



# UNHCR POLICY ON ALTERNATIVES TO CAMPS

# Contents

PURPOSE	3
SCOPE	
RATIONALE	4
OBJECTIVES	6
RELATIONSHIP TO UNHCR'S URBAN REFUGEE POLICY	
IMPLEMENTATION	8
TERMS AND DEFINITIONS	12

Cover page:  
From top: Tanzania / UNHCR / Brendan Bannon / 2009;  
Lebanon / UNHCR / S. Baldwin / 2013

Graphic Design: Alessandro Mannocchi / Rome



## Purpose

UNHCR's policy is to pursue alternatives to camps, whenever possible, while ensuring that refugees are protected and assisted effectively and are able to achieve solutions.

## Scope

The Policy on Alternatives to Camps applies in all UNHCR operations for refugees and in all phases of displacement from contingency planning and preparedness to emergency response to stable and protracted refugee situations and the pursuit of durable solutions. Refugees have a distinct legal status and rights under international law which guide UNHCR's response under this policy. Many aspects of the rationale, policy objectives and key elements for implementation are nevertheless relevant to and should inform UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement.

The policy is directed primarily towards UNHCR staff members engaged in strategic and operational planning, the design and delivery of activities in the field and those responsible for the development of protection, programme and technical policies, standards, guidance, tools and training that support such activities. Successful implementation will also require engagement with and by host government authorities at all levels and the full spectrum of UNHCR's partners and stakeholders. Compliance with this policy is mandatory.

# Rationale

UNHCR is accountable for ensuring that refugees are able to access protection and assistance wherever they are living. Millions of refugees have settled peacefully outside of camps in both rural and urban areas, living on land or in housing that they rent, own or occupy informally or in hosting arrangements within communities or families. Refugee camps nevertheless remain an important feature of the humanitarian landscape. Some forty percent of all refugees live in camps, most often because they have no alternatives.

Refugee camps are diverse. They include planned or self-settled camps and settlements or other facilities, such as collective centres. Camps are locations where refugees reside and where, in most cases, host governments and humanitarian actors provide assistance and services in a centralised manner. The defining characteristic of a camp, however, is typically some degree of limitation on the rights and freedoms of refugees and their ability to make meaningful choices about their lives.

Pursuing alternatives to camps means working to remove such restrictions so that refugees have the possibility to live with greater dignity, independence and normality as members of the community, either from the beginning of displacement or as soon as possible thereafter. The possible alternatives to camps are also as diverse as the refugees and the communities, cultures and laws and policies of the countries where they reside. They will be defined by the degree to which refugees are able to exercise their rights, such as the ability to move freely, choose where to live, work or open a business, cultivate land or access protection and services.

Host governments may insist upon the establishment of camps for reasons of public order or security. Camps may be seen as providing better control over the presence and movement of refugees and as a way easing the potential for tension between them and local communities. Policies restricting refugees to camps may also be motivated by concerns that refugees will compete with nationals for limited economic opportunities and scarce resources, such as water or land. Host governments may also consider that allowing refugees to settle in communities and

participate in the economy makes it less likely that they will return home in the future.

Camps can also be an essential part of UNHCR's operational response, particularly during emergencies. Camps can facilitate the rapid provision of protection and life-saving assistance in the event of a large-scale refugee influx. The establishment of camps can also facilitate the identification of people with specific needs and the delivery of services to them. UNHCR may at times agree to support the establishment of a camp, in order to ensure admission to territory and access to asylum. While camps are an important tool for UNHCR, they nevertheless represent a compromise that limit the rights and freedoms of refugees and too often remain after the emergency phase and the essential reasons for their existence have passed.

UNHCR's experience has been that camps can have significant negative impacts over the longer term for all concerned. Living in camps can engender dependency and weaken the ability of refugees to manage their own lives, which perpetuates the trauma of displacement and creates barriers to solutions, whatever form they take. Camps can also distort local economies and development planning, while also causing negative environmental impacts in the surrounding area. In some contexts, camps may increase critical protection risks, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child protection concerns and human trafficking. Camps may not either contribute to security, where they become venue for the forced recruitment or indoctrination of refugees.

Faced with these risks and challenges, many refugees decide to settle outside of camps or designated areas. Where this violates national laws and policies, refugees may face serious consequences, such as the risk of detention or the confiscation and destruction of property or businesses. Refugees in these circumstances may avoid registering with UNHCR or even making contact altogether, placing them beyond the effective reach of UNHCR's protection.

