

Co-ordinating 'Humanitarian Aid' for Refugees in Egypt

Iman Ismail

Introduction

In funding refugee assistance, donors are reluctant to deal with established government bodies or local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and prefer to channel funds through the 'more entrusted' international bodies. After reviewing some experiences of co-ordination of humanitarian aid in other countries, I decided to examine the degree of co-ordination among refugee assistance programmes that exists in Egypt. My research sought to reveal the obstacles facing co-ordination and to suggest ways to overcome them in Cairo. One practical definition of co-ordination used by the UN is:

Co-ordination is the systematic use of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner. Such instruments include strategic planning, gathering data and managing information, mobilizing resources and ensuring accountability, orchestrating a functional division of labour, negotiating and maintaining a serviceable framework with host political authorities and providing leadership (Minear, Chelliah, Crisp, Mackinlay & Weiss 1992, as cited in Reindorp and Wiles 2001).

The Cairo Inter-Agency bi-monthly meeting, a forum gathering a number of refugee-assisting agencies and some of the embassies of resettlement countries, is taken as the only expression of co-ordination among the agencies providing assistance to refugees in Egypt. Although it is more than a decade now since significant movement of refugees to Egypt began, it is argued that the ways of assisting them are promoting their alienation from their hosts rather than their 'integration' and doing little to promote their enjoyment of human rights in Egypt.

Background

In 2000, according to UNHCR, Egypt hosted refugees from 27 countries (see Annex I). Cairo accommodates one of the five largest refugee populations living in urban areas (Sperl 2001). The predominant feature of assistance to refugees in Egypt is that it is delivered by either churches or NGOs (some of which are UNHCR 'implementing partners') who receive financial support from international sources or by refugee-based NGOs who are largely self-funded. Egyptian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have not been prominent in providing refugee assistance. Another feature is the concentration of assistance in Cairo. This focus on Cairo discourages the dispersal of refugees throughout the country.

Early efforts to assess needs and compile information about refugee assistance in Cairo

In 1990, the Ford Foundation initiated the 'Refugee Resource Project', completed in October 1991, hosted at the American University in Cairo (AUC). This involved researchers from AUC and from the refugee community, as well as people working with refugees. It resulted in the publication of a 'Counselor's Handbook of Resources for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Cairo' (*Refugee Issues*, No.1 March 1992).

In May 1992, a workshop on 'Refugees and Displaced Persons in Egypt' was held, sponsored by the Ford Foundation and hosted at AUC. The workshop was attended by refugees, academics, local and foreign NGOs, inter-governmental organisation (IGO), and church representatives. The meeting had three objectives: to encourage NGOs and other humanitarian agencies to extend their services to refugees; to create self-reliance projects; and to establish a follow-up committee that would ensure the implementation of the workshop resolutions (Workshop Report 1992). 'The Refugee Needs Project' was started in early 1992, with the aim of assessing the needs of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Egypt; it was executed with a grant from Ford Foundation through the American University in Cairo

(Letter from Fabos, Refugee Needs Project to Frelick, U.S.C.R, April 1992). There is no written information on how the Inter-Agency meeting started although those I interviewed agreed that it was there when they first came to Cairo. Two people believed that the meetings of agencies as they are now constituted began in 1998. Before turning to discussing the Inter-Agency forum, I will present what I found to be the first attempt at creating co-ordination among refugee-based organisations in Cairo.

Early co-ordination attempts

The 1990s were marked by the growth of a considerable number of NGOs established by the Sudanese refugees who constituted a majority among the refugees in Egypt. In 1996 the Sudanese Development Initiative Abroad (SUDIA), an NGO founded in 1995 to address some of the challenges facing Sudanese refugees in Egypt, with a main focus on building the capacity of the many Sudanese organizations and groups, building networks and linkages, information dissemination and cultural activities.

SUDIA took the initiative in 1998 by establishing a co-ordinating body for the Sudanese NGOs in Egypt. A number of Sudanese voluntary organizations were invited to a workshop in June 1996. The main aim of the workshop was to discuss the idea of forming a co-ordinating body (a forum) for the NGOs. They explored the possible input of each organization to the forum and the benefit that could be reaped from working together. The letter that was sent to the organizations emphasized on the need to exchange information about the nature of work done by each organization.

