

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

I. BACKGROUND

1. UNHCR has been actively engaged for over a decade in environmental conservation issues in the context of operations for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees. Interventions undertaken by UNHCR and its partners have run through all stages, from initial contingency planning, emergency response and care and maintenance, to return and reintegration, camp closure and rehabilitation. The Office has recognized that the presence of refugees and IDPs can have a damaging impact on the environment, especially where displaced populations are large in size and confined to ecologically fragile areas. Over the years, UNHCR has introduced activities and programmes aimed at mitigating such impacts and promoting adaptation to resource-scarce environments. UNHCR's Environmental Guidelines (originally issued in 1996 and revised in 2005), are based on four principles: integration, prevention-before-cure, cost-effectiveness, and local participation. Respect for these principles is all the more critical as the effects of climate change put additional strains on many countries and areas hosting large populations of refugees, returnees and/or internally displaced persons.

2. This conference room paper provides an update on the implementation of the Guidelines, in particular: the main achievements in mainstreaming sound environmental management and applying best practices; some lessons learned from both Headquarters and field operations; common challenges encountered; and proposed actions. A draft decision is proposed in the Annex for adoption by the Standing Committee.

II. TRANSLATING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

3. In order to translate the above principles into action and build on achievements to date, UNHCR has used a combination of approaches, working together with host governments, implementing partners and other UN agencies, to implement a range of tailored projects and activities worldwide. Covering all areas of policy, programming and operations, these activities have focused on:

- Producing/revising/rolling out guidelines and technical manuals to the Field;
- Developing environmental programming instruments and tools;
- Developing capacity within UNHCR and amongst implementing partners and host government agencies, through training of regional and national staff on sound environmental management;

- Providing environmental management support through technical advice, funding and facilitation of field-based environmental coordinators/focal points;
- Deploying environmental experts to field operations to undertake environmental assessments, project formulations, monitoring and evaluations;
- Developing and funding projects that demonstrate and support environmentally sound principles and practices in accordance with UNHCR's environment policy;
- Integrating environmental issues in the Emergency Shelter, Protection, Camp Coordination and Camp Management clusters;
- Influencing other in-house policies and training programmes; as well as building an outreach and awareness-raising strategy.

4. These activities have helped establish a solid foundation to further consolidate and anchor environmental concerns in decision-making, programming and implementation. However, the degree of implementation of environmental considerations and activities varies from one operation to another.

III. INITIATIVES AND RESULTS

5. UNHCR's activities and programmes are most often based on collaboration with, and support from, the appropriate government agency, and in most field operations, a lead implementing partner. The main areas of focus have been on improving technical capacity within UNHCR and amongst its partners, as well as on increasing financial support for community-based initiatives and practices in refugee, IDP and returnee operations. Much has been documented in terms of technical guidance materials and lessons learned from the refugee and returnee perspectives over the past decade.

6. Since 2001, the Office has supported a wide range of projects and activities in response to identified needs, and which promoted sound environmental management. The issue of climate change has also been added to this scenario, since this is affecting displaced persons as well as causing displacements.

7. At the operational level, since 2000, UNHCR has undertaken significant changes to further improve environmental programming tools and facilitate their implementation. Country offices have been urged to adopt green procurement practices; mainstream environmental issues into all projects; promote energy conservation; raise awareness; and address environmental issues from a cross-sectoral perspective. Activities are to be focused on the application of environmental best practices and the introduction of new techniques in field operations. These initiatives include:

- Assessment of environmental impacts and development of community environmental action plans in a number of countries – Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Nepal and Thailand;
- Promotion of the use of renewable energy, for example: solar lighting and cookers in Chad, Sudan and Nepal, as well as energy efficient stoves;

- Promotion of environmentally friendly shelter-construction practices, using sun-dried mud bricks and reusable roofing components;
- Training of staff of UNHCR, implementing partners and government counterparts on sound environmental management to improve capacity at operational level;
- Environmental awareness raising; and ecosystem restoration through agroforestry and permaculture in a number of countries;
- Providing support to the UNHCR-led clusters in mainstreaming environmental issues at the operational levels;
- Development of multi-year environmental restoration strategies to address problems associated with the long-term presence of refugees and IDPs in the East and Horn of Africa, Pakistan, and Nepal;
- Establishment of targets on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and development of climate-neutral strategies for both Headquarters and field operations; and
- Incorporation of formal and non-formal environmental education and awareness-raising projects in UNHCR programmes.

A. Reforestation

8. In a number of African and Asian countries that are confronted with the problem of deforestation, including Chad, Ethiopia, Namibia, Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Nepal, and Thailand, UNHCR is collaborating with the Government and other partners to promote reforestation and sustainable agriculture in refugee-hosting areas that face deforestation. UNHCR is supporting the planting and after-care activities of over 10 million trees per year globally. Some of the forests thus established are already providing construction materials, firewood and fodder for the benefit of both displaced people and host communities.

