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REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN EMERGENCY RELIEF OPERATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores refugee participation in emergency relief operations. It reviews current practices regarding the involvement of refugees in day-to-day projects and activities in a refugee emergency. It describes the ways that refugees usually participate, the reasons why refugee involvement is not greater than it currently is, and some cases where refugee participation has achieved a higher than normal degree of involvement. The importance of refugee participation is discussed, and opportunities for increasing refugee participation in all phases of an emergency operation are described.

I. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

Full, meaningful participation of refugees in every facet of emergency operations is at present a long way from being realized. While there is general agreement among international relief agencies that refugee participation is "good" and should be encouraged, in reality real participation is lacking and refugee involvement in projects is usually little more than people working as laborers, attendants, physician's assistants...a whole range of "non-thinking" jobs in refugee camps and settlements.

Among relief agencies, refugee participation is an "approved" concept. One would be hard-pressed to find any international agency advocating openly that refugees be denied an opportunity to participate in the programs designed to sustain them. Many relief and development organizations claim to be advocates; many advertise that their programs are designed to promote self-sufficiency and self-reliance by transferring the burden of decision-making to the refugees themselves.

A review of existing refugee emergency programs will show, however, that real participation is lacking. In many countries, refugee participation is limited to menial jobs and tasks concerned with the operation of the refugee camp. In some countries, even the amount of labor that is permitted is circumscribed by local government policy.

In order to increase the amount of meaningful participation, it is important to understand the

underlying assumptions of "participation", the various schools of thought regarding participation, and the subtle and not-so-subtle reasons why participation often encounters resistance.

A. The Concept

There are two predominant perspectives on refugee participation. The first view is that espoused by most humanitarian organizations; that is, a democratic process of refugees coming together to select their leaders, developing institutions to assist in everyday life, and ultimately achieving full participation in the decisions relating to their situation. This style of participation is uniquely a western liberal concept -- a belief that democratic processes are inherently good and will benefit the people.

To a large degree, extending to refugees the right to participate in decision-making relating to their situation can be seen as an offspring of the general social movements of the '60s and '70s which advocated increased citizen participation in all aspects of governmental operations. Prior to that time, there was little talk or even concern about involving refugees in meaningful participation; but as more culturally-conscious relief workers moved into the international relief system, there were mounting calls to increase participatory opportunities.

The second view can be described as "guided" participation. In other words, participation is seen as a means to an end on the part of certain groups, most often political groups within the refugee community and/or the host government. In this view, refugees are to be organized for every possible activity and assigned leaders who will not only train the people for specific activities, but will also use the organizing activities as a means of providing indoctrination, and ultimately control, over the community. Refugee organization and participation are seen as an opportunity to further longer-term goals.

It is the latter view of participation that worries host governments, and there is little support among them for increasing meaningful participation. They view organized refugees as a threat: a direct threat to their control of the community and an indirect threat because, with foreign political groups in control of the refugees, the refugee settlements might become a base for guerrillas and a potential point of conflict in relations with their neighbors.

B. Prattle vs. Practice

While voluntary agencies and the UN system publicly advocate refugee participation as a "desirable goal",

in practice they rarely achieve any degree of meaningful refugee participation and in some cases do not even encourage it. In a study of U.S. voluntary agencies carried out by the Bureau For Private Voluntary Assistance of the Agency For International Development (AID) entitled "Making Voluntary Agencies Development Agencies, Questions For Evaluation", the researchers found that while most PVO's claim to promote participation few have actually developed meaningful models of participatory management that involve the people.

In summary, most agencies overlook or neglect to include participation as a goal. Some passively avoid the matter; others actively avoid it; and most simply don't recognize the opportunities that are available nor how to exploit them.

In the AID study cited above, the authors found that many voluntary agencies were "paternalistic, condescending and insensitive" to the plight of disaster victims. Other observers have referred to the relationship between helpers and victims as the "we know best" syndrome. To a large extent, this has been caused by our perception of disaster victims as being helpless, emotionally distraught and generally unable to cope with events -- people who must somehow be cared for as opposed to given an opportunity help themselves. Many aid personnel feel that only they have the complete picture of needs and are therefore in a better position to decide the people's fate than the refugees themselves. This leads to a vicious circle whereby people are denied the opportunity to participate, lose the sense that they have any control over their lives, and eventually become more lethargic, reinforcing the view that they are incapable of taking part in the decision-making process.

A failure to involve refugees in meaningful participation will ultimately lead to several negative consequences. These include:

1. <u>Increasing lethargy on the part of refugees</u>. As refugees feel that they have less and less control over their lives, they become more lethargic and withdraw into themselves. This, in turn, can create a variety of serious psychological and social problems which, in the end, will make assistance programs more difficult to execute. In the worst case, this can lead to extreme social problems which not only increase not only the costs of providing assistance, but also increase protection problems.

2. An increase in costs. If refugees are denied full participation, costs increase. Not only will certain activities have to be carried out by paid workers from outside the camp, which will ultimately be more expensive than hiring refugees, but many programs or forms of assistance may be inappropriate or ill-suited for the situation and costly to adjust. With participation, these adjustment costs can often be avoided or substantially reduced.