Enabling refugees to reside in communities lawfully, peacefully and without harassment, whether in urban or in rural areas, supports their ability to take

responsibility for their lives and for their families and communities. Refugees bring personal skills and assets, as well as the qualities of perseverance, flexibility and adaptability demonstrated through their flight and survival. Refugees who have maintained their independence, retained their skills and developed sustainable livelihoods will be more resilient and better able to overcome future challenges than if they had spent years dependent on humanitarian assistance, whatever solutions are eventually available to them.

Refugees can better contribute to the communities where they are living when they are supported in achieving self-reliance in a way that is adapted to local conditions and markets. In many situations, the presence of refugees has stimulated local economies and development. Moreover, community-based protection activities and livelihoods and education programmes that also involve local people can promote social cohesion, reduce xenophobic attitudes and create a better protection environment. Where people work, study and play together, they are better equipped to resolve differences and live peacefully.

When setting up a refugee camp, UNHCR, host governments and partners also make significant investments in infrastructure and systems for the

delivery of basic services. The running costs for maintaining and operating these dedicated facilities and systems are also considerable and often must be sustained for many years or even decades. These investments are typically lost when refugees go home, particularly where camps are located in isolated areas far from local communities, so that facilities cannot be handed over to them.

Building upon and seeking synergies with national development planning, by contributing to local infrastructure and bringing refugees within national structures, such as for education and healthcare, can be a more sustainable and efficient approach. This avoids the duplication and inefficiencies arising from the creation of dedicated, parallel structures to serve refugees, while also have greater lasting positive impact for host communities. UNHCR will always retain its accountability for ensuring that the needs of refugees are met, but camps are not the only, or often, the best mechanism for the delivery of services.

Government in many countries hosting refugees have concluded that the disadvantages of camps outweigh the justifications. They have decided not to establish camps. Alternatives to camps exist today and the purpose of the policy is to build upon and expand such good practices.



Chad / UNHCR / H. Caux / March 2008



## Relationship to the Urban Refugee Policy

The 2009 *UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas* (the “urban refugee policy”) had two principal objectives: ensuring that cities are recognised as legitimate places for refugees to reside and exercise their rights and maximising the protection space available to urban refugees and the humanitarian organisations that support them. The urban refugee policy responded to the reality that more than half of all refugees today are living in urban areas and recognised a shift away from giving primary attention to refugees accommodated in camps.

The Policy on Alternatives to Camps refocuses attention on refugees living in camps and extends the principal objectives of the urban refugee policy to all operational contexts. The urban refugee policy noted that it is usually taken for granted that camp-based refugees will receive indefinite assistance if they are unable to engage in agriculture or other economic activities. The policy on alternatives to camps challenges this assumption and calls for UNHCR to work decisively toward the removal of obstacles to the exercise of rights and achieving self-reliance, with a view to making what UNHCR historically called “care and maintenance” programmes increasingly rare exceptions.

## Objectives

UNHCR’s policy is to avoid the establishment of refugee camps, wherever possible, while pursuing alternatives to camps that ensure refugees are protected and assisted effectively and enabled to achieve solutions. Although many governments require that refugees reside in camps and, at the onset of an emergency, UNHCR may also find it necessary to set up camps to ensure protection and save lives, camps should be the exception and, to the extent possible, a temporary measure.

Where camps must be established or where they already exist, UNHCR will plan and implement the operational response in a way that enables camps to be phased out at the earliest possible stage. Where this is not possible or practical, UNHCR will pursue the progressive removal of restrictions on the ability of refugees to exercise their rights and seek to build linkages between the camp and host communities and anchor the camp within the local economy, infrastructure and national social protection and service delivery systems, in order to transform them into sustainable settlements.





Lebanon / UNHCR / S. Baldwin / October 2013

The key principles underpinning the urban refugee policy inform UNHCR's efforts to pursue alternatives to camps. Importantly, under both policies, UNHCR will be guided at all times by accountability to refugees, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and considerations of age, gender and diversity, including ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and other personal attributes, which play a central role in shaping and influencing individual needs and protection risks.

UNHCR's Policy on Alternatives to Camps incorporates the urban refugee policy's commitments to refugee rights, state responsibility, partnership, needs assessment, equity, community orientation, interaction with refugees and, importantly, self-reliance. Many of the comprehensive protection strategies that UNHCR set out in the urban refugee policy will also be relevant when pursuing alternatives to camps.

Since the urban refugee policy was issued in 2009, UNHCR and partner agencies have developed and adapted strategies, operational guidance, tools and good practices to respond to displacement in cities, most of which can be utilised to support alternatives to camps in other operational contexts.

