



# Economic Empowerment of Urban Refugee Youth

## Guiding Principles

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many countries in the Global South, against a backdrop of chronic unaddressed urban poverty, rapid urbanization is giving rise to normalized daily violence and low-level armed conflict in densely populated slums. A sizeable minority of the people coping with these conditions are refugees aged 15-25. The urban context presents unique barriers to the economic success of displaced young women and men, but also some significant advantages. Enormous untapped potential exists for the empowerment of refugee youth in urban areas.

The 2009 urban refugee policy<sup>1</sup> of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) advocates for the right of refugees to live in cities, but governments still restrict refugees' right to work and require them to live in camps. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often implement programs more appropriate to camps.<sup>2</sup>

#### Key Findings

In Cairo, Panama City and Nairobi, where the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) conducted field research, refugee and displaced young women and men suffer from limited freedom of movement due to the threats of petty crime and violence, armed gangs and police harassment. For female youth, especially, the threat of gender-based violence (GBV) looms large in public spaces. Thousands of female refugee youth are employed as domestic workers, where they say their rights are trampled.

These forces limit young people's ability to socialize, earn a living and access services. Most refugee youth are at a major educational disadvantage in their host country and many never manage to return to school, as they face various barriers. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is largely out of reach. Beyond technical skills, refugee youth are said to lack important work readiness skills.

#### What Is a Livelihood?

A "livelihood" refers to the capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living.

Social networks are seen by young women and men as the key to accessing economic opportunities, but refugee networks are often weak. Since self-employment in the informal sector is the main available livelihood option, lack of capital is seen by would-be microentrepreneurs as the major constraint. Young women and men interviewed seemed to have little contact with banks or informal savings or lending. Managers of education and training programs for refugee youth say they cannot hope to meet the scale of the need for their services. Only a tiny subset of the youth interviewed in Cairo, Panama City and Nairobi were accessing any programs besides government education. Organized youth-led or youth-serving organizations are scarce.

#### Key Recommendations

**1. Governments and agencies should work to create an enabling environment for refugee youth and their host country peers by:**

- working with national actors to build their capacity to deliver integrated urban youth livelihood services;
- mainstreaming marginalized youth participation in program design, monitoring and evaluation;
- building bridges between displaced youth and their host country peers and adults;
- maximizing female youth program uptake;



Under contract with UNHCR, Center for Domestic Training and Development (CTDD) in Nairobi is currently training about 250 young people in cooking, computer classes and life skills and educates them on their rights. Recognizing that their target group is often “invisible” in the homes of their employers, CDTD conducts its outreach door-to-door, negotiating with employers to allow young women out of the house. Like most agencies providing services to refugees in Nairobi, CDTD has outgrown its modest facility and cannot meet the vigorous demand for its services.

Facilitate access to flexible savings and loan products that are youth friendly.

5. Programs should help develop peer-to-peer networks and group activities, which are natural platforms upon which to deliver services.

6. Agencies should work to build or promote the expansion of youth-led and youth-serving community groups.

## Notes

1 UNHCR, *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas* (Geneva, 2009). <http://www.unhcr.org/ref-world/docid/4ab8e7f72.html>.

2 Dale Buscher, *Aid Worker Diaries – It’s Time for a New Approach to Urban Refugees*, AlertNet (November 20, 2012). <http://wrc.ms/XuLOuV>.

- offering multi-sectoral interventions (health, education, livelihood); and
- blurring the line between educational programs and economic strengthening.

2. For out-of-school youth, nonformal basic education offerings should be scheduled around their busy schedules and other constraints including the need for childcare. For in-school youth, agencies should promote access to secondary and tertiary school on an equal basis with host country nationals.

3. Vocational training must lead to improved income and should be based on an assessment of local demand for goods and services. Training should focus on transferrable skills such as customer service, computer literacy and UN languages, which will be in demand regardless of where refugees ultimately settle.

4. In building financial capital, programs should fa-

The full report is available at <http://wrc.ms/10fAWrF>.



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