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Youth

Summary

Despite constituting a large proportion of populations affected by forced displacement, refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth are frequently overlooked in humanitarian situations as a social group that has specific needs based on age and stage of development. There is, however, increasing recognition of the positive contributions that displaced youth can make to their host communities and to the development of their countries upon return. This is the first conference room paper specifically on this topic, reflecting recognition of the importance of this demographic and the opportunities for improved protection outcomes and solutions through a strengthened focus on refugee, IDP and stateless youth.

Table of contents

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction	1-3	3
II. Needs and capacities of refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth	4-8	3
III. Key areas of progress	9-12	4
IV. The way forward	13	6
V. Conclusion	14-15	7

I. Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the specific needs and capacities of refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth, provide an overview of ongoing activities targeting this demographic and outline a new paradigm for engagement, based on the outcomes of a number of initiatives undertaken in recent years. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as persons aged between 15-24 years,¹ although UNHCR understands that the meaning of the term “youth” varies in different societies around the world, and flexibility is required in order to accommodate national and regional youth policies and directives, as well as different contextual realities.

2. Despite constituting a large proportion of populations affected by forced displacement, refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth are frequently overlooked in humanitarian programming as a social group with specific needs based on age and stage of development, and their capacities are often not recognized. In the development sphere, there has been increasing recognition of the need to engage with youth, with a number of States having elaborated national strategies and action plans targeting this population. While the engagement and empowerment of displaced youth in both humanitarian and development contexts is seen as a dividend in terms of the contribution they can bring to national economies if inclusive and supportive policies are put in place at the national level, there are competing concerns about providing employment and education opportunities during periods of economic downturn, when resources are scarce.

3. Humanitarian response has for many years focused on the younger population of children, ensuring that they have access to primary education and developing targeted, quality child protection programmes and services. This drive has been largely successful, such that displaced children have greater opportunities than ever before to complete their primary education and be engaged as children. However, there is often an absence of targeted age appropriate protection and assistance programmes to accompany them as they grow, including limited possibilities of attaining secondary or tertiary education and benefiting from other learning opportunities.

II. Needs and capacities of refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth

4. Conflict and forced displacement frequently force youth to take on new roles and responsibilities beyond their years to try to meet their own and their families’ basic needs. For youth living in conflict-affected areas,² displacement can lead to an increased sense of marginalization, where a perceived lack of prospects for the future and inability to influence their own lives can heighten protection risks. This can lead to the adoption of harmful coping strategies, such as transactional sex, child marriage, the risk of forced recruitment in criminal and armed groups, and exploitation in the labour market.

¹ At its thirty-fourth session in 1979, the General Assembly (A/RES/34/151) designated 1985 as International Youth Year. During the preparatory process and in reports relating to the International Youth Year, the General Assembly defined youth as those persons between 15 and 24 years of age, without prejudice to other definitions of Member States (A/40/256, para. 19). This definition has been reaffirmed in numerous subsequent General Assembly reports and resolutions.

² According to UNDP, 600 million youth live in conflict-affected areas (see Youth Strategy 2014-2017: Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future (New York, 2014)), available from http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Youth/UNDP_Youth-Strategy-2014-17_Web.pdf.

5. In situations of conflict, young people are often emotionally and psychologically affected by their experiences, during what is a crucial transformative time in their cognitive and physiological development. They often have little or no opportunity to engage in constructive activities during displacement and have few education or employment opportunities. Adolescent girls are often the most neglected and the least able to access programmes targeting youth because of challenging social norms and traditional practices, which may leave them confined to their homes, required to work or obliged to marry at a young age. The disruption of positive developmental opportunities for young people can have a long-term impact on their communities, including reintegration, reconciliation and economic prosperity.

6. Stateless youth are often at heightened risk due to their inability to prove their legal status. UNHCR has documented the particular challenges stateless children and youth face in its report, “I am here, I belong: the urgent need to end childhood statelessness”.³ The report highlighted that stateless young people are often denied the opportunity to receive school qualifications, go to university and find a decent job, and concluded that their lack of nationality often sentences them and their families to remain impoverished and marginalized for generations.

7. However, despite the adversity and challenges they face, young people demonstrate great resilience when given the opportunity to develop their talents and skills. If effectively nurtured and channelled, these talents and skills can greatly benefit them in their transition to adulthood and lead to considerable contributions to their communities and to humanitarian response efforts. Young people are often the first to develop and understand new technologies that can bring about positive change in their communities, societies and economies. A large youth population presents a unique demographic dividend that can contribute to economic prosperity if supported and if inclusive policies are in place.

