

Lessons learned from UNHCR's involvement in the Guatemala refugee repatriation and reintegration programme (1987-1999)

by Paula Worby

Preface

In early 1998 and in view of operational phase-down and eventual closure of the Office, UNHCR Guatemala began planning a series of lessons learned exercises. UNHCR considered that its unique experience in the repatriation of Guatemalan refugees from Mexico constituted an important resource for future operations, particularly in light of the highly organised and political nature of the collective return process, as well as the innovative role which UNHCR played in areas such as negotiation over refugee lands, socio-economic reintegration, and personal documentation.

The general objective of the exercise was to systematise and analyse lessons learned throughout the repatriation and reintegration process, with a view to identifying "best practices" and successful models that could be applied to other UNHCR repatriations, as well as shortcomings and limitations which should be avoided in the future. A secondary objective of the exercise was to identify "gaps" that UNHCR has been unable to meet, in order to promote appropriate linkages with long-term development actors present in the areas of return. Finally, it was hoped that a series of inter-institutional lessons learned exercises would serve a public information purpose in disseminating information about UNHCR's work in Guatemala, highlighting the importance of the international community's contribution to the achievement of a lasting peace through the donors' support for repatriation process.

The various lessons learned exercises created the opportunity to reflect on the successes and shortcomings of the repatriation process operation not only among UNHCR staff, but also among a variety of national and international institutions. This final report synthesises and builds on the results of the lessons learned field exercises, which were virtually all co-sponsored with other institutions, and include:

1. Internal UNHCR Guatemala Lessons Learned Workshop with the participation of all professional and field staff.
2. Mediating Group/GRICAR Evaluation Workshop
3. Forum on Lessons Learned in UNHCR's Work with Refugee/Returnee Women's Organisations
4. Permanent Commissions -CCPP- Workshops on the Return Process involving 35 returnee communities
5. Workshop on Reintegration and QIPs (UNHCR/CECI)
6. Workshop on the Documentation of the Uprooted Population (UNHCR/CTEAR/EU)
7. Workshop on Linkage Strategy and Sustainable Development in Returnee Areas, (UNHCR/UNDP/CEAR/CTEAR).

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The task of analysing lessons learned by UNHCR in Guatemala after 12 years of intervention is a challenging one. There is a wealth of information available but the complexity and ever-changing nature of the situation as the refugees returned, eludes simplistic analysis.

There is an even bigger challenge in making this information accessible and of use in UNHCR's difficult work. Surely the nature of the refugee situation and return process in Guatemala was atypical in so many ways that practical lessons are difficult to discover.

But the lessons are there: whether it be the benefits of ceding partial control over a repatriation process so that the refugees themselves have a voice in their destiny or the example of fortitude that the Guatemalan women put forth with full and unique support from UNHCR