The challenges of marketing and income generation training to support women in exercising their right to self-reliance in a refugee camp context: a case study from the Thai-Burma border

Debra Maynard and Janita Suter*

Until recently there has been insufficient attention to livelihood rights as a protection tool for refugee women confined to living in camps, particularly in protracted environments such as the Thai-Burma border, despite recognition by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of self-reliance as a tool for seeking durable solutions and avoiding protection problems such as exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). New UNHCR protection policy developments emphasise the link between self-reliance and protection for refugee women, but do not specifically address how to achieve this in the context of structural barriers typical of protracted refugee camp situations, such as the absence of legal employment opportunities and lack of host government support for self-reliance. Based on fieldwork with Karen refugee women in Mae Sot in north-western Thailand, this article discusses some of the challenges of interventions such as income generation training and home-based cottage industry development for combating protection risks and building self-reliance beyond basic survival needs. The article concludes by recommending a rights-based approach to handicrafts income generation and marketing training, in which identification and discussion of rights are integrated into practical production sessions, to support refugee women in putting a higher value on their labour and in exploring and finding ways to circumvent the barriers to earning a fair living wage and addressing protection gaps.

Introduction

There are approximately 140,000 ethnic-minority refugees, who have fled human rights abuses in Burma, living in Thailand's nine camps along the Thai-Burma border.

* Debra Maynard and Janita Suter are graduates of the Master of International Social Development program at the University of New South Wales. They are members of Women for Education, Freedom and Textiles (www.weftshop.com.au), a non-profit venture supporting refugee women on the Thai-Burma border and displaced women in Burma to earn a fair living wage from their textile products. Email: Debra Maynard at <maynardweiss@bigpond.com> and Janita Suter at <janitasuter@hotmail.com>.

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They are dependent on subsistence-level humanitarian assistance and the majority have limited or no means to provide for themselves and their families. They are dependent on nutritionally inadequate monthly rations, and there is a lack of space in crowded camps for refugees to produce vegetables and livestock (UNHCR and ILO 2007). As a result, between 5 and 40 per cent of refugees seek work outside camp confines to earn enough money to buy fresh food and other essential household goods such as clothing and medicine, exposing them to greatly increased levels of vulnerability and personal risk (Thompson 2007). Any refugee caught outside his or her camp is considered an illegal migrant and liable to arrest and deportation (Brees 2008; UNHCR and ILO 2007). For women and girls, the lack of opportunities to earn an income safely and legally can also lead to reliance on negative survival strategies, such as trading sex for food and other goods (De Vriese 2006). Such structural barriers violate refugees' human rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Art 23(1), (2) and (3) on the right to work, equal pay and just remuneration and Art 25(1) on the right to a standard of living adequate for health and wellbeing. These barriers continue, despite the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees requiring in Art 17(1) that refugees are accorded the right to engage in wage-earning employment and in Art 18(1) the right to engage in self-employment.

Until recently, there has been little improvement in Thai-Burma border refugees' access to opportunities to earn enough money to meet essential needs, reduce dependence on international food assistance, and work towards self-reliance[1] with dignity (WCRW&C 2006; Thompson 2007; Duffy and Phanwathanawong 2007).

This lack of opportunity for refugees to achieve food and income security has endured because of humanitarian agencies' historical focus on relief-based solutions to refugee assistance, such as camp-based care and maintenance (UNHCR and ILO 2005), coupled with the ongoing policy of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) of restricting refugees and internally displaced people from working inside or outside the refugee camps (UNHCR and ILO 2007; WCRW&C 2006; Thompson 2007).

Despite the increasing acknowledgement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of the importance of the right to work and self-reliance in the

1 This article follows the UNHCR's definition of 'self-reliance' as the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity (UNHCR and ILO 2005).

context of refugee protection[2] (UNHCR 2003a; UNHCR 2006a; UNHCR 2008b), this has largely failed to translate into practice in Thailand and many other protracted refugee situations in the world. Strategies to enhance refugees' economic and social rights, including gainful employment, are difficult to pursue in Thailand, where government policy works against local integration and discourages rather than supports self-reliance initiatives (Buscher 2007; UNHCR and ILO 2005).

The RTG is reluctant to allow refugees from Burma to produce handicrafts that may compete with local Thai products promoted under the RTG's national OTOP (One Tambon One Product) policy established to reduce poverty in remote communities by encouraging the development and commercialisation of indigenous handicrafts. Unfortunately, this stance discounts the scope for Thai villagers and refugees to work together to develop distinctive products for mutual benefit. For example, community-based women's development organisations on the Thai-Burma border have facilitated natural dyeing of yarn by Thai hill-tribe women, which is then woven by camp-based refugee women and sewn into cushion covers to create a unique and marketable product (Weftshop 2009). A view of refugee communities as detrimentally competitive, rather than having the capacity to contribute to local economic development, has been a factor in the discouragement of permanency for refugees, despite the 20-plus years they have been there (WCRW&C 2006).

