NGO Statement on UNHCR Reform

Dear Chair,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs. It has been prepared in close consultation with the NGO community, representing a diverse set of views.

The current reform UNHCR is undertaking, based on regionalization/decentralization, offers the promise of empowering the actors that are closest to the ground and know a specific region best to find efficient and practicable solutions. This shift in focus is particularly critical as UNHCR looks to make real the promise of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The imperative to address humanitarian and livelihoods/self-reliance needs of refugees and other persons of concern, including IDPs, stateless persons and vulnerable host communities, will require much greater collaboration with local actors.

The shift from centralization to regionalization/decentralization is, however, not a panacea for all ills. It must be matched with far-reaching reform at all levels to improve partnership and operational efficiency, increase accountability and, most critically, improve outcomes for refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern. Adequate consultation with NGOs in the development and roll-out of the reform is a key element to consolidate the process. Ensuring effective stakeholder consultation is of paramount importance as it determines the desired quality of collective outcomes in terms of impact and sustainability. Broad-based consultation and participation of stakeholders will help refine and concretize changes. We therefore propose the following perspectives and suggestions to be considered in the refinement of the reform:

1. As moving authority and responsibility from the centre to the regions represents only the first step, the reform can neither be complete nor adequate unless the same dynamic organically works shifting the focus systematically from regions to country-level structures and from country-level structures to the actual sites of operation on the ground. This is necessary to ensure clarity and to determine the optimal scope and coverage of the regionalization and decentralization process. Moreover, as the scope and coverage of the regionalization/decentralization process seem to be restricted within a 3-tiered construct limited within the global–regional–national level structures, there is a need to address the missing link capturing the dynamic and the interaction between the national level structures and the actual operation sites on the ground.

2. The reform does not provide a once-for-all solution as much as it unlocks the potential for policy makers, managers and operators to ensure progress based on day-to-day conversations and consultations throughout the system. The collective engagement of all concerned in the ‘software’ management of the reform, based on open and transparent day-to-day communication, generates multiple benefits in terms of ensuring connectivity, continuity and stability after the transition and day-to-day problem solving especially in the management of operational emergencies. Dynamic
information flow from the ground up also strengthens the reform with greater participation of and commitment from refugees and other persons of concern. Community-based NGOs are best placed to provide the necessary vehicle to catalyse this process.

3. While the overarching purpose of the reform, advancing protection and sustainable solutions in a complementary process, should maintain uniformity and stability, the roles and responsibilities at each level should be managed with flexibility thus reflecting contextual diversities and best practices. Beyond the response to pre-determined challenges, the reform should also create built-in mechanisms with shock absorption capacities at each level to manage the consequences of unforeseen circumstances and crises, including the key aspects of emergency response and resource mobilization. It is important that the Regional Bureaus are empowered to take decisions independently to ensure rapid response while, at the same time, applying international policies consistently in all regions.

4. Although the process of regionalization/decentralization may be based on a set of common templates, the chronic vulnerability and capacity limitations of certain regions, including Africa, merits special consideration in terms of resource mobilization and allocation. African countries that currently host a large number of refugees, despite their very low economic base, cannot adequately discharge their responsibilities unless they are supported with increasing solidarity as part of the reform dynamics. The reform should also provide a strong impetus for more synergistic efforts strengthening strategic and operational alliances with other regional organizations including the African Union (AU). The AU has declared 2019 as the Year of ‘Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa’. In this connection, we very much support the effort UNHCR makes, taking into consideration the specific needs of each region in the process of setting up the regional bureaux.

5. Any decentralization should reinforce accountability in terms of checks and balances. We urge UNHCR to take heightened measures to address and answer complaints and concerns voiced by refugees regarding instances of unethical behaviour from some field staff. The point is to avoid or at least limit future scandals like the ones observed in Uganda and Kenya that seriously endanger refugees and their protection.

6. Regionalization must, above all, respond to UNHCR’s operational needs. Therefore, regional and sub-regional offices should be situated in close proximity to UNHCR’s main operations to maximize efficiency of response, rather than following the model of other UN agencies. It appears that the current regionalization/decentralization process has been principally guided by inter-agency requirements. For example, rather than putting a regional office in Panama to cover the entire Americas region, two regional offices should be established: one for Central and North America and the second in Colombia to cover the Venezuela situation and the rest of South America.

7. Getting the balance right in terms of the human resources mix, is another pertinent issue that needs serious consideration as part of the reform. The persistent voice – ‘NOTHING ABOUT REFUGEES WITHOUT REFUGEES’ – is often heard reflecting a sense of frustration and ambition expressed by the refugees and other persons of concern thus challenging the rather exclusive nature of the prevailing system in terms of human resources selection, training and engagement. In a positive sense, however, the challenge could provide an opportunity for a timely adjustment in a way that enables UNHCR and its partners to ensure adequate inclusion of representatives of refugees and other persons of concern,
including vulnerable host communities as primary stakeholders. Based on an over-reliance on ‘experts/professionals’, the conventional approach is often mired in and constrained by the inherent challenge of a ‘know-it-all’ situation. In the current context, it does not represent the silver bullet required to bring about the desired change. It is also important to emphasise the fact that success is to be measured differently in the implementation of the GCR and the CRRF which focus on both protection and solutions/self-reliance. The comprehensive nature of the agenda demands systematic and creative use of indigenous technical know-how and talents based on a more balanced mix of HR employment and engagement including experts/professionals, refugees and other persons of concern as well as their host community members, especially at the local and national levels. This needs to be consolidated with increased opportunities for an on-going process of mutual learning and exchange built into the reform.

8. Regionalization should support our shared ambition to provide reliable, higher quality services to our clients, but to do so, it must be coupled with meaningful reforms to partnership practice. These include adopting policies consistent with the Grand Bargain including longer-term awards and multiyear financing, timely communication of budgets and negotiations of Project Partnership Agreements (PPAs), covering the cost of quality programs. We acknowledge the positive step to introduce Multi-year PPAs this year and cover, for the first time, 4% of overhead costs for national NGOs, but this is just a first step. To see greater effectiveness of programs, these policies need to be expanded upon, communicated and consistently applied in the field.

9. Finally, we call for a more fundamental and comprehensive change to ensure that the new normal, to be established by the reform, is based on greater transparency and accountability to enable all the stakeholders, including NGOs, to contribute optimally to the effective implementation of the GCR.

Thank you.