Meeting: Dialogue with UNHCR MENA Regional Bureau & NGOs on COVID-19 Strategy and Response

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Presenters: Ayman Gharaibeh (UNHCR MENA Director), Hy Shelow (Head of UNHCR MENA Protection Service), Robert Hurt (UNHCR HQ), Shaden Khallaf (Senior Policy Advisor, UNHCR MENA Bureau), Monica Noro (UNHCR MENA Bureau Deputy Director)

Participants: NGOs in MENA and NGOs Fora from: Libya, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen, Turkey, and OPT.

Facilitator: Eman Ismail (ICVA)

Eman Ismail

• **Purpose of meeting:** Since the beginning of COVID-19 crises, NGOs and UN agencies are thriving to do their best to ensure that refugees needs inside the camps and urban settings are well-considered, and an inclusive and comprehensive protection strategy is in place ensuring that no one is left behind. UNHCR has declared an internal level-2 emergency to accelerate UNHCR’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. The dialogue between UNHCR and partners aims to detail UNHCR’s perspectives in the MENA region in terms of strategy, response and business continuity and to discuss with local and international NGOs about challenges and ways forward to strengthen their partnerships.

Ayman Gharaibeh

**Strategic overview**

• **Immediate impact of COVID-19 on populations of concern:** The imposition of lockdowns and resulting immobility, lack of opportunities resulting from loss of livelihoods, etc. are impacting nationals and refugees all over the region. Protection space is impacted as well, and it is unsure how it will look like post-COVID-19. The impact on refugees is worrisome: COVID-19 is a health crisis but also developing into a protection and poverty crisis for nationals and refugees.

  → **Stay and deliver.** Through different communication modalities, UNHCR will continue to stay and deliver protection.

• **UNHCR focus areas:** In Syria & Iraq, UNHCR is able to continue its cash programmes as they do not require mobility or visits to partners. In camps and urban settings, data collection has continued as well. Through its work with governments, which recognise that UNHCR’s support is key, UNHCR advocates for the inclusion of refugees in national COVID-19 responses – which has been done by number of countries already – and supports the procurement of supplies. Communication with communities has been key as well in terms of both mental and material support. In addition, UNHCR is currently looking into cash injections to support vulnerable people with 2-3 months of cash. The social & economic impacts of the virus are considered as well, in particular for the medium to long-term effects on communities and on humanitarian funding as donor countries are affected as well.

• **Future areas of focus and pointers for the future (2020-2021):** Due to their fragility to deal with the virus and for being sources of refugee outflow, countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya will be a future area of focus for UNCHR. Furthermore, there is a need to continue
contingency planning and preparedness. With respect to humanitarian space and border closures, emergency laws, etc. in place, the return to normality will be slow and protection space will be impacted in the future. Restriction on access to asylum might be present. Mental health, domestic violence and exploitation, which might be exacerbated by the pandemic, are also focus areas for UNHCR. The durable solutions issue is also increasingly important.

- **Partnerships:** The pandemic has set new challenges; how can all the stakeholders work together collectively?

**Q&A**

**Q1.** Humanitarian and development funding for refugee hosting countries might be affected – are there any discussions with donor countries to move development funding to humanitarian funding due to crisis of the pandemic?

**Ayman Gharraibeh:** Development and humanitarian are two different work streams and funding does not jump from one to the other. Thus, development funding will not be changed to humanitarian financing. However, UNCHR is hopeful that if refugees are hosted by governments that are tackling the economic crisis and will resume economic operations, also due to economic injections from different stakeholder such as the World Bank, refugees who have lost their jobs will be able to benefit as well.

**Hy Shelow**

**Regional Protection Environment**

- **Deepening protection and poverty crisis in MENA:** There is a need for a whole-of-society approach in order to include the contributions from diverse stakeholders and to ensure the inclusion of refugees, forced displaced, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and the communities hosting them.
- **Focus on favourable protection space and solutions:** UNHCR has managed to maintain its protection interventions, resettlement processing, prevention of detention, child protection, education, GBV protection, risk mitigation and community-based protection.
- **Mental health impact of COVID-19:** The psychosocial impacts of government measures introduced and in particular isolation have had effects on elevating stress, anxiety and the levels of loneliness, depression, drug use, suicidal behaviour and violence are expected to rise as well. It has become increasingly important to include mental health impacts in national response.
- **Communication with Persons of Concern:** A 2-way communication is used to identify needs and guiding response adapted to COVID-19, such as the use of hotlines, social media, translation of material and guides, risk communication, remote resettlement processing, etc. Partners are a critical component in this, and true partnership is if anything more crucial in present circumstances.
- **COVID-19 multi-year impact:** will be felt increasingly by marginalised populations due to economic degradation, increased protection needs and vulnerabilities.