It also ignores evidence to the contrary in other countries and communities where refugees have transferred valuable skills to local communities (UNHCR and ILO 2005). This unresolved tension between international refugee law and standards for the treatment of refugees (UNHCR 2007e), host government refugee policy and capacity to respond to increasing refugee arrivals, and the implementation of self-reliance initiatives to support a more hopeful future for refugees in long-term exile and confinement, is well-acknowledged (WCRW&C 2006; UNHCR 2007a; Jacobsen 2005; Kibreab 2003). It is, therefore, important for prospective facilitators of income generation training and interventions to be aware of such structural disconnections to:

- understand the importance of tailoring interventions to the local conditions and constraints under which the refugees being trained are living;
- be aware of any potential risks for participants in pursuing income generation

2 The article follows UNHCR's definition of 'protection' as actions that not only ensure refugees' physical safety, but also enable refugees full access to their social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights: 'Actions aim[ed] at ensuring equal access to and enjoyment of the rights of women, men, girls and boys of concern to UNHCR, in accordance with the relevant bodies on law (international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law)' (UNHCR 2008a).

initiatives in the face of host-government constraints to freedom of movement and work permits; and
- realise the importance of designing livelihood initiatives to foster the most practical opportunities to earn income and build self-reliance beyond basic survival needs.

Situational analysis

Fieldwork summary

As student interns for the Centre for Refugee Research, under the supervision of Professor Eileen Pittaway of the University of New South Wales, we conducted refugee handicrafts marketing and income generation training in Mae Sot with 20 Karen refugee women in July 2007. These women were involved in handicrafts income generation projects coordinated by the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) in Mae La, Mae La Oon, Umpiem Mai, Nu Po and Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. All of the women were helped by the KWO to travel to Mae Sot for training. Their handicrafts skills and experience included weaving on backstrap and shuttle looms, embroidery, product design, sewing and knitting, as well as training others in handicraft skills such as weaving and sewing. Several participants were experienced in running KWO-supported income generation activities — such as managing a refugee camp shop to sell blankets, sarongs and traditional shirts to camp residents — to fund camp community services such as safe houses for women and girls. These community activities, including running the safe houses and other social coordination and support initiatives, were all carried out by the women on a voluntary basis.

The introductory 'getting to know you' session revealed a great deal of social self-reliance among the women, many of whom actively participated in, as well as benefited from, KWO education, training, community care and income generation programs and activities in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border (KWO and UNSW 2007). They have developed this capacity and built social capital in difficult circumstances, but continue to lack opportunities to pursue economic self-reliance owing to government-imposed employment and market access barriers. Since the establishment of the camps, the RTG has enforced a policy restricting refugees' freedom of movement and confining refugees to camps with no legal right to work (WCRW&C 2006). As a result, handicrafts production is one of the few accessible, home-based means for refugee women to use existing skills to earn money safely. As security is a well-known barrier to women's livelihoods, home-based cottage industry can enhance protection by providing income in a safe environment, while also allowing women to care for children (Buscher 2007, 11).

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children — which commenced a three-year refugee livelihoods initiative in January 2007 in collaboration with the American Refugee Committee and International Rescue Committee, including pilot projects in refugee camps — notes that 'refugee situations now last, on average, for 17 years, and the lack of economic opportunity often results in increases in domestic violence and alcohol abuse' (WCRW&C 2007a, 1). Women also face particular risk from negative coping strategies, such as resorting to harmful behaviour to survive, including prostitution and trading sex for food owing to the loss of original homes and family structures (UNHCR 2006a; De Vriese 2006; WCRW&C 2007a). Livelihood strategies, such as income generation training, food-for-work programs, self-employment opportunities and business start-up programs, can play an important part in improving refugee women's protection by reducing these risks,[3] provided they are tailored to women's skills and local conditions, and match targeted market needs to generate sustainable work and income.

Handicrafts producers living in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border make a range of textile products, including shawls and scarves, sarongs, women's and men's traditional shirts, bags and wallets, table runners, blankets, wall hangings and key rings, which are sold in camp shops and in a few shops outside the camps, including the WEAVE, Borderline and KWO outlets in Mae Sot. According to information gathered by a Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRW&C 2006) delegation to Thailand in 2006, the RTG's policy now allows products produced in the camps to be sold outside — a crucial development for women's ability to access markets for their products. Yet, despite this concession and the women's skills and desire to work, they have little or no opportunity, either within or outside their camps, to access legal employment or income generation opportunities capable of fully meeting their essential needs in a reliable and sustainable manner. Why does this denial of refugees' right to work and enjoyment of universal human rights persist?