3. A decrease in the avenues of communication. Communications between the assisting agencies and the refugee community are vital if programs are to have a beneficial social impact and if protection problems are to be avoided. By reducing refugee participation to non-meaningful activities, avenues of communication are lessened and the likelihood that protection problems will increase is greater.

Advocates of increased participation should recognize that there is a "down side" to refugee involvement. Refugee participation does have its limits, especially in regard to decision-making. Participation in, and advice about, a particular aspect of a program is always important, but to give the ultimate decision-making authority to refugees can often be counter-productive.

Well-meaning advocates of participation have been known to go overboard and ask refugees to make technical decisions that they are not qualified to make. For example, in 1979 in the preparation of the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand, the camp planners asked the refugees to select the shelter systems and design the layout of the shelters. Most of the refugees were people from rural areas who had no previous experience living in high density situations (over 100,000 people destined to live in the camp) and never before had they been faced with the need to put so many people in such a small area. Therefore, the housing style that they chose was to build long, multifamily buildings and to place them in straight, narrow lines in a grid fashion. Since most of the people had never encountered sewage disposal in such an environment, there were no plans to integrate sanitation within the overall camp layout. As a result, the social and environmental conditions quickly deteriorated. Had professional planners been involved in the camp development, a more creative layout would likely have evolved, incorporating more open space, near-in sanitation and smaller, less hard-to-manage, shelter units.

Clearly, some technical questions lie outside the purview of competency for refugee decision-making. Participation in decision-making, but not necessarily the ultimate control over the final decision, is still a very desirable objective. The trick for the refugee assistance agencies then, is to find a balance between participation in decision-making and technical requirements.

II. ISSUES

There are several issues involved in the concept of refugee participation. These include:

A. Accountability

The principal reason why refugees are not more involved in meaningful participatory activities is that relief agencies and the international organizations do not view themselves as being accountable to the refugees but rather to their donors and to the host country. Because the agencies do not feel themselves accountable, there are no effective corrective mechanisms through which refugees can attain meaningful participation, nor councils wherein they can demand a greater say in their own affairs. In short, refugees are left at the mercy and whims of the assisting agencies.

B. Determining Appropriate Leaders

A key issue in refugee involvement is defining who should provide leadership for the refugee community. In most cases, relief agencies find that it is easiest to work with people with whom they can communicate. Therefore, younger bilingual and educated persons within the refugee community are usually selected for leadership roles. Most often these people are not the traditional leaders and may find themselves in conflict with the usual community leaders. In this case, effective communication and participation is often obstructed. An important principle for relief agencies is that traditional leaders should be involved in advisory and decision-making roles while younger, educated or "westernized" refugees can be involved in managing day-to-day operations (but their appointment and authority should always be subordinate to the traditional leadership).

Program planners can create an atmosphere wherein the natural coping mechanisms of a society can operate, generating leaders who are respected by the refugee community. To do this, the relief agencies should develop specialists in informal organization who can

work within a group of people to identify the coping mechanisms, learn how leaders are designated, identify the traits that are respected, and advise the agencies on structuring their programs to allow for the emergence of natural leaders. This is especially important in those societies where disruption has been so great that natural leaders may be absent or reluctant to come forward.

C. Stacking

A common problem in refugee involvement is that the first people who arrive become the leaders. Relief agencies rarely make allowances for the fact that the true leaders of the community may not be the first arrivals, and they may too quickly institutionalize a structure that places non-traditional leaders in leadership roles. This can cause a great deal of confusion (and problems) when the more traditional leaders arrive and demand to be recognized.

D. Volunteer vs. Salaried Workers

Another question to be addressed is the issue of whether people in leadership roles and, more particularly, in camp jobs should be paid or should do the work on a voluntary basis. Most relief agencies cling to the dogma that work in camps should be voluntary, despite the evidence that very few people are willing to work for long periods of time without pay. Food-for-work programs have been tried but without long-term success. People need to be able to accumulate local currency in order to purchase necessities that are not provided in the relief program and to have some cash reserves for emergencies. As a general rule, participation in operational activities (water supply, sanitation, garbage collection, food service, etc.) can only be guaranteed by paying workers on a long-term basis.

E. Changes in Leadership

One constraint on refugee participation is the fact that refugee leaders often undergo a high rate of turnover. Because the leaders are in contact with expatriate workers, they may be eligible sooner than others for resettlement. They are also more likely to leave the camp early to assimilate into the local community or to repatriate. For this reason, it is important in planning participatory activities that leadership positions always have two or three backup people available so that a program will not be brought to a halt by the sudden exodus of a key leader.

III. CONSTRAINTS TO REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

To understand why fuller refugee participation is not often achieved, it is important to understand the constraints that exist. These can be classified as official constraints, economic constraints, ideological constraints, social constraints/ cross-cultural barriers and managerial constraints.

A. Official Constraints

The most important barriers, and the ones most difficult to overcome, are those limitations placed on participation by the host country. These constraints may be in the form of written instructions (to the United Nations or to other assisting agencies) circumscribing the limits on participation, statements specifying what types of jobs or positions must be filled by host country or expatriate workers, and/or case-by-case limitations placed on specific sectors of camps or communities within the refugee population. In other cases, official constraints may be more subtle but nonetheless restrictive. For example, a refugee administrator may simply delay making decisions regarding certain programs until "adjustments" have been made by the assisting agency limiting or removing refugee participation in the project's execution. In some cases, a refugee administrator may hold up other projects until the assisting agencies recognize the reason for the delay and quietly withdraw, phase out or cancel another activity which has a high degree of participation.

