

# New commitments for older displaced persons

by Erin Mooney

*Among the many issues on the agenda of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, held in Madrid in April 2002, that of older refugees and IDPs occupied an important place.*



Convened at the request of the UN General Assembly, this inter-governmental meeting was organised to assess the progress made in implementing the 1982 Vienna Plan of Action on Ageing adopted at the first Assembly and to take into account new challenges that had arisen.

Only one of the Vienna Plan's 51 recommendations directly addressed the issue of displacement:

As far as possible, groups of refugees accepted by a country should include elderly persons as well as adults and children, and efforts should be made to keep family groups intact and to ensure that appropriate housing and services are provided.<sup>1</sup>

In advance of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, the UN Secretary-General, in a report entitled, *Abuse of Older Persons: Recognising and Responding to Abuse of Older Persons in a Global Context*, underscored that this follow-up meeting should devote much more attention to issues of displacement. "The special needs of displaced older persons," he pointed out, "are rarely provided for in humanitarian relief plans" and, particularly in camps, "older persons may be marginalised in food and health care distribution."<sup>2</sup>

There is much to suggest that the Second World Assembly did indeed heed the Secretary-General's call to focus greater attention on the special needs of older refugees and displaced persons. The Madrid International Plan of Action,<sup>3</sup> adopted by consensus at the meeting, contains a number of commitments for improving responses to the special needs of older

refugees and internally displaced persons. Particularly noteworthy are the 18 recommendations regarding emergency situations, which are grouped under two broad objectives.

The first objective is to ensure "equal access by older persons to food, shelter and medical care and other services during and after natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies." To this end, states have recommended 12 specific actions:

- take concrete measures to protect and assist older persons in situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation including through the provision of physical and mental rehabilitation services for those who are disabled in these situations
- protect, assist and provide humanitarian assistance and humanitarian emergency assistance to older persons in situations of internal displacement in accordance with General Assembly resolutions
- locate and identify older persons in emergency situations and ensure inclusion of their contributions and vulnerabilities in needs assessment reports
- raise awareness among relief agency personnel of the physical and health issues specific to older persons and of ways to adapt basic needs support to their requirements
- ensure that appropriate services are available and that older persons have physical access to them, and that they are involved in planning and delivering services as appropriate
- recognise that older refugees of different cultural backgrounds growing old in new and unfamiliar surroundings are often in special need of social networks and of extra support and aim to ensure that they have physical access to such services
- make explicit reference to, and design national guidelines for, assisting older persons in disaster relief plans, including disaster preparedness, training for relief workers and availability of services and goods
- assist older persons to re-establish family and social ties, and address their post-traumatic stress
- put in place post-disaster mechanisms to prevent the targeting and financial exploitation of older persons by fraudulent opportunists
- raise awareness and protect older persons from physical, psychological, sexual or financial abuse in emergency situations, paying particular attention to the particular risks faced by women
- encourage a more targeted inclusion of older refugees in all aspects of programme planning and implementation, *inter alia* by helping active persons to be more self-supporting and by promoting better community care initiatives for the very old
- enhance international cooperation including burden sharing and

coordination of humanitarian assistance to countries affected by natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies and post-conflict situations in ways that would be supportive of recovery and long-term development

Also relevant to situations of displacement is the Plan of Action's objective of "enhanced contributions of older persons to the re-establishment and reconstruction of communities and the rebuilding of the social fabric following emergencies." A number of actions are suggested:

- include older persons in the provision of community relief and rehabilitation programmes, including by identifying and helping vulnerable older persons
- recognise the potential of older persons as leaders in family and

community, for education, communication and conflict resolution

- assist older persons to re-establish economic self-sufficiency through rehabilitation projects, including income generation, educational programmes and occupational activities, taking into account the special needs of older women
- provide legal advice and information to older persons in situations of displacement and dispossession of land and other productive and personal assets
- provide special attention for older persons in humanitarian aid programmes and packages offered in situations of natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies
- share and apply, as appropriate, lessons learned from practices that have successfully utilised the contributions of older persons in the aftermath of emergencies