Context/Barriers

A barrier to progress on refugee self-reliance in Thailand is that the RTG is not a state party to the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which determine the rights of refugees and minimum standards of treatment. It is, therefore, under no specific obligation to adhere to those instruments' rules and guidelines, including those regarding refugees'

3 The UNHCR's 58th Executive Committee (ExCom) 2006 Conclusion 105 on Women at Risk acknowledges the lack of access to livelihoods as a protection risk factor and protection gap to be addressed (UNHCR 2006a).

rights to work and self-reliance. The RTG's refugee policy is enforced by regulating admission of asylum-seekers and refugees from Burma in nine closed camps along the border, operated through the provincial and district authorities of the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with refugee and camp committees (TBBC 2007; UNHCR 2009). There is no guarantee that people seeking refuge will be granted shelter and confined to a refugee camp, and UNHCR has witnessed increasing numbers of asylum-seekers being returned to Burma without getting access to screening (UNHCR 2009). Although the RTG does collaborate with various NGOs to provide shelter, food, medicine and clothing, and has recently expressed more openness to allowing educational and vocational training for camp-based refugees (WCRW&C 2006), it does not follow refugee convention guidelines to:

- 'give sympathetic consideration to assimilating the rights of all refugees with regard to wage-earning employment' (Art 17(3));
- lift employment restrictions on aliens who have completed three years' residence in the country (Art 17(2)); and
- ensure that strategies for self-reliance are integrated into assistance programs (UNHCR 2003a).

In addition, it is a contradiction to collaborate with NGOs to offer vocational training for refugees while restricting the market and employment access required for putting the training to productive use. As a result, the majority of refugees continue to 'lead lives of poverty, frustration and unrealized potential', according to a recent study of livelihoods programs for refugees in Thailand (UNHCR and ILO 2007, 1). The refugee women we trained described the difficulty of earning income to supplement camp rations to pay for nutritious food and medicine. Average weaving, sewing and embroidery wages are 30–60 Thai baht per day, while a kilogram of fresh fish, if obtainable, costs 50 baht — equal to, or more than, a day's wages. Refugee families needed at least 500 baht a month, over and above rations, to meet their nutrition needs, according to the women (KWO and UNSW 2007) — which highlights how vital it is for them to have an opportunity to earn enough income to ensure food security for themselves and their families. Without legal and safe employment opportunities, protection gaps endure because of the risk of women resorting to illegal work outside their camps, where they are exposed to increased exploitation. Our training sought to address the disparity between handicrafts earnings and cost of living by encouraging producers to simplify their designs and reduce the time required to make selected handicrafts to earn more income, and by targeting tourist markets which can afford to pay more, among other cost-of-production and marketing strategies to increase earning power (Maynard and Suter 2007). According to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which is the largest non-government humanitarian service and protection provider working under RTG regulations on the border, people have been:

> … confined to camps for many years [and] with new arrivals entering, the camps are more and more crowded … the situation inside Burma is not improving, thus the hope of a return in the near future fades … [resulting in a] sense of hopelessness and boredom from [difficult] daily life in the camps. [Thompson 2007.]

Only about 12 per cent of the working population, both men and women, have access to some form of employment in the camps — as community leaders, camp committee workers, warehouse staff, health and water sanitation workers, teachers and translators (Thompson 2007). Much of this work requires education and literacy, leaving those without such capacity marginalised and with even less access to livelihoods. Many positions available to skilled refugees are funded by NGOs working within the camps, with some offering inflexible conditions including only full-time positions (IGP Coordinator 2007). Such conditions for obtaining paid employment present enormous challenges for those refugees already engaged in vital unpaid community service roles which often demand long working hours, including running safe houses, orphanages and other community services within the camps — services which cannot be neglected without detriment to the wider refugee camp community. In an environment where encouraging partnerships and community cohesion is paramount, the inflexibility of very limited employment opportunities available in camps, coupled with the skills shortage generated by extensive resettlement, can undermine work by refugee-initiated and refugee-run organisations to mitigate such vulnerability. Handicrafts and other home-based cottage industries are one way of providing safe working opportunities for refugees with craft and other trade skills that do not require high levels of literacy or professional qualifications. However, as handicraft production is hampered by lack of both access to markets and resources to invest in product development, it is imperative for handicrafts income generation training to include content and invite ideas from refugees on how to best overcome these barriers. We workshopped ideas with training participants, such as:

- identifying and developing niche overseas market demand for selected products;
- targeting fair trade[4] markets with an interest in supporting refugees to generate income;
- finding a town-based broker to market handicrafts on behalf of camp-based producers; and

4 A "trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade … contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers — especially in the South" (IFAT 2008).

- identifying small changes to existing products to enhance profitability, as an alternative strategy to developing cost- and labour-intensive new product ranges (Maynard and Suter 2007).

Denial of the right to work forces refugees in Thailand into a dependence on host country and international community support, despite evidence of skills that could contribute to the local economy. For example, many of the women we trained had participated in KWO training programs in community care, counselling and leadership, which could be deployed to the benefit of local Thai communities if they were allowed to work legally outside the camps (KWO and UNSW 2007). The absence of a supportive legislative environment not only hinders refugees' ability to realise their livelihood rights in accordance with UNHCR's Agenda for Protection objectives, but is counterproductive in failing to recognise refugees' capacity to contribute to local economic development.

