



Afghan returnee children draw water from a well



## ENSURING CLEAN WATER & SANITATION FOR REFUGEES

Water is life. It is more vital to human survival than food or any other commodity. Yet, it can also spread deadly diseases if contaminated and inappropriately used or kept. People in desperate situations often lack the choice or the capacity to distinguish between safe and unsafe water. They are forced to use whatever is available.

Many of us who have clean water delivered straight to our homes pay little attention to the multitude of ways in which we depend on this precious resource or to the risks we would be exposed to without it. We rely on others to find, test, collect, treat, protect, store and deliver this good to us. Equally, we have easy ways to dispose of the used water and solid waste that we produce without any risk to our health and wellbeing.

For people who have lost their homes and moved into overcrowded makeshift refugee settlements, often in inhospitable areas with already scarce resources and little or no infrastructure, keeping clean and healthy becomes a daily struggle. The common surge in death rates among refugees in the first days of displacement is largely due to the lack of clean water and proper sanitation in areas of spontaneous refugee concentration. The problem is compounded by the fact that a person's minimum water needs rise with air temperature, level of exposure and physical exercise. Even those used to coping with limited amounts of water at home will generally require a larger amount than usual when living in a refugee camp due to crowding and environmental factors. Rapid and effective outside intervention is therefore essential to supply sufficient quantities of potable water, find and protect water sources, organise collection and distribution and set up sanitation systems.

### WHAT PEOPLE NEED

- **Access.** People need water points close by. The longer the distance to be covered by women and children fetching water for the family, the greater the risk that they may collect contaminated water from closer but unsafe sources, or that they may be attacked on the way.
- **Quantity and Quality.** A person needs a minimum of 7 litres of clean water a day, just to survive. However, between 15 and 20 litres per day are necessary to allow him or her to stay healthy and lead a somewhat normal life. People need water to drink, but also for personal hygiene, household uses (cooking, washing and cleaning), and for communal facilities like schools and health centres. Those with access to land or livestock need water for their animals and crops as well. When the water supply is reduced and/or the quality is degraded, personal hygiene suffers and the incidence of parasitic, fungal, and other infectious skin and eye diseases as well as diarrhoeal diseases increases immediately.
- **Safety.** Often, people contribute unwittingly to the pollution of their own water sources through disposal of waste water, solid waste, human or animal faeces, or by using dirty containers to draw water from wells or tanks. Only the organized management of key water sources can ensure that the water supply is kept safe and distributed equitably to the whole community, and in a manner that avoids shortage in times of drought. Water sources and sanitary facilities need to be clearly separated and well maintained to avoid contamination. People should have at least one latrine per 12-20 persons, as this encourages proper maintenance and reduces the risk of infection with communicable diseases. Functioning drainage and garbage disposal systems, as well as communal measures in the area of vector and pest control, are also essential.
- **Information.** People need instruction in conservation and protection of water and public health and hygiene, so that they learn about the value of water, potential health hazards and how to prevent or mitigate associated problems.



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UNHCR/Neelaman

Water supply for Sudanese refugees in Fugnido camp, Ethiopia



UNHCR/Taylor

## WHAT WE DO

In the early phases of a crisis, the adequate supply of clean water to refugees is our top priority. If there is insufficient potable water available in the vicinity, it may have to be brought in by trucks. UNHCR regularly carries out such operations while setting up more permanent and sustainable water supply systems for the displaced populations in question. Last year, for instance, UNHCR trucked daily water supplies to over 100 IDP locations in the Russian Federation not yet serviced by the main water supply system.

From the very beginning, the process has to involve both outside experts (to assess the quality and capacity of available water resources and to design the necessary water and sanitation infrastructure) and members of the local and refugee communities. This is to ensure that beneficiary needs are met, that the system is cost-effective, that competition between locals and refugees for natural resources is minimised and that the new system is set up in such a way that it can ultimately be managed and maintained by the beneficiaries themselves. In established refugee camps in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, refugee committees already manage their own water and sanitation systems with the advice and support of UNHCR and its partner agencies.

