
International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)

Statement to The Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA II)

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies wishes to thank the ICARA II Steering Committee for the invitation to make a statement on behalf of nongovernmental organizations. We wish to offer these few remarks from our perspective as an association of 71 voluntary agencies from both the north and the south. For many years, voluntary agencies have provided the channels for millions of individuals and families to express their humanitarian concern for refugees in Africa.

The Overall Context

Voluntary agencies have traditionally played a very special role in helping refugees. Being community-based organizations, they have first-hand knowledge of the problems faced by refugees and by the communities that receive them in their midst. Because of this, they often have to assume the role of advocates on behalf of these afflicted groups with respect to governments, intergovernmental organizations and the agencies' own constituencies. The ICVA publications, entitled "Timely Solutions — Voluntary Agencies and African Refugees" and "Assistance to African Refugees by Voluntary Organizations", which have been prepared for this conference, provide details of the contributions being made by voluntary agencies.

We are conscious of the need to approach the refugee situation within the broader context of Africa's current economic and social crisis. This crisis has rapidly escalated in recent years and has now reached a critical level as a result of widespread, severe and persistent drought, and the rapidly deteriorating international economic environment (see the special memorandum prepared by the Conference of Ministers of the Economic Commission for Africa for the 1984 second regular session of ECOSOC — E/ECA/CM.10/37/Rev. 1).

African governments are now formulating strategies to redress the situation. Yet, for the most part, they are currently unable to meet the material needs of their own growing populations, let alone those of the refugees. This extremely serious situation is affecting the traditional hospitality of some African governments and peoples towards refugees.

Protection

While recognizing these problems, we trust that African governments will comply fully with the various Conventions and UN Resolutions relating to the international protection of refugees, and that they will avoid any form of forced repatriation. In this connection, ICVA agencies warmly welcome the unanimous adoption by the organization of African Unity of the Charter on Human and People's Rights and hope that all African governments will shortly ratify it.

The Response

Over the past few years, the international community has increasingly recognized the need for new approaches in assisting refugees. Past responses have proved to be inadequate or not fully effective, and durable solutions have remained elusive. In early 1983, however, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme began a detailed study of the links between "refugee aid and development". This concept, which the voluntary agencies understand well, has been incorporated into the thinking behind ICARA II.

The adoption of this concept should enable African governments to consider their approach to the arrival of new groups of refugees within the context of development programmes for the whole

area into which the refugees are moving. This may allow them to avoid the temptation of setting up camps, or settlements artificially separated from host communities, which foster among the refugees a state of dependency on outside assistance and which may eventually stifle the initiative of whole communities, thereby lessening their ability to help themselves. Conversely, the international community must stand ready, not only to provide emergency assistance but also to address, from the outset, the developmental requirements which a refugee influx creates in a specific area. It is essential to involve the refugees in all phases of the search for durable solutions: the identification of needs, and project planning, implementation and evaluation.

Overall UNHCR Responsibility

ICARA II provides a forum and an opportunity for addressing the structural problems facing host governments and the international community in meeting the needs of refugees and local populations, and in making equitable arrangements for sharing the burden. The participation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Conference's Steering Committee and its role in preparing the project outlines are welcomed. However, this must not be allowed to detract from the paramount role of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the field of assistance to refugees, whether the projects are funded through his office or through other UN agencies. While UNDP may have a role to play in the follow-up to 5(C) projects, we believe that UNHCR still has the overall responsibility in this area as well. We have also noted another form of collaboration which involves cooperation between UNHCR and the World

Bank in a refugee-related rural project and we shall be watching with interest for examples of innovative cooperation between other UN development agencies and UNHCR, and for the possible participation of voluntary agencies in such projects.

Implementing Structures

ICVA has begun a process of reviewing the ICARA II projects in order to assess the role which voluntary agencies might play and to identify those projects most suitable for their involvement. The reviews, which will be completed by the end of 1984, are being undertaken on a country-by-country basis and a group of ICVA member agencies, specialized in various aspects of agriculture, health, water, infrastructure, social affairs, education and training, has recently completed an analysis of one country's projects. ICVA is prepared to make these reviews available to interested parties.