Renewed focus on livelihood rights

In recent years, UNHCR has increasingly acknowledged the protection role offered by livelihoods. When High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres visited Thailand in 2006, he:

> … urged the Thai government to give refugees greater freedom of movement, especially to work outside the camps in Thailand's labour-short economy. Guterres stressed that many refugees are already working illegally, and said they should be given a legal opportunity to build a better life. [Han and Hin 2007.]

Structural barriers to gainful employment force refugees to seek work illegally — exposing them to the risk of arrest, deportation and exploitation — and work against UNHCR's protection objectives and obligations. A consequence of such structural barriers includes labour exploitation. A UNHCR and ILO livelihoods analysis of refugees in Mae La, Umpiem Mai and Nu Po refugee camps found that refugees who were illegally engaged in employment outside camps received 'very low daily rates of pay' (UNHCR and ILO 2007, 4). According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), many refugees do not understand the rules governing their camps, exacerbating the risk of arrest and deportation. To address this protection gap, the IRC established three UNHCR-funded legal centres in 2007 near the border towns of Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son, providing legal assistance to more than 430 Burmese refugees in their first year of operation, including assistance to refugees arrested outside camp to prevent deportation. The IRC has also helped rescue refugee girls who have been illegally trafficked for work (IRC 2008).

The 2006 ExCom Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk (UNHCR 2006a), which addresses refugee protection risks specific to women, recognised lack of access to livelihoods as a risk factor for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). It acknowledged the preventative role that strengthening livelihood opportunities, access to labour markets and vocational training play in reducing the risk of SGBV (UNHCR 2006a). Since then, UNHCR's focus on livelihood initiatives as a strategy to increase safety and security for women refugees has continued to grow. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at the 2007 ExCom meeting highlighted the role of self-sufficiency in ending protracted refugee situations (Feller 2007), and UNHCR's 2008 *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls,* which replaces the 1991 *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women,* acknowledges the link between economic opportunities and protection (UNHCR 2008a). While this represents the strongest focus yet on livelihoods, it is the implementation — the complexities of working with the RTG to encourage self-reliance for refugees on the Thai-Burma border, particularly in the context of ongoing resettlement — that remains the greatest challenge for the ability of such policy developments to bring about real change.

UNHCR launched its Strengthening Protection Capacity Project (SPCP) in Thailand in 2006 and is coordinating a comprehensive response to outstanding refugee needs, including education and livelihoods in camps, linked to economic opportunities in surrounding Thai host communities. While SPCP has recorded some success in increasing self-reliance, particularly with an agricultural project outside one camp, livelihoods remain a 'top protection gap' that is only increasing with rising costs of food. A 2008 project update revealed persistent and widening protection gaps, due in part to the reduced purchasing power of donor funding and an almost total reliance of refugees on food assistance (UNHCR 2008b, 3). The impact of the current global food crisis on this assistance only further increases the vulnerability of refugees (Refugees International 2008). Their reliance on increasingly unstable humanitarian aid highlights a critical need for the right to earn an income to pay for nutritious food and essential goods. However, if protection strengthening strategies fail to address the inherent contradiction between the settlement system that keeps refugees apart from host communities and refugees' ability to pursue sustainable income generation activity, development assistance will continue to have little positive impact on refugee self-reliance, including food security (Kaiser 2006; Jacobsen 2005). The protracted nature of the refugee situation on the Thai-Burma border demands a reworking of the care and maintenance phase of assistance towards a local development approach that strengthens protection through livelihoods. This requires strategies and projects that are committed to navigating a path through structural barriers to build interconnections, relationships and networks between refugees and host communities, coupled with stronger and more collaborative advocacy by the UN, NGOs and refugee communities for

the designation of land to grow food and the accordance of rights to refugees (Jacobsen 2005).

In conjunction with the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNHCR's Consolidated Livelihoods Programme: Phase Two promises to implement

> … a comprehensive livelihoods strategy suited to the unique circumstances found in each camp, that will increase the quality and variety of food available to residents, provide skills training and the opportunity to use those skills productively, and provide equal benefits to residents of each of the host communities. [Duffy and Phanwathanawong 2007, 7.]

The program will initially take the form of small-scale pilot livelihood activities with potential for future income generation, delivered through existing NGOs. In the foreword to 'A comprehensive plan addressing the needs of displaced persons on the Thailand/Myanmar (Burma) border in 2007/8', a joint report by UNHCR and the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), both organisations acknowledge that 'long term exile and confinement have inevitably led to stress on the refugee population whilst also straining the tolerance of the RTG and the donor community' (UNHCR and CCSDPT 2007, 3). They advocate a:

> … more comprehensive approach to the problem which would enable refugees to more fully realise their human potential and become more valuable assets both during their exile in Thailand and in the future, whether that is back in Myanmar (Burma) or in a third country. [UNHCR and CCSDPT 2007, 3.]