B. Assessment, monitoring and evaluation tools

9. The Framework for Assessing, Monitoring and Evaluating the Environment in Refugee-related Operations (FRAME)¹ was developed to measure compliance with environment policy and guidelines. To date, it has been applied in refugee, IDP and returnee situations, in post-conflict and post-disaster situations, primarily in Africa and Asia. Results are used to guide decision-making.

C. Community-based environmental action plans

10. The community-based environmental action plans (CEAPs) have found widespread application and support in many country operations. Building on the outcomes of the above-mentioned assessments, CEAPs are entirely developed and owned by the community, guided by external facilitation in the initial stages or later through technical support, including monitoring, if required.

¹ A collection of tools and guidance for UNHCR staff and key operational partners developed under a UNHCR-CARE project.

11. During the process of camp closure and rehabilitation, action plans are particularly important in the preparations for handing over facilities and assets to host communities and local authorities. These CEAPs have also proven an effective entry point for larger scale initiatives, including for example the One UN programme in Ethiopia and Tanzania.

D. Input to programming

12. Planning instruments such as Country Operations Plans are especially relevant for ensuring compliance with environmental standards and approaches; assessing the need for further environmental initiatives; and raising funds for budgeted activities.

E. Environmentally responsible camp clean-up and rehabilitation

13. The closure of camps and subsequent withdrawal of external assistance is often a time of concern for host communities. Through its environmental interventions, UNHCR aims to achieve more consistent and responsible planning and implementation of camp closure and environmental rehabilitation, as required. Several programmes of this nature have been piloted successfully in the East and Horn of Africa refugee operations, and in collaboration with Emergency Shelter and Camp Coordination/Camp Management clusters in IDP operations.

F. Training

14. In order to build the capacity of UNHCR staff, implementing partners and government counterparts, the Office has developed and conducted a number of national and regional environmental management learning workshops. In future, particular focus will be put on including counterparts from government departments, to strengthen local capacity and sustainability.

G. Partnerships

15. UNHCR's network of partners in addressing environmental and climate change issues includes private sector organizations. These partnerships have helped strengthen the capacity of UNHCR and its implementing partners to respond more effectively to identified needs. Key partners include: UNEP on post-conflict environmental assessment and climate change; the World Conservation Union (IUCN) on development and support of community natural resource management plans and training; CARE International in rolling out FRAME tools; and the Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources on Land Use Design.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

16. Having taken stock of a number of successful and unsuccessful attempts to improve environmental management in situations of displacement across the world, UNHCR and its partners have now drawn up a series of valuable lessons which are being used to improve the Office's performance at both headquarters and field levels, and are being shared with partners and other agencies. These include the recognition that:

- While each refugee, IDP or returnee situation is different, it is important to be aware of common threads in humanitarian operations which, if recognized and addressed in time, could help to save scarce resources and improve the plight of displaced people.

Timely action during emergencies, for example, can help prevent or at least contain the level of habitat destruction or degradation, thus avoiding the need for costly, and sometimes impractical, rehabilitation at a later stage;

- Mainstreaming environmental considerations into UNHCR's policies, programmes, and operations is legitimate and it is the responsibility of every staff member to ensure the coherence and sustainability of practices; not just the role of a few organizational entities;
- Mainstreaming sound environmental management effectively depends upon joint capacity building, long-term commitment and involvement on the part of many actors, including UNHCR, implementing partners, host governments and other agencies;
- In some cases, influencing policies that govern the control and use of natural resources through a combination of local, national and international advocacy may be more effective for protecting the environment than only undertaking direct restorative or remedial measures.

V. OUTSTANDING CHALLENGES

17. Despite considerable progress in supporting and mainstreaming environmental management into UNHCR'S refugee, IDP and returnee programmes since environmental guidelines were first issued, much remains to be done. Natural resource management is not a straightforward process, and in many situations resources are inadequate to address emerging issues. Outstanding challenges include:

A. Available resources

18. The level of resources available to address the environmental impacts associated with human displacement at the country level is still far too low to enable the identified needs to be addressed in a more consistent and holistic manner. While environmental considerations affect every refugee, IDP and returnee operation, available resources (technical support and financial assistance) have declined considerably in recent years. This effectively undermines UNHCR's ability to respond to all but the most urgent requests for assistance. Important opportunities are also being missed, notably by the organization's inability to extend at least some environmental support to host communities, which can result in very positive benefits for the whole programme.

19. It remains difficult to engage in medium-to-longer-term environmentally related programmes, given the current funding situation. This has an important bearing on environment-related activities which need to be synchronized with the seasons. Commitments are difficult to make, and community expectations are often dashed when sudden scarcity of funds leads to unforeseen interruptions of programmed activities. Many programmes only start to develop and bear fruit after several years of effort.

