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# Feinstein International Center

Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice



## Refugee Livelihoods in Urban Areas: Identifying Program Opportunities

*Recommendations for programming and advocacy*



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*Despite a growing body of research about the livelihood problems of refugees in urban areas in countries of first asylum, there is little evidence about which humanitarian programs work, what livelihoods initiatives refugees undertake themselves, and where opportunities for programming interventions lie. This study addresses this knowledge gap by analyzing the urban livelihoods context, and identifying programming opportunities and examples of promising program initiatives. The study's key objective was to support livelihoods programming for refugees by generating new ideas from related fields of inquiry, such as low-income urban development and youth employment, and adapting these ideas to make them relevant for refugees.*

*Our study began with a global desk review of livelihoods programming for refugees in urban settings together with a review of low-income urban development programs that could be relevant for refugees. We then conducted three case studies – in Cairo, Tel Aviv and Quito, Ecuador – each representing a different refugee policy and livelihoods context, and which together offer lessons for other host settings. Each case study begins with a review of existing livelihood programs in the country. This includes a mapping of commercial, humanitarian and governmental organizations that provide programming, advocacy or other resources that support the livelihoods of refugees, migrants and low-income citizens. We then interviewed asylum seekers and key informants to deepen our understanding of the livelihoods context in each country.*

*Both the desk review and the case studies can be found at [fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu)*

*Our global review and case studies generated many ideas, and in this document we summarize the main program and advocacy approaches that show promise for supporting the livelihoods of urban refugees. We begin with a discussion of advocacy, then focus on programming.*

## Main urban livelihood programming ideas

- Providing employer wage subsidies during an internship or training period
- Supporting anti-xenophobia campaigns
- Guaranteeing bank loans of refugee clients in the event of repatriation or deportation
- Supporting bank programs to link loans and credit histories with country of asylum and home country
- Providing temporary rental subsidies for new arrivals and neediest families
- Conducting value chain assessments for skills training programs
- Designing combined sports and skills-training programs for youth
- Developing refugee translation/interpretation services and employing refugees in interpretation work
- Assisting in identifying demand for cultural activities and supporting these activities
- Assisting with recertification and other needed documentation for skilled refugees and business start-ups
- Opening daycare centers for refugee and local children, staffed by refugees
- Supporting vocationally-focused language training

## Advocacy

In many urban refugee settings, the political context in which refugees pursue livelihoods is very unsupportive. The host government often resists allowing refugees to work, and can be actively opposed to livelihoods programming, which is seen as promoting the ability of refugees to work, compete with locals, and remain in the country.

In such a context advocacy must be carefully considered, in order to avoid making the situation worse. In settings where the government tends to turn a blind eye to refugees working, such as Egypt, promotion of 'the right of refugees to work' can backfire. The government might cease to turn a blind eye and respond negatively. Rather than adopt a blanket (blunt instrument) approach, it is more effective to identify windows of opportunity and work within those. For example, a new influx of refugees, such as the Syrians coming to Cairo, could provide an opportunity to discuss new ideas with the government<sup>[1]</sup>. Existing efforts to regulate and provide protection to informal sector workers, such as domestic workers and street vendors, could include local and refugee communities.

Most importantly, however, refugee organizations must adopt a common and agreed-upon advocacy strategy, rather than acting independently when it comes to engaging with the government. We recommend that local and international NGOs coordinate their livelihoods advocacy with UNHCR, especially in settings where there is a Livelihoods Coordinator. This will ensure a unified advocacy front that will not undermine success or create conflicting messages and positions. A coordinated advocacy strategy will also increase transparency so that all organizations know what efforts are being attempted, when to hold back, and when to make a concerted push in a particular direction.

## Livelihoods programming

There is a consensus among organizations working with both local population and refugees about the need to shift from a social protection or charity model to a self-reliance model enhanced by sustainable livelihoods programming.

We define livelihoods programming as that which directly supports household income generation by promoting wage employment or self-employment through skills and vocational training, microfinance, business development and legal services, job placement, apprenticeships, mentoring, and so forth.

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[1] Egypt recently released a presidential statement about Syrian students having access to free public Egyptian education. This could be an opportunity to advocate for refugees of other nationalities to have increased access to educational services. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/52716.aspx>

As with advocacy, we recommend that NGOs coordinate their livelihoods programming with UNHCR, especially in settings where there is a Livelihoods Coordinator.