What is missing from this undertaking is any mention of a local development approach to livelihoods or the right to work, which are critical factors in realising self-reliance in refugee contexts; their absence will continue to restrict refugees' ability to practise their income generation skills. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the renewed focus on livelihoods and consultations between the CCSDPT, UNHCR and RTG (UNHCR and CCSDPT 2007) has resulted in 'expanded vocational training programs in the camps and Thai officials' [acknowledgement] that these programs have to lead to opportunities for income generation' (WCRW&C 2006, 2). However, the 2006 Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children delegation to Thailand warned of misunderstandings between RTG and refugee communities about using income generation programs to work towards self-reliance:

> The Thai government does not talk about refugee self-reliance, but rather about allowing refugees to supplement their incomes in order to purchase supplemental food items … The government's livelihood strategy should not be about refugees' ability to buy additional

> food to complement their food rations but about giving refugees the means to achieve food security, thereby eliminating the food rations altogether. [WCRW&C 2006, 2.]

The Women's Commission also highlights that the RTG limits proposed income generation projects to those that will benefit local villagers and avoid competing with neighbouring Thai villages' livelihoods — tough criteria for a considerably disadvantaged and forcibly-dependent population. Camp-based income generation projects — for example, agriculture or home-based textile production aimed at providing refugees with essential goods such as fresh food and clothing — clearly present minimal direct benefits to neighbouring villagers if aimed at refugees' self-sufficiency, rather than increasing demand for local villagers' goods. On the other hand, refugee programs that do generate income for purchasing essential goods from nearby villages will not adequately address protection gaps without acknowledging and eliminating the risks refugees take in travelling outside their camps without a permit. Livelihood strategies should, therefore, incorporate opportunities for mutual benefit among refugee and local village communities.

Protection risks: why livelihoods and self-reliance are crucial to enhancing refugee protection

Despite widespread recognition among both government officials and humanitarian workers that many refugees find regular and irregular work locally in garment, agricultural, construction and unskilled sectors — 'jobs referred to as the three D's (disgusting, dirty and dangerous) and largely undesired by the Thai locals' — the RTG remains reluctant to regularise work outside the camps (WCRW&C 2006, 4). A factor in this reluctance is the dilemma the RTG faces in managing the swell of refugees into Thailand, as well as poverty among Thai populations. Yet, failure to legislate in favour of refugees' right to work exposes refugees to additional protection risks due to increased vulnerability to exploitation from 'illegal' employers: reportedly, refugee workers are commonly paid half the daily minimum wage received by their Thai counterparts (WCRW&C 2006). Clarifying refugees' work status, issuing work permits and providing sustainable opportunities for income generation of mutual benefit to refugee and local Thai populations are clearly crucial steps to reducing the multiple protection risks that refugees encounter in pursuit of self-reliance (UNHCR 2007c).

Gender

In its Strengthening Protection Capacity Project, UNHCR explored the gendered nature of the relationship between a lack of livelihood opportunities and refugees' vulnerability to exploitation and to psychological and physical abuse within camps.

It recognised that refugee women, in particular, face serious protection problems, including sexual and gender-based violence, as well as domestic violence (UNHCR 2006b). It is particularly in protracted refugee situations that the promotion of women's social and economic reliance and abilities through income generation can form an effective protection strategy (UNHCR 2003, 37). Indeed, UNHCR's *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* recommends actions such as 'support for income-generating activities to strengthen self-reliance, reduce dependence on assistance and thereby remove exposure to survival sex' to strengthen community capacity to support protection solutions (UNHCR 2008a, 110). Helping women to build on their skills to earn an income not only empowers women as individuals, but can benefit entire families. These benefits can include improvements in protection and nutrition for families, as well as the diminishment of poverty, exploitation and dependence on food aid (UNHCR 2007b; Buscher 2007). As Gry Tina Tinde, the special adviser on gender issues to High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, said:

> The goal [of empowering refugee women and girls through businesses and education] is to improve women's lives by recognising their right to work, their potential in creating micro-businesses and to help them to become self-sufficient. [UNHCR 2007b.]

While home-based income generation activities such as weaving can provide some opportunities for safe employment for women on the Thai-Burma border, the amount and sustainability of income that handicrafts are able to generate needs to be assessed (WCRW&C 2006, 3). For this reason, it is vital that income generation training offers general principles, knowledge and transferable skills of use to refugee women engaged in various income generation activities in exile, return or resettlement.