In extreme cases, refugee administrators have been known to "punish" a certain refugee community or assisting agency where participation has gone beyond the perceived or proscribed limits set out by the host country. An example of the latter occurred in India in 1971. A Bengali refugee camp operated by Oxfam was punished when the people became too vocal and demanded improvements in flood protection for the camp. The small 3,500 person camp was built between Calcutta's Dum Dum Airport and the town of Banipur. The camp had been established on a low-lying, abandoned field in the dry season. When the rainy season began, the field flooded and became an uninhabitable swamp. Water supplies became contaminated, latrines overflowed into living areas and cooking fires were almost impossible.

The refugees, prompted by social workers from Oxfam, organized a community group to approach the government and petition for a new site. When the government rejected their plea, the refugees organized a demonstration along the main highway between Calcutta

and the border. The refugees sat in the road and blocked traffic for several hours. Government soldiers disbanded the demonstration and returned the refugees to the camp. In retaliation for the refugee's activities, food supplies were reduced to the bare minimum level and Oxfam found that its requests for permission to conduct programs in other camps were consistently rejected.

Official constraints are usually a result of one of the following three concerns:

1. Governmental fear of losing control. A case in the recent relief operations in eastern Sudan illustrates this concern and shows how a government may adopt different positions for different groups.

   In 1985, a visitor to the region's refugee camps would be struck by the differences between the degree of organization in the Tigrayan and Eritrean camps. The Tigrayans organized their camps according to the villages from which the people had come. The traditional leaders in the villages, the elders, maintained their positions in the camp and the camp was divided into geographic areas representing the different villages and regions of Tigray. Almost every aspect of camp operations was turned over to the Tigrayans, and community leaders had a great deal of say.

   In the Eritrean camps, especially those around Kassala, all forms of community organization were forbidden and people were assigned to specific locations in the camp according to a "space available" allocation system. There were no attempts to group families, clans or villages together. Sudanese authorities appointed the persons who would be the spokesmen for the refugees.

   The difference between the two was a result of a struggle between the EPLF and the ELF which culminated in a shootout near the camp of Wad Sharife in 1984. The Sudanese government had generally been supportive of the ELF, the loser in the struggle, and feared that with the EPLF the dominant force, the camps could soon be turned into guerrilla bases. Thus, in order to maintain control, all forms of participatory activity were closed down.

2. Reservation of benefits for host country nationals. A major reason why participation is often restricted is that the host government insists that the economic benefits of assistance

programs go to their own citizens rather than to the refugees. The United Nations and other relief organizations are often placed in a difficult position regarding this matter. Since many governments are openly hostile to even having the refugees in their country, it is often felt that a concession to the government to hire only host country nationals to work in the camps (especially if unemployment is high in the regions where the refugees are residing) will give the U.N. a better position in gaining admittance and asylum for the refugees. The result is that hundreds of jobs that could be filled by refugees and would increase their participation in camp operations are effectively denied them.

This issue also complicates the question of paying refugees for work in camps. Many relief agencies insist that refugees work for free or for additional food. In practice, however, people are only willing to do this for a short period of time. The one commodity they need most is money; usually voluntary work or food-for-work will only last for several weeks. (It's even doubtful whether food-for-work programs can be initiated unless there is a market within the camp or the likelihood that people can leave the camp to sell extra food on a parallel market in a nearby town.)

When a government issues instructions that only host country nationals can be paid for work in the camps, the chances that the camp will operate with full efficiency are minimal. Often, the next step is for the relief agencies and the government to agree that leadership positions will be held by host country nationals but the laborers will be refugees. While on the surface this appears to be a workable agreement, the fact that leadership positions and decision-making are denied the refugees limits their participation.

Cases where these issues have been a problem include India (1971 Bengali refugee crisis), eastern Sudan (1984-85), Mexico (current).

3. <u>Governmental fear that participation and full employment may create permanency, thereby obstructing repatriation.</u> This sentiment is often expressed by countries such as Thailand which severely restrict activities designed to promote self-sufficiency among the refugees.

B. Economic Constraints

Some relief organizations cite economic reasons for not emphasizing early involvement of refugees in project planning and execution. Among the reasons they give are:

1. That participation, especially refugee involvement in paid labor activities, competes for scarce funds during the emergency period.

2. That costs will increase due to delays resulting from organizing and training refugees.

3. That refugees should provide voluntary labor rather than being compensated with cash. Since this dogma prevails, many agencies initially promote voluntary work or food-for-work with the result that fewer and fewer people continue to work in the programs. While many agencies recognize that pay is a better incentive, they cite the lack of funds as the primary reason why voluntary or food-for-work schemes are promoted.*

C. Managerial Constraints

In practice, there are several major managerial obstacles to full participation by refugees. In cases where host governments operate the camps, there are few qualified community organizers who can develop participatory programs. While many governments have social workers, few have the necessary language capabilities or community organization experience. More often than not, the military will be in charge of the camp and participatory activities run counter to their training and ideas about how a camp should be operated.

Managers often see community organization, especially during the emergency period, as an obstacle. In this case, they will often justify not organizing as an expediency, claiming that they should first build the camps and get them operating, then involve the refugees once things have simmered down.

