

2020 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs – ExCom Statement

8 October 2020

Dear Chair, Excellencies, UNHCR and NGO colleagues,

I am honored to report on last week's fully virtual UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations. Fully virtual and held in September. It was originally planned to be in-person and in July, but we too had to adapt and we – UNHCR and NGOs – were determined to maintain a consultation process during those challenging times linked to COVID-19.

This consultations process took place, first through a series of weekly online meetings on COVID-19 challenges organized between UNHCR and NGOs from the outbreak of the pandemic. UNHCR Regional Bureaus also engaged with their partners through online meetings, sometimes focused on the pandemic challenges. Then, with last week's 3-day NGOs consultation, focused on “**Responding to Pandemics**”, which was strongly linked to the upcoming High-Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. To establish this link, the consultations covered the same themes as the Dialogue, namely Protection Considerations, Resilience and Inclusion, and Climate Action.

Before summarizing our debates, let me highlight that this statement is somewhat of a novelty. It is not an NGO-only intervention but a joint UNHCR-NGO reporting on the NGO consultations.

Last week, the UNHCR-NGO Consultations gathered about 50 UNHCR staff with some 200 NGO participants, representing 117 different organizations, including Refugee-Led Organizations. Our aim was to discuss challenges resulting from the pandemic, but also emerging opportunities and innovative approaches, including good practices. Moreover, the aim was to see how we can further strengthen our partnerships in the pandemic response and beyond. As mentioned by an NGO delegate, in challenging times, we always come back to our common purpose: supporting and protecting refugees.

Over a health crisis, COVID-19 is clearly a major socio-economic crisis for displaced populations, adding to preexisting vulnerabilities. Women and girls as well as persons with specific needs such as persons with disabilities, are particularly affected. In this context, to stay and deliver, humanitarian workers had to adapt to unprecedented constraints, while facing a possibly long-term funding crisis. In this perspective, in line with the Refugee Compact and Grand Bargain, COVID-19 confirmed the importance of localization, the participation revolution and partnerships. The pandemic has shown the value of working with communities, with refugee- and IDP-led organisations, which have proven to be a vital link with populations of concern. They need to be better recognized, better resourced and included into principled partnerships and coordination structures.

The session on **resilience and inclusion** focused on how UNHCR-NGO partnerships can help to step-up livelihoods activities and to advocate for inclusive environments. We all need to ‘make the case’: refugees can contribute to recovery plans. Past crises have shown how resilient displaced populations can be, despite limited options to cope with shocks. In addition

to reduced access to social safety nets, they face obstacles such as lack documentation, discrimination, limited freedom of movement, or limited connectivity. Discussing how to program better, we heard about good practices of quick adaptations to challenges, through innovations (for example, with cash programs), but also about long-term planning, through scalable initiatives such as the Refugee-Self Reliance Initiative, featured at the Global Refugee Forum. Multi-stakeholder collaboration was also identified as crucial. Together, humanitarians, governments, development actors and the private sector can support refugee businesses, enhance refugee skills recognition and national services' capacity in refugee hosting areas.

Our discussions on **Protection Considerations** also highlighted communities' critical role. As first responders and building on pre-established trust, Community-Based Organizations have assisted refugees, to ensure their access to food and services, including education, WASH, and health. They have distributed masks, assisted with distance learning programs and protection services such as in dealing with SGBV cases. UNHCR and NGOs have provided remote support to those organizations, for example by building on communication with communities and enhanced community assessments. However, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees' emphasis on refugee and host community participation, community-based protection should be better supported in the future. In the process, it is important to further strengthen an age, gender, and diversity perspective, avoid transferring risks to communities and ensure community-based protection is complementary to other efforts.

Discussing **Climate Action**, we reflected on opportunities for enhanced UNHCR-NGO partnership in this realm, particularly drawing on preliminary lessons from the pandemic. Moving from policy discussion to concrete and collaborative efforts, participants recognized once more the critical role of communities in responding to environmental challenges. The value of including affected families in planning and decision-making was highlighted as well as the potential of gender transformative adaptations in shaping ambitious policies and localized programs. The need to enhance resilience and preparedness to shocks was particularly highlighted, resonating with other sessions. We also agreed on the need to prioritize greening our interventions and to advocate for the adoption of climate-positive responses to recover from the pandemic. Long-term investments should develop, with multi-year and multi-stakeholder partnerships on climate action, alongside the roll out of UNHCR's Climate Action Framework.

UNHCR and NGOs also used this opportunity to continue exchanging on **Partnership Agreements**. We all agreed that, overall, our partnership continued to improve, including in the COVID-19 context and despite resource constraints. NGOs welcomed UNHCR's sustained efforts to simplify and harmonize partnership procedures, with reforms that are cost effective, increase accountability to refugees, and add value to projects. This is a healthy ongoing dynamic. Keeping to the consultations focus, NGOs welcomed UNHCR's efforts to develop simplified Partnership Agreements with Refugee-Led Organizations.

As a result of our discussions, we developed a set of **recommendations**, some already alluded to in my summary, highlighting joint UNHCR-NGO actions but also recommendations for you, dear Member States.

First, in the pandemic context, we strongly recommend to continue engaging through the Compact mechanisms. We call on you to follow-up on your GRF pledges to develop an enabling environment promoting resilience and inclusion; strengthen protection capacities and engage with the Clean Energy Challenge. This means ensuring multi-year flexible funding is made available for livelihoods and economic inclusion programmes as well as to prioritize community-based protection and ensure community-based organizations have access to resources made available for protection responses.

More specifically, on Resilience and Inclusion:

- States should work to improve refugee skills recognition and ability to contribute to the response. In the long-term, this should translate into durable inclusion measures.

On Protection Considerations:

- States should actively acknowledge the critical importance of community-based approaches to protection and address existing administrative and political barriers.

On Climate Action:

- States should promote complementarity between various policy frameworks, investing in climate change adaptation and preparedness to avert and minimize displacement.

The full set of recommendations, with added details, will soon be available on the webpage of the upcoming High-Commissioner's Dialogue. We hope you will all draw on this resource in engaging with the Dialogue, in reflecting on your own future policies and also in the ExCom Conclusions process. The recommendations are particularly relevant to a Conclusion on International Protection in the context of a Health Emergency and possibly also on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support.

Finally, let me conclude by indicating that the UNHCR-NGO consultations process will continue, at global and regional level. Innovative ways are being explored, building on our COVID-19 experience and the regionalization process, on which we will report – at the latest – next year at the Executive Committee.

Thank you.