The workshop was attended by twelve associations, organizations, and groups working in different fields among the Sudanese refugees. The co-ordinating body was called the 'Sudanese NGO Forum in Egypt'. A decision was made in that workshop to establish a Steering Committee for the forum; three organizations' representatives - one of whom was that of SUDIA - were chosen for the Steering Committee. SUDIA was chosen as a co-ordinator for the Forum during the first Steering Committee meeting.

The main tasks of the Steering Committee were to compile and distribute meeting minutes to the members of the Forum, to set the time and circulate the invitations for the following workshop, and to make sure that the workshop outcomes are implemented. It also had the responsibility of devising a suitable mechanism for follow-up on decisions taken by the meeting (SUDIA 1998).

The Forum was very active, meeting six times in 1996/97. At its first meeting, the programs of a number of the NGO members of the Forum were explained and the difficulties facing these organizations were discussed. Another meeting was held under the theme: "Together for the establishment of the Civil Society". A strategic plan for the Forum was devised in another meeting and several committees were formed to carry out the plans that emerged. Another meeting included a lecture on the 'Legal Protection for Refugees" and approved the mandate of the Forum. In March 1997, a training workshop on "The Management of Non-Governmental Organizations" was held (SUDIA 1998). During each of the meetings, the programs and fields of work of a number of the member organizations were reviewed and discussed. The Forum also participated to the International Conference on Sudanese Studies, held at the American University in Cairo (AUC) in collaboration between the Office of African Studies at AUC and the Sudan Studies Association of the USA (SSA-USA).

Building the capacities of the Sudanese NGOs was the main focus of SUDIA's work, in addition to building networks and linkages, information dissemination and cultural activities (SUDIA 2002). This focus explains the nature of the different training workshops held by the Forum, which included training on funding policies, proposal and report writing, financial planning and management, the

development of marketing plans - which is a vital area of need for many NGOs that produce different kinds of products that include African clothes, arts and crafts.

The Sudanese NGO Forum remained operational until October 1998; it operated as a membership body through an elected Executive Committee, and had a mandate and bylaws developed and agreed-upon by the different members. The mandate stated that funding for the different activities of the Forum should come from membership dues.

The reasons why the Forum ceased to operate are multiple and complex. Many of the NGOs that constituted the Forum are no longer alive and others are keeping a very low profile. The disintegration of many of the refugee-based organizations has also resulted from the regular resettlement by UNHCR of the 'best and the brightest' refugees to third countries including Canada, Australia, and the USA. The reasons some organizations are keeping a low profile are mainly related to security issues and the lack of registration, which renders them liable to security harassment and the clampdown by the Egyptian authorities on the activities of these organizations. It is worth mentioning that the ten year old office of the Sudan Human Rights Organization, that operated in exile from Cairo, was closed down by the Egyptian authorities in 2001. The space and freedom granted by the Egyptian authorities for the Sudanese refugee organizations is influenced by the desire of the Egyptian government to maintain good relationships with the Sudan government which has always shadowed its treatment for the Sudanese refugees within its boundaries.

The issue of membership dues also represented a major difficulty for the continuation of the Forum. Other difficulties which impeded the operation of the Forum include the repeated absence of some members from meetings, the irregular nature of the Executive Committee meetings, which made organization and follow-up difficult, and the long periods between activities (SUDIA 1998). On the other hand, the interaction and cooperation among the members, the facilitation of knowledge among the members about each other's activities, the participation to the Sudan Studies Conference, the use of the Forum-generated training material by each organization to train its own staff and members, the exercise of democracy and the exchange of opinions among the members, and the fact that the Forum became known to the Sudanese community in Egypt were all seen by the members as positive points (SUDIA).

