EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER’S PROGRAMME
STANDING COMMITTEE
74th Meeting
5-7 March 2019

NGOs' Statement on Strategic Partnerships

Dear Chair,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs.

UNHCR has currently over 1,000 NGO partners. Despite the great diversity among us, we would like to make four points affecting all NGOs in their partnership with UNHCR.

First, NGOs appreciate UNHCR’s commitment to dialogue with civil society partners. In an ever more difficult environment where refugees face increasing hostility and xenophobia, this effort remains central for NGOs working with displaced populations. We share UNHCR’s vision of a society where refugees and other displaced continue to enjoy their rights in a welcoming atmosphere of trust and humanism. NGOs are proud partners of UNHCR and remain committed to supporting its mandate to safeguard, promote and implement the Refugee Convention and other relevant legal frameworks.

Against this background, we ask UNHCR to further deepen trust with the NGO community. This requires translating the spirit and principles of partnership into strategic and programmatic collaboration, including in joint analysis of humanitarian situations and needs. We call on UNHCR to embrace the NGOs’ diversity and rich response capacity. We also encourage UNHCR to further recognize NGOs as independent entities with their own ideals, principles and identity, and not simply as implementing partners. To achieve this, we ask UNHCR to give NGOs more space to apply their own modalities and modus operandi while remaining accountable. Further structured dialogues and transparent communication are essential to ensure mutual trust.

Second, we underscore the importance of efficiency in aid delivery and offer to support UNHCR on this matter. With a self-commitment to efficiency, we constantly strive for best service delivery and lean support mechanisms. However, despite the efficiency ambitions articulated at the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain commitments, including work stream 2 on localization, NGOs constantly face increasing demands and tighter control by many donors, resulting in administrative cost. Unfortunately, this also applies to UNHCR. Overall, NGOs face increasingly complex administrative and financial procedures, high reporting demands and budgetary restrictions. In consequence, NGOs are frequently requested to recover unmet costs from other sources to implement UNHCR interventions. This negatively impacts NGOs operational capacities, particularly with regard to personnel costs, safety and security, as seen in South Sudan. We therefore urge UNHCR to simplify and streamline processes, reduce requirements and cover real project costs.

We welcome UNHCR’s decision to expand the implementation of the standard narrative reporting template to all countries and encourage other donors and UN agencies to do the same. We acknowledge and appreciate the development of a unified UN Portal even if not yet fully operational. Considering this as a beginning, we encourage UNHCR and others to collaborate with NGOs in mapping out opportunities for further
harmonization across UN agencies. We would also encourage UNHCR to revamp the discussion with UNICEF, WFP and OCHA on other aspects of harmonization.

In addition, we encourage UNHCR to review its budget coding system in view of simplifying and harmonizing financial templates, and exploring innovative solutions for increased efficiency. NGOs recognize the importance of transparency, cost efficiency and accountability, but ask that these criteria apply at a sound level. We further urge UNHCR to invest in NGOs’ capacities and systems, enabling them to respond with quality and accountability.

**Third**, we support UNHCR’s appeal for longer-term planning and funding. Evidence suggests that social change needs not only smart innovative and context-specific interventions but, above all, time to take effect. NGOs aspire to support people of concern in becoming self-reliant. Economic recovery programming and social integration of displaced populations into host societies confirm the need for stable programming and implementation. As such, we strongly support UNHCR in its advocacy to secure longer and more predictable funding, but are concerned that UNHCR reports an actual reduction in longer-term funding, compared to previous years. This stands in sharp contrast to the consensus expressed in the Global Compact on Refugees, which lays out a vision for more predictable and more comprehensive responses. Making the GCR a reality is our shared responsibility and this will not be possible without long-term funding mechanisms.

For this reason, NGOs appeal to donors to realize their commitment on more flexible, long-term funding. We also ask UNHCR to pass on multi-year funding received to its NGO partners; initiate adequate internal reforms to open such funding mechanisms; and complement our collective efforts to reduce administrative and grant-management burdens. UNHCR is already applying multi-year, multi-partner programming in selected countries and we encourage UNHCR to further expand this effort and engage with partners in an open and transparent manner.

**Fourth**, we express our support to UNHCR’s regionalization efforts. NGOs largely see this as an opportunity for further programmatic collaboration with UNHCR, as many displacement situations require regional analysis and responses. A UNHCR closer to the field and more accessible to its NGO partners is welcomed. Especially for those NGOs not present in Geneva, we see opportunities for more direct strategic and programmatic engagement with UNHCR Regional Offices. NGOs hope that this new proximity to the field will result in faster and more effective response mechanisms. Nonetheless, we call for consistency in the application of policies and procedures across the organization.

In summary, we hope UNHCR expands its trust in NGOs and sees value in strengthening their capacities. We appeal to UNHCR to reform its administrative systems requirements related to NGOs in order to boost efficiency. NGOs strongly support UNHCR’s petition for more longer-term funding to meet the GCR opportunities and obligations. Last but not least, we look forward to a regionalized UNHCR structure bringing decision-making closer to the field and hope this results in enhanced programmatic collaboration between UNHCR and NGOs.

We look forward to our continued partnership with UNHCR in these challenging times.

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

Thank you.