



High Level Segment of the 65th Annual Session of UNHCR's
Executive Committee on "Enhancing International Cooperation,
Solidarity, Local Capacities and Humanitarian Action for Refugees
in Africa"

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Statement by
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Mr. Chairman, Mr. High Commissioner, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen -

On behalf of African Civil Society Organizations underrepresented at such gatherings, I must thank High Commissioner Antonio Guterres and his team for inviting Africa Humanitarian Action (AHA) - thank you.

This may be my last speech at such an august gathering. I am stepping down from the organization I helped establish, to retire after 44 years in disaster response.

Following medical training, my career started in a camp for South Sudanese refugees in Gambella, in then remote western Ethiopia. Numbers talk: the camp of less than 30,000 refugees in 1970, today hosts over 200,000 in the same area. Generously funded in 1970, living conditions were adequate and nutrition not a concern. We even considered building a hospital, but settled for a 36-bed health centre; luxury by present day African refugee health care standards.

Africa's number of refugees has now exceeded 3.5 million, with an additional over 12 million displaced, their plight compounded by ever diminishing resources. Massive overcrowded camps, fragile nutrition status, violence amidst token social services have become today's accepted norms.

From decades on the front line, I have much to share with you. Twenty years ago, I and a dozen fellow Africans watched in horror as slaughter swept Rwanda's green hills. We had no means to stop the killing, but we knew we could take swift action to help those suffering in its aftermath. Thus Africa Humanitarian Action was born, doing the best it could in the chaos of crisis.



We learned the disaster alphabet: UNHCR to WFP, WHO to OCHA; passionately pursued partnerships with the African Union and regional African organizations; the African Development Bank, the Red Cross movement, IOM and other intergovernmental bodies, and fellow NGOs, such as IMC; joined ICVA and ALNAP; and even attempted to create a continental consortium. We have ECOSOC observer status, a presence in New York, and are here in Geneva, the humanitarian capital. We did all this to be part of the global humanitarian family and meet our core objectives: timely and effective indigenous response to Africa's disasters.

Twenty years on, AHA has met its promise. Taking action, aiding millions of Africans in crisis after crisis, from displacement to gender violence, AIDS to Ebola, maintaining high humanitarian standards while holding overheads well under 5%.

But we have much less to celebrate after 20 years than we would like. Knowing that we could have done more to prevent hunger, disease and death.

Take Africa's latest curse: Ebola. Amid rumours of Ebola, AHA was already working in Liberia's Bahan Refugee Camp. We know the value of early action. With limited resources, weeks before the outbreak's official confirmation, AHA began community sensitization to prevent Ebola transmission. Bahan Refugee Camp is in an area engulfed in Ebola's soaring death toll, yet we have seen one Ebola death; one.

We could have done more had our resources matched our vision. We could have – and still could – educate wider communities, build isolation structures, mobilize staff and save more lives from Ebola. Talking of Ebola, despite lacking the repeatedly requested investment to train and maintain an African disaster preparedness and response capacity, it was AHA that mobilized, from its rosters, the first 54 health care professionals and other experts for the African Union's Ebola mission already on ground.

AHA sees no lack of knowledge of how to prevent or respond to disease, hunger and displacement among African humanitarian actors. Even with limited resources and capacity, local communities and indigenous agencies provide early warning of crises and are first responders, while Geneva, New York and national capitals in the North deliberate.

Our proximity to disasters is vital for early effective action. As is our long experience, detailed knowledge, cultural sensitivity, our skills and contacts, languages and much more. Yet African agencies must wait, looking North for funding and strategic decisions; demeaning when, in these very rooms, we have long talked of equal partnership and capacity building.

To tackle Africa's conflicts and displacement, vast funding and political capital is expended through peacekeeping forces and diplomatic envoys. Surely humanitarian



response should be, must be, an equally important third pillar to address dire needs, save lives and start the way to recovery.

African agencies have little to show for repeated efforts to forge partnerships. Partnerships have largely meant sub-contracted delivery of menial tasks with minimal outlay, but without great efforts to enable or empower. African agencies remain unable to independently forecast, plan or implement, unable to campaign, fundraise, research, train or prepare for coming disasters.

Across Africa's humanitarian landscape is a crisis of genuine partnership, of engagement, even of simple respect for indigenous agencies. No meaningful, sustained response to Africa's humanitarian concerns will ever take root unless grounded in real African leadership, participation and engagement, including civil society.

Capacity building shares much the same fate, with overhead costs inequality, benign neglect, and training options so basic they make no real difference. The notion that African agencies lack technical expertise, requiring only miserly subsidies to improve operational skills, is false. There is never enough support to develop as independent sustainable institutions.

Politics remains the over-riding problem, from politically-driven conflicts to how foreign organisations dominate emergency response; dominate despite depending on cheap local labour yet allowing few resources to remain in Africa.

It is in the international community's self-interest to have enabled and empowered African agencies that react faster, do more, cost less and save more lives. Many in the North endorse African-driven solutions to conflict and poverty. But little has been done, even by the UNHCR, Mr. High Commissioner, despite its policy to prioritize local NGO engagement, and initiatives such as Oslo and recently on local capacity building.

Where is the meaningful engagement and support of African agencies from within UNHCR, donors and African governments? Only with real engagement and support can African agencies create the capacity to become the principal actors tackling their continent's crises.

This needs no further debate but a dramatic change in attitude, strategy and objectives. Let us stop talking. What is needed is commitment, is investment, is action.

I thank you for your time.