Session 3C: Third Country Children in urban settings: the Middle East

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Using the specific context of Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, this panel explored issues of protection and care for separated, unaccompanied and other vulnerable children. While many refugee cases are based on the camp model of service provision, a major factor in the Iraqi refugee case is its urban context. Iraqi refugees living in Amman and Damascus rely primarily on their own resources to survive. Any attempt to address the issues identifying vulnerable children and ensuring that they are appropriately protected and cared for should take into consideration the overall social, psychological and cultural contexts of the region.

Over half of the world’s refugees live in urban settings. UNHCR is currently developing policy specifically related to protecting refugees in urban settings. Particularly difficult in an urban environment is the question of how to access a population that appears in many ways to blend in with local city-dwellers. Mobile phones are often used to locate refugees, but as families are forced to cut back on monthly expenses, this primary method of identification becomes problematic. Furthermore, many refugees are fearful of exposing themselves the authorities and are severely affected by the violence that they have personally experienced. As a group, Iraqi refugees appear unwilling to “tell on their neighbors” and report others in need of vital services. Only a percentage of Iraqi refugees have registered with UNHCR making it difficult to plan and organize appropriate programs and services.

Syria

Because of the difficulty many non-governmental organizations face in registering in Syria, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and local faith based groups are often the only organizations operating on the ground. There is no social work system in Syria, meaning that many of the issues related to psychosocial care and protection of unaccompanied and vulnerable children often fall below the radar. The lack of non-governmental services is supported by the government’s view of itself as the sole party responsible for looking after the welfare of citizens. Because of the cultural context of a collective society, many in the region have yet to identify unaccompanied vulnerable children as a specific issue in need of addressing. Given the collective nature of Arab society, many feel that the care of such children is the responsibility of extended families and entire communities.

UNHCR originated estimated that .5% of roughly 1.2 million Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR in Syria are unaccompanied and separated children. Based on the number of Iraqi children involved in programs provided by UNHCR, this number may be more along the lines of 4-5%, which has helped to place unaccompanied and separated children back on the agenda. In
a study conducted in August this year, UNHCR found an increasing number of juvenile domestic and street workers – children forced to drop out of school in order to support their families. Of roughly a dozen Iraqi girls in juvenile and rehabilitation centers in Syria, the majority are survivors of Sex and Gender-Based Violence, including rape and forced prostitution. UNHCR currently supports Safe Houses in Damascus for women and girls, and many Catholic Church workers provide additional welfare services. Without a consistent system of child welfare and social welfare services in Syria, cases in which extreme protect is needed are falling through the cracks, when the provision of these services is not within the mandate of a specific organization.

Jordan

UNHCR has significantly expanded its operations in Jordan over the past year. As of September 2008, 55,000 Iraqi refugees have registered with UNHCR in Jordan, including roughly 100 unaccompanied or separated children. Thought its implementing partner Questscope, UNHCR supports group home care for these unaccompanied and separated children. This form of care may be optimal in some cases, especially because identifying potential foster families is particularly difficult in an urban setting. Iraqi refugee youth (mainly males ages 16-18) in group homes have established close friendships through helping one another, even though many came from very different sectarian backgrounds. For separated children living with extended families, UNHCR recommends visitation at least once per month, as a family's unique situation can change with time. Many single Iraqi mothers have remarried Jordanian men, who may or may not want any responsibility in raising stepchildren. Other parents have chosen to return to Iraq, or migrate illegally to countries such as Sweden in search of a better life.

Overall, there is a lack of “safe space” for Iraqi refugee children in Jordan, especially those not able to regularly attend school. The current climate of insecurity and uncertainty is not conducive for recovery. However initial positive outcomes have been seen in programs of music and drama therapy as a vehicle for addressing psychosocial trauma.

Resources:

- Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guiding principles on working with separated and unaccompanied children
- IASC guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings
- Heightened Risk Identification tool (used in Jordan – shown it may not be successful unless accompanied with adequate training)
- BID guidelines – developed by UNHCR, Jordan

Next steps:

- Reduce negative chain reaction/ multiplying effect following exposure by altering child’s risk
- Establish and maintain self esteem and self efficacy
- Greater clarity in assessment & data collection, terminology, etc.
- Application of consistent social work principles
- Training for para-social workers (awareness, outreach, monitoring, etc.)
• Exit strategy (durable solution of resettlement available for most vulnerable cases)
• Programs designed to strengthen existing welfare system