Since refugee settlements have a tendency to grow into densely populated makeshift cities, keeping them safe and clean requires a consistent and comprehensive effort. Taking into account specific conditions on the ground including physiography, climate, resource availability, prevalence of certain disease vectors (insects and rodents), particular socio-cultural practices, etc., UNHCR implements a **wide range of activities** including:

- Calculating water requirements and assessing supply possibilities;
- Protecting water sources from pollution, through different types of constructions and fences;
- Testing, on a regular basis, water quality and its treatment/purification as necessary;
- Constructing infrastructures for collecting water from either surface sources, groundwater or both;
- Distributing (and sometimes rationing) water at safe and designated distribution points, in an equitable fashion and with due attention to the needs of vulnerable persons;
- Constructing (together with beneficiaries) various types of latrines, in accordance with international standards and local customs;

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Organising garbage collection and disposal systems;
- Draining stagnating surface water and recycling or disposing safely of wastewater;
- Controlling vectors through spraying of biological and chemical agents, especially in malaria-prone areas;
- Constructing public sanitation and communal laundry facilities (for better control of waste water disposal and to spare women and children the effort of carrying large amounts of water to their homes);
- Distributing containers (such as jerry-cans) for the safe transport and storage of water;
- Educating beneficiaries, on a continuous basis, in the areas of personal and domestic hygiene, public health and environmental protection; and
- Providing support to families for the burial or cremation of their dead relatives in a culturally acceptable yet hygienic manner.

In all these activities, efforts are made to keep the technology simple, draw on locally available materials and avoid the excessive use of chemicals. Moreover, in places where locals and refugees draw on the same resources, at least some of the services are made available to local communities so as to prevent potential conflict.

The close involvement of individuals is key to the success of any water and sanitation project. It takes the conscious effort of every individual refugee to keep his or her personal environment clean and hazard-free. Many of the messages disseminated by UNHCR in its health and hygiene education work require people to change profoundly their habits and way of thinking. At the same time, beneficiary committees, groups of refugee students and women's groups have proven highly responsive and creative in the development of small recycling or sanitation projects. UNHCR is actively supporting a multitude of small-scale activities such as the planting of vegetable gardens around water points to take advantage of the wastewater.

UNHCR also provides water and sanitation facilities for returning refugees during voluntary repatriation operations, both en route and upon return to their areas of origin. Presently, thousands of returning Afghans benefit from such services in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In 2001, UNHCR spent over US\$14 million (2% of its expenditure for refugee support programmes) on the provision of water and sanitation services to refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons worldwide. Yet, there still remains a wide gap between the minimum level of standard and actual service provided in many of UNHCR operations due to lack of funds. In addition, a clean and safe environment requires more than sufficient water and proper sanitation facilities.

Your unrestricted financial contribution could help UNHCR to operate and expand its comprehensive, multi-sectoral programmes for refugees around the world and, most importantly, would:

- Make a difference in the lives of some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable persons, enabling them to take care of themselves and their families;
- Help protect and empower women, children and other vulnerable persons;
- Curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases;
- Contribute to the recovery of war-ravaged countries;
- Help us not only to assist victims of high-profile current emergencies, but to sustain the 'forgotten' refugees who are mired in protracted situations and remote areas – beyond the radar of short-lived media and public attention.

Sierra Leonean refugees in Katkama camp, Guinea





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## UNHCR IN SHORT

### MANDATE AND BENEFICIARIES

UNHCR has an official mandate to protect and assist refugees world-wide and to seek durable solutions to their plight. At times, UNHCR is also called on to care for other people in 'refugee-like' situations, such as persons who have been displaced within their own country or who are not recognised as nationals of any state. Today, almost 20 million people are forced to live away from their homes as a result of conflict and persecution around the world. Some 75% of them are women and children.