Overall, we recommend the following for programming (for recommendations about specific types of programs, see Section 4, below):

- a) All livelihoods programming should adopt an inclusive approach that targets both nationals and non-nationals (refugees, migrants) so as to avoid parallel programming. There are several reasons why such targeting could improve the livelihoods context for refugees:
  - The government is more likely to look favorably on such programs;
  - Bringing nationals and non-nationals together in a learning environment (such as training programs) is beneficial for refugees in terms of networking, potential partnerships, increased understanding of the local context, and building social capital with the host community; and,
  - Joint programming can reduce antagonism and resentment on the part of the host community, both because refugees are seen to be bringing resources (in the form of programs) and because working/learning together is good for social relations.
- b) Livelihood programs must consider the diverse set of existing skills, knowledge, assets, and experience of the refugee community. This diversity can be addressed by a sequenced “laddered” approach that enables individuals and communities to progressively improve their life conditions.

Oxfam’s “laddered livelihoods”<sup>[2]</sup> refers to four stages or wealth groups: Accumulating, Adapting, Coping and Surviving. People in these groups have different sets of skills and assets, and need different programs and services at different times:

- Those who are accumulating might need financial literacy classes, and could be mentors, or provide employment.
- Those adapting need vocational and professional training, microcredit, and could be linked to people in the accumulating sector for mentorship.
- Those coping need financial literacy, savings groups, microcredit, vocational training, language classes, etc.

[2] Oxfam, *The Sustainable Livelihoods Handbook: An asset based approach to poverty*. Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam Great Britain, 2009, p. 14.

- Those surviving need conditional grants, savings groups, vocational training, and psychosocial, life skills, and language classes.

Livelihood programs should also focus on transferable skills that will enhance the possibilities of new livelihoods and integration upon return to their home country.

- c) Different kinds of livelihood programs should be linked and integrated along the value chain.
- Example 1: Promoting wage employment. Language courses and literacy could be linked to job placement programs, which in turn could be supported by subsidizing employment of refugees (perhaps through incentives for employers).
  - Example 2: Promoting self-employment. People graduating from a vocational training course with a specific skill set (such as electronics) and wanting to start their own business could be linked to a mentor or an apprenticeship, with the possibility of microfinance plus business training to start their own business.
  - Example 3: Promoting increased business productivity. People with existing businesses could be linked to business development services such as technical assistance or mentors, and then to microfinance.
- d) Assistance programs not directly aimed at supporting wage- or self-employment, such as psychosocial counseling, educational programs, or health services, should be linked to or paired with livelihoods programming opportunities. Such pairing of mental and physical health with livelihoods programming can significantly improve beneficiaries' attitudes around goals/motivation and prospects for the future.
- e) Programming that is currently aimed at so-called "vulnerable groups" such as women, single parents and youth, should be orientated towards livelihoods:

### *Women and single parents*

These households often have difficulty utilizing their existing livelihood assets and capacities. Problems include psychological/physical abuse such as: domestic violence, past torture experiences, rape, and trafficking, as well as cultural impediments (beliefs about the proper roles of women and men) and social and family restrictions imposed by having children at home and



no child care. Special attention should be given to strategies that increase the ability of these households to pursue livelihoods.

Businesses based on the provision of in-home child care facilities, and community centers that provide opportunity for strengthened social networks may support livelihood activities.

## Youth

Youth livelihood programming should integrate traditional education, financial literacy, entrepreneurship skills, and life skills including sexual and reproductive health education. Career orientation and skills development programming should be integrated at the middle and high school levels to better prepare young people to compete in the labor market.

Unaccompanied minors and victims of violence should be integrated into livelihoods programs within a wider spectrum of services aiming to cover basic needs, care and education.

Private and public high schools and universities should be encouraged to give more refugees access such as through scholarship programs (such as DAFI). Information about scholarships and education possibilities should be clarified and made available to refugees.

## Information and communication

Better sharing of information and transparency between all stakeholders, including UNHCR, NGOs and the different refugee communities will improve livelihoods programming.

