UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | Yemen

2023 Participatory Assessment

Refugees & Asylum-Seekers

December 2023

Isaac, a Somali returnee with family, said "I took this decision to return to Somalia for my children." Isaac was one of 159 Somali refugees who returned home on this boat with UNHCR's support. Refugees from Hadramout, Sana'a, and Aden together in this journey for the first time. © UNHCR/Mysa Khalaf

Overview

Yemen remains the only country in the Arabian Peninsula to accede to the 1951 Convention and its Protocol. As of 31 October 2023, Yemen hosts 71,760 refugees and asylum-seekers. While Yemen has generously hosted refugees for decades, refugees and asylum-seekers suffer from discriminatory attitudes and legal barriers when accessing public services or pursuing livelihood opportunities because of the protracted conflict and the shrinking protection space and humanitarian support.

Participatory Assessment (PA) exercises are conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the concerns, priorities, and capacities of refugees, asylum-seekers, and host communities. Using an approach guided by UNHCR's principle of age, gender, and diversity (AGD), participatory assessments help ensure those who are forcibly displaced are at the centre of decision-making and programme design and that a broad diversity of viewpoints and experiences are considered.

During the exercise, UNHCR, partners, and those forcibly displaced actively discuss protection risks and concerns, and solutions proposed by refugees and asylum-seekers. The PA is an important tool for engaging displacement affected populations in structured dialogue, for seeking frank feedback on the services provided by UNHCR and its partners, and for better understanding the general protection environment in the country. The outcomes of the exercise serve as a key element of UNHCR's overall programming and provide a strong basis for reflection on its current programmes and how they can be further improved in the coming year.

The 2023 PA exercise was conducted by UNHCR in collaboration with partner organizations and authorities. Between September and October 2023, multi-functional teams (MFT) conducted focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and semi-structured discussions with refugees and asylum-seekers, throughout Yemen. UNHCR and partners ensured adequate representation in terms of age, gender, and persons with specific needs.

Methodology

UNHCR's Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations is the primary guiding document for conducting PAs. Other key guiding documents for conducting PAs include, but are not limited to, the updated UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender, and Diversity (March 2018), the UNHCR Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected People (September 2020), and the UNHCR Pocket Guide on Reporting: AGD Accountability Report (2018).

MFTs were assembled with staff from UNHCR, partners, and authorities. Purposive sampling, as well as random and non-random selection was used to select a wide-ranging representation of refugees and asylum-seekers. The data was collected and analysed using Kobo-based forms. Overall, 598 asylum seekers, refugees, and members of the host community were engaged in the exercise in Aden, Amanat al-Asimah, and Al-Mukalla governorates. In addition, in Sana'a city, UNHCR conducted two focus discussion groups with members of the host-community.

Summary of findings

The leading protection risks and concerns voiced by refugees and asylum-seekers relate to basic needs and child protection, followed by concerns about physical protection, access to education, and healthcare.

Basic needs, including housing – The majority of people with specific needs or vulnerable profile reported that they are unable to meet their basic needs. These same people face heightened protection risks as a result of limited livelihood opportunities. This has led to the reduction of meals to one or two meals a day and children dropping out of school to search for casual day work or begging. Women and girls, female-headed/single parents expressed concerns of harassment and abuse when trying to secure basic needs, including accommodation and employment.

With the majority of refugees and asylum-seeker residing in cities, there is widespread concern over increasing rent prices with fears of eviction. Participants noted that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and exploitation by landlords. Women and girls who are homeless reported being at particular risk of harassment and violence, in addition to being at heightened risk of injury and illness. Refugees and asylum-seekers reported being excluded from winter assistance distributed by and within the host community. A lack of decent income-generating opportunities was reported by almost all participants, regardless of their age, gender, nationality, and/or specific needs. The general economic context in Yemen, discrimination, a lack of documentation, a lack of childcare, and a lack of relevant skills were cited as factors. Efforts to remedy this were often given as a recommendation by respondents.