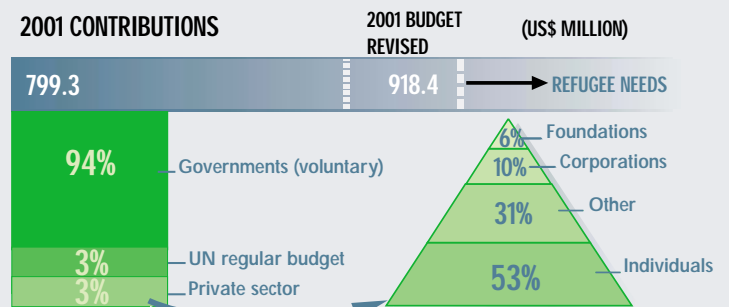
UNHCR's work is guided by the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and by other relevant international legal instruments. For the implementation of its far-reaching protection and assistance work, UNHCR co-operates closely with governments and some 510 non-governmental partner agencies in 114 countries.

### FUNDING

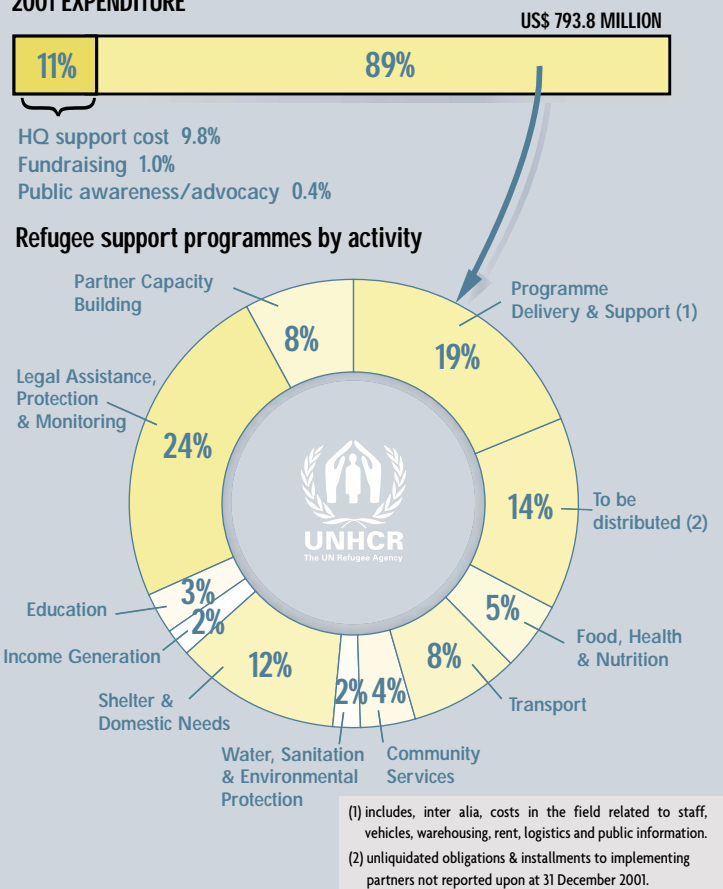
Despite its mandate and more than 50 years of achievements - recognised twice with the Nobel Prize for Peace - UNHCR still has to go to great lengths, year after year, to mobilise the necessary resources for its important work. Unlike other agencies, UNHCR does not receive mandatory contributions from governments but relies almost exclusively (i.e. for 97% of its needs) on strictly voluntary contributions from governments and intergovernmental or private sources. However, each year this support falls drastically short of meeting refugees' needs. Furthermore, the world continues to witness new humanitarian crises, which by definition require a quick and comprehensive response and the rapid reallocation of financial, material and human resources to where they are most urgently needed. We therefore thank both our new and established partners for entrusting us with unrestricted contributions, giving us the necessary flexibility to respond to pressing needs as they arise.

Consult our website for more detailed information : [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

### 2001 CONTRIBUTIONS



### 2001 EXPENDITURE



'A refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

1951 Geneva Refugee Convention