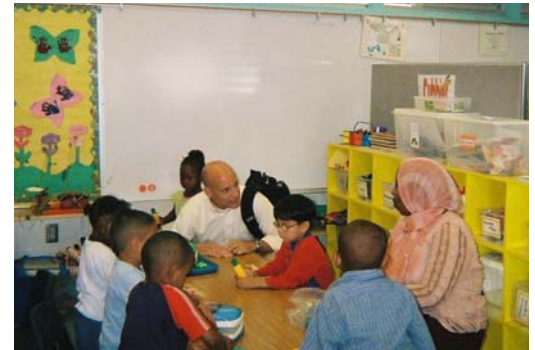
Employment Readiness

Students Plus After School Program provides mentoring and tutors to assist refugee youth in developing English and math skills which, in turn, open up opportunities for higher education and increased employment options in both the near and longer term.

In refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, informal tutoring networks are seldom developed. However, they could be fairly easily and economically promoted through existing youth groups, whereby more educated youth serve as peer educators to assist those who have had fewer educational opportunities or lack access to secondary school.

First Things First – Mother Preschooler Program simultaneously assists refugee mothers and their preschool-aged children. It provides life skills, English as a Second Language, health, education, parenting and accessing community resources for mothers while their children attend preschool to prepare them for success in the American school system.

The provision of child care and preschool services could likewise enhance women’s participation in education and training programs in refugee settings.



Financial Literacy Program teaches refugees how to manage money and put together a household budget. Financial incentives are given for course attendance and, upon completion of the third course, refugees are given a small loan to help them establish a credit history.

While financial literacy classes are often provided to some refugees prior to receipt of a micro-credit loan in refugee settings, these programs are seldom provided for the general refugee adult and youth population and could be invaluable as refugees prepare for any of the durable solutions and for reducing dependency on international aid.

Food Security and Community Health Program works to increase access to fresh, affordable foods among San Diego’s refugee and low-income communities. The IRC provides information and resources that help refugees navigate the overwhelming and often unhealthy food options they encounter in the United States. The program also supports community-driven initiatives that promote culinary diversity and healthful eating. The Food Security and Community Health Program includes: working with IRC’s Students Plus program to build a school garden and facilitate food literacy and leadership development; partnering with refugees and local community groups to build an “urban farm”; giving refugees a free bag of fresh produce each month to enhance nutrition; conducting community outreach to increase participation in the food stamp program; and offering technical assistance, start-up grants and graphic design assistance to help refugees establish and expand food businesses.

In situations of displacement, much more could be done to develop and implement backyard and community gardens, supplemental feeding programs, nutritional literacy and preventive health care, all of which could promote better health and nutritional habits. Given the prevalence of food insecurity among refugees in countries of first asylum, programs promoting complementary and supplementary food sources should be standard practice.

Economic Opportunities

Employment Program prepares refugees to secure gainful employment in San Diego. Services offered include: skill and language assessments; job readiness training and job search assistance; direct job placement through employer contacts and referrals; purchase of work tools and uniforms and assistance with other work-related expenses; the purchase of bus passes or gas for the first two months of employment; and assistance with certification, employment upgrades or career advancement.

Job placement programs, which match existing skills with camp labor needs, are seldom implemented in refugee and IDP settings and yet are, perhaps, one of the easiest ways to expand economic opportunities for those with less access within the population at little additional cost.

Small Business Development Program gives refugees the tools they need to establish their own small businesses, including business training, startup grants followed by micro-credit loans, and comprehensive technical support to enhance the success and effectiveness of businesses started. IRC San Diego has helped more than 100 refugees start their own businesses and is now developing a refugee business “Yellow Pages” to market and advertise these businesses.

While micro-finance services are often part of livelihoods programming in return contexts, micro-finance services are provided infrequently in contexts of displacement due to concerns about stability, mobility and fears about low repayment rates. Recent learning suggests, however, that it is possible to successfully provide micro-finance services to less-stable populations such as refugees and that these programs are most successful when inclusive of business training, micro-credit loans and a savings component. Additionally, at least one organization has had success in linking refugee loan clients with micro-finance institutions in countries and regions of return upon their repatriation, where their previous credit histories provide them with priority access to new loans.

Recommendations for Refugee and IDP Settings

“You cannot understand conditions of refugee camps unless you get to live there as a refugee.”

—Resettled refugee in San Diego, July 2007.

More focus during displacement needs to be on preparing the displaced for a durable solution and upgrading their skills and employment experiences. This would enhance their successful transition and the rebuilding of their lives following displacement. Adequate and predictable provision of food is vital to ensure refugees can benefit and participate in these preparatory programs. Possible activities to do this might include:

Employment Readiness

- **Train refugee adults in literacy in native languages and/or other dominant languages in the regions, such as English and French, as well as in entrepreneurship and financial skills in refugee and IDP settings** as a means of preparing displaced populations for an eventual durable solution whether that is resettlement, return or local integration.
- **Provide child care and preschool services to enhance women’s participation in training and livelihood programs** (these could be staffed by refugee women, perhaps on a rotational basis as a training opportunity itself). Training and economic program times may have to be staggered or held during off-hours to allow women to complete their other household tasks. Training childcare and nursing assistants, as an example,



appears to provide flexible employment opportunities for resettled refugee women who have to juggle work and household responsibilities.

- **Engage displaced youth as peer educators to mentor those with fewer educational opportunities** as a means of better preparing young people for adulthood when few secondary or tertiary educational options are available. An added benefit is providing youth with a constructive activity.
- **Enhance food security through backyard and community gardens, small livestock distributions and school feeding programs** as a means of facilitating refugees' ability to participate in training and livelihood programs. When basic survival needs are not adequately met, refugees are not able to focus on preparing themselves and their families for the future.

Economic Opportunities

- **Establish job placement programs that tap existing skills within the displaced community and match those to labor needs within the camp or urban area.** Include relief substitution programs that provide income to refugees to grow or make those items normally purchased outside the camp for distribution inside.
- **Provide micro-finance services to displaced populations in camps and urban areas, including business training, micro-credit loans, a savings component and mentoring and follow-up to enhance success.** When such programs also target host community members and, hence, promote economic development in the refugee-impacted region, host governments are more receptive to their implementation.

General

- **Maximize the time spent during displacement as preparation for a durable solution.** Services should be viewed as a continuum of care from displacement to durable solution with increased emphasis on employment-readiness skills and the provision of economic opportunities that could be transferable to situations of return, local integration or resettlement to a third country.
- **Challenge programming that focuses only a specific sector (food, health, education, etc.) or activity and instead focus on human development more broadly** and how programs can be more comprehensive and linked to better prepare displaced populations for any durable solution.
- **Tap into the displaced community to identify talent and skills that can be utilized to assist with the skill development of other community members.**

For more information on the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children's livelihoods project and to see other reports on this subject, please visit:

http://www.womenscommission.org/projects/protection/self_sufficiency.php

Notes

¹ Third-country resettlement is usually the last option of the three "durable solutions," available to refugees. When repatriation would be unsafe and the first-asylum country refuses local integration, a third country must be found to accept the refugees. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. <http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1089>

² The International Rescue Committee is one of the largest resettlement agencies in the United States. www.theirc.org

Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children
122 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10168-1289

tel. 212.551.3115
fax. 212.551.3180
wcrwc@womenscommission.org
www.womenscommission.org