8. Security Council Resolution 2250 recognizes the positive contributions that young people can make to conflict prevention and resolution as well as to efforts aimed at maintaining lasting peace and security. In this regard, youth can often be the initiators at the forefront of positive change. Support for young refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons that is focussed on empowerment opportunities is essential. Refugee, IDP and stateless youth must be at the centre of identifying and taking action towards sustainable solutions for their communities.

III. Key areas of progress

9. In 2013, UNHCR conducted a global review of “UNHCR’s engagement with displaced youth”.⁴ Since then, the Office has focused on strengthening measures to support this population, in line with the recommendations of the review. This has included the appointment of dedicated staff working on youth issues; internal and external advocacy through conferences and other fora; and participation in the inter-agency Youth and Adolescents in Emergencies Advocacy Group. In addition, UNHCR has established a dedicated fund for youth-led protection projects. The Youth Initiative Fund is a unique initiative that supports forcibly displaced youth in designing and leading protection projects for their own benefit and for the benefit of their communities. These projects build upon the existing capacities of youth and provide them with the support needed to develop confidence and life skills that strengthen their resilience. The projects provide an enabling environment for social development through a community-based approach, and promote

³ Available from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/563368b34.html>.

⁴ Available from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5142d52d2.html>.

rights awareness, peaceful coexistence and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Many of the projects target youth themselves, but also seek to benefit others in their communities, including older persons, persons with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals, and children. Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools are built into the programmes to track progress, outcomes and impact, as well as to garner lessons learned for future iteration. Since the inception of the fund in 2013, 69 youth-led projects have been supported in 34 countries globally,⁵ including 25 projects being implemented in 2016.

10. In 2014, UNHCR conducted a mapping exercise of existing adolescent and youth programmes to determine what worked well and what could be improved. The Office then piloted a number of new initiatives, the results of which highlighted the value of peer-to-peer support and the promotion of educational achievement. One of the new initiatives was the “Leadership, education and empowerment programme” (LEEP)⁶ launched in Botswana in 2014. LEEP is an after-school initiative that promotes academic achievement, leadership and community development, and supports adolescent girls and boys in the transition from primary to secondary school. The programme is implemented by young adults recruited from the refugee community and trained as programme leaders and instructors. The programme has now been handed over to the community and is led by two youths trained through the project. In 2015, UNHCR – together with Plan International – implemented a project in Rwanda on the empowerment of adolescent girls, which emphasizes mentorship, life skills and livelihoods. The project recruited mentors from among female adult refugees and trained them to facilitate weekly meetings, covering topics such as sexual and reproductive health and financial literacy. The project helped reduce the risk of SGBV and supported survivors of SGBV and other vulnerable adolescent girls in completing educational and skills training programmes.

11. UNHCR is expanding its partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders to enhance its programmatic responses for youth and its engagement with and for young people. Some of these new partnerships include:

- Working with the International Olympic Committee and Terre des Hommes to develop guidance on the use of sports programming for youth in order to achieve protection outcomes. In 2016-2017, work will focus on the development of a toolkit to provide practical guidance in this area, followed by the piloting of good practices in the field.
- Participating in the Secretary-General’s progress study on the positive contribution of youth to peace processes and conflict resolution, as mandated by Security Council Resolution 2250, to ensure that the perspectives of and programmatic responses specific to refugee, IDP and stateless youth are taken into consideration.
- Engaging in the development of the “Global compact for young people in humanitarian action”, launched at a special session of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul earlier this month. The global compact aims to ensure that the priorities and specific needs of young people in humanitarian settings, including

⁵ Youth Initiative Fund Projects have been implemented in the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Niger, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

⁶ LEEP was implemented in partnership with Scottie’s Place, a non-profit organization based in the United States that supports programmes for children and youth affected by poverty and conflict.

those displaced by conflict, are addressed in an age, gender and diversity appropriate manner, and that young people are consulted, informed and engaged in all stages of humanitarian action.