As with the urban refugee policy, UNHCR can only achieve the objectives of the policy on alternatives to camps with the engagement and support of all partners and stakeholders, including refugee and host communities, government authorities at all levels, non-governmental and community-based organisations and other civil society actors, UN agencies and other international organisations and development partners.

The urban refugee policy highlights several challenges that are also important in the broader context of alternatives to camps and must be reflected in UNHCR's strategic and operational planning. The urban refugee policy, for example, recognises the considerable pressures that large refugee populations may place on resources and services that already strain to meet the needs of local people. In both urban and non-urban environments, making contact with dispersed populations and understanding and responding to their needs presents challenges that must be overcome.

As with the urban refugee policy, building refugee self-reliance and access to sustainable livelihoods activities is a cornerstone of the policy on alternatives to camps and will be a key factor in successful implementation. UNHCR operations will need to bear in mind the call in the urban refugee policy for a level of realism regarding the potential for refugees to become independent in situations where legal restrictions and social, economic and racial discrimination impact on their ability to access economic opportunity.

## Implementation

The Policy on Alternatives to Camps establishes an accountability for UNHCR operations in the field to make strategic and determined best efforts to pursue alternatives to camps, under the overall strategic direction of the Regional Bureaux and with the support of the relevant Divisions at Headquarters. The policy also calls for UNHCR to adapt systems, procedures and approaches and develop new skills, capacities, competencies and partnerships across the protection, programme management and emergency response functions.





Implementation of the policy requires UNHCR operations to undertake an in-depth analysis of the potential for pursuing alternatives to camps when undertaking contingency planning and emergency preparedness actions for a possible future refugee influx and also in relation to existing refugee camps or camp-like facilities or structures. Programme design, including advocacy priorities, will be determined by the particular circumstances of each operation. The framework for analysis must be comprehensive and should include the following considerations:

- the perspectives and intentions of both refugee and host communities, the history of displacement, political context and outlook for solutions;
- national laws, policies and practices in relation to the protection of refugees, including restrictions on the exercise of rights and freedoms;
- the protection situation in the area of displacement, including security conditions and specific needs and risks, such as child protection and SGBV;
- the scale of displacement, demographic profile of the refugee and host populations and current standards in the communities in key areas, such as healthcare and education;
- the national and local economy and the opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant, build sustainable livelihoods and contribute to the community;
- national and local social programmes and service delivery structures and community-based organisations and their capacity to meet the needs of refugees;
- national and local development planning in the area of displacement and the potential areas of alignment and opportunities for synergies; and

- the presence and activities of UN agencies and other development and humanitarian partners, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and the private sector and their potential to support alternatives to camps.

The pursuit of alternatives to camps represents a fundamentally important policy orientation for UNHCR. At the same time, UNHCR works within the framework of national law and policy in countries hosting refugees, which in some cases will present fundamental obstacles to implementation of the policy. Avoiding the establishment of camps or the early phasing out of existing camps will not be possible or practical in all situations. Implementation of the policy will necessarily be progressive and will proceed at different speeds in UNHCR operations globally.

Alternatives to camps should ultimately be more sustainable and cost-effective, because they harness the potential of refugees, rationalise service delivery and allow for more targeted assistance to those most in need. Achieving these objectives, however, may require greater early investments, in order to realise such efficiencies later. Making alternatives to camps work also calls for strengthened protection outreach and monitoring which may be more labour and resource-intensive than in a camp setting. These increased costs, however, should be offset by the reductions in direct assistance, as more refugees become self-reliant and are able to meet their own basic needs.

The policy on alternatives to camps is expected to have a transformational impact. To implement the policy, UNHCR must work along several lines of action, including by:

#### **Consulting with refugees and host**

**communities** and taking the time needed to understand their intentions, aspirations, conditions and concerns through continuing, direct interaction and structured participatory assessments using the age, gender and diversity approach, adapted as necessary to overcome the challenges that arise when people are not consolidated in camps.



Ecuador / UNHCR / B. Heger / September 2004

### **Promoting an enabling protection**

**environment** where the legal, policy and administrative framework of the host country provide refugees with freedom of movement and residence, permission to work and access to basic services and social “safety nets” as members of the communities where they are living.

**Developing advocacy strategies** that respond to the perspectives and concerns of host governments and communities and complement appeals to state responsibility and a rights-based approach with policy arguments, based upon research, data and evidence, that alternatives to camps produce better outcomes for both refugees and the host communities.

**Reinforcing contingency planning and emergency preparedness** to facilitate alternatives to camps, including an assessment of national legal and policy frameworks, the capacity of communities and the local economy, infrastructure, administrative structures, service delivery systems, housing, land, water and the key interventions that will be needed to absorb a refugee influx, working together with government authorities at all levels and the potential of host communities.