The Inter-Agency 'forum'

Today, the Inter-Agency meeting brings together some of the agencies working with refugees. There are apparently no criteria to determine which agency becomes party or member of the forum. The meetings, as already noted, are bi-monthly, hosted each time by a different group which is responsible for compiling and circulating the minutes. Since there is no secretariat, which agency or individual gets invited to the next meeting seems to be very *ad hoc*, depending to a large extent if it was on the list of attendees at the last meeting. There is, as a result, also no source of permanent records of the work of the forum. Formerly, a government representative was in attendance at the meetings and this was perceived by some agencies as helpful. It provided them, for example, with the chance to know the laws under which they operate.

The March 2002 meeting was attended by representatives from the UNHCR Regional Office, International Organization for Migration (IOM), the US, Canadian, Australian, and Finnish embassies; All Saint's Cathedral and St. Andrew's Church (both members of the Joint Relief Ministry), Sacred Heart Church, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program – AUC, the Refugee Legal Aid Project (part of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights), the Sudanese Development Initiative Abroad (SUDIA) and MA'AN Group (both a refugee-based NGO).

A problem with the Inter-Agency forum for UNHCR is that it includes refugee-based organisations and that information shared is not kept confidential. As a result, for the past several months, UNHCR has called another meeting with the embassies of 'resettlement' countries to discuss confidential matters.

The research findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of agency representatives to explore their ideas and thoughts about co-ordination, how they see the current level of co-ordination, the constraints they experience and how they attempt to tackle them. Specific issues that were addressed in the interviews were: what needs to be co-ordinated? Is there a problem of duplication of services? Should funds be made available to facilitate co-ordinations through a secretariat? How could human and financial resources be better shared? Is there a role for the Egyptian government in promoting co-ordination?

When asked to define co-ordination, agencies emphasized on the importance of information sharing, but they agreed that co-ordination goes beyond that level. Co-ordination, they agreed, is about involving all the actors, including the refugees, and making sure that they are all informed, consulted, respected, and appreciated so that best use of human and financial resources and assets is made, that duplication of services is avoided and that complementariness in actions taken by all the partners is ensured. One respondent emphasized the importance of the responsiveness of the services to the felt needs of refugees. To some, co-ordination entailed some authority to impose decisions, but, obviously fearing such 'authority', they noted the freedom they enjoyed in the Inter-Agency forum. However the same respondent later argued that the lack of commitment to follow-up on issues raised during the meetings is the result of the non-binding nature of decisions of the Inter-Agency meeting.

When asked about the actors who need to co-ordinate their work, agencies had varying views. For UNHCR, there are two groups: the first one includes the Egyptian authorities, the NGOs, the Church groups, UNHCR and the refugee community while the second group includes the resettlement and the donor countries. Churches were not so concerned with the government as they consider themselves independent from it. FMRS saw the importance of working with the Government.

Regarding what needs to be co-ordinated, UNHCR made a minimal suggestion that all the agencies should be using the same name and case number to identify specific refugees that they kept files on. UNHCR suggested the idea of having a common beneficiary card for all refugees and asylum seekers, where each organization stamps the assistance provided to one refugee or asylum seeker, to avoid duplication of services. It was said that this idea was opposed by the agencies and, of course, many agencies continue to try to help the vast majority of refugees who have closed files. Two other areas for co-ordination were suggested by UNHCR. These are the social protection of minors and legal advocacy for refugees who are detained by the Egyptian authorities.

NGOs and UNHCR agreed on the fact that all the major fields of assistance need to be co-ordinated, including self-reliance assistance (or relief as called by some of the actors), medical and educational assistance. Sacred Heart Church representative highlighted that a new area that needs to be co-ordinated is what can be put under legal aid, he specifically spoke about the rights of refugees who are detained or subjected to inhuman treatment in different situations like women who often get raped, or domestic workers who are exploited by their employers. He emphasized that advocacy is needed in this regard.

Since there is no common database, duplication of service does occur. When asked about how they deal with such an issue, agencies had no concrete answer. All Saints Cathedral representative mentioned that they often need to 'interrogate' their beneficiaries about whether they have been recognized by UNHCR and are hence receiving UNHCR assistance through Caritas.

