NGO Statement on the Grand Bargain

Dear Chairperson,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs.

The past year has been a critical period for the Grand Bargain with the focus moving towards implementation in the field. Most of the Grand Bargain workstreams, and the organizations tasked to lead them, are more active now than previously, with significant advances in rolling out pilot projects, establishing links between workstreams, and proposing ways to improve the process. UNHCR has continued to be a key actor in these advances.

NGOs commend UNHCR for its ongoing participation in the Grand Bargain and leadership of workstream 4. Throughout 2018, UNHCR engaged in Grand Bargain processes, participating in dialogue between workstreams to improve implementation. UNHCR was instrumental in planning the January 2018 meeting among Grand Bargain co-conveners to better identify workstream objectives and linkages across workstreams. For NGOs, workstream 4 – targeting the reduction of duplicative processes and reduction of management costs – is important, particularly for field staff seeking to be effective with limited resources. UNHCR’s continued leadership of workstream 4 to ensure full implementation of commitments is welcome, and we encourage UNHCR’s further engagement in the Grand Bargain process. NGOs stand ready to support co-conveners in the Grand Bargain implementation.

We commend UNHCR for engaging in the Harmonized Narrative Reporting Pilot. The July mid-term review of the ongoing reporting pilot highlighted that UNHCR contributed 62 reports from NGO partners, which were key in assessing progress and providing recommendations. UNHCR’s proactive approach in applying the pilot 8+3 harmonized reporting template with all partners in Somalia, Iraq, and Myanmar is commended. We further encourage UNHCR to rollout the template across all field locations as part of its guidance for the 2019 partnership agreements. In addition, we hope UNHCR will further discuss the simplification of financial reporting to harmonise cost classification.

We appreciate UNHCR’s commitment to harmonize and simplify UN approaches towards NGOs. However, NGOs expect progress in the harmonization of UN partnership agreements, building on steps undertaken with WFP and UNICEF. Parallel to the work of Grand Bargain workstreams, UNHCR, along with UNICEF, WFP, and OCHA, have engaged in a dialogue to harmonize and simplify UN processes and systems involving NGOs. Notably, the UNHCR Partner Portal now provides a common platform for UN partners to register and access calls for expression of interest. Identifying simplified and harmonized frameworks for partnership agreements, partner capacity assessment, and audit across UN agencies is also welcome. At the same time, UNHCR and other UN agencies must
increase the level of engagement to achieve results in these areas including on harmonized implementation of the UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Involving Implementing Partners. In most cases, minor changes to existing processes of identifying partners and developing programmes can significantly reduce the burden on NGO staff, freeing time and resource to better serve affected populations.

We call on UNHCR to pilot multi-year agreements with partners, in line with the Grand Bargain commitment to increase humanitarian multi-year planning and funding. Multi-year financing can drive increased efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian response. Self-reports indicate donors are beginning to provide more multiyear financing, and engaging in multiyear planning efforts. However, UN agencies, including UNHCR, often the primary recipients of multiyear grants, do not typically pass along the multiyear timeline to NGOs for program implementation. NGOs stand ready to advocate for increased multi-year funding from donors. The lessons learned from piloting multi-year planning in over 16 countries serves as a solid base to inform this discussion.

UNHCR country offices and staff should remain informed of UNHCR’s engagement in the Grand Bargain and they must be supported to follow through on commitments. Their full understanding and participation are critical to the implementation of Grand Bargain commitments in the field. This will also ensure that NGO and UNHCR field staff are mutually accountable to fulfilling these commitments. In this regard, UNHCR’s ongoing support for capacity strengthening of NGO partners can be linked to the Grand Bargain commitment of developing local capacity to enable sustainable implementation.

We encourage UNHCR to mainstream the nexus in the implementation of Grand Bargain commitments. This will require sustained political leadership. UNHCR should lead by example, ensuring the proactive engagement of development actors at the outset of a crisis and in situations of protracted displacement, as outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees.

We urge UNHCR leadership to maintain a sense of urgency to fulfill Grand Bargain commitments. The ODI annual independent review found that the sense of urgency with which the Grand Bargain signatories originally came together in 2016 is starting to ebb. Furthermore, the Grand Bargain’s bureaucratic footprint is not particularly light, comprised of a Facilitation Group, a Secretariat, nine workstreams, a self-reporting system, and an independent annual report. To achieve the original intent of the Grand Bargain, including 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. As opportunities to engage in pilot work or other activities become available, we urge UNHCR to take action quickly.

We call on UNHCR to engage in a discussion on risk. The Grand Bargain does not adequately address issues of risk mitigation and risk sharing in the humanitarian system. This requires greater levels of trust between donors and partners to function effectively. Improved management of risk can ensure donors trust partners with greater funds, over longer periods of time, with reduced oversight burdens. The current debate over risk – driven largely by sexual exploitation and abuse – frequently excludes the NGO voice. UNHCR should engage with NGOs to ensure that risk management is appropriately included in partnership agreements, partner capacity assessments, as well as dialogue over allegations and investigations.
To conclude, we appreciate UNHCR’s role in the implementation of the Grand Bargain. We hope this will continue across all levels, and look forward to continued partnership with UNHCR.

A detailed version of this intervention is available on icvanetwork.org

Thank you