

COMMUNITY CENTRES



Community-Based Protection in Action
Community-Based Protection Unit, Division of International Protection



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● WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

In situations of forced displacement, the ties which hold a community together are often severely weakened or broken. Open and regular interaction between individuals and groups, their shared values and interests, and their means of minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization, may need to be supported to regenerate during displacement. Tensions within and among displaced communities may arise and quickly escalate. In addition, the perception can be created among the host community that refugees¹ are a strain on inadequate public services and natural resources.

Maintaining the social fabric of displaced communities and promoting their peaceful coexistence with host communities can therefore be highly challenging in both camp and non-camp settings. They may struggle to find safe spaces where they can gather, lack information and assistance, and may not have access to work, where they could use their skills and capacities to support themselves, all of which may limit their ability to participate in decisions affecting their lives. These challenges are particularly acute for marginalized groups and people with specific needs.

To address these challenges, UNHCR's *Understanding Community-Based Protection* policy paper advocates for the adoption of a community-based approach to protection interventions and programmes. Community centres can be an important community-based protection tool with the potential to yield protection results. This is recognized in UNHCR's *Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas and its Policy on Alternatives to Camps*.

"In many operations, coexistence has been encouraged through community centres, where refugees or IDPs may design and implement activities for themselves and host communities, such as social events, recreational activities, public information and education"

Community-based protection and age, gender and diversity, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, Standing Committee, 63rd meeting

¹ This briefing note refers to refugees. However, it should be noted that the content provided herein could equally apply to internally displaced persons or other persons of concern to UNHCR.

● WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CENTRE?

Community centres are safe and public places where women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds can meet for social events, recreation, education and livelihood programmes, information exchange, and other purposes. They are established with the main objective of empowering refugee and host communities and providing them with a forum to promote their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

● WHAT HAPPENS IN A COMMUNITY CENTRE?

Although activities and services provided at community centres depend on the local context and financial situation, some of the following services are commonly available in situations of forced displacement:



Community Mobilization & Outreach

- Refugee committees
- Mobile activities
- Youth/Disability/Children/Older persons groups & clubs



Skills Development

- Language, computer, literacy courses
- Vocational training



Awareness Raising & Information Sharing

- Awareness sessions on health, education, child protection, SGBV
- Information on services and assistance provided



Education

- Accelerated Learning Programmes
- Library and Online courses
- Day care/kindergarten



Recreation

- Sport activities
- Children's games
- Video screenings



Other Support

- Registration
- Referral information
- Feedback and complaints opportunities

● THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY CENTRES

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● PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE:

Community centres are a key resource in promoting peaceful coexistence through joint activities where both refugees and host communities come together. In Lebanon, for example, refugees and local people both serve on management committees of community centres. In Nepal, early childhood development centres in the refugee camps are used by refugees and locals alike. In places where refugees from various nationalities live side-by-side, community centres can serve to strengthen coexistence between these different groups, as in the case of Cairo, where refugees from several nationalities engage in a variety of actions promoting multi-culturalism and pluralism. It should, however, be stressed that in some contexts, due to security or geographical considerations, the opportunity for bringing together refugees and host communities or different refugee communities can be limited.

● EMPOWERMENT, DIGNITY AND A SENSE OF BELONGING:

As a safe space for refugees to gather and exchange ideas and concerns, community centres have proven to be a

catalyst for initiatives and innovations by refugees, such as the creation of youth committees or the provision of informal education. In settings where host communities and authorities may be unwelcoming, the ability to gather also gives refugees a sense of belonging and security, especially to groups who may be particularly marginalized or at-risk, such as persons with disabilities, older persons or unaccompanied and separated children. Having access to meaningful and potentially income-generating training and educational opportunities can empower refugees.

● “ONE STOP SHOP”:

Having access to a wide variety of services and programmes that cater to people of different ages, genders and diversity profiles in the same location is particularly convenient for refugees, whose mobility may be hampered by distance, transportation costs or security concerns. This aspect of community centres as “one stop shops” has been particularly important in remote areas where availability of services is scarce whether from government or other actors.