Assistance to refugees outside Cairo is almost absent. Only UNHCR through its implementing partner, CARITAS, provides services to refugees in Alexandria. Other agencies in Cairo seem to have no plans to expand their services elsewhere. However, through conversations with a few refugees, it appears that some churches in Alexandria are responding to the needs of refugees but there is no concrete information about their activities.

Agencies have different ways through which they incorporate the refugees in the planning and implementation of their programs. The extent of involvement of the refugees in the planning varies. UNHCR is moving towards more incorporation of refugees into setting the priorities for its programs. To develop its proposal for 2003, UNHCR had three series of meetings with the 'leaders' of refugee communities: the Yemeni, the Sudanese, and the Somali. This is a positive initiative that deserves to be strengthened, further developed, and institutionalised.

Churches use refugees as 'volunteer' workers to implement their different programs, stressing their service to the community and paying them small salaries. Although refugees are included in policy-making meetings, refugees still complain that there is not enough consultation with them or their communities on the content of programmes.

The question about the creation of a focal point for the Inter-Agency forum was met with varying responses; some of the agencies perceived it would constitute an unwelcome bureaucracy, while others were very enthusiastic about the idea. UNHCR, FMRS, and SUDIA suggested that someone should be responsible for compiling the meeting minutes, distributing invitations, keeping the list of participants and running the administrative work for the meetings. UNHCR went further to suggest that a specific theme should be identified for each meeting and guest speakers invited by the focal person.¹

In assessing the way the Inter-Agency meeting works, most of the churches saw it as satisfactory, but one complained that as the meeting has no binding role on decisions taken, it is highly inefficient. The lack of homogeneity of the partners with different mandates and interests does make it difficult for the meeting to be more than an information-sharing forum. Constraints on co-ordination, as perceived by the agencies include problems of 'confidentiality' issues which prevents UNHCR from disclosing much information, lack of consensus over key issues such as whether refugees with closed files should be beneficiaries which affects the agencies' target populations, commitment at the level of the agency to follow-up on the Inter-Agency meeting decisions, and the uninteresting nature of much of the discussions. Some agencies pointed up the problems of the no follow-up on actions proposed at the meeting and that consideration of important issues ends with the discussion at the meeting.

A healthy sign observed among the organizations is the tendency to share resources, both material and human. Sharing human resources is seen in the form of sharing expertise among the organizations, and benefiting from the skills of the staff of the different agencies. For example, SUDIA shares its facilities and proposal-writing skills with refugee-based organisations. UNHCR holds meetings in churches and at AUC with different refugee groups. Churches seem quite active in co-ordinating with other church related agencies, but less so with other agencies. UNHCR is currently extending the network of its implementing partners to include the Joint Relief Ministry, St. Andrew's Church, Care with Love, and the Cairo Family Planning Association, in addition to Caritas, which is the principal partner.

Collaboration among agencies is dominated by the reliance on good will and personal relationships. Most of the current collaboration is carried out with no written agreements. Apart from UNHCR, which

¹ An issue for discussion that was proposed by the UNHCR Regional Representative is the new Egyptian law that is being developed on the employment of foreigners to be presented to Parliament soon. UNHCR representative was hopeful that the agencies would be able to discuss that issue and come up with recommendations or a specific position that can be put in front of the Egyptian government.

follows strict partnership rules of written memoranda, reporting, and financial auditing, agencies largely depend on good intentions. Most agencies thought that special funds should be allocated to improving co-ordination. This would entail the establishment of a secretariat at the minimum.

Concerning partnerships with Egyptian organizations, UNHCR seems to have made some effort in this regard, but it is quite aware of the new Egyptian NGO Act, which puts limits on Egyptian NGOs receiving foreign funding. Apart from steps taken by JRM clinic to collaborate with the Egyptian government, for example, in the tuberculosis programme, church groups look at this kind of partnership as something that could be beneficial but have no concrete plans to do so.

