

## LOCAL INTEGRATION

### I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper examines the role of local integration and the promotion of self-reliance as a means of finding durable solutions to refugee problems. It attempts to define the concepts of local integration and self-reliance, as well as their relationship to each other. It further explains why the international community has paid relatively little attention to local integration in recent years, and preferred to pursue a solutions strategy which focuses predominantly on repatriation.

2. The paper suggests that voluntary repatriation is not an immediately attainable solution for many of the world's refugees, nor is it necessarily the most viable one for others. On the basis of this analysis, the paper concludes that a comprehensive durable solutions strategy is required for refugee problems to be effectively addressed and resolved, involving a revitalized approach to local integration and the promotion of self-reliance.

### II. BACKGROUND

3. When the international refugee protection regime was established over 50 years ago, the international community recognized the potential for certain refugee problems to be resolved by means of local integration.<sup>1</sup> In practice, however, local integration can, for a range of political and practical reasons, be difficult to realise. Even for individuals in countries where asylum systems are structured to provide for refugees remaining permanently with a wide range of rights and entitlements, including citizenship, this solution is made decreasingly available. Some States prefer to grant limited and temporary forms of asylum, in the expectation that those persons benefiting will return to their country of origin - either voluntarily or at the request of the authorities - as soon as it is safe to do so. In other parts of the world, where refugees are confined to camps or designated zones, self-reliance is discouraged and voluntary repatriation is presented as the solution which will be pursued, even in situations where conditions in the country of origin remain unsafe or unstable. Indeed, in a number of States, limiting self-reliance becomes a means to promote early repatriation.

4. A comprehensive strategy will need to recognise the proper place of local integration and self-reliance in the pursuit of durable solutions. Such an approach is particularly important to resolve protracted refugee situations,<sup>2</sup> to which UNHCR and States have been paying concerted attention recently, following the initiative to explore new approaches in Africa launched by UNHCR in the aftermath of the Ministerial Meeting of the Global Consultations last year.

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<sup>1</sup> See Article 34 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>2</sup> A protracted refugee situation is one where, over time, there have been considerable changes in refugees' needs, which neither UNHCR nor the host country have been able to address in a meaningful manner, thus leaving refugees in a state of material dependency and often without adequate access to basic rights (e.g. employment, freedom of movement and education) even after many years spent in the host country.

### III. DEFINING LOCAL INTEGRATION<sup>3</sup>

5. Local integration in the refugee context is the end product of a multifaceted and on-going process, of which self-reliance is but one part. Integration requires a preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society, without having to forego their own cultural identity. From the host society, it requires communities that are welcoming and responsive to refugees, and public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population.<sup>4</sup> As a process leading to a durable solution for refugees in the country of asylum, local integration has three inter-related and quite specific dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

6. First, it is a legal process, whereby refugees are granted a progressively wider range of rights and entitlements by the host State that are broadly commensurate with those enjoyed by its citizens. These include freedom of movement, access to education and the labour market, access to public relief and assistance, including health facilities, the possibility of acquiring and disposing of property, and the capacity to travel with valid travel and identity documents. Realization of family unity is another important aspect of local integration. Over time the process should lead to permanent residence rights and in some cases the acquisition, in due course, of citizenship in the country of asylum.

7. Second, local integration is clearly an economic process. Refugees become progressively less reliant on State aid or humanitarian assistance, attaining a growing degree of self-reliance and becoming able to pursue sustainable livelihoods, thus contributing to the economic life of the host country.

8. Third, local integration is a social and cultural process of acclimatization by the refugees and accommodation by the local communities, that enables refugees to live amongst or alongside the host population, without discrimination or exploitation and contribute actively to the social life of their country of asylum. It is, in this sense, an interactive process involving both refugees and nationals of the host State, as well as its institutions. The result should be a society that is both diverse and open, where people can form a community, regardless of differences.

### IV. PROMOTING SELF-RELIANCE

9. Promoting self-reliance and reducing the need for external support is in the interests of refugees, host States and the international community generally, whatever the durable solution may ultimately be. For the purposes of this paper, self-reliance is understood to mean that refugees are able to provide for themselves and their community members in terms of food and other living expenses, including housing, health services and education; can cope with unexpected events; and are no longer dependent on outside assistance.