While most of these recommended actions should be straightforward, a number of delegations expressed regret that the recommendation for governments to protect and assist IDPs

did not more clearly articulate the potential concrete actions which could be taken to help them, reflecting both the central responsibility of national authorities and the supporting role that could be played by the international community.<sup>5</sup> An earlier draft had more specifically called on governments to "take into account the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which include special mention of older persons".<sup>6</sup> The Guiding Principles note that they are to be applied without discrimination, including on the basis of age, and that certain IDPs, including elderly persons, "are entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment which takes into account their special needs."<sup>7</sup> The Principles, it was pointed out at the Madrid meeting, already "have proven to be a useful tool" for national authorities, international agencies and NGOs in helping older displaced persons.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to the Assembly, various proposals were put forward which built upon the draft recommendation to refer to national and international responsibility for the internally displaced while maintaining reference to the Guiding Principles. The Principles themselves stress these same themes, providing, for instance, that "national authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and assistance to IDPs within their jurisdiction" (Principle 2) — language which was echoed verbatim in the proposal put forth, for instance, by Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, India, Cuba, Libya and Pakistan, which also noted "the work of the Representative



of the Secretary-General in developing a compilation and analysis of legal norms and the development of guiding principles on internal displacement.<sup>10</sup>

Though the Plan of Action, which was revised in many respects before being adopted by the Assembly, in the end does not contain express reference to the Guiding Principles, the call for governments to protect and assist IDPs "in accordance with General Assembly resolutions" goes beyond the draft language of simply "taking into account" the Guiding Principles. The most recent GA resolution on IDPs, which it was noted should be the point of reference for the Plan of Action, *inter alia* notes with appreciation that an increasing number of states, UN agencies, regional bodies and NGOs are making use of the Principles and encourages the further dissemination, promotion and application of the Principles, including through regional seminars as well as support for capacity building in their use. As noted above, the Madrid Plan of Action also calls for legal advice and information to be provided to older persons in situations of displacement.

The Guiding Principles have now been translated into over two dozen languages. It is important that dissemination efforts recognise the unique needs of older displaced persons, for instance by publishing large-print, easy to read versions of the Principles. Mobile awareness-raising programmes and legal clinics would also be important for reaching out to older persons among the internally displaced. The Plan of Action notes that lack of access to legal protection often exacerbates abuse and violence directed at older women.<sup>11</sup> Because older persons often serve as highly respected formal and informal community leaders, who provide guidance and leadership particularly in peace and reconciliation efforts, engaging them in the promotion and use of the Principles can be critical



not only to their own welfare but that of IDP communities as a whole.

Other objectives contained in the Madrid Plan of Action are also of tremendous relevance to efforts to improve responses to the needs of older refugees and IDPs. The commitments concerning income generation, education, food, housing, physical and mental health care, HIV/AIDS, disability and protection from neglect, abuse and violence also merit the attention of all actors engaged in addressing the plight of older refugees and IDPs. In summary, the Second World Assembly on Ageing and its resulting Plan of Action mark significant progress in focusing greater attention on the special needs of older refugees and displaced persons and in elaborating a number of commitments by states. While the Plan of Action places primary responsibility for its implementation upon governments, it also recognises the critical role of NGOs and civil society, as well as international and regional organisations. Indeed, the recommended actions provide important guidance as to how

international humanitarian and development agencies, human rights bodies, NGOs, civil society groups and others concerned with the plight of refugee and IDPs can better attend to the compelling, but long overlooked, needs of older displaced persons.

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1. Recommendation 43, *International Plan of Action on Ageing*, adopted at the World Assembly on Ageing at Vienna, Austria, and endorsed by the UN General Assembly in resolution 37/51 (1982), available at: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/ageipaa.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/ageipaa.htm)

2. *Abuse of Older Persons: Recognising and Responding to Abuse of Older Persons in a Global Context*, Report of the UN Secretary-General to the Commission for Social Development, acting as the preparatory committee for the Second World Assembly on Ageing, UN Doc E/CN.4/2002/PC/2 (9 January 2002), para 15.

3. *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002*, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, 12 April 2002, advance unedited copy available at: [www.un.org/ageing/coverage/index.html](http://www.un.org/ageing/coverage/index.html)

4. *Madrid Plan of Action*

5. See "Governments Affirm Concept of Society for All Ages," press release from Second World Assembly on Ageing, SOC/M/22, 12 April 2002.

6. *Draft international plan of action on ageing*, 2002, UN Doc. A/CONF.197/3/Add.2 (6 March 2002), para 55(a).

7. *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs, Francis M Deng, to the UN Commission on Human Rights, UN Doc E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, Principle 4.

8. Statement by the delegation of Canada to the Second World Assembly on Ageing, 12 April 2002.

9. See, for instance, UN Doc A/CONF.197/3/Add.5.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Madrid Plan of Action*, para 99.

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