● COORDINATION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS:

Community centres are in most instances supported or used by diverse actors, which can foster collaboration and complementarity between them, including between governments, NGOs and civil society. Community centres in some contexts also work closely with networks of community volunteers/workers, who can use the centres as their offices, and through their outreach work will spread information about the community centres in remote areas and to persons with limited mobility.



● KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SETTING UP A COMMUNITY CENTRE

The different steps and key considerations when setting up a community centre will inevitably vary from one context to the other. There is no “one size fits all” approach and the decision to set up such a programme in the first place should be taken in close consultation with persons of concern and be based on their recommendations and suggestions. The key considerations outlined below are mostly derived from community centres in Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, India and Nepal.

“Promote sustainability from the start”

“Support and work with existing community and national structures”

Key lessons from **Understanding Community-Based Protection: Protection Policy Paper, UNHCR**

AL-GHEITH ASSOCIATION IN YEMEN

When Somali refugees first settled in camps in Yemen, UNHCR started running community centres out of former military buildings. The centres were later managed by partner NGOs. Somali refugees started organizing themselves and provided computer classes to their peers with used computers they had acquired. They eventually created an association, “Al-Gheith”, and gradually got more involved in running activities at the centres. When the partnership between UNHCR and the NGOs ended, Al-Gheith took over management of the community centres themselves, designing and implementing their own annual plans, with financial support from UNHCR.

SUSTAINABILITY

Promoting sustainability is often the main challenge faced by operations supporting community centres, which often incur high running costs, including rent, utilities and staffing. A number of initiatives taken by UNHCR operations help to reduce these running costs and promote sustainability:

SUPPORTING EXISTING COMMUNITY CENTRES:

When it is feasible and will not lead to protection risks for refugees, support to existing community centres should be the preferred option. In Egypt, for example, UNHCR is strengthening the inclusion of Syrian refugees within existing Government or community initiatives and structures, including community centres, run by local Egyptians, by providing a one-time contribution for things like facility renovation and provision of furniture. In Lebanon, UNHCR provides financial and technical support to Government-run community centres that welcome both local people and refugees.

BUILDING MANAGEMENT CAPACITIES OF LOCAL NGOS AND REFUGEE GROUPS:

While it is preferable to support local people or refugees to initiate and run their own community centres, at times this may not be possible, for example during the initial stages of some emergency responses. Thus community centres may have to be temporarily run by UNHCR or partners. But in that case, it is critical that UNHCR identifies local organizations or refugee groups who could gradually take over the management of centres and build their capacities from the beginning,

as it promotes local ownership and empowers refugees, in line with UNHCR’s community-based protection approach.

INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES:

Some community centres managed by local NGOs or refugee groups have found ways to generate income in order to reduce their dependency on external funding. In Egypt, a Syrian refugee women’s association managing community centres is running a successful catering business for local Egyptians and Syrians alike. The food is prepared by women attending the centre. In addition, the association charges a small fee for skills training and for the use of their kindergarten. Fees are waived for the most at-risk families. Similarly, a committee of persons with disabilities running a community centre in Kigeme camp in Rwanda generates income through screenings of football matches and renting of rooms for events. Charging fees for certain activities or services provided at community centres is, however, only recommended in contexts where refugees have access to livelihoods opportunities.

CAREFUL MANAGEMENT OF INCENTIVES:

If the decision is taken to provide incentives for volunteers working at community centres, this should be done in a manner that does not erode or undermine existing community volunteering mechanisms. For instance, a sudden influx of funding in a protracted situation (or one likely to become protracted) should not automatically result in a major scaling up of incentives, particularly for services that were previously provided on a volunteer basis.

PARTICIPATION

Refugees should not merely be able to attend events, but should be meaningfully involved in the assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and services provided at community centres. This meaningful involvement takes a variety of forms in community centres supported by UNHCR operations:

CENTRES FULLY MANAGED BY REFUGEES:

In addition to the aforementioned case of Al Gheith association in Yemen, a number of community centres in different contexts are fully managed by refugees, from the design and implementation of programmes to financial and administrative management. Although in most settings there will be refugees with the necessary skills to perform these tasks, capacity building will still likely be required to allow refugee associations to efficiently manage the centres. In Malaysia and India, comprehensive and well-established capacity building programmes for refugee community-based organizations (CBOs) have been implemented for several years. Currently, CBOs from the Chin refugee community from Myanmar, for example, fully manage day care centres in New Delhi.

