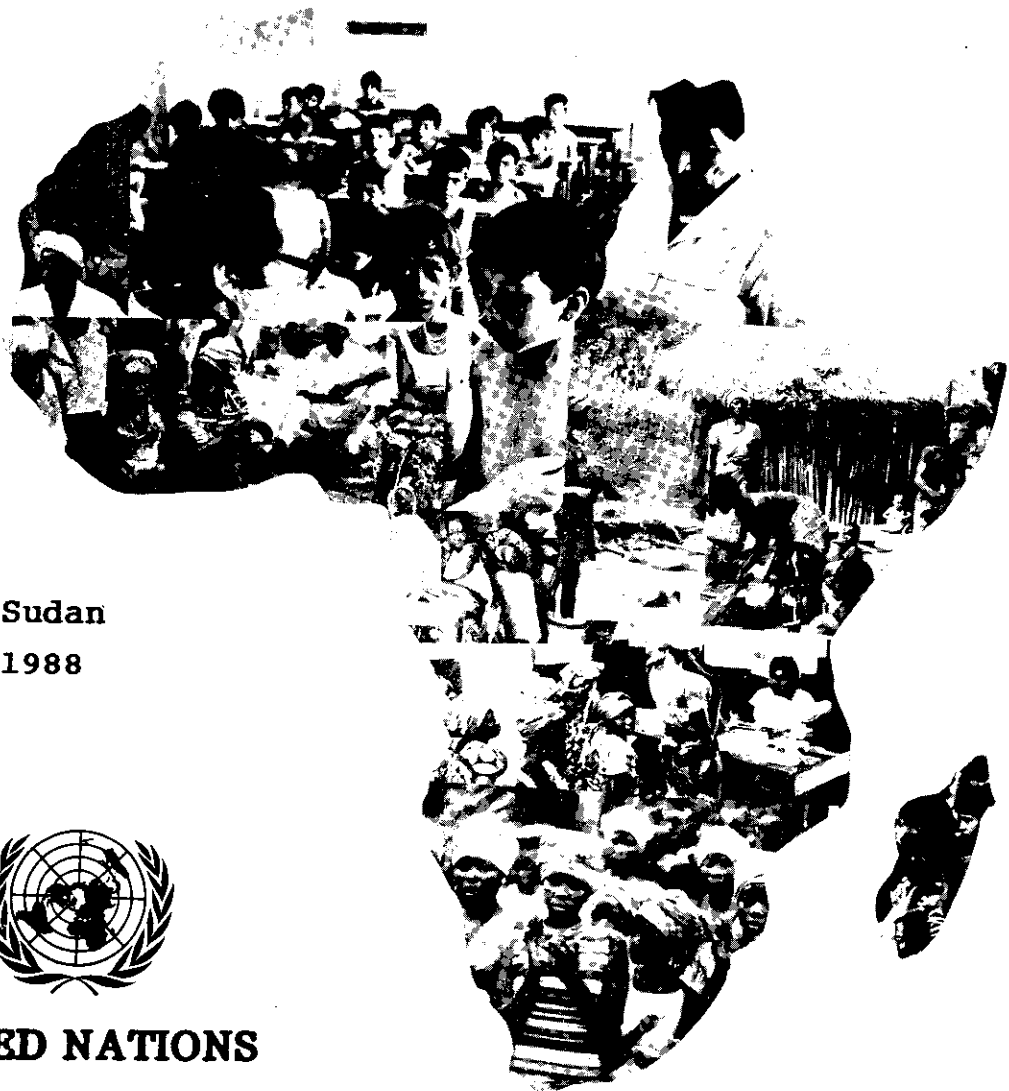


# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF AFRICA'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON VULNERABLE GROUPS  
IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES, REFUGEES

by

United Nations High Commissioner  
for Refugees (UNHCR)



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## A. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper considers the impact of the economic crisis on refugees: persons who have been forced to flee their country either because of a well-founded fear of persecution or because of external aggression, occupation, foreign dominance or events seriously disturbing public order. In many cases, economic factors are likely to be contributory causes of flight. Once asylum is found, economic factors will determine to a great extent the prospects for refugee self-sufficiency and the impact on the hosts, and may also influence the prospects for voluntary repatriation after the political causes of flight have disappeared.

2. Eight of the ten countries of origin for the largest numbers of refugees on the continent are in the least developed category, as are all the main countries of asylum. The majority of refugees are located in the least developed areas within these countries. In these circumstances, it is evident that the economic crisis has compounded the problem of refugees. At the same time, the problem of refugees itself exacerbates the crisis. Vital human resources are lost to the country of origin. The pressures on the economy, infrastructure, natural environment and social framework of the country of asylum are increased just as a declining economy is making them less supportable.