Where relevant, UNHCR should increase information to refugees about their legal right to work. This situation is often complicated and warrants careful explanation. For example, in Egypt refugees are allowed to work, but there are specific conditions that must be met and refugees are often unaware of these conditions.

UNHCR, NGOs and community organizations should hold regular meetings or communicate via listserv to share information and exchange ideas.

UNHCR could take the lead in promoting systematic data collection both about the livelihoods capacities (skills, experience) of different refugee populations and individuals, and about livelihoods programs available in a particular setting. Such a system could include information about work abuses, risks, and their consequences, as well as monitoring and evaluation of programs to learn

about the impact of new and revised strategies.

Improved communication channels, such as SMS, could convey information and announce activities to refugee communities. Such a channel could include information about resettlement, what to do when job problems (abuse) arise, employment brokerage, etc.

Awareness-raising among refugee communities is a significant need, especially about resettlement or repatriation, as well as rights and responsibilities while in the host country. It is also important to raise the local/host population's awareness about refugees in the country, including their rights and responsibilities, and the value of living with diversity. Agencies should identify, support and advocate with local neighborhood charities and community leaders to raise awareness of refugees in their neighborhoods, particularly among slum dwellers, and help foster relations with local populations.

There is potential for international and local organizations to include refugees in their mandates and collaborate on possible solutions in order to expand the network of refugee-concerned organizations. For example, ILO and other UN and development agencies working on poverty reduction strategies could integrate refugees in their programming.

## Recommendations about specific types of livelihoods programming

### *Mentoring, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training*

Diversify livelihood training options (apprenticeships, entrepreneurship training, trade skills training) along with livelihood strategies within the refugee community (access to employment and micro-enterprise).

Take advantage of existing skills in the refugee population. Support (financially or otherwise, through training or community-building) a network of refugee mentors to provide support to others. This could be combined with a listing of success stories (see communication channels above).

Incorporate refugees with prior skills into vocational training, job placement programs and/or micro-finance/grants programming aiming to establish small enterprises.

Collaborate with the private sector. Working with individual companies, including small and me-

dium enterprises as well as large multinationals with corporate social responsibility or foundation arms, identify opportunities for access to on-the-job training for refugees, or job placement. The latter could include subsidized salaries. For example, UNHCR or another agency could work with a company to support the salary of a mixed group of refugees and locals for six months, making an agreement with the company to continue employment of the individuals after the subsidy period if his/her work meets certain requirements.

Employ refugees in existing NGO service provision. Refugees bring administrative, managerial, accounting and other technical<sup>[3]</sup> skills with them to the host country. NGOs currently do employ refugees, but often in limited positions such as translators, interpreters, community outreach workers (health, psychosocial, paralegal), etc. Employment in administrative and other positions in NGOs could increase refugees' ability to actively participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of programming.

### *Business development services and support*

Provide training, apprenticeships and mentoring for refugees wishing to start or grow their small businesses, trade, or professions. There is high demand in the refugee population for ways to improve their knowledge and skills around business.

Make special emphasis on exploring niche markets aiming to re-activate and enhance local/group economies.

### *Microfinance*

Microfinance is a vast industry with a well-known set of best practices. Microfinance usually refers to microcredit and savings facilities, but can sometimes include other financial services such as microinsurance. These services are most often delivered by microfinance institutions (MFIs). We will not address the complexities of microfinance here, except to emphasize that in refugee settings, as everywhere, non-MFIs should not conduct microcredit programs. However, group savings and ROSCAs could be encouraged and supported.

We recommend the following, as part of a coordinated urban refugee livelihoods strategy:

- Increase the access of refugees with business experience to microfinance, in a carefully monitored way, working with MFIs.

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[3] Health and mental health expertise, multi language skills, education, among many others.

- Consider incorporating community interventions such as group grants/loans based on traditional practices, where social/cultural capital can be enhanced.
- Consider incorporating a well-planned financial literacy training incorporating household and businesses budgeting as well as savings and cost reduction strategies.

### *Vocational training*

Conduct a full evaluation of present and past vocational training programs to ensure that programs offered are market-driven, appropriately targeted, effectively implemented, and properly evaluated. Future research could focus on collecting data around the impacts of specific programs implemented in order to compare effectiveness.



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