Training approach and implementation

Acknowledging obstacles to self-reliance

For refugees living within camps to achieve self-reliance, it is vital that marketing and income generation training considers not only the key obstacles to self-reliance, but also how the training approach and content will specifically address these obstacles. Income generation training that extends beyond short-term survival strategies can increase refugees' self-reliance. It can achieve this by enhancing refugees' ability to practise safe and sustainable livelihood strategies, within the restrictions of their environment, by mobilising their available resources and accessing and responding to market needs. Income generation training can facilitate this process through in-field and market research, community consultation and the use of participatory learning and action in project planning and during training. Refugees can develop sustainable

self-reliance through training that builds on existing skills or that develops skills targeted towards market needs in the countries of displacement, return and resettlement, or in international markets where appropriate and accessible. While this may sound an obvious approach, international practice has varied historically:

> Previous livelihood and self-reliance strategies have often been ad hoc, piecemeal or implemented without building on existing skills or on developing skills targeted towards market needs… interventions have rarely catered to the specific situation where the displaced may be hosted — whether in camps where freedom of movement is restricted, in depressed urban areas, or in harsh, inhospitable environments with limited agricultural potential. [WCRW&C 2007c, 1.]

Ad hoc interventions

Evidence of ad hoc interventions indicates a lack of focus and cooperation among NGOs on sustainability and longer-term needs of refugees and their families — in particular, building capacity to improve production and marketing expertise, which is vital if livelihood projects are to be sustained after outside actors leave. NGO attitudes can also contribute to ad hoc or short-term outcomes, particularly where traditional service delivery or charity-needs approaches are manifest, which tend to focus on gaps and weaknesses to the detriment of harnessing pre-existing skills and resources to promote empowerment and ownership of livelihood strategies (Crooke 2003). NGO projects may also hinder more than they help if focused on external agendas, such as the need to spend development funds or reach targets, ahead of commitment to the type of development that emancipates people or, at the very least, fosters pathways to earning sustainable income. Although 'all players now talk earnestly of participatory approaches, sustainability, and even empowerment, the gap between rhetoric and genuine understanding and application of these approaches is still wide' (Crooke 2003, 2).

Impact of resettlement on production capacity

Income generation training also needs to acknowledge the effects of 'durable solutions' on refugees' ability to achieve self-reliance. Our field experience revealed a strong link between an increase in resettlement of refugees from the camps and a reduction of handicraft production capacity. Training participants were, for example, unable to accept an order to produce 200 customised embroidered bags that would generate a higher profit margin than traditional non-embroidered bags, as there were no longer enough experienced embroiderers to complete the order within the three-month timeframe (KWO and UNSW 2007). Feller (2007) similarly acknowledges the challenges resettlement poses in depleting vital capacity within camps, which

points to an urgent need to fund handicrafts training within the camps so that skills, knowledge, capacity and livelihoods are not lost with the resettlement of skilled producers. Training, therefore, needs to acknowledge the impacts of resettlement on refugees' income generation strategies and facilitate participants' ability to address these impacts in both the settled and the resettled locations. To achieve this, it is vital for training to focus on marketing and income generation skills relevant to a range of income generation activities and to show how these can be applied beyond handicrafts to other business endeavours. Our training, for example, offered skills to access market information and product development ideas, cost-of-production calculations to determine product profitability, techniques for promoting a product brand, and other practical marketing concepts that could be applied widely in income generation.

Linking with host communities

UNHCR's *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* argues for ensuring that 'self-reliance initiatives benefit local host communities as well as displaced communities' as a strategy for progressing self-reliance and protection for refugees (UNHCR 2008a, 164). Income generation training should, therefore, seek to address how refugee women could work with locals to build production and marketing capacities. For example, in handicrafts income generation projects, a local villager could work as a broker for refugee women's textiles or villagers could produce natural dye thread to sell to refugee women who weave natural dye textiles. While such cooperation would benefit both refugee and host communities, it also presents one of the biggest challenges on the Thai-Burma border, both legally and practically, given the RTG's disinclination towards allowing work rights or self-reliance for refugees.

Tailoring training to difficult conditions in refugee camps

That refugees need to conduct their livelihoods within a disabling income generation environment is not unique to camps on the Thai-Burma border. In protracted refugee situations around the world, the remote locations, crowded living conditions and restrictions of movement that characterise camp life are among many factors that severely stifle income generation by hampering access to customers, raw material suppliers and market information (KWO and UNSW 2007; Thompson 2007).

Impact of camp environment and trauma

In our training, the camp environment impacted on participants' production capacity in diverse ways: overcrowding in recent years had eliminated space to plant cotton

used in handicrafts and created income generation project (IGP) coordination difficulties due to shuttle looms being located distances apart; lack of consultation with and training for producers and IGP coordinators to conduct repairs on sewing machines and looms forced a reliance on outside expertise and parts to repair common problems, while restrictions on movement ensured a high incidence of broken and unused equipment; and the lack of funds to purchase spare fabric and thread presented significant challenges for training new producers and developing or experimenting with product styles (KWO and UNSW 2007). Unless income generation training acknowledges and directly addresses the unique conditions affecting refugees' capacity to earn a livelihood, and ascertains and incorporates participants' knowledge and training needs, interventions can be of limited relevance or benefit to participants.

