EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER’S PROGRAMME
STANDING COMMITTEE
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NGO statement on Strategic Partnerships

Dear Chair,

This statement has been drafted through wide consultations with NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

UNHCR has currently more than 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,** we NGOs appreciate UNHCR’s serious commitment to have a close dialogue with its civil society partners. This effort is central to the NGO community working with refugees and displacement in an ever more difficult environment where refugees are met with increasing hostility and outright xenophobia. We share with UNHCR a vision of a society where refugees and displaced are not pushed aside but enjoy their rights in a welcoming atmosphere of trust and humanism. Many civil society organizations are proud partners of UNHCR and are committed to support its mandate to safeguard, promote and implement the 1951 Refugee Convention and other legal frameworks that ought to provide protection for displaced people.

It is against this background that we ask UNHCR to further deepen trust in the NGO community and translate the spirit and principles of partnership into strategic and programmatic collaboration, including in joint analysis of humanitarian situations and of priority humanitarian needs. We call on UNHCR to embrace the value of diversity amongst NGOs and their capacity to respond to different needs. We also encourage UNHCR to strengthen its efforts to recognize NGOs as independent, self-mandated entities with their own ideals, principles and identity and not purely as partners for the implementation of projects. To achieve this, we ask UNHCR to give NGOs more space to apply its own modalities and modus operandi while remaining accountable. Further structured dialogues and transparent communication are essential to ensure mutual trust.

**Second,** we want to underscore the importance of efficiency of aid delivery and offer UNHCR our support on this matter. We have a self-commitment to efficiency and constantly strive for best service delivery and lean support mechanisms. However, despite the efficiency ambitions articulated at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and the Grand Bargain commitments, including work stream 2 on localisation, NGOs constantly face increasing demands and tighter control by many donors resulting in increasing administrative cost. Unfortunately, this also applies to UNHCR. NGOs are confronted with complex administrative and financial procedures, high reporting demands and constantly tightening budgetary restrictions. In consequence, NGOs are frequently requested to recover unmet costs from other sources to implement UNHCR interventions, which can have significant negative impact on NGO operational capacities. This is particularly true in reference to personnel costs and safety and security as highlighted in detail by NGOs in country as for instance in South Sudan.
Moreover, restrictive contractual requirements by donors may risk perpetuating negative trends. With donors becoming increasingly averse to risk (particularly, financial and fraud/terror-related), there is a tendency to transfer risk, resulting in NGOs further tightening internal controls, which, in turn, reduces the rapidity needed in emergency responses. This also links back to the point on trust above.

We welcome UNHCR’s decision to expand the implementation of the standard narrative reporting template (8+3) 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 it is not yet fully operational. We consider this as the beginning of a process and encourage UNHCR as well as other UN agencies to collaborate with NGO efforts mapping out opportunities for further harmonisation across UN agencies. We would encourage UNHCR to revamp the discussion with UNICEF, WFP and OCHA to look at other aspects of harmonisation.

We ask UNHCR to simplify and streamline processes, reduce requirements and cover real project cost. In addition, we encourage UNHCR to review its budget coding system in view of simplifying and harmonising financial templates, and exploring innovative solutions for increased efficiency. NGOs certainly recognize the importance of transparency, cost efficiency and accountability but we ask that these criteria apply at a sound level. We further urge UNHCR to invest in NGOs’ capacities and systems so that they are able to respond with quality and accountability rather than imposing additional external control mechanisms on them.

**Third**, we want to support UNHCR’s appeal for longer-term planning and funding. There is countless evidence that social change needs not only smart innovative and context specific interventions but above all time to take effect. NGOs working in the field of resilience and solutions all have the ambition to support people of concern to move from initial recipients of aid to self-reliant communities. Economic recovery programming and social integration of displaced populations into hosting societies confirm the need for stable programming and implementation. We strongly support UNHCR in its advocacy with States to secure longer and more predictable funding mechanisms, and we are very concerned that UNHCR reports an actual reduction of longer-term funding, compared to previous years. This stands in sharp contrast to the consensus expressed in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework which lays out a vision for a more predictable and more comprehensive response to crises. There is not only an opportunity but a responsibility of all actors to make the GCR a reality. This will not be possible without longer-term funding mechanisms.

This makes us, NGOs, appeal to all donors to realize their commitment to provide more flexible, long-term funding. At the same time, we ask UNHCR to pass on multi-year funding received to its NGO partners; initiate adequate internal reforms and 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 want to encourage the UN Refugee Agency to expand this effort even further and engage with partners in an open and transparent manner.

**Fourth**, we want to express our firm commitment to support UNHCR’s regionalization efforts. NGOs widely 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 reality, more directly accessible and responsive to its NGO partners at a regional level, is welcomed. Especially for NGOs not present at Geneva level, we see an increasing opportunity for more direct strategic and programmatic engagement with UNHCR Regional Offices. NGOs further have hopes that this new proximity to the field will result in faster
and more effective response mechanisms. Nonetheless, we would like to make a call to ensure consistency in the application of policies and procedures across the organization.

In short, we look forward to our continued partnership with UNHCR in challenging times, and hope UNHCR expands its trust in the NGO community and sees value in its diversity by respecting and strengthening its capacities. We appeal to UNHCR to reform its administrative systems requirements for NGO partners thus boosting the efficiency of our collective work. NGOs strongly support UNHCR’s petition for more longer-term funding to meet the opportunities and obligations of the GCR; and last but not least, we look forward to a regionalized UNHCR structure where decision making is brought closer to the field. We hope this will result in enhanced programmatic collaboration between UNHCR with NGOs.

Thank you, chair.