## B. BACKGROUND AND PROSPECTS

3. Two related developments are of particular significance when considering refugees in the context of the economic crisis. First, the decline in food production by the subsistence farmer. Food shortages in areas affected by events seriously disturbing public order were the major contributory factors to the large-scale population displacements in the 1984-1986 African emergency. Drought was the immediate cause of these shortages, but the disaster was not primarily natural and unavoidable. Second, the rural exodus and consequent rapid growth of the urban centres, which has put great pressure on urban society.

4. As a result of the economic crisis, increasingly large numbers of African refugees are facing long-term dependence on outside assistance, without any real prospect of economic self-sufficiency and the concomitant start to regaining self-respect. Even some rural settlements that had been self-supporting and integrated within national structures for several years have required renewed international assistance, particularly for the recurrent costs of services.

5. Many others among Africa's refugees are not directly assisted by the international community but have settled spontaneously in towns or villages, in some cases 20 or more years ago. In times of economic growth spontaneously settled refugees often made significant contributions to national economies. Now they are among the first to suffer from inflation, shortages, the breakdown of services and unemployment. As these pressures mount on urban populations, some governments have felt compelled to adopt measures that effectively limit the residence or employment rights of urban refugees, thereby accelerating their decline from self-sufficiency.

6. Within refugee communities, the effects of the economic crisis have been particularly severe on women and children. Some of the consequences are obvious and felt immediately. Others manifest themselves over time. Perhaps the single most important problem is the lack of proper educational opportunities for refugee children. This lack is evident in the great majority of refugee situations and reflects many factors. Some - such as the difficulties in reconciling conflicting considerations with regard to the preferred language of instruction - are unrelated to the economic crisis. But the crisis has increased the magnitude of the problem and thus the danger that still larger numbers of African children will be denied the opportunity to develop their individual potential. In turn, their potential contribution to continued African economic recovery and development will be irretrievably lost.

7. Political considerations apart, unless economic decline can be arrested and recovery begins, the prognosis is bleak. The well-being of existing refugees will be further threatened, both immediately and as a result of solutions becoming still more difficult to achieve, whether because self-sufficiency in the country of asylum becomes unattainable or because, even after voluntary repatriation, economic conditions inhibit reintegration. The burden on the countries of asylum, and particularly on the poorest of the poor among the hosts in the areas most affected by the presence of refugees, will increase. More persons will be uprooted or feel forced to uproot themselves and cross frontiers. Many will be refugees, others might more correctly be described as mass-distress migrants. Both groups would suffer greatly, and be part of and contribute to deepening the economic and social crisis in Africa. This cycle of despair can and must be prevented.

#### C. ACTION TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

8. Discussion of measures that could help prevent refugee flows is outside the scope of this paper. However, it may be noted that the OAU's African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights entered into force in October 1986. Its further ratification and respect for its provisions would make a major contribution, not only to the prevention of new refugee flows but also to the creation of conditions that would favour repatriation. Where economic factors are contributory causes of flight, it is equally evident that successful measures to promote economic recovery and development, particularly of the rural poor, will also help avert new flows and favourably influence repatriation. In this respect therefore, solving the economic crisis will contribute to both the prevention and solution of problems of refugees.

9. Whatever form measures to address the economic problems take, they can only be successful if they are able to build on an assured respect for the basic principles governing the treatment of refugees. These principles are embodied in the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, to which 33 of the 51 OAU member States have now acceded. The Convention affirms that the granting of asylum to refugees is a peaceful and humanitarian act and shall not be regarded as an unfriendly act, and stresses the importance of the principles of "non refoulement" and of voluntary repatriation. The 1979 Arusha Conference on the Situation of

Refugees in Africa reaffirmed that respect for these principles should be considered as a fundamental right of refugees.

10. Once asylum has been granted, all concerned must respect the strictly humanitarian, civilian and non-political character that is inherent in the concept of refugee status and explicit in the provisions of the OAU Convention. A refugee has a right to security, and must in turn respect the laws and regulations of his or her country of asylum. But real solutions cannot be found, nor the potential benefits of refugees to their country of asylum be realized, unless the right to work, of movement in search of work, and of access to markets is also granted. Where refugee problems remain unresolved for many years, special consideration should be given to the full equation of refugees' rights and responsibilities with those of nationals by facilitating naturalization. Of particular concern is the fact that many Africans born refugees are now reaching adulthood "in limbo" in the countries where their parents were granted asylum a generation ago.

