

September 1981

A do-it-yourself information facility  
to disperse some of the tensions and  
generalised anxiety in the refugee  
camps.

The facility needs special accommodation just somewhere to sit  
and a sign declaring that all questions about DRUCKER are welcome here.  
Here, should be a central meeting place. A Mental Health Consultant or  
c/o UNHCR  
anywhere people ordinarily converse with Bangkok. More, and preferably  
should be opened when people are especially at leisure evenings, festivals

There is reported to be a great deal of anxiety and depressive reaction which drains the psychological energy of the refugees in the camps. Just one of the causes seems to be the lack of flow of authoritative information which is available to the refugees. Where information is in short supply rumour fills the vacuum. Of course there are some questions for which no proper information is available anywhere but even in that kind of situation authoritative information that "no such authentic information exists and all else is rumour founded on no reliable fact or source", could be of some value. Much information resides within different organisations and agencies and is held by various personnel but is neither provided to the refugees nor do the refugees have a way to gain access to it. Officials and their offices (along with much else) create perhaps unwittingly frontiers across which the refugees do not cross. Rumour (and some sound information too for that matter) travels along informal networks. There is perhaps a common perverse pleasure in conveying bad news rather than good and much of this occurs in natural gossip.

It occurs to me that it might prove very useful in relieving the refugees from the burden of rumour and at the same time providing them with useful things to do, think about, and plan for, if we could assist in strengthening the informal information network, link it to the more organised and formal network, and tackle head on some of the rumour and destructive gaps in information. One would hope that a genuine partnership style of relationships between the refugees and the helping services would emerge also.

The refugees should themselves become an important resource for disseminating information (both ways) and run their own information facility.

The 'facility' needs no special accommodation just somewhere to sit and a sign declaring that all questions about anything are welcome here.

Here, should be a central meeting place, in a market at a restaurant or anywhere people ordinarily congregate with time to spare, and preferably should be manned when people are ordinarily at leisure, evenings, festivals

talk when they arrive and are in a mood to hear or understand?

Will the information given be reliable and useful?

Should there be a sign?



and so on.

A group of information workers should be organised on a rota basis and their major skills should be in good listening and encouraging others to speak and to be at ease. Some simple questions can be common-sense answered simply (Although common sense is not as common as many of us like to believe.) Many questions will involve providing information about resources within the camp and making or encouraging referral.

But a record should be kept by the worker of all questions that come to them. Especially in the refugee situation the people are geographically captive, they have time on their hands and should therefore fairly easily be persuaded to return in a specified short time when some kind of answer or response will be ready for them.

The workers should meet on a regular basis with the Volag partners of the information facility and carefully consider the appropriate resource for getting answers to the specific questions and the nature of the response to be given to the 'client'. The information workers are not to attempt counselling, or therapeutics of any kind although of course information about resources for such service can be offered as appropriate.

From the list of questions as they are accumulated one will soon be able to identify the common occurrence questions and begin to build some kind of card index resource for "looking-up" some of the information. The cards could indicate ways for the worker to proceed in getting specific information to general type questions (i.e. What has happened to my application for...?). One would also soon discern those areas where perhaps special campaigns to provide certain types of information would be appropriate and rewarding. Two or three such possibilities come quickly to mind, the style of doing various things.

#### 2.1.1. Tours of the Camp for Refugees

Refugees are told about camp facilities usually in one big introductory talk when they arrive and are in poor shape to hear or understand all the information about the various unfamiliar services and appropriate procedures for doing things.

Why not regular camp "tours" with tour leaders on a pre-arranged basis taking groups round the facilities, explaining them, introducing, encouraging questions and so on...? May be with a few picture leaflets just like any tourist agency might provide. But in this case a series of "this is your camp, how best to use it and contribute to its life" as the focus!

2. Demystifying Medical Records/Health Education

See Memo to Dr. Amos Townsend CCSDPT (enclosed)

3. Resettlement (Comic-Strip)

Organise the refugees who are involved in resettlement into producing a 'comic-strip' with lots of humour, as a guide to resettlement procedures, drawn from their own experience and any information we can reliably give them. Include in the comic-strip all the misconceptions and the consequences of making some of the mistakes. If the resettlement people can be encouraged to react to the early 'draft' of the comic-strip that would be fine and in any event the positive and reasonable reasons for things being done the way they are should be emphasised. Even some of the seemingly unreasonable things could be incorporated in an amusing way. It is to be hoped that the first issue of such a comic-book will be improved upon as its usefulness (or otherwise) becomes apparent.

These are just my off-the-cuff examples - the questions as they come to the information facility should suggest many more and should lead to serious projects for the refugees to tackle themselves, mainly in their own way. It is their responsibility (we the Volags are only there as a resource for them). However, one would hope a light and, lets have some fun, approach would be the style of doing serious things.

An information facility of this do-it-yourself kind should need little or no initial funding. (Later, specific campaigns, production of materials etc. would need an appropriate but modest budget.) What is needed is a community organisation approach with a worker who has the



responsibility of setting up such a facility and able to stick with it stimulating the activity and being sensitive to the enthusiasms and loss of interest which characterise any volunteer project. Recruitment of volunteers, working out procedures and processes, establishing a rota, arranging for pairing the volunteers to support each other, making sure new recruitment takes place as workers drop out, doing a great deal of 'finding out' which the refugees are in no position to do for themselves are some of the major tasks.

Training for such workers should be of an arising-from-the-job case-by-case basis. The facility will need some camp publicity to get started but should be generally low-profile and thought of as "a friendly place where our own kind will help us find out what we need to know".

A flow of information to the refugees and a source for keeping one's finger on the pulse of what is currently of concern to them which are the objectives of such a facility should go some way towards dispersing some of the tensions and anxieties in the camps.