10. Promoting self-reliance helps refugees to seize whatever opportunities are available to establish livelihoods. At the same time, self-reliance contributes to the realization of durable solutions at a later stage, since self-reliant refugees have acquired skills and experience that they will be able to put to use wherever they are: in the country of origin upon return; in a country of resettlement; or in the country of asylum, should local integration become the durable solution. The process of local integration is greatly facilitated by refugees becoming self-reliant, since they are better able to interact with the local population economically and socially, and thereby contribute to local development as an asset rather than a "burden". Self-reliance also facilitates the voluntary repatriation solution as self-reliant refugees are better

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<sup>3</sup> While both Article 34 of the 1951 Convention and UNHCR's Statute, make reference to 'assimilation', the international community has always rejected the notion that refugees should be expected to abandon their own culture and way of life, so as to become indistinguishable from nationals of the host community. In this respect, 'local integration' is the more appropriate term and should be used when referring to this durable solution.

<sup>4</sup> See the definition as developed by the International Conference on the Reception and Integration of Resettled Refugees, which took place in Norrköping (Sweden) from 25 to 27 April 2001. See also *New directions for resettlement policy and practice* (EC/51/SC/INF.2, Annex) discussed at the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in June 2001, and ExCom Conclusion on International Protection No. 90 (LII), para I.

<sup>5</sup> See also the recommendations on local integration resulting from "The Refugee Perspective", a meeting with refugees which took place in Rouen from 14 to 16 September 2001, available on UNHCR's website (Global Consultations).

equipped to restart their lives and contribute to the development, reconstruction, and peace building processes in their own country.

11. A self-reliance strategy should address, variously and as appropriate the following areas:

- community-development activities promoting community organization and leadership structures, if possible, linked to local structures, with representation of the various community groups;
- targeted assistance packages to enhance the economic self-reliance of refugees through: provision of agricultural land and related support, income-generation and micro-finance activities, job-oriented skills development programmes, grants for education or scholarships;
- projects to strengthen the absorption capacity of local communities by investing in the infrastructure, community services, and local economy, as well as preserving or remedying the natural habitat;
- building and/or strengthening multi-faceted partnerships among the various stakeholders to include information-sharing, joint strategic planning and programming, coordination and division of labour with different actors, as well as joint management of projects and programmes implemented by different partners within and outside the UN country teams;
- full involvement of refugees and their communities, including host communities, in the design, development and monitoring of programmes;
- development of legal and institutional frameworks that foster productive activities and protect relevant civil, social and economic rights (related, for example, to land, employment, education, freedom of movement, identity documents, access to the judicial system).

12. Self-reliance can, however, only be achieved if there is an enabling environment. This includes a viable economic situation, availability of affordable housing or access to land, as well as receptive attitudes within the host community. The skills and capacities of refugees also determine their potential for self-reliance. For example, refugees with professional qualifications are more likely to be productive in an urban environment where they are permitted to use their skills professionally than farmers and agriculturalists who would need access to land.

13. The design of self-reliance strategies for protracted refugee situations in Africa<sup>6</sup> has already been looked at in some detail. The annex to this paper contains relevant proposals put to the Informal Ministerial Consultations in December 2001, and might provide an interesting starting point for consideration of this matter in other regions where strategies to promote self-reliance are also warranted.

#### V. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOCAL INTEGRATION, SELF-RELIANCE AND LOCAL SETTLEMENT

14. Local integration and self-reliance are, as indicated earlier, related but different, one from another. For the purposes of this paper, the following distinction can be made.

15. Local integration is commonly referred to as one of the three 'durable solutions' available to refugees. It is based on the assumption that refugees will remain in their country of asylum permanently and find a solution to their plight in that State. Ideally, that will involve the acquisition of citizenship.

16. Self-reliance, on the other hand, does not presuppose that refugees will find a durable solution in the country of asylum. Rather, it should be seen as the precursor to any of the three durable solutions. In the context of local integration as the durable solution, self-reliance can be seen as part of a continuum, progressively leading to local integration.

17. The relationship between the concept of local integration and that of local settlement is somewhat ambiguous, complicated by the tendency of some commentators to use them interchangeably. Local settlement is situated somewhere in between self-reliance and local integration. It was practised widely in

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<sup>6</sup> See also the UNHCR *Discussion Paper on Protracted Refugee Situations in the African Region* (prepared for the Panel Discussion of 3 October 2002, during ExCom's 52<sup>nd</sup> session) together with the UNHCR paper *Addressing Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa* (prepared for the Informal Consultations on New Approaches and Partnerships for Protection and Solutions in Africa, 14 December 2001).

developing countries, particularly in Africa, between the 1960s and 1980s, at a time when large-scale influxes were met in a number of host countries by recognition of new arrivals on a *prima facie* basis, coupled with provision of land where the refugees could establish new settlements, engage in farming and other economic activities. In some instances, locally settled refugees might indeed remain in their country of asylum and become progressively integrated there. But in other instances, local settlement is a temporary phase, allowing refugees to become self-reliant, pending the time when they are able to benefit from the solution of voluntary repatriation.