11. Before considering how the burdens on and of refugees might be lightened it may be noted that certain improvements will not be possible without major social change to correct underlying problems that are not refugee-specific, though they become more acute for refugees. In some societies the role of women places responsibilities on them that can become unworkable in the context of life in a refugee camp. It is, for example, often not possible for a refugee woman alone to attend food distribution and fetch water and firewood as well as cook, keep house and care for children. Yet such may be expected of her even when she is not the head of family.

12. The economic policy reforms, structural adjustments and other measures that may be required to deal with the economic crisis will provide the framework for measures to address the needs of refugees and to ease the burden on their hosts. Within this framework there is an emerging consensus on the approach to the problem of refugees. This requires that assistance to refugees and to the areas affected by their presence should be provided in a manner that is integrated within national development plans and thus allows best use of the resources available through national and international institutions.

13. In 1984, the second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA II) set out the concept of development-oriented assistance to refugees and returnees. ICARA II also considered the impact of refugees on national economies and sought to mobilize assistance to strengthen social and economic infrastructure and thereby help alleviate the burden of refugees and returnees. The economic crisis and the African emergency limited the practical results, but have underlined the need for such an approach. Some momentum would already be regained by the redirection by donors to appropriate development projects of unused funds originally allocated to the emergency.

14. The presence of refugees and the direct assistance available through UNHCR, which already benefits certain of their immediate hosts, must be used as a catalyst for the mobilization of additional resources for the development of these areas, planned as a coherent whole and within the national and international development process. While the direct assistance

available through UNHCR to returnees after repatriation is limited in scope and duration, the same approach is no less important for the reintegration of former refugees. It will help promote the most desirable solution for a refugee and also lessen the likelihood that economic factors alone would precipitate a second flight.

15. For this approach to succeed, a number of actions must be taken or consolidated. First, the government of asylum must be convinced of its validity and take the necessary measures for its implementation. The OAU Council of Ministers has invited member States to take the necessary measures to incorporate refugee and returnee programmes into national plans. For many governments the critical question is "additionality": the funds required to implement integrated programmes should be additional to the resources that would have been available either through UNHCR's normal assistance or for non-refugee-related development assistance. The history of joint projects to date suggests that the donors will be prepared to make extra funds available. UNHCR has already demonstrated its ability to assist in initial fund-raising.

16. Host governments must also take practical measures to ensure the necessary co-ordination among the national entity responsible for refugees, the planning ministry and the technical ministries. An enhanced role for the latter is important even with respect to UNHCR's normal assistance. Without the proper involvement of the appropriate technical ministry, much of the potential benefits to local communities and infrastructure from the resources UNHCR can make directly available may be lost.

17. For their part, UNHCR and international development organizations must reinforce their own co-operation. Within the United Nations system, procedures to make the best use of available resources and expertise have been developed, as for example the co-operation between UNDP and UNHCR on refugees and development, and must be further refined. However, the key to success lies in the mobilization of development institutions that have not hitherto considered the problem of refugees as either a proper concern or a priority. Such mobilization should also include the non-governmental developmental sector at both the international and often neglected national level. The general public in some host countries is increasingly conscious of and concerned at the impact of refugees, and action is necessary to inform public opinion of the aims and benefits of this approach. The impact of the economic crisis would be greater were it not for the traditional hospitality of the African peoples, but the strains are real.

18. Some progress has been made, notably with the formulation of projects for areas affected by the presence of refugees by the European Economic Community under Lomé III; in developing or extending World Bank projects to benefit refugees as well as nationals; and in exploring possibilities for collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development, whose target population - the poorest in rural areas - are in many countries in Africa themselves the immediate hosts of the refugees.

19. The necessary financial support from the international community for these and future initiatives is an obvious prerequisite. Mobilizing this support, and ensuring co-ordination at the international level, requires that whenever their numbers or importance so warrant, refugees and returnees are on the agenda in the various development fora such as round tables, consultative groups and consortia, as well as of the governing councils of the development agencies.

#### D. CONCLUSION

20. Refugees, and especially those who are spontaneously settled, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the economic crisis. They are also inadvertent contributors to this crisis and its impact on the poorer of their hosts, whose hospitality has prevented worse suffering but has itself been sorely stretched by the crisis. In better times, refugees have made substantial contributions to economic development in Africa. They could do so again if concerted action is taken within the framework of an integrated national development programme to meet both their longer-term needs and those resulting from their presence. Even before the economic benefits are felt, human suffering will be reduced and hope rekindled for many refugees. However, it should not be forgotten that neither the underlying causes of refugees nor the measures necessary to solve their problems are at heart economic in nature.