D. Administration & Management

It is important that the relief agency in charge of an emergency operation establish refugee participation as part of administration and management (A&M) systems. In large-scale emergency operations, is that agencies

*Most food for food-for-work is provided free to the relief agencies by AID or WFP.

often set up effective command and control systems based solely on electronic communications and standardized reporting procedures. These systems are designed to give administrators ability to communicate and respond quickly to unforeseen contingencies but effectively eliminate refugee input into the decision-making and information-gathering process. To correct this, refugee administrators must establish effective A&M systems that assure meaningful refugee participation in the command and control network.

E. Social Constraints/Cross-Cultural Barriers

Since refugee camps will almost always be operated by host country nationals or expatriates, a number of social and cross-cultural barriers exist that are difficult to overcome. These barriers include the more obvious language and cultural barriers that lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications, but also problems of racism, ethno-centrism and all forms and degrees of discrimination. The host country may also harbour xenophobic fears about the refugees. In that environment, the government is not likely to encourage participatory activities.

Racism and its more subtle relation, paternalism, are often present in the international relief agencies working with refugees. Religious organizations, especially the evangelical groups, as well as the United Nations and many of the specialized disaster teams that work under the UNHCR, have been privately criticized for the poor quality of staff that they field in emergencies. One particular Scandinavian unit operating in eastern Sudan in 1985 was continually ostracized by other agencies for the overt racial slurs made by their staff about the refugees whom they were supporting. As one observer pointed out, "It's difficult to organize the people when you keep calling them niggers."

Subtle paternalism is perhaps the worst obstacle to overcome. Many western relief workers -- living in decent housing, eating three square meals a day; driving fancy late-model four-wheel-drive vehicles, with dollars to convert on the black market -- fall into an easy feeling of superiority and regard their "charges" with a benign and superior air. This environment breeds the "we know best" syndrome which militates against the development of meaningful participation.

F. Ideological Constraints

Unfortunately, there is often a "stiff" view of participation. In other words, many relief agencies

believe that participation is not a natural activity; rather it is something that has to be taught to the refugees or developed through special programs. There is little recognition within the relief community that participation is, in fact, a normal activity, something that people will do on their own if left alone. In probably one of the most absurd things to come out of recent relief operations, a major U.S. foundation gave a grant to a refugee group to study ways to increase its own participation in day-to-day refugee camp activities.

Only a few relief organizations truly understand refugees' need to participate. There have been few comparative studies on participation and the benefits derived from full involvement. Therefore, there are few strong advocates within the relief community for meaningful participation and certainly no major initiatives, guidelines or standard procedures have been developed by the U.N. system to encourage, promote or guarantee refugee involvement in emergencies. In the UNHCR Emergency Management Training Program carried out by the Disaster Management Center at the University of Wisconsin, it has been consistently noted that social services receives the least attention in training and it is the least focused objective. In other words, there is not a great deal of information about how to integrate refugees into the overall process; there is only a vague concept that it should be done.

The very nature of the relief system is a structural barrier to refugee participation. With only a very few exceptions, most agencies do not have full-time emergency operations specialists. When a disaster strikes, temporary workers are recruited for specific tasks and rotated at fairly frequent intervals. Few performance evaluations are carried out and there is little record of the social programs and programmatic approaches that have been tried. Since few evaluations are conducted out, there is little record of success or failure and, due to the high turnover of staff, there is little internal memory of success. It has been pointed out by UNHCR social service officers, John Williamson and Anne Dawson-Shepard that, of all the facets of emergency operation that are studied, social services and community organization receive the least attention. Without institutional memory, newcomers in the next disaster have only a limited view of the possibilities of refugee involvement and are generally unaware of the benefits that full participation can bring. By the time that the more creative staff begin to advocate fuller involvement, the operation is usually well into the second or third month (or even later).

IV. IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION

Refugee participation is important for a number of reasons. These include:

A. Participation Enhances Normal Coping Process

Psychological studies of disaster victims have shown that it is important that they be involved in meaningful activities as soon after they have experienced trauma as possible, since participation aids in the psychological coping process. Psychologists have pointed out that participation:

1. builds self-esteem;

2. rebuilds self-confidence;

3. reduces feelings of isolation;

4. reduces lethargy, depression and despondency.

A comparative study of Bengali refugee camps in West Bengal was carried out in 1971. Two camps were compared: Salt Lake Camp in Calcutta and Dum Dum Camp at the edge of the Calcutta airport. At the Dum Dum Camp all major activities, including camp construction, were carried out by paid Indian laborers. At the Salt Lake Camp, all activities were carried out by the refugees under supervision of Indian administrative personnel. All healthy refugees entering the camp were immediately assigned to construction details, work brigades, food service or other activities which were supervised by refugee group leaders who received their instructions from the camp administrators.

The Indian social workers carrying out the study reported to the Indian refugee administration that the refugees' ability to cope with their situation was significantly increased by the participatory activities in Salt Lake Camp. They also reported a significant difference in the level of psychological problems and anti-social behavior on the part of the refugees. It should be noted that Salt Lake Camp held approximately 250,000 at the time of the survey, while Dum Dum Camp held only 75,000, and environmental conditions were considered far worse in Salt Lake Camp than in Dum Dum.