Facilitators must also be aware of and sensitive to refugees' experiences of trauma from flight and the ongoing effects of displacement and encampment. While recognising participants' unique experiences and coping mechanisms, trauma may affect individuals' concentration, engagement and participation in the training. Certain activities may inadvertently recall distressing experiences for participants: our branding activity, which emphasised the important role of the producer's story in handicraft marketing, could have triggered memories of traumatic experiences. At the same time, it was an empowering exercise that validated the producer's role, culture and experience. Similarly, a 'community project product' activity raised discussion of the ongoing struggle experienced by Karen refugees and internally displaced people in finding food, shelter and medicine, and the vulnerability of children who are orphaned during the conflict and arrive at the camps without parents (KWO and UNSW 2007). It is vital that facilitators maintain confidentiality if such personal stories arise and that encouragement of participation be balanced with sensitivity to the varied factors that may affect participants' engagement in the sessions.

Marginalised income

While accurate figures on refugees' income from handicrafts and other sources are not available, the reality that handicrafts production is likely to be a marginal income generation activity that only supplements livelihoods must also be addressed in the training (Thompson 2007). Given the historical and current ambiguity of RTG policy and practice relating to refugees' right to work, restrictions of movement, and the absence of work permits, land and access to markets mean marginal income generation activities are, perhaps, the only realistically available option.

Using a rights-based approach and fair trade principles: the complexities and challenges

We used a rights-based approach to inform both the approach and content of marketing and income generation training to bring the issues of rights and protection — not only into the training room, but also into production processes and ideas. This approach integrates discussion of rights into practical cost-of-production and product development sessions to raise awareness of the concept of the right to earn a fair living wage, place a higher value on handicrafts labour and explore production solutions to circumvent denial of work rights and market access barriers. Our training aimed to build participants' capacity to use their production skills to realise their rights, and used participatory community development practices, including sharing experiences through group discussions and participant-directed activities, to encourage transfer of skills and knowledge from 'within' the group. Negative effects of NGO interventions not consistently using a rights-based approach to raise awareness among producers of their right to earn an income, coupled with participatory practices to encourage producer-led ideas for generating more income in the camps, were evident during our field research. These included the supply of inappropriate raw materials resulting from a lack of consultation with camp producers about production costs and how much the income generation program's camp-based customers could afford to pay, and previously mentioned productivity and sustainability issues owing to a high incidence of broken equipment and no capacity to repair these (KWO and UNSW 2007). Our training offered opportunities to identify such supply chain and production weaknesses and discuss strategies to overcome them. A rights-based approach guided our activities to enable participants to make informed decisions to improve their handicrafts income generation projects, including identifying steps towards realising their right to work and to a fair living wage and assessing the viability of their existing strategies. However, introducing and discussing notions of fair trade and fair wages were perhaps the greatest challenges we faced during the training, as a fair living wage and fair trade conditions are unattainable in the short to medium term owing to the ongoing barriers to legal work and freedom of movement. Discussion of the differences between what constitutes a 'fair living wage' and what producers are entitled to be paid according to the host country's minimum wage had to be dealt with sensitively. The matter is complex because RTG policy does not recognise refugees' right to work and denies those confined to camps the basic conditions and rights essential for fair trade to flourish. The income the producers received from the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) was often well below the daily minimum wage of 151 baht in Tak province (Thailand Board of Investment 2009), owing to the low price on handicrafts sold in camps and in limited local outlets. Lack of employment opportunities within the camps meant the reality for producers was to either accept income often insufficient to

meet or even adequately supplement basic household needs, or risk the likelihood of receiving none at all. Similarly, poor living conditions within the camps meant a safe working environment represented little more than a hope for the future. Nevertheless, for refugees living within camps to develop the capacity to earn more income from their handicrafts, it is vital for income-generation training to promote refugees' right to access information about their work rights, fair trade principles and ideas for circumventing the barriers they face to work towards earning a fair living wage. We found this was also important for increasing refugee handicraft producers' engagement with the management of their income generation programs and promoting transparency within and among camp-based income generation programs.

