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Instead of giving to and providing for refugees, programs need to create opportunities for the displaced to help themselves.

THE WORLDWIDE FINANCIAL CRISIS, COMING QUICKLY ON THE HEELS OF A GLOBAL FOOD crisis, demonstrates that we have entered uncharted territory, a new reality. The world has changed. As always, the most vulnerable suffer most from these crises. Refugees endure cuts in their food rations and humanitarian assistance continues to be underfunded. These crises, however, also provide opportunities, a chance to rethink our business model and the structure and practice of humanitarian aid. We need to change with the changing world and develop new models and innovative practices. It is time to end dependency-inducing programs and focus as early and as soon as possible on how to help crisis-affected populations resume their lives and their livelihoods.

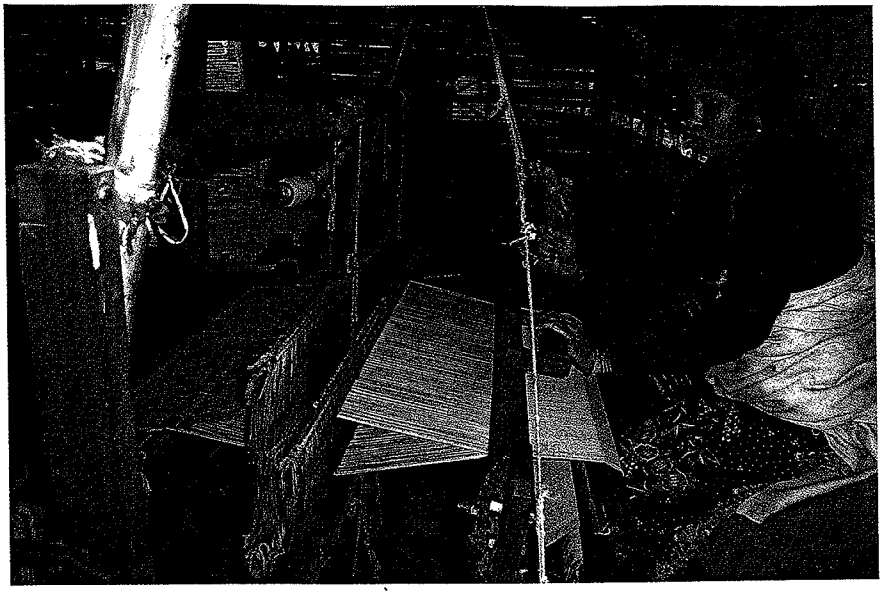
For the past two and a half years, staff from the Women's Refugee Commission have been traveling to camps for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) and to urban areas with large populations of displaced persons to find out, first hand, about the economic opportunities available to these populations and the livelihood interventions that are being implemented and supported in these settings. We have coupled this with extensive global desk research and interviews with experts. Our findings have been discouraging. In spite of the best of intentions, programs are seldom driven by what the market needs and even less frequently do they lead to sustainable income and the opportunity to lead a dignified life. The evidence base about which economic programs work in humanitarian contexts is weak, at best, and the lessons learned from development settings have not been extrapolated and applied in settings affected by conflict and displacement.

The majority of refugees are now, on average, displaced for 17 years. Meanwhile, civil conflicts rage on for an average of 15 years, during which time people may become internally displaced at any point and, more often than not, displaced multiple times. These timeframes alone should cause us to rethink our programming and service delivery. Further, when combining this information with that of the financial crisis and the food crisis, alarm bells should be ringing throughout the humanitarian community. Humanitarian assistance, based on the slow evolution of the charity model and the parachuting in of white, Western staff, is outdated, often ineffective and antiquated; a work model ▷

with little relevance in today's world. Instead of giving to and providing for refugees, we need to create opportunities for the displaced to help themselves, to use and further develop their skills, and to lead and manage their own communities.

At present, with few real economic opportunities, displaced people have little recourse but to resort to negative economic coping strategies to supplement their meager food rations. Women and girls leave the relative safety of camps to gather firewood to sell, putting themselves at risk of abuse and exploitation; girls trade sex for food and material goods; and men and young people leave camps clandestinely to work at local construction sites and on nearby farms—leaving themselves open to arrest, extortion, detention and deportation. Without economic opportunities, the years spent in displacement result in a terrible waste of human potential and the erosion of existing skills. When Burmese refugees in Thailand are still completely dependent on food aid and other humanitarian assistance after 25 years of displacement—and at a staggering cost of $60 million per year—something is seriously wrong with our model. Granted, the Government of Thailand does not allow refugees freedom of movement and the right to work. However, if the international community had insisted that there was no other way and that creating long-term dependency was not an option, maybe the 135,000 refugees still on the Thai-Burma border would be in a very different place today. Maybe they would be feeding themselves, providing for their families and, equally important, learning and practicing new skills that would prepare them for life post-displacement.

We know that economic opportunities can be an effective means of protecting women from gender-based violence and exploitation. We know that when women earn money it is more likely to be spent on the health, education and nutrition of their children. We know that employed men are less likely to feel emasculated and less likely to take out their frustrations through alcohol abuse and domestic violence. It is time to act on what we know: not with poorly thought out and ill-managed economic programs, but with interventions tailored to the local context and that build on the refugees' existing skills and match local market demand.



Relief substitution programs (paying refugees to produce what agencies often purchase outside the camps and bring in for distribution) provide jobs for refugees and decrease dependence on outside vendors.

Based on our research, the Women's Refugee Commission has developed a Livelihoods Field Manual aimed at field-based practitioners. The manual will be a valuable tool and resource for programmers and implementers—one that helps them design more effective economic interventions and develop economic programs that are based on market demand and that lead to real employment and income generation opportunities. The manual includes a livelihood framework chapter that provides an overview of how we think about livelihoods and the steps required to assess, design and plan an intervention. The manual covers a variety of interventions from pre-employment programs, such as vocational training and apprenticeships, to programs used in the early days of return, such as cash and food for work, and programs applied during full-scale economic recovery, such as small enterprise development, agrarian interventions and micro-finance programs. The manual also includes programs that can be undertaken in refugee and IDP camps, including relief substitution programs (paying refugees to produce what agencies often purchase outside the camps and bring in for distribution) and incentive worker interventions such as hiring refugees as teachers and health workers. In addition to the chapters on direct intervention, the manual includes chapters on advocating with host governments for the promotion of refugee rights, on developing public-private partnerships to expand economic opportunities, and on remittances and the role they play in the lives of the displaced and how they might be more effectively used to further enhance economic security. Finally, the manual includes a section on tools and approaches to design and implement more effective programs, including a market assessment tool, value chain analysis mapping and explanations of key approaches such as conducting a rapid rural appraisal.

The Women's Refugee Commission will be holding a public launch for the manual in New York on June 3rd and rolling it out in the field at regional workshops in Accra, Ghana (May 12 – 14), Nairobi, Kenya (June 23 – 26) and Bangkok, Thailand (August 11 – 14). Program managers, planners and implementers from international and local NGOs are invited to attend. Copies of the field manual will also be mailed to NGOs and UN staff throughout the world and will be available for downloading at no cost from the Women's Refugee Commission website at www.womensrefugeecommission.org by late May.

We hope that the manual will help practitioners design and implement ever-stronger economic programs serving the displaced, who deserve the best programming we can provide. We also hope that the manual will challenge our collective thinking about humanitarian aid and push us further on the path of restoring lives, dignity and livelihoods. MD

For questions and comments, please contact the author at DaleB@wrcommission.org.

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