(It should also be noted that despite this finding, the government of India continued its policy of refusing to allow refugees in other camps to participate in construction or other work activities,

decreeing instead that all work would be carried out by Indian contract laborers.)

B. Participation Is Cost-Effective

Contrary to the belief of many in the relief community, participation is cost-effective. It is obvious that refugee workers will almost always be cheaper than hiring outside contract laborers. And relief agencies have no trouble justifying a lower wage scale since food, shelter and other services are being provided free of cost.

More important, full refugee participation in all activities leads to avoidance of expensive mistakes. While it would be hard to document the specific cost savings of having refugees involved in assessment and project planning, it should be intuitively understood that if refugees help with program design the programs' will usually be more effective than if they were designed by persons unfamiliar with the society and culture.

Claims that refugees will attempt to "pad" the payroll and create bogus positions for family and friends are usually exaggerated. While this may occur in the implementation stage, it is rare in the assessment or planning phases.

C. Participation Promotes Protection

Internal protection problems are usually due as much to people's feelings of isolation, frustration and lack of belonging to a structured society as they are to any other form of social problem. Refugee participation helps build the values and sense of community that reduce protection problems. By giving people a sense of worth, a sense of control over their own lives, and by building a community to which people feel responsible about community affairs, the groundwork is laid for a bonding of the community which will reduce protection incidents. Furthermore, if relief agencies have encouraged participation, more avenues of communication exist between the refugees and the assisting agencies; thus, protection problems or incidents will usually be easier to detect and control.

D. Participation Leads To Self-Sufficiency

Self-sufficiency, or at least partial self-sufficiency, is a long-term goal of every relief program. To hasten self-sufficiency, it is important that refugees be involved in planning and decision-making as soon as possible. Participation is the

basis of all programs leading to self-sufficiency and is especially important where integration into the host country is one of the durable solutions to be promoted.

V. OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

Refugee participation can and should be promoted in all phases of a relief operation. In addition to the normal project activities of needs assessment, project planning, project execution, and monitoring and evaluation, there are certain types of special projects that can enhance and promote participation of specific refugee groups.

A. Needs Assessment

During the needs assessment process, refugee participation should begin at the earliest possible stage. Most agencies would consider that participation should begin as the first groups arrive and should try to involve the refugees in defining the needs of the people that are coming in. However, if an agency is on the ball and has anticipated the influx by observing the early warning signs, it may be possible to find people in the host country of the same ethnic and cultural groups as the entering refugees who can identify some of the needs the people will have and recommend appropriate measures to ensure early involvement of the incoming refugees.

As the refugees begin to come into the country, relief agencies should look for the "natural" leaders of the refugee community: the elders, minor elected political leaders (such as mayors or other local officials), village chiefs, heads of clans, etc. Where possible, put these leaders on a temporary advisory council to help define the refugees' needs. (Caution should be exercised when selecting elected leaders, those from political parties or military leaders from insurgent or liberation forces. Such leaders may be unacceptable to the host country and could be problematic. Therefore, it is more important to look for traditional leaders and lower-level elected officials.)

Once the leaders have been identified, they can be organized into several working committees. One committee can be used to develop information about the refugees that will be helpful to the relief agencies: information on cultural traits, eating habits, religious or social taboos, sanitation habits, traditional make-up of the community (tribes, clans, etc.), skills, professions and other aspects of work.

A specific task of this group would be to identify the people, as they come in, who have particular skills that would be useful in the relief program (doctors, nurses, paramedical personnel, traditional healers, dressers, traditional birth attendants, etc., as well as drivers, radio technicians, accountants, etc.) A master list of people should be prepared and maintained according to previous jobs and experience.

An "origins" committee would also be helpful in needs assessment. This group would help identify the areas or regions of origin and would interview the refugees to determine how many more people might be coming out. The group would also help determine whether or not people could be placed in sectors of the camp according to the village or neighborhood of origin. Using the projected number of new arrivals, camp planners would have a good idea about how much space to allocate for each camp. This group is very important and forms the basis of establishing a remote detection system.

A third group that should be involved at the needs assessment stage is a committee to work with relief officials to define personal and family needs. This group should work with the refugees during the initial registration process to determine what belongings they have been able to bring with them and develop lists of the types of equipment or personal supplies they will require. After only a few days of these interviews, the group should be able to define the total package of assistance needed by the refugees. This group would also advise the camp administrators on special needs such as family reunification, etc. The overall criteria for the relief program, especially such aspects as the food basket, etc., can be defined by this group. It would be the responsibility of the committee to point out specific regional or ethnic variations among the refugee population that should be recognized when determining the overall assistance package.

The committees can provide a bridge of two-way communication between relief officials and the refugee community. Communication is an important aspect of the assessment process. Relief officials should use these committees as channels to communicate to the refugees the need to keep expectations within realistic limits.

During the needs assessment phase, any committee or organizational structures that are developed for

involving the refugees should be kept as flexible as possible, and participants in the process should be reminded constantly that entire organization is subject to change. It is important that the relief agencies not allow themselves to establish a permanent or inflexible structure since new arrivals may substantially change the social equation and other, more important leaders may arrive who should be involved in the participatory process. Also, once the project implementation phase is begun, other mechanisms for involving a wider variety of people must be developed.