Child Protection - Refugee and asylum-seeking children and adolescents reported that they regularly experience verbal harassment, violence, discrimination, and bullying in public and at school. Some children reported not being enrolled in school though they expressed the wish to continue their studies. Some did not go to school due to reports of harassment and discrimination from the community due to their ethnicity. Children with parents living with a disability reported harassment and bulling at school. Many children reported they are unable to meet their basic needs and a lack of child-friendly spaces and playgrounds.

The other top concerns are below but are not limited to:

Physical and Legal Protection - Even with valid refugee or asylum-seeker certificates, some reported fears for their safety and security, impacting their freedom of movement. Women and girls in particular expressed concerns for their physical safety. Those living with a disability reported stigma and discrimination. Some participants reported legal cases remaining open or unresolved for long periods of time. Moreover, women who have resorted to harmful coping mechanisms reported risk of trafficking, exploitation, arrest, and rape, with limited recourse.

Education – There is a high dropout rate among asylum seeker and refugee children. The reasons being physical punishment, bullying, theft, discrimination, harassment, language barriers, and school fees. Youth and parents requested increased scholarships. While lack of civil documentation often prevented parents from enrolling their children. For some, Arabic language requirements precluded access to education.

Healthcare – Refugee and asylum-seekers reported increased cases of chronic illness, psychosocial distress, and mental disorders. They reported that the healthcare provided is of poor quality and are unable to pay related fees. Many respondents reported on the limited availability of medical services and medicines provided at the five health clinics UNHCR supports.

Cash Assistance - Refugees and asylum-seekers reported a reduction in the amount and frequency of cash distribution as compared to 2021 and noted that the cessation of the continuous cash assistance affected their socio-economic situation and contributed to an increase in evictions and reliance on harmful coping mechanisms, including reducing food intake and dropping out of school. Some also expressed concern or fatigue over the socio-economic assessment and subsequent selection process.

Durable Solutions – Refugees and asylum-seekers reported the lack of resettlement opportunities and the lack of meaningful local integration and livelihood opportunities as barriers to solutions. Some reconfirmed protection risks as the reason for displacement with no prospect of return in the near future. Some expressed interest in the assisted spontaneous return programmes.

Registration and documentation - Refugees and asylum-seekers reported obstacles to accessing registration and document renewal due to the distance to registration centres, discrimination based on nationality, and specific procedural requirements linked to documentation and medical examinations. Restrictions on freedom of movement were also flagged as a barrier to registration. Others cited a lack of information on the registration process.

Communication with communities and complaint and feedback mechanisms – Some participants reported that they were not aware of the available complaint and feedback mechanisms, while some who were aware didn't trust the system.

Conclusion

Refugees and asylum-seekers are seeing services reducing. Refugees and asylum-seekers requested regular and predictable access to basic and essential services, and physical and legal protection environment as their top priority. There is interest among all communities in exploring possibilities for self-reliance. Self-reliance encompasses income generating activities, livelihoods, and access to formal education and training. A common recommendation from refugees and asylum-seeker youth, women, and those with specific needs is for income-generating opportunities. There were requests for UNHCR to prioritize advocacy for the recognition of refugees and asylum-seeker identity documents so they can receive work permits, access financial institutions, and basic services.

Related, is the need for UNHCR to increase awareness among refugee and asylum-seeker communities on registration and documentation so that displaced communities can access the services that are available to them. Such as free healthcare at one of the five health clinics across Yemen. There were recommendations to expand access to services and improve the quality of healthcare at these clinics.

There were recommendations, in the north, to establish representation committees in urban areas to support and improve community cohesion. This also would mean continuing the work to enhance the communication channels and complain and feedback mechanisms.

In the longer term, there were recommendations to increase resettlement opportunities. Refugees want to ensure that those with serious medical conditions are also considered.

Throughout the exercise, it was clear refugees and asylum-seekers are feeling the impact of the deteriorating economy and underfunding of the humanitarian response.

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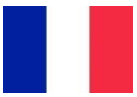

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