Production-focused strategies to increase livelihoods

The inability of programs to pay handicraft producers a fair living wage is the result of many factors, including the necessity to price products in line with virtually non-existent or low disposable incomes in camps and local markets. The group's product range simply could not be sold in camp shops or in KWO's Mae Sot shop at a price that would give producers enough money to meet minimum standards of living. Our training therefore focused on identifying and discussing more profitable opportunities in local, national and international markets; examining the profitability of products and methods for improving the efficiency of production processes; and encouraging ideas for small changes to existing products to appeal to new markets and improve profitability. It is particularly important for income generation program coordinators to be aware of such strategies to increase producers' livelihoods. Thinking strategically about product development by making products that customers want in markets producers have access to — and using smarter production processes — advances the producers' opportunity to secure a fair living wage. Similarly, securing fair wages can also be used by refugees as an advocacy tool, particularly when negotiating with international buyers, who need to be reminded of their responsibility to pay a price that enables producers to receive a fair living wage for their work. For example, price quotations and marketing materials should highlight the labour input of each product with corresponding fair wage costs, putting the onus on buyers to respect and uphold refugee producers' right to a fair living wage. Similarly, retail tags and marketing materials should clearly state a product's handmade process and how long it has taken a producer to weave, sew and embroider, in order to educate consumers about the importance of paying a premium for handmade (versus factory-made) products and ensure producers receive fair wages for their work. In turn, this information can be used to encourage international community development organisations, such as Oxfam, to create campaigns in their retail stores around fair trade and paying fair wages to producers.

While camp-based refugees have different living expenses due to their receipt of housing and food aid, this should not undermine refugees' rights to a living wage. Despite receiving food aid, the existence of widespread low-level malnutrition exists across camp populations, and a lack of access to fresh food and other basic provisions such as medicine, clothing, educational materials and sanitary/hygiene items is common (IGP Coordinator 2007). Those engaged in income generation programs within camps must consider refugees' cost of living when setting producer wages. Marketing and income generation training can provide a forum to collectively explore the true cost of living for camp-based refugees and discuss a fair living wage under these circumstances. The complexities and deprivations of Thailand's refugee camp context mean fair wages are largely unachievable in present circumstances and, therefore, relegated to a future goal. However, this situation should not discourage but, rather, propel facilitators to encourage discussion of attaining minimum wages as a progressive realisation of refugees' human rights. As a denial of rights characterises the camp environment, improving refugees' access to their right to work, to free movement, and to education, shelter and healthcare, among other social and economic rights, may not be achievable immediately or simultaneously. These rights must, however, be recognised and fair wages are an integral and interconnected step towards this.

Conclusion

Income generation training is one among many livelihood strategies — including vocational and micro-enterprise training, funding for micro-enterprise equipment, resources and repair management, self-managed savings schemes, and collaboration with local villagers in product development and marketing channels (WCRW&C 2007b) — needed to support refugee women to work towards social and economic self-reliance and close protection gaps.

It would be easy to become disheartened by the seemingly intractable ongoing barriers and lack of policy and regulatory support in countries such as Thailand for refugees to earn the income needed to achieve self-reliance. Such barriers, as described in this article, include:

- forced confinement of refugees in camps without freedom of movement or any legal right to work in host communities;
- a shortage of space in crowded camps and lack of designated land for refugees to produce vegetables and livestock as a means to achieve food security and generate income;
- the RTG's refusal to allow permanent protection to long-term refugees who have been forcibly confined to camps for as many as 20 years; and

- RTG policy that, on the one hand, allows some vocational training and income generation in camps but, on the other hand, restricts the travel and access to markets necessary to advance refugee self-reliance.

Yet, our experience with Karen women on the Thai-Burma border demonstrated the importance and power of strengthening refugee women's knowledge of their human rights, including their right to work and to a fair living wage, in building social capital and networks to circumvent barriers and build capacity to achieve social and economic self-reliance. The women discussed and exchanged new knowledge and ideas on marketing and handicraft production processes — enhanced by their varied age groups, skills and refugee camp experiences — to reveal new ways to earn more income from their handicrafts production, despite their restrictive environment and circumstances (Maynard and Suter 2007; KWO and UNSW 2007).

It is clear that if handicraft income generation programs on the Thai-Burma border are to successfully tackle livelihood barriers and enhance protection through the development of self-reliance, they must incorporate training and skills that:

- promote marketing and cost-of-production expertise matched to sales opportunities that can circumvent market access barriers;
- fund training in traditional skills to combat skills loss through resettlement;
- advance practical, low-cost product development skills and ideas for earning more income from existing handicrafts; and
- encourage refugees to incorporate the realities of refugee camp life into product stories for use in advocacy and in developing new sales opportunities in fair trade and social justice networks in Thailand and overseas.

There has been policy and operational failure by international agencies, too slow in identifying and addressing gaps in livelihood services to enable refugees, particularly those living in protracted situations, to realise their right to work and pursue durable solutions to rebuild their lives. Now the challenge is how to turn renewed development policy focus on livelihood opportunities into interventions capable of leading to real income generation for improving the protection, wellbeing and standard of living beyond basic survival needs for refugee women and their families. In so doing, it is critical for practitioners to recognise and understand the nature of income generation interventions as a self-reliance tool and the contribution they can make to protection — particularly for women and girls who are often more vulnerable to exploitation and negative coping strategies as described in this article. We hope that the increasing focus on livelihoods as a protection tool, with initiatives such as those described in this article, will make a life-changing difference and honour the right to work for all refugees. ●

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