B. Project Planning

During the project planning phase, refugee participation is especially important. Refugees should not only be involved in planning overall project activities (such as camp planning, developing the comprehensive assistance package, etc.), but also in planning the more specific operational projects or activities that will be carried out as part normal community activities (such as sanitation programs, water supply activities, etc.).

The most important reason for involving refugees at this stage is that it helps to avoid mistakes at the macro programmatic level as well as in the small, day-to-day details of project implementation. Had refugees been involved in project planning, for example, planners of the camps in West Bengal, India, would have known not to put Hindu and Moslem refugees in the same communities and thus could have saved lives that were lost when ethnic clashes flared into violence in the camps. In Thailand in 1979, had refugees been involved at an early stage, program planners would have recognized the need to separate Chinese and Vietnamese ethnics in the Sakeo Camp from the majority Khmer population before lives had been lost in the settling of scores between the two groups.

Smaller mistakes can also be avoided with refugee participation. In 1971, foreign engineers set up several refugee camps in the Calcutta area and installed hundreds of brick-enclosed latrines with pour-flush toilets that emptied into septic tanks. Despite the fact that the latrines were kept very clean, they were rarely used. Only after consultation with the refugees was it learned that the latrines were built facing a sacred Banyan tree and therefore Hindus were prohibited by custom from using them.

A similar incident occurred in Pakistani camps for Afghan refugees in the early 1980s. Several banks of latrines were built facing the southwest; Moslems refused to use them because they faced Mecca.

In both cases, had refugees been involved in the site selection, these mistakes and the cost of correcting them could have been avoided.

In the project planning phase, it is important to begin laying the groundwork for an overall refugee participation scheme. At this point, traditional leaders and community-level elected leaders should have been identified; from these groups, central leadership figures should begin to emerge. A committee can then be developed to work with the relief agencies, planning each major element of the assistance program, the overall assistance package, and camp-level activities.

In day-to-day operations, such as water and sanitation, technicians or skilled refugees with previous or similar experience in these fields can usually be identified and assigned leadership positions in planning and execution of these projects. Educated persons, bilingual refugees and others who do not hold traditional leadership positions can be integrated into the overall project structure and given important responsibilities, An important principle to remember is that non-traditional leaders, no matter how good they are, should always be subordinate to traditional or elected leaders in order to prevent a breakdown in traditional authority.

During the planning phase, refugees should be given as much real responsibility as possible, but should not be expected to make technical decisions that are beyond their level of competence. During this phase, refugees should usually be working in an advisory capacity and be full participants in the planning process, although ultimate decisions, especially for technical matters, should remain in the hands of technicians and the overall refugee program authorities. Again, relief agencies should be careful not to raise refugees' expectations to unrealistic levels.

Examples of specific activities that can be carried out by refugees participating in the planning phase are:

1. planning the makeup of labor forces for specific camp operations;

2. advising on the design and layout of refugee camps;

3. advising on the design and controls of the food distribution systems;

4. advising on the development of special programs for certain groups (elderly, unaccompanied, etc.);

5. identification and planning of special projects aimed at promoting self-sufficiency (gardening, fish ponds, etc.).

C. Project Execution

During the project implementation phase, participation should reach its maximum. At this point, almost everyone in a community should be involved in some form of participatory activity. To an extent, the degree of participation by each individual depends on the social structure of the refugees and the degree to which the traditional structure has been retained in the new refugee community.

In circumstances where a new structure has developed (due to the fact that the traditional structure did not survive intact during flight), it is especially important to organize people down to the lowest possible social unit. Refugee camps in Honduras for Nicaraguan refugees during the Sandinista revolution managed to attain a very high degree of social organization. One camp was subdivided into blocks and sections and had committees at each of these levels. Each shelter had a representative on the block committee. Each head of household participated in a shelter committee and elected a shelter leader. With this degree of organization, it was possible to mobilize large work forces for temporary activities and to rotate responsibility for day-to-day camp operations. Administrators of these camps report a high level of self-confidence attained by the people in their own ability to run the camps.

If traditional societal structures have been reestablished in the refugee community, participation (especially in relation to decisions that affect the whole community), should usually follow along traditional lines. It is important that good, cooperative working relationships be established and that adversarial relationships be avoided. Recently in a camp for southern Sudanese refugees in Uganda, the author witnessed an initial contact between a

UNHCR field officer and a group of refugee community leaders. The leaders immediately began listing problems in the camp and demanding closer attention on the part of UNHCR. The field officer responded in a haughty manner, said that this was not the time to discuss such things, and notified the elders that he would appoint a committee to work with him to plan specific projects. Since that time, relations between UNHCR and the refugees can best be described as a running battle.

In some cases, it is impossible to utilize traditional structures. This is especially the case where the society has undergone massive disruptions, large numbers of urban people are mixed with rural people, and there have been catastrophic losses to the familial structures. In cases like this (such as the case of the Kampuchean refugees in Thailand), it may be important to build a new structure that enables the refugees to participate in overall community activities. Experience has shown that the best way to organize the people is according to the layout of the camp. Recent camps have been designed with social organization in mind.* Especially important is the grouping of shelters at the lowest planning level. Inward-facing community units like that depicted in Figure 1 encourage "bonding" and participation, while rigid grids such that depicted in Figure 2 discourage participation. Using the inward-facing community unit as a basis, innovative camp plans can be designed incorporating the units into blocks, blocks into sectors, and sectors into the overall camp.

