



## The state of UNHCR's organisational culture

by Jeff Crisp

Over the past 20 years, a voluminous literature – much of it somewhat critical in tone – has been published on the policies, programmes and activities of UNHCR. During the same period, the concept of 'organisational culture' has gained wide acceptance amongst sociologists and anthropologists as a means of understanding human systems and the way in which they behave. But curiously, very few analysts have endeavoured to combine these fields of study, bringing an organisational culture perspective to the work of the UN's refugee agency.<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to address this neglected issue, UNHCR's Staff Development Section, supported by the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, has launched a new research project titled 'The state of UNHCR's organisational culture'. Led by Barb Wigley, an experienced management consultant and health practitioner who is studying for a PhD at the University of Melbourne, the project seeks to determine how UNHCR's culture influences the organisation's activities and performance and its capacity to implement change.

It is hoped that the study will enable the organisation to provide better support to its staff, to enhance the training programmes provided to senior and middle managers, and, more generally, to reinforce UNHCR's capacity for individual and organisational learning. For, as one scholar has argued, "UNHCR has an organisational culture that makes it extremely difficult to learn from past mistakes, and therefore some of the same mistakes are repeated from one operation to another."<sup>2</sup>

This is a regular page of news and debate from UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU). For further information, or suggestions regarding this feature, contact Jeff Crisp, head of EPAU. Email [CRISP@unhcr.ch](mailto:CRISP@unhcr.ch)

Drawing upon existing literature in this field, the study defines organisational culture as the set of assumptions, values, customs and myths which guide the perceptions and behaviour of UNHCR staff members and which are passed on to new members of that group by both formal and informal means.

The study recognises that many of these assumptions and values are socially embedded within UNHCR but have never been officially articulated. The project will also take due account of the fact that large international organisations such as UNHCR tend to be characterised by a plethora of 'micro-cultures', a manifestation of interlocking social networks based on the nationality, regional origin, function, gender, grade and career history of staff members.

A variety of different methods will be used to conduct this analysis, including participant observation, one-to-one interviews with a cross-section of Headquarters and field staff, and the analysis of data gathered from participants in UNHCR's management learning programmes. Field visits are planned to East and West Africa, the Balkans and South-East Asia. A report of the project will be placed in the public domain, most probably in the second half of 2004.

According to specialists in this area, the culture of any organisation serves two important purposes: the integration of individual staff members and the adaptation of the institution to its external environment. If it is to examine the latter of these two purposes, this new UNHCR study will evidently need to solicit the opinions and perceptions of other stakeholders, including subscribers to *Forced Migration Review*. We therefore invite interested readers to contact Ms Wigley in relation to her research. She can be reached by email at: [bwigley@bigpond.net.au](mailto:bwigley@bigpond.net.au)

1. For an exception to this rule, see Mark Walkup 'Policy dysfunction in humanitarian organizations: the role of coping strategies, institutions and organizational culture', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol.

10, no. 1, 1997.

2. Gil Loescher *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p19.

### New working papers

UNHCR is pleased to announce the publications of nos. 93-100 in the working paper series *New Issues in Refugee Research*. The papers can be accessed under 'Publications' on the UNHCR website ([www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)) or ordered in hard copy from [hqep00@unhcr.ch](mailto:hqep00@unhcr.ch).

**No. 100.** A new asylum paradigm? Globalization, migration and the uncertain future of the international refugee regime, by Jeff Crisp

**No. 99.** From 'protective passports' to protected entry procedures? The legacy of Raoul Wallenberg in the contemporary asylum debate, by Gregor Noll

**No. 98.** The issue of 'trust' or 'mistrust' in research with refugees: choices, caveats and considerations for researchers, by Tricia Hynes

**No. 97.** Bosnian refugees in Australia: identity, community and labour market integration, by Val Colic-Peisker

**No. 96.** A bitter pill to swallow: obstacles facing refugee and overseas doctors in the UK, by Emma Stewart

**No. 95.** Forced migrants as an under-utilized asset: refugee skills, livelihoods, and achievements in Kampala, Uganda, by Michela Macchiavello

**No. 94.** Refugees, forced resettlers and 'other forced migrants': towards a unitary study of forced migration, by David Turton

**No. 93.** Local integration as a durable solution: refugees, host populations and education in Uganda, by Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Lucy Hovil