Livelihoods and self reliance in rural areas

Key points

- Set realistic, well defined and measurable goals and targets for livelihood programmes; it is desirable to agree a livelihoods strategy.
- Collect data through market and baseline assessments (and from secondary sources).
- Use up-to-date data when you define livelihoods interventions.
- Make sure that interventions take account of refugees’ socio-economic status, skills and capacities.
- Provide and safeguard livelihood consumables.
- Secure productive assets.
- Ensure access to essential services.
- Assign dedicated staff or focal points.
- Select the best rather than the most available partners.
- Ensure that livelihood programmes are market oriented and create employment or self-employment opportunities.
- Work with partners that do have livelihood expertise.
- Do not train people in skills they cannot use in the short-term.
- Discontinue programmes that fail to improve the self-reliance of target populations.
- Do not hand out assistance to people who do not need it, because this is likely to increase dependence rather than self-reliance.

1. Overview

Self-reliance is the ability of an individual, household or community to meet essential needs and enjoy social and economic rights in a sustainable manner and with dignity. In rural dispersed settings the ability to lead active and productive lives is strictly linked to natural resources and supported by the capacity to build strong social, economic and cultural ties with their host communities. Access to land and key productive assets might contribute to define the level of refugees' vulnerability.

The first short-term layer of humanitarian support preserves or recovers essential productive assets, to avoid negative coping strategies and meet basic needs.
Medium and longer-term forms of support should seek to protect existing assets and improve the economic capacity of the displaced population allowing refugees to invest in activities, which produce higher positive returns in a wider timespan.

In rural dispersed settings, economic opportunities are linked to the production, transformation and trade of natural capital, for example, food goods and accessing and understanding markets is crucial. Interventions with immediate impact should therefore take account of seasonal factors, market conditions, and complementary economic roles and skills in the refugee and host communities. It is important to make sure that refugees do not deplete their own resources or those of the area in which they settle as this leads to negative impacts in terms of livelihoods and local integration.

2. Protection objectives

- To meet basic needs and decent living standards.
- To protect productive capital and diversify income sources.
- To prevent asset depletion and adoption of negative coping strategies.
- To protect and build human and social capital and decent work strategies.
- To support equal access to services and economic opportunities.

3. Underlying principles and standards

Key principles

UNHCR recognizes 13 key principles of livelihood programming. (See Livelihood programming in UNHCR: operation guidelines: http://www.unhcr.org/4fbdf17c9.html.) In the early stages of an emergency:

- Use quality data to guide programme strategies, obtained through comprehensive livelihood assessments. Use analytical and programming frameworks and tools
- Conduct a livelihood assessment and convene internal and external stakeholders
- Develop a comprehensive multi-year strategic plan
- Focus on livelihood support, using socio-economic profiling
- Develop area-based approaches
- Contribute to (and participate in) local development plans and processes.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate progress

Standards
• The Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach, developed by DFID, organizes factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities, and shows how they relate to one another.

• Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS: http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/handbook-companions/the-mershandbook/) set minimum standards for facilitating economic recovery in crisis situations. They address:
  - Market oriented programming.
  - Coordination and effectiveness.

4. Protection Risks

• Depletion of assets, causing vulnerability.
• No or limited freedom of movement.
• Sexual exploitation or abuse in rural areas.
• Dangerous coping mechanisms (survival sex, child labour, engagement in illegal activities).
• Detention, deportation or arrest.
• Difficulties in accessing basic services.
• No access to markets and land.

5. Other risks

• Remoteness and isolation limits the full enjoyment of social, economic and civil rights.
• Lack of partners with development expertise.
• Programme models create competition and social jealousy with hosting communities.
• Livelihood programmes not tailored to the specific context.

6. Key decision points

It is important to identify the actors already operating in the area and assess the development potential of the existing interventions, understand which institution has a comparative advantage in relation to each specific activity, and which organizations are likely to be good partners. Avoid duplication and promote the inclusion of refugees in existing programmes. Specific agriculture and livestock expertise might be needed and it might be available through partner organisations, the Ministry of Agriculture or within the refugee groups (data available in ProGres when all sections have been filled in).