## VI. WHEN IS LOCAL INTEGRATION APPROPRIATE

18. In recent times, the three durable solutions have taken on a hierarchy, with voluntary repatriation taking clear priority over the others. Many refugees are eager to return to their country of origin and will do so once this is feasible, which supports the designation of voluntary repatriation as the most preferred solution. The preference has also been prompted by other considerations. They include:

- concern about the negative economic and environmental impact of large-scale refugee populations in countries which are struggling to meet the needs of their own citizens;
- the reluctance of host States to accommodate large numbers of refugees, resulting in part from a perception that the international community is not sufficiently committed to burden-sharing;
- a belief that exiled populations represent a threat to local, national and regional security, especially in situations where *bona fide* refugees are mixed with armed elements;
- popular antagonism to the presence of refugees, mobilized in some cases by the media and politicians; and,
- an increasingly restrictive climate, associated with a fear that States are losing their ability to control the movement of people across international borders.

19. As a result of these factors, some countries in different parts of the world have become more reluctant to admit large numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees. They are generally also disinclined to take any action that would imply the long-term or permanent presence of such people on their territory.

20. While it is important to recognize this reality, it is equally important to acknowledge that refugee problems - and the problems of refugees - cannot be adequately addressed by means of voluntary repatriation alone.

21. First, it has become clear that a significant proportion of the world's refugees is destined to remain in their countries of asylum for long periods of time, due to the protracted nature of the conflicts which have forced them to leave their homeland. It has become equally clear that confining refugees to camps for years on end, deprived of the right to freedom of movement and without access to educational and income-generating opportunities, has many negative consequences. It prevents refugees from developing their human potential and limits their ability to make a positive contribution to the economy and society of the country which has granted them asylum. It creates a situation in which refugees are more prone to become involved in illicit and anti-social activity. It means also that refugees will lack the skills and motivation they need once it becomes possible for them to return to and reintegrate in their country of origin.

22. Second, there are situations in which the promotion of local integration has good potential to succeed. Such is the case when refugees share a language, a culture or an ethnic origin with the host community. Similarly, when refugees bring particular skills to their country of asylum, when they move into areas where land is available, and when their presence can attract resources and investments which would not otherwise be available to the area, a response based solely on the expectation of an eventual repatriation movement is not necessarily the most effective one.

23. Third, while many of the world's refugees do yearn for the opportunity to return safely to their homes, it must also be recognized that others feel unable or will not be able to do so. This may be because they have established close economic or social links to their country of asylum due to the long duration of stay. It may also be for valid protection reasons that refugees cannot return, either because

the circumstances may not have changed and persecution upon return is still a reality, or because the circumstances which forced them into exile were so traumatic that they cannot be expected to return, as the 1951 Convention recognizes. The general cessation clause does not, indeed, apply if the refugee is able to invoke compelling reasons for not returning arising out of previous persecution.

24. Fourth, while it is true to say that the pursuit of local integration has received relatively little support from the international community, it would be wrong to give the impression that refugees are incapable of settling peacefully and productively in the countries where they have found asylum. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that in developing regions, most notably in Africa, large numbers of refugees are "self-settled", supporting themselves without international assistance and living in harmony with the local population.

25. The analysis presented above suggests that an approach to the solution of refugee problems, focusing predominantly on voluntary repatriation, ignores a number of important issues, namely that:

- a significant proportion of the world's refugees are currently unable to repatriate in safety and dignity;
- long-term care and maintenance programmes<sup>8</sup> bring few lasting benefits to host countries, donor States or to refugees themselves;
- refugees who are unable to attain a certain degree of self-reliance or to benefit from local integration are more likely to move on to urban areas or to other countries and regions, thereby exacerbating the problem of irregular migration;
- the promotion of self-reliance, leading perhaps to the local integration of some, can in certain circumstances be an appropriate and viable means of addressing refugee situations.

## VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

26. Against this background, it is suggested that a comprehensive durable solutions strategy, which recognizes the value of self-reliance and provides, where called for, for local integration, has the greatest likelihood of success. Such a strategy should reflect appropriately the following considerations:

- While voluntary repatriation will continue to be the durable solution sought and attained by the largest number of refugees, a comprehensive durable solutions approach will also have to focus on the situation of those refugees who are unable to return to their country of origin, or for whom local integration is otherwise the preferable of the three solutions.
- Refugees who have already attained a marked degree of socio-economic integration should be actively considered for the grant of secure legal status and residence rights, including the opportunity to become naturalized citizens of the country of asylum.
- Even in situations where local integration does not appear to be a viable solution for a refugee population, self-reliance should be vigorously pursued, pending the resolution of displacement through voluntary repatriation or resettlement.
- It is important to recognize that a solutions strategy, which includes the promotion of self-reliance, does not preclude the possibility of voluntary repatriation once this becomes safe and feasible. Self-reliant refugees are better equipped for the challenge of return and reintegration than those who have been condemned to an unproductive existence for many years on end. This in turn contributes to preventing the reasons for recurring movement back to the host country.
- Host States should allow refugees to exercise effectively the rights granted to them by the 1951 Convention, particularly those rights which make it possible for refugees to engage in income-generating activities, such as farming, trading or paid labour.
- The placement of refugee settlements in an economically viable environment is of equal importance.
- A burden-sharing approach should ensure that the necessary resources are available to promote self-reliance and local integration, in a manner which also contributes to the economic viability of local communities affected by their presence.

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<sup>7</sup> See Article 1 (C)5.

<sup>8</sup> These are programmes which provide for the basic needs of refugees but do not capacitate them.

- A partnership approach with international and regional development actors will be essential to underpin local integration as the long-term solution, given not least the limited competence of UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in this domain.

*Addressing Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa,*  
prepared by UNHCR for the Informal Consultations  
on New Approaches and Partnerships for Protection and Solutions in Africa

Geneva, 14 December 2001  
(Excerpts)

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9. An effective strategy to address protracted refugee situations and prevent possible future refugee crises from becoming protracted should be based on the following elements:

a. Compile an inventory of best practices for self-reliance strategies and provide governments with practical operational tools to turn such principles into real measures, including guidelines and manuals for the development of specific projects and programmes. UNHCR needs to draw up a menu of available options/practical tools to ensure that today's emergencies do not become tomorrow's protracted refugee situations.

b. Promote policies that allow refugees to contribute to the socio-economic activities of the host communities and thereby focus on refugees as potential "agents of development". This would involve integrating them into the development planning process of the countries of asylum so that they can receive more attention and "investment" from donor countries, bilateral development banks and other financial institutions. More specifically, there should be better linkages between UNHCR's activities and national development plans, in particular with poverty alleviation initiatives.

c. Ensure that, from the outset, assistance programmes for refugees have a limited emergency relief and care and maintenance phase and that strategies for self-reliance/empowerment are integrated into UNHCR's programmes at the start of a new operation. This would include designing programmes in order to increase the absorption capacity of host countries and mitigate the impact of refugees on local host communities.

d. Adopt community-based assistance as a central pillar of UNHCR's programmes in existing and future refugee situations, including making social services and amenities destined for refugees available to the entire host community, and initiating joint economically productive activities, particularly in agriculture, but also activities for urban refugees.

e. Ensure that refugees, in particular refugee women and adolescents, and host communities themselves participate in the design and development of self-reliance and development programmes. Programmes concretely benefiting host communities would also ensure greater sustainability.

f. Devise programmes based on a relief-substitution strategy, which would involve both refugees and local communities in producing certain items (e.g. cooking oil, flour, blankets, stoves etc.) for the initial care and maintenance programmes rather than continuing to import them.

g. Seek to increase investment in education and skills training, which would not only benefit self-reliance strategies and increase local economic activity, but also constitute transferable skills for the refugees upon return to their countries of origin.

h. Develop legal and institutional frameworks that would enable refugees to exercise their civil, social and economic rights (e.g. access to land, right to work and education, freedom of movement, provision of identity documents, access to the judicial system), in order to engage in productive activities.

i. Reinforce partnerships with governments and the international community to include information-sharing, joint strategic planning and programming, co-ordination and division of labour with different actors and joint management of projects and programmes implemented by different partners within and outside the UN country teams."