### **Achieving synergies with national development planning**

and international development cooperation, through such processes as Delivering as One, the UN Development Assistance Framework and Common Country Assessments, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and Joint Programmes, in order to achieve efficiencies and greater lasting impact for refugees and host communities, including in areas such as education, healthcare, nutrition, water, sanitation, housing, energy and employment.

### **Planning on the basis of data, information and analysis**

related to refugees and host communities obtained through protection monitoring, profiling exercises, registration, including the systematic use of biometrics, and vulnerability assessment, as well as monitoring and surveillance of public health, nutrition and sanitation conditions, supported by effective information management systems, and the better use of available macro-economic and community-level data.

### **Updating protection and programme management**

policies, operational guidance and tools to meet the challenges of assessment and targeting assistance and establishing standards and indicators for monitoring, measuring progress and reporting on results when populations are not consolidated in camps, as well as parameters for UNHCR support to host communities and frameworks for implementing multi-year strategies and area-based approaches, where outcomes depend not only on UNHCR but, importantly, upon the contributions of host government and development partners.

### **Strengthening community-based protection,**

monitoring, outreach and case management, including increased direct engagement with refugee and host communities, through mobile monitoring teams, community centres, the co-location of government, UNHCR and partner services (“one-stop shops”) and the use of virtual platforms to facilitate information sharing and two-way communication, in order to overcome the challenges that arise when refugees are not consolidated in camps and to ensure that refugees with specific needs and vulnerabilities, child protection risks and SGBV issues do not remain hidden.

**Adapting service delivery** in areas such as education, public health, nutrition, water and sanitation to support alternatives to camps and needs of refugees living in host communities through mainstreaming within national, local and community-based systems and structures and the further development of new models and approaches, such as the use of mobile teams, enhanced referral mechanisms, enrolment of refugees in health insurance schemes, expanded access to distance learning programmes and the greater use of cash-based interventions.



### **Developing settlement and shelter responses**

that enable refugees to settle in communities or facilitate the transformation of camps into sustainable settlements that are anchored within the framework of national development planning and housing, land and property laws and are linked to host communities and the local economy, markets, infrastructure and service delivery systems, such that they require only limited humanitarian support.

### **Enabling refugees to build sustainable**

**livelihoods** and achieve self-reliance, including food security, through programmes that promote access to land and agricultural production, and relevant education, training and support that enable refugees to access employment and self-employment opportunities through market-based livelihoods strategies that are informed by professional assessments and analysis of the economy, markets and the skills, assets and potential of refugees.

**Maximizing mobility** to allow refugees greater access to employment and education and possibilities to build their livelihoods assets and skills and to send remittances, including through regional frameworks that facilitate the movement of labour, in order to promote dignity, the enjoyment of basic rights and to ensure that refugees are better prepared to achieve durable solutions.

**Engaging with national authorities** at all levels to ensure that legitimate security issues can be addressed effectively through alternatives to camps and that protection concerns are addressed in a manner that respects the specific status and rights of refugees, as distinct from other non-nationals, while also working closely with refugees to reinforce understanding of their rights, responsibilities and obligation to respect the laws of the host country.

**Creating adapted partnership models** that expand collaboration with relevant national line ministries, municipal and local government authorities, national and international NGOs, community-based organizations and other civil society actors and the private sector, as well as with development-oriented UN agencies and other, including UNDP, WFP UNICEF, WHO, ILO, FAO, IFAD and the World Bank, both globally and through their national programmes, within the framework of UNHCR's Refugee Coordination Model and with the objective of complementing, reinforcing and creating synergies with UNHCR's humanitarian programmes.

# Terms and Definitions

## **Camp**

For the purposes of this policy, a camp is any purpose-built, planned and managed location or spontaneous settlement where refugees are accommodated and receive assistance and services from government and humanitarian agencies. The defining characteristic of a camp, as highlighted in paragraph 3.2 of the policy, is some degree of limitation on the rights and freedoms of refugees, such as their ability to move freely, choose where to live, work or open a business, cultivate land or access protection and services.

## **Alternatives to Camps**

Alternatives to camps are achieved when UNHCR is able to ensure that refugees are protected and assisted effectively and are able to achieve solutions without resorting to the establishment of camps and when existing camps are phased out or transformed into sustainable settlements. From the perspective of refugees, alternatives to camps means being able to exercise rights and freedoms, make meaningful choices regarding their lives and have the possibility to live with greater dignity, independence and normality as members of communities.