It is clear that additional resources could be obtained for some countries where the need is greatest, provided that suitable implementing structures exist. This requires the development of genuine cooperation arrangements between host government, intergovernmental organizations and voluntary agencies. ICVA stresses the importance of establishing or strengthening in each country the appropriate coordinating mechanism for both local and international voluntary agencies. Such bodies would undertake the following tasks: information sharing; liaison with government departments and intergovernmental organizations; and, situation analysis and programme development. We recognize that, unless strong mechanisms for cooperation exist, there will always be a danger of duplication, inappropriate distribution, and misunderstanding between voluntary agencies, governments and intergovernmental organizations.

The question of the arrangements for project implementation is of particular importance in relation to the 5(C) projects. The gap, which has arisen in recent years between humanitarian relief and development assistance programmes, is partly responsible for the current need to obtain additional resources for infrastructural development in the areas affected by refugee influxes. In order to

fill this gap, voluntary agencies believe that, in some circumstances, they are well placed to make effective use of the additional resources which donor governments are willing to offer under the 5(C) heading. However, the development of satisfactory implementing arrangements will involve concerted co-operative efforts among governments, UNHCR, UNDP and voluntary agencies in each country in which these projects are being carried out. We have no single recipe to put forward, but we do believe that the coordination of agency resources within the framework of a consortium will often be a successful arrangement. Voluntary agencies consider that the organization of follow-up arrangements to ICARA II is of crucial importance and are ready to participate at all levels of the process.

Additionality

Donor governments will recognize from the above that the principle of "additionality" is an essential component of any long-term solution. We are happy to note that some governments have accepted the principle of "additionality" and we hope that other donors will be able to announce major additional contributions as ICARA II progresses or during its immediate aftermath. In this context, it should also be recognized that durable solutions require a multi-year financial commitment. Further, we believe that host governments also have an obligation to do everything possible to ensure the success of this new approach by integrating refugee programmes into the government's development plans. Conditions should be established which are conducive to the full and durable settlement of refugees, including facilities for naturalization and for the granting to new refugee rural communities of a status identical to that of indigenous rural communities.

Root Causes

Whereas voluntary agencies actively support these new and innovative responses to the refugee problem in Africa, they recognize that there will be no lasting solution unless the root causes are adequately addressed. One of the major causes is political instability in the region. We would urge all the governments present to show the political will to tackle this element of the crisis in a creative way. In this respect,

we feel that the armaments race contributes to the current crises not only in Africa but elsewhere. A second major cause is the general crisis of economic underdevelopment and poverty in many parts of the continent. In this context, we believe that much more emphasis must be placed on prevention and anticipation including, where necessary, aid to potential countries of exodus.

While supporting the general view that voluntary repatriation represents the preferred solution to all refugee situations, we believe that voluntary repatriation requires, not only the establishment of appropriate political conditions in the country of origin, but also a specific programme, not limited by artificial time constraints, of economic and social rehabilitation for the area where the returnees are to be settled. This should also be coordinated within the overall development policy of the country of origin.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to emphasize three points.

Firstly, we believe that the international community should now entrust the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with the responsibility for mobilizing and involving the development agencies, within and outside the UN system, from the moment that a new refugee situation emerges. These agencies should address the development components of the situation from the start, and should not wait until the needs are so overwhelming that another conference such as ICARA II becomes necessary.

Secondly, we would like to stress our conviction that refugees and their families, in close cooperation with the host community and local voluntary agencies, should participate in the planning and implementation of projects promoting their durable settlement.

Finally, we believe that ICARA II constitutes the first stage in a process which deserves the genuine support of the international community. ICVA pledges its support towards achieving the objectives of this Conference and is prepared to participate in any follow-up consultation.

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL
ASSEMBLY