REFUGEES IN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES:

In contexts where refugees cannot manage community centres on their own, securing their active participation in management structures is essential to ensure that the centre's programmes address the priorities identified by their fellow refugees. "Mixed" management committees composed of refugees and members of the host community, and/or refugees from different nationalities can be a powerful tool to promote peaceful coexistence, and ensure that members of all communities, and of different ages, gender and diversity backgrounds benefit from the centre's programmes.

REFUGEES AS FACILITATORS:

Refugees come with a rich variety of skills and experience, which should be valued and promoted to maintain their dignity in situations of forced displacement. Community centres should offer opportunities for refugees to demonstrate their skills and pass them on to their fellow refugees and members of the host community. Across UNHCR operations, refugees are supporting their peers in community centres in many different functions, such as school and kindergarten teachers, language teachers, vocational trainers, sports coaches, community mobilizers, and psychosocial workers.

APPLYING AN AGE, GENDER AND DIVERSITY APPROACH TO PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY CENTRES

As a starting point, to promote and secure the equal participation of all groups in a displaced community, the different groups must be consulted prior to the design of community centre programmes to make sure they are appropriate and accessible. Participation of refugees in management of community centres should also reflect the age, gender and diversity makeup of displaced communities. UNHCR and partner organizations have adopted a variety of measures to prevent the exclusion of certain groups or individuals from community centres:

- Community centres can be set up specifically for one particular group. The most common are women's and children's centres, but in Nepal for instance, centres for the elderly and centres for persons with disabilities have been established in the Bhutanese refugee camps.
- Persons with specific needs, such as persons with disabilities, should be included in mainstream programmes along with other groups, to reduce their marginalization. It is imperative that different segments of the community can interact with each other through events open to everyone, and diverse representation in all group programmes and committees. In some cases, however, it can be useful to set aside a specific time and/or space for a particular group within community centres that are open to all, to ensure the participation of diverse groups, including the marginalized. These groups can also be supported to develop their own committees if necessary to discuss sensitive or specific issues. These measures should only be used where necessary and always in parallel with ongoing efforts to ensure community centres are equally accessible to women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds.
- When refugees are scattered across a wide geographic area or have limited mobility, community centres, in partnership with relevant organizations, should actively reach out to refugees. In Lebanon, one UNHCR partner provides safe transportation for children from remote areas to travel to the centre. Refugee outreach workers also play an important role in ensuring access to the centres, by identifying groups or individuals who may be excluded, advocating for their participation in community centre programmes, and even accompanying them to the centre.

In any setting, the strategies adopted to promote the active participation of all segments of the community should be designed based on a careful assessment of protection risks, including the risk that some groups or individuals may try to advance political agendas through the community centres.

SAMPLE CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITY CENTRES

To illustrate some considerations of sustainability and promotion of participation by all age, gender and diversity groups within displaced communities, below are criteria for support to community centres in the UNHCR Operation in Lebanon, which has set-up and continues to support community centres throughout the country since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis:

- Located in areas with high concentration of refugees
- Located in areas not covered by other agencies/organizations with similar interventions
- No protection risks for refugees in the area (e.g. checkpoints, dangerous areas, mine fields, controversial political party offices)
- Accessibility, preferably at the ground floor, and with

disability ramps and/or elevator

- Existing utility connection (e.g. water, electricity, telephone)
- Adjacent space for expansion
- Potential opportunities to contribute to local community development

“When children started coming to the community centre, all their drawings were about the war. Now they draw gardens and flowers”

Refugee kindergarten teacher at a community center in Cairo, Egypt



To learn more about community-based protection and share your own experience, join our community of practice at: <http://www.unhcrexchange.org/communities/9159>



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