NGO Statement on the Grand Bargain

The following is presented on behalf of the NGO community, and was drafted in consultation with NGOs in order to represent the broad range of organization types and views within the community.

The past year has been a critical period for the Grand Bargain, with the initiative entering into the third year of implementation. Most of the nine current Grand Bargain workstreams, as well as the agencies and organizations tasked to lead them, have been more active in the past year than previously, with significant advances in rolling out pilot projects, establishing links between workstreams, and proposing ways to improve the process. A key theme for the year was the need to shift the focus of Grand Bargain commitments toward implementation in the field. UNHCR has continued to be a key actor in these advances.

We commend UNHCR for its ongoing participation in the Grand Bargain and leadership of workstream 4 and would welcome further engagement in advancing the agenda on behalf of the whole humanitarian community. Throughout 2018, UNHCR maintained engagement in Grand Bargain processes, participating in the ongoing dialogue between workstreams with the intent to improve implementation. In particular, UNHCR was instrumental in planning the January 2018 meeting among Grand Bargain co-convenors to better identify workstream objectives and linkages across workstreams. From the NGO perspective, workstream 4, targeting the reduction of duplicative processes and reduction of management costs, is particularly important for field staff seeking to be as effective as possible with limited resources. NGOs stand ready to support the co-convenors in this endeavor to support the field through Grand Bargain implementation. UNHCR is encouraged to engage further in the leadership of workstream 4 to ensure full implementation of commitments.

We also commend UNHCR for its engagement in the Harmonized Narrative Reporting Pilot. The mid-term review of the ongoing reporting pilot, released in July, highlighted that UNHCR contributed 62 reports from NGO partners to the review, which were key in assessing progress to date and recommendations moving forward. UNHCR is particularly commended for a proactive approach in applying the pilot 8+3 harmonized reporting template with all partners in Somalia, Iraq, and Myanmar. We further encourage UNHCR to consider rollout of the harmonized 8+3 template to NGO partners across all field locations as part of the guidance for 2019 partnership agreements. In addition, we hope UNHCR will be open in the near future to further discuss how to apply simplification to financial reporting in connection with harmonization of cost classification.

We appreciate UNHCR’s ongoing commitment to harmonize and simplify UN approaches toward NGOs, however, NGOs are particularly interested in seeing progress in the harmonization of UN partnership agreements, building on the initial steps undertaken with WFP and UNICEF. Parallel to the work within the Grand Bargain workstreams, UNHCR, along with UNICEF, WFP, and OCHA, have engaged in dialogue to harmonize and simplify UN processes and
systems that involve NGOs. Notably, the UN Partner Portal now being rolled out provides a common platform for UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP partners to register and access calls for expression of interest. We welcome UNHCR’s support to take these efforts further in order to identify simplified and harmonized frameworks for partnership agreements, partner capacity assessment, and audit across UN agencies. At the same time, it is important to increase the level of engagement from UNHCR and other UN agencies to achieve results in these areas. We particularly encourage UNHCR to engage with other UN agencies on harmonized implementation of the UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Involving Implementing Partners. In most cases, the needs of UN agencies when it comes to identifying partners and developing programming should be common, and minor changes to existing processes can significantly reduce the burden on NGO staff. This reduction in burden frees time and resource to better serve affected populations.

We call on UNHCR to further explore opportunities to pilot multi year agreements with partners, in line with the Grand Bargain commitment to increase collaborative humanitarian multi year planning and funding. The growing evidence base suggests multiyear financing can drive increased efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian response. Donors are beginning to deliver on their commitment to workstream 7; self-reports indicate donors are providing more multiyear financing and engaging in multiyear planning efforts. However, UN agencies, including UNHCR, which are often primary recipients of multiyear grants, do not typically pass along the multiyear timeline to the NGOs they fund to do program implementation. NGOs stand ready to move forward collectively, and advocate for increased multi-year funding allocations from donors. The lessons learned from piloting multi-year planning in more than 16 countries should serve as a basis to inform this discussion.

We remind UNHCR to ensure that country offices and staff are informed of UNHCR engagement in the Grand Bargain and supported to follow through on commitments. The full understanding and participation of UNHCR country office staff in the field are critical to effectively shifting from discussion at the global level to practical implementation of Grand Bargain commitments in the field and achieving change. This support from UNHCR staff at the country level ensures that field staff of NGO partners and UNHCR alike are mutually accountable to fulfilling Grand Bargain commitments. UNHCR’s ongoing support for capacity strengthening of NGO partners can also be linked to fulfillment of Grand Bargain commitments – ensuring that appropriate capacity of local partners is developed to enable sustainable implementation.

We ask that UNHCR lead on mainstreaming the nexus in the implementation of Grand Bargain commitments. While we understand the rationale for mainstreaming the Grand Bargain workstream on enhancing the engagement between humanitarian and development actors, we believe that mainstreaming this work will require sustained political leadership. We call on UNHCR to lead by example through ensuring the proactive engagement of development actors at the outset of a crisis and in situations of protracted displacement, as clearly outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees.

We call on UNHCR leadership to renew and maintain a sense of urgency to fulfill Grand Bargain commitments. ODI’s presentation of its annual independent review of progress made against the 51 Grand Bargain commitments found that “the sense of urgency with which signatories originally came together in 2016 is starting to ebb.” Furthermore, the Grand Bargain’s bureaucratic footprint – or structural set-up for implementation comprised of a Facilitation Group, a Secretariat, nine workstreams each led by a donor and an agency co-convenor, a self-reporting system, and an independent annual report – is not particularly light. To achieve the original intent of the Grand
Bargain, including the principles of simplification and harmonization across systems and agencies, it is important for key partners such as UNHCR to maintain commitment to the process at the highest levels of the agency. As opportunities to engage in pilot work or other concrete activities become available, we urge UNHCR to take action quickly.

**We also call on UNHCR to engage in a discussion on risk.** Since the first round of Grand Bargain negotiations in February 2016, NGOs have been warning that the Grand Bargain does not adequately address issues of risk mitigation and risk sharing in the humanitarian system. The issue cuts to the core of the ‘quid pro quo,’ which fundamentally requires greater levels of trust between donors and partners to function effectively. Improved management of risk is one of the few paths through which donors are likely to trust partners with greater funds, over longer periods of time, with reduced oversight burdens – characteristics which cut across many of the Grand Bargain workstreams. The current debate over risk – largely driven by ongoing issues with sexual exploitation and abuse – frequently excludes the NGO voice when it comes to developing systems to ensure realistic assessment, management, and transfer of risk. As a key funding partner of NGOs, UNHCR should engage with NGOs to ensure that the concept of risk management is appropriately included in partnership agreements, partner capacity assessments, as well as dialogue over allegations and investigations.

In conclusion, we remain highly appreciative of the role that UNHCR plays in implementation of the Grand Bargain, as well as demonstration of ongoing support for NGO partners; we hope this support will continue from all levels within UNHCR. We look forward to a continued partnership with UNHCR, including the opportunity to support improvements to that partnership as outlined above. The Grand Bargain represents a significant opportunity for the humanitarian system to become more effective and efficient. We, as NGOs, are hopeful that a strong partnership with UNHCR will continue to play a key role in achieving those objectives.