

Stories from the field

UNDP Deployee in Djibouti – Doris Knoechel

Here, you are used to read exciting stories from the field – when disaster strikes, we are sent urgently to save lives, and our engagement makes a tangible difference for people who are suffering. We as humanitarian workers get a good part of our ‘reward’ from that feeling of being needed – I was part of it in my recent deployments to the Iraq crisis in Erbil and Basra and to the humanitarian impact of the Boko Haram incursions in Northern Cameroon.

My actual mission as the Strategic Advisor to the UN Resident Coordinator in Djibouti is different. Djibouti is different! Djibouti is the calm eye of the storm at the turbulent Horn of Africa.

However, it has a protracted refugee caseload ranking among the 10 countries burdened with the highest refugee proportion per capita, while about a quarter of its citizens lives under the extreme poverty line and nearly half of the workforce is unemployed and low skilled.

To address the ever growing displacement crisis, a new initiative launched in 2016 by the UN Secretary General aims for a Comprehensive Refugee Response engaging the international community in;

- alleviating the burden on hosting countries;
- financially supporting the integration in host societies when return is no option;
- facilitating self-reliance of refugees as much as possible.

The president of Djibouti has paved the way towards realizing this new approach by promulgating an innovative law to accept refugee children in the national education system and open up the country’s health facilities for refugees – no more parallel systems with different standards in camps and in communities. Most importantly, refugees are granted freedom of movement, freedom of seeking employment or creating an own business under the same rules as nationals.

This marks the end of the ‘direct care –and-maintenance model’ in separate refugee camps



and a shift towards an ‘area development’ with integrated national and refugee residents enjoying together the same basic communal services and livelihood opportunities in settlements, villages, and towns.

In order to make this happen, we have to adopt a ‘New Way of Working’ (NWoW). This term, coined at the Humanitarian Summit, means breaking down traditional silos and bridging the longstanding humanitarian – development divide. No longer should year after year short term budgets aliment camp services like emergency health posts and emergency refugee education - these funds go now into the national budgets of the line ministries who provide the services to refugees and villagers alike. In reality much more money is needed to enhance the often rudimentary national service delivery for all in the mid- and longer term. Development actors such as the World Bank, African Bank, and The European Union step up with dedicated loans and grants in support of the integrated development, resulting hopefully soon in improved conditions for nationals and refugees.

The most challenging component of this concept is the self – reliance of refugees in a context of high unemployment and an environment not conducive to small business. There must be investment in the productive capacities of the refugees, market studies need to guide our professional formation programs in the direction of dynamic sectors that hold growth, job creation and absorption of employees with the matching skills. We have started to ‘think market’, but there is still a distance to bridge. We need to reach out to the private sector and incorporate a stronger economic focus in our 4-year development planning while traditionally the UN agencies have their comparative advantages and expertise in the social sectors like health and education, we also engage in rural development to build resilience against adverse effects of climate change.

This is in broad strokes the bigger picture of the NWoW applied practically with the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) – a holistic view on the society we work in, where a diversity of partners start from a shared problem analysis and work together towards agreed common outcomes to reach over a term of 3-5 years.



In my day-to-day work as the Strategic Advisor to the Resident Coordinator I struggle already with minor obstacles: currently I am working on our Contingency planning getting prepared for a major influx of migrants and refugees across potentially all borders, because the sparks of civil unrest, outright war, tight control by martial law and not least the threat of Al Shebab terrorism jumps around in the region and can ignite massive population movements at any moment. Just in these days, in the end of March, 10 000 villagers fled from Oromo region in Ethiopia to Kenya, because soldiers had ‘accidentally’ killed 9 men.

While the two agencies mandated to respectively support refugees and migrants, have each their own procedures to manage a population influx, they are both present at the border crossings, both receive arrivals and offer initial assistance in reception centers, yet they drafted each a separate plan starting even from different assumptions , planning figures and scenarios. Out of the office of the UN Resident Coordinator I am now harmonizing the two plans. Once agreed on a joint baseline to work from, we can then present the planning to UN key partners like WFP and UNICEF for their support and input. In addition, we can include Non-Governmental organizations and Community Based

Organizations who often are the first to respond – ultimately then offering the draft to the government who is the lead of the response, registering arrivals and contributing with staff and material. With a consolidated contingency plan we can swiftly apply for a Central Emergency Response Funding (CERF) if needed.

Unfortunately an influx – moderate or massive, from one border or simultaneously from 2 borders – is not the only scenario we need to prepare for. Djibouti is extremely dependent on vital supply from Ethiopia - from fresh food and drinking water to fuel and power – all arriving from Ethiopia via one road, train and pipelines. Just one strike on the other side of the border resonates immediately in Djibouti.

It may sound like a joke, but on my way home in the afternoon I, even as foreigner, notice how the dynamics and flows in the city and in the suburbs change when the QAT supply from Ethiopia - probably the best organized trade! - is interrupted.

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