It should be noted that, anytime traditional structures are left behind and a new artificial structure is developed, planners must be certain that the leaders who evolve are not obtaining power or their position by taking advantage of the refugees or relief programs. It is also important to make sure that armed elements within the camp do not suborn the camp organization to their own ends. In 1979 and 1980 the Khmer Rouge continuously tried to use camp structure as a means of enforcing cadre discipline in the Sakeo Camp.

During project implementation, an important objective of increasing community participation should be to phase out expatriates and host country nationals as much as is practically and politically feasible. Once a camp is operating, there is no reason why the vast majority of activities in the camp cannot be put in

*Refugee Camps and Camp Planning, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1986.

FIGURE 1

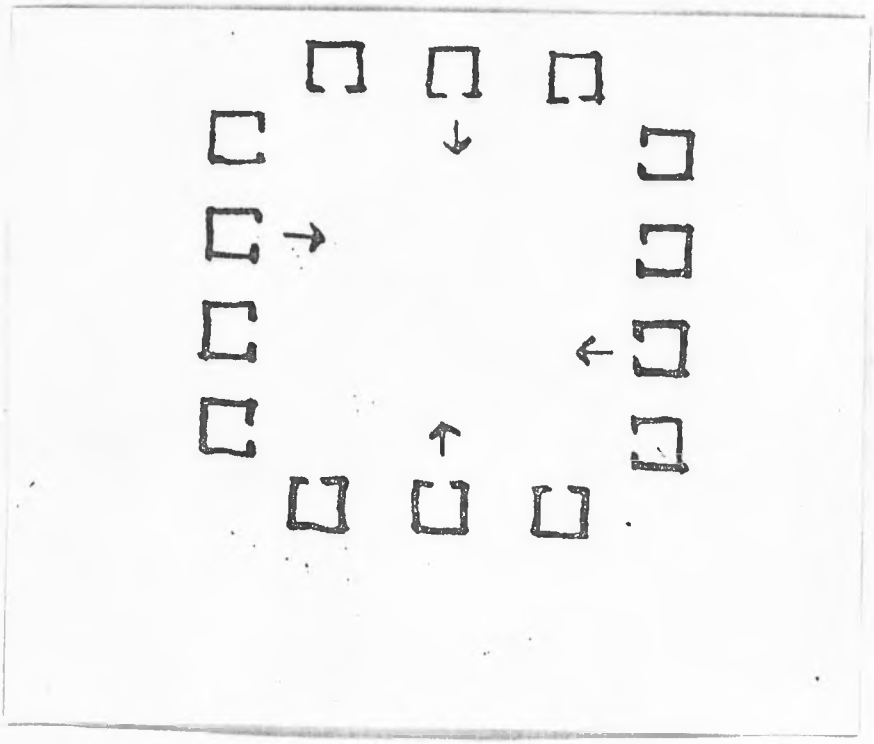
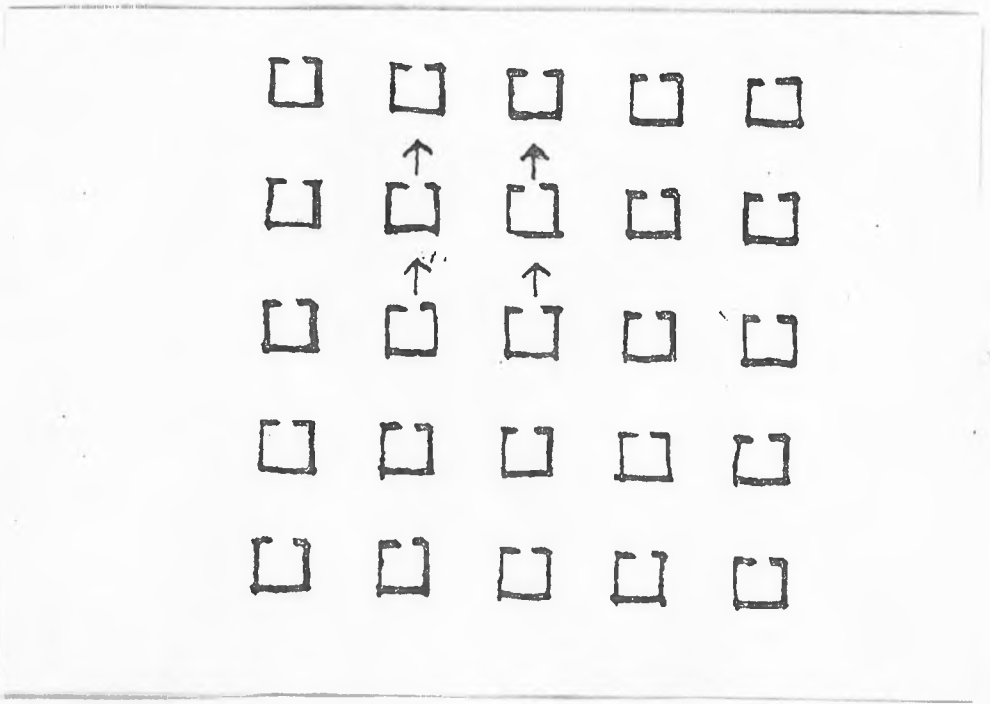


FIGURE 2



th hands of the refugees themselves. In one of the East Timor refugee camps in 1980, a group of refugees successfully established a complete refugee camp, laid out the camp, built their own shelters, established their own water systems and sanitation programs, and carried out a food distribution program that would be considered a model by any western standard. The camp was in operation a full three months before any outside help arrived.