Discussion

Many of the obstacles arising in relief operations spring from the lack of co-ordination among the various efforts of the different national and international actors and by failure of these actors to work effectively with local governments (Cox, 1981). Comparing the data extracted from the information collected on the history of the different efforts with refugees in Egypt since the early nineties with the current situation, the following observations emerge:

There is very little information on what the real concerns of refugees are. Even when there is an attempt to do a 'needs assessment', it is done from the agency's perspective. For example, a list of services that are already provided was put to the refugees to ask them what were their priorities. In fact, refugees never get an opportunity to talk about their real concerns, for example, the lack of opportunities for higher education, and how it could be tackled.

Rather than concentrating resources on 'traditional' handicrafts with limited saleability, the problems of earning an income and how to relate the skills of the refugees to the actual labour market should be explored. Perhaps most important is the isolation of 'refugee' agencies from the mainstream of Egyptian civil society. 'Refugee-centric' programmes risk increasing xenophobia. Finding solutions to this general problem will be difficult, but at the moment, the Inter-Agency forum does not appear to even tackle it.

Early on, there was the idea of establishing a permanent resource centre (Fabos, personal notes). One of the duties of the centre would be to regularly update the Refugee Resource Handbook. There is also the serious need to provide assistance to asylum seekers. (It is expected that the Convention on the Rights of Migrants and their Families will come into effect in September 2002. The Inter-Agency forum needs to inform itself on the provisions of this legislation and encourage Egypt, which is a party, to give legal security to these people who are not able or unwilling to go home.)

The majority of the refugees reside in Cairo mainly to be close to UNHCR and the other agencies that provide assistance but some refugees have opted to live outside Cairo because it is relatively easier to find work and cheaper accommodation in these cities, which include 6th of October City, Alexandria, Suez, Zagazig, Ismailia and Aswan. Such refugees should be documented and their needs assessed. Some research needs to be done on the strategies used by these refugees to maintain their livelihoods.

My research on the co-ordination experiences elsewhere shows the need for some co-ordinating body. In the cases of Afghanistan and Ethiopia, the co-ordinating bodies acted as links between donors and the NGOs in the field. The good intentioned efforts taking place in Egypt do not translate into positive changes in the situation of refugees. This is largely the result of the 'ad-hocracy' with which the agencies act. I would argue that the agencies working in Cairo are falling into the same pitfalls of the larger UN system. As it was described for the Former Yugoslavia:

The United Nations did not respond as a system but rather as a series of separate and largely autonomous agencies. Each had its own institutional dynamics, formulated its

own priorities, and moved according to a timetable of its own devising (Minear, Clark, Cohen, Gallagher, Guest, & Weiss 1994, as cited in Reindorp and Wiles, 2001).

In the Former Yugoslavia, the UN system was described as having a hollow core and lacking a strong capacity at the centre to provide leadership and overall co-ordination for both UN agencies and other NGOs (Borton 1996, as cited in Reindorp and Wiles, 2001).

As someone who has worked closely with the refugee community for many years in Egypt, I argue that the present ways of aid delivery are exacerbating the alienation of the refugees from their local hosts. The fact that refugee-assisting agencies do not provide the same services to hosts is already creating some competition especially in poor areas of the country like Arba O' Nos (an outskirt of Cairo). It has been frequently demonstrated that if a society is to develop, it has to conduct some cooperative activities (Cuny, 1983). By using the term society I mean treating both the refugees and their hosts as one.

In many cases bilateral relief has far-reaching political goals that may benefit from the continuation of the *status quo*. The adoption of a rights-based approach to address the problems of the refugees as part and parcel of the host community could help dissolve the barriers between the hosts and the refugees. I believe that if more Egyptian organizations were involved and addressed the issue of refugees as part of their mandates, they could act as advocates for the rights of the different segments of the community, both hosts and refugees. Foreign NGOs should least partner with and support local counterparts (Grunewald, 1999).