Following the assessment, define UNHCR role and foresee a long-term plan which includes a viable exit strategy. Even in rural settings do not focus only on agriculture or agriculture-related activities and include an adequate diversification of livelihoods activities. Monitor closely the interventions to adjust them to the changing context and to scale them up or down, based on their results and demonstrated
potential. Seek for partners who have a market-oriented approach and who can help refugees develop sustainable incomes.

Analyse the assessment’s findings, identify the existing gaps and make sure the livelihoods projects and trainings are well balanced to avoid saturation of market segments. If an activity is successful look into developing its value chain more than simply expanding it. Cooperate with other units to encourage local authorities, communities and employers to grant refugees the right to work and move about, as well as access to financial services, and business opportunities.

Design programmes that strengthen individuals’ skills, when possible building on existing skills and organising both based and advanced training, so that refugees can compete in local markets. For example:

- The region has an unmet demand for milk, and livestock is currently only used for meat or leather production.
- The refugee influx has created a demand for skills in data entry and analysis.
- The Government needs skilled as well as unskilled labour to build a road to a nearby mine.

7. Key steps

1. Conduct a socio-economic analysis to understand the context refugees are living in as well as formal and informal protection risks refugees face while pursuing their livelihoods strategies.
2. Gather all existing data, surveys and reports available both internally and externally.
3. Evaluate previous livelihoods interventions conducted by UNHCR, assessing which ones were successful and why and which ones didn’t meet the expectations and why. Include in the analysis the work of and the relation with the implementing and operational partners.
4. Carry out an institutional mapping including all the existing actors (if too many, select those whose work is focused on livelihoods, market-oriented and able to provide sustainable incomes). Include organisations working and not working with refugees.
5. Invest early on in market assessments, value chain analysis and baselines that generate good data. Be consistent with the collection methods, data are useful if they are comparable.
6. Identify good partners and if no development institutions are present, work to make it appealing for them to work in refugee hosting areas.
7. Develop strategic plans which define clear objectives, the target populations, different sets of interventions for different wealth groups and prioritise activities. Avoid engaging in many sectors but focus on those where gaps exist or where UNHCR has possibilities to succeed.
8. Closely monitor implementation to be able to change, adjust and adapt the interventions to the contexts and the needs and aspirations of beneficiaries.
9. Develop the capacity of staff and partners to define and manage effective livelihood support programmes (rural development related skills) that meet global standards. Mobilise the financial and human resources necessary.
10. Celebrate and document success and learn from mistakes.

8. Key management considerations

In field operations, successful livelihood interventions require cooperation and coordination. Overall as well as specific goals need to be clearly set to identify how each team can productively contribute to their achievement. Management should ensure that livelihoods staff works in coordination with staff from education, protection, community based protection, health, nutrition, SGBV, etc. In rural settings the involvement of hosting communities in the livelihoods plans is key, the ratio between refugees and locals should be defined and explained to both groups and selection criteria should be clear from the beginning.

Management should also make sure that programmes reach out to stakeholders, including local and international NGOs, the private sector, government agencies, and research institutions. These organizations may already possess much of the information you need to develop livelihood programmes. Their expertise might result useful to avoid mistakes and adopt tested approaches.

9. Resources and partnerships

Staff

- UNHCR livelihoods staff in the field.

Partners

- Implementation partners which adopt a market oriented approach and are familiar with refugee specific issues.
- Operational partners with specific expertise on microfinance, vocational training, entrepreneurship building, employment services, agriculture/rural development should be included in and efforts coordinated.

10. Links

UNHCR, Global Strategy for Livelihoods 2014-2018
UNHCR, Livelihood Programming in UNHCR: Operational Guidelines, 2012

Need help?

CONTACT UNHCR DPSM, OSTS, Livelihoods Unit. At: livelihood@unhcr.org
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