It has been noted many times that the more refugees participate in a program, the more diverse will be the range of activities that are developed for their participation. In the Mesa Grande camp for Salvadoran refugees in Honduras, a high level of participation was achieved during the first year of the camp's existence. Not only did people participate in a wide range of handicrafts, gardening, farming and other traditional activities; a massive poultry scheme was introduced along with furniture-making and other light manufacturing schemes.

Examples of some of the ways refugees can be involved in project execution include:

1. participation as both leaders and laborers in day-to-day camp operations and maintenance;

2. participation as planners in schemes for camp upgrading and improvement;

3. participation in the development and execution of exile programs such as schools, adult education and cultural activities;

4. participation in the development and execution of self-help programs;

5. participation in the development and execution of programs designed to help make the camp more self-sufficient in both food and cash income;

6. participating on the planning and execution of special programs for target groups within the community (such as women, children, the elderly, handicapped, etc.).

D. Project Monitoring and Evaluation

During project monitoring and evaluation, the question of accountability comes fully into play. In the past, there has been little monitoring and very few evaluation; the few evaluations that have taken place have generally disregarded major refugee input. More often than not, evaluations have tended to focus on

cost-efficiency questions rather than refugee satisfaction or ways in which refugees' status could be improved. Meaningful evaluations, however, must consider the refugees' point of view and whether or not their needs are being met.

Project evaluations are normally carried out by the international organizations or voluntary agencies working in the refugee communities. An increase in refugee participation is simply a matter of seeking input from the refugees and developing appropriate mechanisms to promote participation in the monitoring and evaluation activities.

Refugees can assist in monitoring camp operations. A committee can be asked to participate in developing the overall structure for monitoring, identify indicators to determine the relative success or failure of a particular program approach, determine user satisfaction of a particular project, and develop recommendations from the refugees on ways to modify or adjust a program to increase its workability.

This committee can also help in the ongoing monitoring process and participate in the development of any reporting formats that will be required.

Refugees can participate in evaluations into two ways, in planning and in carrying out the evaluation. Again, a committee structure can be an appropriate means of involving the refugees. The committee can help design the evaluation and help select appropriate questions. Once the evaluation procedure and instruments have been developed, the refugees themselves can carry out a large portion of the evaluation. In some cases, refugees will be much more effective at gathering information than outsiders, especially expatriates. If adequate attention is given to training the people in survey methods, sample surveys using questionnaires can be an effective evaluation tool.

In 1985, Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children) carried out an evaluation of needs for women and children in the war-torn areas of Guatemala. An outside consultant was retained to conduct the evaluation and develop the survey and questionnaires to be used to determine family needs. The consultant produced a draft questionnaire and then formed a committee of women representing households in the affected communities. For one week, the committee worked with the consultant to revise the questionnaire, making it more applicable to the situation and less threatening to the persons being

interviewed. As a result of the participatory process, Redd Barna was able to develop an evaluation that provided the basis for a major readjustment of the project. The information developed also provided insights that otherwise would probably not have come out.

E. Special Projects

Every refugee society will have special needs that cannot be foreseen or that are unique to a particular situation. Refugee participation leads to the identification of these needs and can be very useful in the formulation of special projects to meet the needs. Examples of special projects include:

1. Special projects for women. These projects may be no more than social or work activities but can also include projects designed to help women that have experienced special personal trauma such as the loss of children, women who have been physically abused or raped, and women who have special physiological or health needs.

2. Coping programs. Special programs are often designed to help people cope with their circumstances. An example would be childrens' houses, such as those set up by relief agencies in Kampuchean refugee camps in 1979. One of the most innovative programs that this author has seen was an "arts" program started in 1969 to help Biafran children cope with their experiences by getting them to draw or paint scenes from their life. Expatriate observers were horrified by the drawings, which often depicted massacres, people being burned alive, etc. But for the children, the ability to express these things and get them out in the open played a vital part in the coping process. The project was originated by social workers from the refugee community and has since been copied by many relief agencies in other parts of the world.

3. Return Training. An innovative project was designed in 1985 to help prepare Tigrayans to return to their villages with enhanced skills. This approach was used in eastern Sudan in 1985 in the Sefawa camp. First, the refugees were assigned to sectors of the camp according to their original villages. Next, workers were identified and trained to work in the camp doing activities and learning skills that would be useful to their community once they returned. The objective was to provide skills that were not already there. For

example, women were trained to be nutrition extensionists and to promote better nutrition practices. Traditional healers and birth attendants were identified and brought into the SCF clinics to receive special training to improve their skills, reduce infection, and carry out their normal activities in a more sanitary environment. Community leaders were educated on the need for instituting GOBI-like programs to reduce infant mortality. And farmers were given specialized instruction to improve their crop yields once they returned to their lands. This program, conceived by SCF (U.K.) and developed with the cooperation of REST (the Relief Society of Tigray), was carried out with the participation of the village elders.