LIVELIHOODS:

Promoting Economic Opportunities for Refugee Women and Youth

A "livelihood" refers to the capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living; that is, to achieve food security and income security through a variety of productive economic activities. In refugee and displaced contexts, livelihoods cover the range of activities and programs that work toward and enhance self-reliance, including non-formal education, vocational and skills training programs, income generation activities, food-for-work programs, apprenticeship placement projects, micro-credit schemes, agriculture programs such as seeds and tools projects and animal disbursement projects, business start-up programs, self-employment opportunities and job placement programs.

The goal of any livelihoods strategy is to develop self-reliance.

"There are so many things we'd like to do; we'd like to grow mushrooms, bottle water and start a laundry soap production."
Burmese-Karen refugee women in the Umpiem refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border, reflecting on their desire to work and the Thai government's policy that restricts them from doing so, June 2006.

"I am sleeping every night with a hungry stomach. I choose to sleep with a soldier who is HIV positive who provides me with food. I know eventually I would contract HIV, but at least I will continue to live another few years with food in my stomach."
Internally displaced woman, Pader, northern Uganda, April 2007.

Lack of opportunities leads to wasted potential

More than 35 million people are currently displaced by armed conflict and human rights abuses. The majority of them have limited or no means to provide for themselves and their families. Almost completely dependent on international food assistance, they are idle and frustrated. The lack of economic opportunity often results in increases in domestic violence and alcohol abuse, and people are forced to resort to harmful behavior to survive, such as prostitution and trading sex for food. This represents a terrible waste of human capacity and potential.

Economic programs for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are generally ad hoc and cater to only a small segment of the displaced population. They largely focus on meeting basic survival needs in order to reduce or cut off food rations.

The length of time people live as refugees continues to grow; refugee situations now last, on average, for 17 years. For the social, emotional and economic well-being of displaced women and young people, it is vital to address livelihoods more systematically and comprehensively. Without opportunities to make use of or further develop their skills during displacement, women and youth will not be able to fully participate in rebuilding their communities and lives when they

WOMEN'S COMMISSION
for refugee women & children

Dogs and cats in Western households eat food that is more nutritious than the typical rations that relief workers give refugees, British scientists say.
... [R]esearchers said experiments had shown that pet food eaten by dogs and cats contained more riboflavin, niacin, vitamin A and iron than the same quantity of a typical refugee ration.
A daily refugee ration was described as about 14oz of cereals, 1oz of lentils or legumes, three-quarters of 1oz of oil and a small quantity of sugar. *Reuters, 8/9/92*

return to their homes or settle permanently in a new location.

Livelihood programs are rarely tailored to the specific circumstances under which the displaced are living—whether in camps where freedom of movement is restricted, in depressed urban areas or in harsh, inhospitable and isolated environments with limited agricultural potential. Programs must be changed so that they take into consideration people's experience, knowledge, skills and future aspirations.

Women and youth

Livelihood programs must be based on the input, ideas and participation of the displaced people themselves. They need to build on existing skills and match local market needs. They must recognize the changing roles of women and young people during displacement—including that of becoming the family's primary income earner—while recognizing their often overwhelming workloads.

Programs should be tailored to the unique needs of specific groups (female heads of household, young men, adolescents, the disabled, etc.) and provide individuals and families with sustainable income. Further, opportunities need to be created that provide access for women and girls to professions that are usually considered "men's work," as traditional male occupations tend to carry both higher status and income.

Steps forward

The Women's Commission is undertaking a comprehensive three-year initiative in collaboration with operational agencies in the field to transform how livelihood programs are designed and implemented for displaced populations. In 2006, the Women's Commission raised nearly $2.4 million for the project, which will:

- assess current livelihoods approaches and gaps in services for refugees and IDPs in diverse settings;
- work with displaced women and youth to identify their needs, ideas and future aspirations;
- promote practical, realistic economic opportunities for refugees that take into account local conditions and constraints;
- identify and document promising practices that build on existing skills, target market needs and build self-reliance beyond basic survival needs;
- partner with field-based agencies to test and implement innovative practices; and
- produce and aggressively promote the first-ever comprehensive "how-to" handbook on livelihood programming for the humanitarian field.

Our aim is to enhance the protection and well-being of displaced women and youth through more targeted, effective and sustainable livelihoods programs that lead to real income generation and self-sufficiency.

Women's Commission resources

"Sustainability of Livelihoods for Women and their Children in Situations of Migration and Conflict." Forthcoming chapter in *Women, Conflict and Migration,* UNFPA, 2007.

From the Ground Up: Education and Livelihoods in Southern Sudan. 2007.

We Want to Work: Providing Livelihood Opportunities for Refugees in Thailand. 2006.

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168-1289
212.551.3115 Fax: 212.551.3180
wcrwc@womenscommission.org
www.womenscommission.org

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