**Q&A**

**Q2:** There are interlinkages between access and protection as border closures, etc. are putting strains on protection issues. How does UNHCR respond to xenophobia issues, GBV issues, etc.?**

**Hy Shelow:** UNHCR has made proposals to states to establish humanitarian exemptions. The importance of this has been acknowledged by some states but most countries have kept their borders closed. Access is promoted by UNHCR: while being mindful of policies governments are putting in place, with regard to COVID-19 prevention. In MENA, the response is a significant concern. In terms of protection response, as access can be challenging, it is difficult to continue detention monitoring and the implementation of remote processing, while ongoing, is not straightforward either. Issues of
confidentiality, integrity, non-verbal communication and psycho-social impact of stressful procedures are some of the challenges..

Q3: Issues of refugees being exposed to stigmatisation - how can all actors respond? How can refugee communities be included in the community level approach and reporting mechanisms?

Hy Shelow: UNHCR published some documentation recently on communication with communities. Host communities cannot be forced to embrace persons of concern; hence it is important to justify and provide inputs why they should to be included to the communities to mitigate pressures and encourage them continuing to embrace and host the large populations that continue to need this.

Robert Hurt
Partnerships

- **Current UNHCR partnership framework:** Many aspects of current framework are very heavy and involve lengthy procedures and detailed documents. There is a need to change a number of things within the regulatory framework of dealing with partners.
- **Reform programme:** UNHCR has come up with 14 different reforms to tackle some of the root causes that make partnerships burdensome for NGO partners through better and simplified analysis and treatment of risk, increased emphasis and accountability on results and simplified procedures. With the spread of COVID-19, it has become important to adapt, not interrupt, the reform plan. Some measures need to be accelerated, other temporary and emergency measures need to be put in place.
- **Guidance on partnership management:** has been sent to country offices. Its key messages include the need to engage in good faith dialogue and discussions and to be transparent, the need to reduce burden for both country and partner staff and the importance of partnerships to be based on Principles of partnership.
- **Specifics of partnership management guidance:** include, among others, increase of 20% budgetary flexibility within an Output to 30% budgetary flexibility; allow overtime to be charged to the relevant project, financial verifications & audits may be conducted through remote/desk reviews; allow documentation (normally submitted in hard copy) to be submitted in electronic form.
- **Issues under further consideration:** UNHCR is considering other flexibility measures, however, there is no guarantee that they will be accepted. It is important to understand which ones can be accommodated and how.
- **Next steps:** include UNHCR working in a harmonised way with other UN agencies, advocate with donor governments to acknowledge and accept exceptional measures, reporting back to IASC Results Group 5, in which ICVA plays a leading role.
  
  ➔ Need to strengthen partnerships even if there is no financial aspect or project management to it.

Shaden Khallaf
Partnerships

- **Partnership policy team:** is looking at the MENA humanitarian landscape to examine which partnerships can be strengthened even though they do not financial implications. The emphasis lies on a collaborative approach to the policy framework and on who can be allied to this. This is in alignment with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). A multi-stakeholder approach is very rich and there is also a lot of appetite for it.
- **Variety of actors:** UNHCR works with civil society, faith-based actors, academics, research institutes, private sector, etc. and tries to include them in the design of the response of displacement management.
- **Non-financial transactional partnerships:** UNHCR is trying to build across the MENA region.
Q&A

Q4. Inclusion of local voices by UNHCR in human response plans: How does UNHCR engage and include displaced voices? What needs to be done to include local voices in coordination mechanisms?

Shaden Khallaf: Refugee groups and networks are vital and are part of the different processes. However, there is still a need to improve and grow.

Q5. **Global Humanitarian Response Plan** (GHRP): How can UNHCR ensure that the second iteration is bottom up, that NGOs are consulted, and their concerns included?

Monica Noro: As the preparation of the appeal was done in an emergency phase, the collection of input was accelerated. However, networks and NGOs were consulted. Initially it was staggered process.

Robert Hurt: The time period was very quick and the time frame for the GHRP not ideal, hence, there was not enough time for consultation. Moving forward, there needs to be more consultations in order to reflect the needs and concerns of partners as well.

Ayman Gharibeh: In head of agencies meetings, complaints arose that flexible measures UNHCR has put in place were not cascading down to field operations. UNHCR needs to receive these feedbacks from NGOs directly in the region. It also needs to look into contract agreements signed with NGOs, as they have become very heavy, bureaucratic, etc. Hopefully, UNHCR will learn from COVID-19 lessons in order to accommodate sudden changes in the operational contexts and include revision of partnership agreements.

Q&A

Q6. Need for more collaboration between all stakeholders, including a better presentation of refugees and other groups in different working groups and mechanisms. There is added value of an inclusive partnership.

Monica Noro

Way Forward

- Interest in continuing this initiative. From an UNHCR perspective, more interactive discussions would be welcome, concentrated on specific thematic issues, where partners can interact. This could potentially be done for the next call.
- Importance of working together and including all stakeholders in the discussions and on the different platforms, also regionally. The UNHCR partnership reform programme could be used for dialogue.

The End