12. In recognition of the need for more information on the priorities and needs of refugee youth, UNHCR is co-leading, together with the Women's Refugee Commission, the global refugee youth consultations process, involving international and national NGOs. The consultations aim to create space for young refugees to engage in participatory dialogue with other youth and relevant stakeholders; to encourage their involvement in local, national and regional and youth alliances and networks; and to support leadership and empowerment opportunities for this population. The consultations consist of a series of ten national consultations,⁷ a number of local consultations and one global consultation to be held in June 2016, during which refugee youth representatives from the national consultations will finalize a set of core actions for refugee youth and recommendations for stakeholders. Thus far, the main concerns raised across regions were: access to personal documentation; personal security; access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health care; opportunities to engage in decision-making processes; and access to quality education and training. The outcome of the consultations will contribute to guidelines and policy recommendations on youth-inclusive protection programming.

IV. The way forward

13. Despite these advances, more needs to be done to encourage and sustain the participation and engagement of refugee, IDP and stateless youth in their own protection, in securing their rights and in contributing towards the development of sustainable solutions. With this in mind, UNHCR will prioritize the following actions, setting in motion a new paradigm for youth engagement:

(a) Building upon the outcomes of the global refugee youth consultations, UNHCR will establish an action plan for implementing the core actions for refugee youth. Refugee youth will be involved in monitoring and reporting on implementation, and a Youth Advisory Council will be established to support UNHCR in these endeavours.

(b) Recognizing the lack of disaggregated data on youth, UNHCR will aim to strengthen the generation and use of age and sex disaggregated data on refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth. Collecting and analysing this data will help improve the relevance and effectiveness of youth programming, ensure that humanitarian responses and the search for solutions are more responsive to the needs of young people, and help guide UNHCR, governments and partners in prioritizing resources for this demographic.

(c) UNHCR will expand age, gender and diversity responsive initiatives that contribute to the protection and development of forcibly displaced and stateless youth, including the Youth Initiative Fund. It will also explore opportunities to support youth in directly accessing alternative sources of funding for their development. Building upon the outcomes of the global refugee youth consultations, UNHCR will ensure that existing programmes are responsive to the specific needs of youth in the areas of: education (including increased opportunities for formal education and vocational training), health care (including psychosocial support and sexual and reproductive health care), SGBV prevention and response, livelihoods (including skills-building for young entrepreneurs), and sports and recreation.

⁷ The national consultations will take place across four regions: four in Africa (Chad, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia); two in the Middle East and North Africa (Jordan and Morocco); one in Asia and the Pacific (Pakistan); two in Europe (Malta and Turkey); and one in the Americas (Ecuador).

(d) Efforts will be made to promote long-term youth leadership development programmes, in particular those that are youth led. UNHCR will support programmes that strengthen intergenerational and inter-group dialogue.

(e) Emphasis will be placed on working with displaced youth as genuine partners by empowering them to participate in all aspects of programming, including through their meaningful participation and representation in community management and decision-making leadership structures. This includes ensuring that youth are part of participatory assessments, including as researchers and data collectors, that youth are meaningfully involved throughout the programme cycle, and that they have access to relevant information in a timely manner. UNHCR will continue to prioritize the inclusion of young persons with disabilities and gender equality, developing strategies and methods to overcome the specific barriers they face in exercising their rights and having their voices heard.

(f) Recognizing and building on the capacities of displaced youth as agents for change and as contributors to solutions for themselves and their communities, UNHCR will advocate the inclusion of refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth in national youth plans, development plans and national services, as well as peacebuilding endeavours, highlighting the economic, social and political dividends of such measures.

(g) UNHCR will continue to help build new partnerships and open up opportunities for refugee, internally displaced and stateless youth at national and global levels, including exploring expanded partnerships for education and employment opportunities with the United Nations Volunteers programme and the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), as well as other scholarship and connected learning programmes. The Office will also seek to improve access to local, national, regional and global youth alliances and networks.

V. Conclusion

14. The protection of forcibly displaced and stateless youth is not only a legal and social responsibility but also an investment in the future. It is a common effort, requiring the assumption of responsibility at the national level, with international support where necessary. UNHCR looks forward to working closely with States and key partners, in particular refugee, internally displaced and stateless young persons, to advance this agenda.

15. Drawing on the analysis outlined above, UNHCR also welcomes suggestions for issues to be included in an Executive Committee conclusion on international protection on the theme of youth, within the following broad areas:

- participation of youth, in particular their contributions through participatory approaches, to protection and assistance programmes for themselves and their communities;
- participation of youth in decision-making processes relevant to them and their communities; and
- engagement and development of youth through education, training and livelihood opportunities.