Recommendations:

1. A memorandum of minimum standards, which takes into account the unconditional right of the refugees to lead a dignified life with access to health and education, and their right to be free from harassment and torture should be drawn up and signed by member agencies. This could be a first step in ensuring accountability.
2. Set up a small-scale data-bank project, which would act as a resource centre for information on refugees in Egypt, and disseminate up-to-date, global information to the agencies. Devise creative methods for exchanging information.
3. Give attention to the plight of hundreds of refugee youth (15-24 year olds as defined by the UN) who have missed many years of education.
4. Take a broader look into the issue of legal aid to include not only assistance for the UNHCR status determination applications but also conduct active research into other issues. For example, explore ways through which refugee domestic workers could be protected and create a focal point for the rights of refugees who are detained by the authorities.
5. FMRS-AUC should organize outreach research projects to explore the situation of urban refugees living outside Cairo.
6. NGOs working with refugees should engage in a more active awareness and lobbying campaign among Egyptian NGOs to draw their attention to the plight of refugees and to explore and define possible areas of co-operation.
7. FMRS-AUC should resume publishing the printed newsletter 'Refugee Issues', and distribute it to the refugee community and the agencies working with refugees in Egypt. Agencies and refugee groups should be consulted for their input to the published information. The newsletter can be used as a

link with Egyptian organizations as well. FMRS should seek ways to make the newsletter available to Egyptian journalists.

References:

Bennet, Jon (1995) 'Afghanistan: Cross-Border NGO Coordination, 1985-93', in Bennet, Jon, with Mark Duffied, Monika Kathina Juma, Hohn Borton, Alun Burge, and Charlotte Besndon, 1995 Meeting Needs, NGO Coordination in Practice. London: Earthscan Publications Limited.

Cox, George W. 1981, The Ecology of Famine: An Overview, in Famine, Its Causes, Effects and Management. Robson, John R.K ed. Pp. 5-18. NY, London, Paris: Gordon and Breach.

Cuny, C. Frederick (1983), Disaster and Development, NY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Fabos, Anita, personal notes (undated), The Refugee Resource Project.

"General information on SUDIA, 2002", Sudanese Development Initiative Abroad (SUDIA), public document.

Grunewald, Francois (1999), in Pirotte Claire, Husson Bernard, Grunewald Francois, eds.1999 Responding to Emergencies and Fostering Development. London: Zed Books & NY: Room 400.

Letter from A. Fabos, Refugee Needs Project to Bill Frelick, U.S. Committee for Refugees, 13 April 1992.

Refugee Issues, No.1 March 1992. A newsletter from the Refugee Needs Project, Office of African studies, The American University in Cairo.

Reindorp, Nicola and Wiles, Peter (June 2001) 'Humanitarian Co-ordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience, A study commissioned by the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'. Overseas Development Institute, London, in: <http://www.un.org> (Accessed: 14.05.02)

Reports on the workshop: Refugees and Displaced Persons in Egypt, 2 May 1992.

"Report on the performance of the Sudanese NGO forum for the period August 96- October 1998", Sudanese Development Initiative Abroad (SUDIA), (Internal reports), 1988.

Sperl, Stephan (2001), 'Evaluation of the UNHCR's policy on urban areas: a case study review of Cairo', EPAU: 1-61.

Annex I: Refugees in Egypt by nationality

(At 31 December 2000)

Origin	Female	Male	Total
Afghanistan	18	42	60
Albania	2	1	3
Algeria	3	3	6
Angola		1	1
Armenia	1		1
Burundi	12	24	36
Bosnia & Herzegovina	5	1	6
China	2	1	3
Republic of Congo	6	4	10
Democratic Republic of Congo	4	5	9
Djibouti	2	5	7
Eritrea	1	12	13
Ethiopia	26	28	54
Iran		1	1
Iraq	23	25	48
Kuwait	1		1
Liberia	2	40	42
Libya	1	3	4
Nigeria		1	1
Russian Federation		2	2
Rwanda	7	17	24
Sierra Leone	44	98	142
Somalia	1,321	1,289	2,610
Sudan	1,288	1,545	2,833
Syria		4	4
Yemen	335	348	683
Fed Republic of Yugoslavia	13	10	23
Stateless	100	40	140
Others	25	48	73
Total	3,242	3,598	6,840

(UNHCR, 2001).