B. Continuity and consistency of approach

20. A further challenge is to ensure consistency in the use of mainstreaming tools, the development of human resources capacity and the achievement of expected outcomes. Addressing environmental issues requires a certain level of technical expertise within UNHCR

and capable implementing partners with resident environmental experience to respond appropriately in each situation. The frequent rotation of staff, especially during or following an emergency, affects institutional knowledge and expertise in many programmes. At the same time, the capacity within key national institutions to deal with environmental issues in refugee/IDP hosting areas in an integrated manner is sometimes lacking.

21. Over the past decade, the number of environmental coordinators/technical staff at global and field levels has fallen from 5 to 1 at Headquarters, and from 20 to 6² in country operations. This situation has restricted the ability of UNHCR and partners to deal with global and local environmental issues in a timely and consistent manner. At a minimum, this calls for a certain level of technical expertise within UNHCR. There is also a pressing need to build local capacity from the outset so that partners can take a more active and prominent role in environmental management issues, but this also requires human and financial support.

C. Fragile environment

22. Most refugee and IDP camps are situated in often arid environments which are already ecologically fragile, as in Chad, Djibouti, Algeria, and Mauritania, or in overpopulated countries, for example, Rwanda. In such situations, assuring basic services for displaced populations, such as water and domestic energy supplies or the availability of building materials poses enormous challenges, generating additional costs to bring in wood, alternative fuels or water where there are no such natural resources.

D. Unpredictable weather conditions and climate change

23. Climate change and chronic droughts, floods, and unpredictable meteorological conditions have a considerable impact on UNHCR's environmental activities, notably on water supply management, reforestation, agroforestry and sustainable agriculture, which are dependant on the availability of water. Any reduced or excessive precipitation in countries such as Bangladesh, Djibouti, Kenya, Uganda, Chad, Nepal and Ethiopia pose challenges.

E. Collaboration

24. Integrating environmental considerations into other relevant programme sectors remains a constant challenge, as the environment is not sector-specific. Greater emphasis is now being given by UNHCR to intra-organizational collaboration on environmental issues, e.g. with regard to logistics, food security, water and sanitation and education, to ensure that sectoral activities complement and do not undermine each other.

² This includes 1 international professional position and 2 national professional positions, with the rest being covered by United Nations Volunteers (UNVs).

VI. THE WAY FORWARD

25. Environmental issues are going to remain a concern in virtually all operations. This situation is likely to be exacerbated in future years if the frequency and intensity of natural disasters increase, striking vulnerable communities in areas that have often already been heavily affected by conflict, drought, flooding or other natural phenomena, or a combination of these. Factoring climate change into the equation of population displacement management is now also a reality, in addition to more traditionally known threats.

26. UNHCR has made important inroads into developing and applying a range of technically sound environmental interventions around the globe. It has worked to consolidate learning from these operations and to strengthen its knowledge network and profile as a leader in this arena. However, if additional resources are not firmly committed to support and build on the groundwork already undertaken by the Office and its partners, then much is at risk: most at risk will be the welfare and well-being of the persons of concern to UNHCR and the fundamental principles of asylum for people forced to flee their homes.

Annex

DRAFT DECISION ON ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN OPERATIONS FOR
PERSONS OF CONCERN TO UNHCR

The Standing Committee,

Appreciating the measures already undertaken by UNHCR to mainstream environmental considerations into its programmes,

Keenly aware of the risk that climate change and environmental degradation will exacerbate the challenges of protecting and assisting vulnerable populations of concern to UNHCR across the globe,

Recognizing also the importance of adaptation at country level, and the need for enhanced burden sharing in this regard,

- (a) *Notes* the usefulness of the environmental policy and guidelines produced by UNHCR in 1997 and revised in 2005, and *urges* their further dissemination;
 - (b) *Welcomes* UNHCR's continued efforts to develop and promote sustainable responses to environmental concerns in refugee, IDP and returnee operations, through the integration of environmental principles into its management and training tools;
 - (c) *Encourages* UNHCR to further strengthen its collaboration with other agencies concerned with environmental management, particularly in the context of cluster arrangements, Delivering as One and other UN coordination mechanisms, notably in promoting sustainable environmental conservation and rehabilitation;
 - (d) *Calls* on affected States to ensure, with the support of UNHCR and other relevant partners, that their National Action Plans for Adaptation (NAPAs) make adequate provision for the needs of refugee and IDP hosting areas;
 - (e) *Further encourages* UNHCR, together with relevant partners, to extend the scope of its assessment and monitoring of environmental activities and to develop strategies for disaster risk reduction in refugee and IDP hosting and returnee areas;
 - (f) *Calls on* UNHCR to allocate adequate resources for addressing environmental issues identified through its comprehensive needs assessment, after due consideration of core priorities for the needs of persons of concern.
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