



UNHCR's third meeting with NGOs partners on preparedness and response to COVID-19 in refugee situations

Special measures for Partnership Agreements related to COVID-19

1 April 2020
Online

Participants:

UNHCR:

- Kelly Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
- Ritu Shroff, Director, Division of Strategic Planning and Results
- Robert Hurt, Head, Implementation Management and Assurance Service
- Arafat Jamal, Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service

NGOs:

- About 100 participants, mostly NGOs.

Arafat Jamal

- Hoping to keep this weekly channel for a two-way communication so we are able to take stock of what is happening with the crisis and more importantly regroup and see which way we would like to go.
- We are all adjusting to this teleworking world. We are using WebEx for those consultations.
- Kelly Clements will set the scene on where we are today on a number of issues, Ritu Shroff will focus on overall programming and strategic leadership, Robert Hurt will talk about the flexibility we are able to exercise in our contractual engagement.

Kelly Clements

- In those most unusual times, we consider those meetings as priority conversations and we will continue this as long as needed.
- Intention is actually to not only have this as a global conversation but also at regional and country levels. Just came out of a call with the HC and AHC-O and Regional Bureaus Directors. Regional Bureaus already scheduled discussions with NGOs in the field.
- Having our second virtual townhall meeting in a few minutes with 17,000 colleagues around the globe. We are all adjusting with this new way of working and try to figure out how to continue to operate, serve, protect and aid; taking care of ourselves, of our families and of our teams.
- Some of NGOs have been in discussion with IASC, a strong call out for flexibility and partnership.
- Happy to do our part and try to lead in close partnership with sister agencies which are also partnering with NGOs and try to ensure we have a harmonized approach in terms to agreements flexibility.
- Over the past 7 days, at UNHCR we have intensified and looked at our program criticality, for country operations, looking closely as business continuity plans for example, which have determined which of those tasks we need to absolutely maintain, redouble, if not strengthen. Those include health, WASH, working closely with local partners, protection monitoring, other key elements and so on.
- Have launched internally a global L2 situation, which will give us more flexibility as regards resource allocation, staff personnel issues that will require flexibility. This is done in close collaboration with Director groups in the IASC. The dynamics within the IASC is an interesting one, not surprising to NGOs as you are on the frontline, especially dynamics between



operational agencies which are determined to stay and deliver and some of those agencies that have a more normative function and no field locations. We try to remain as aligned as we can.

- Determined to remain functional and be creative in delivery in some locations. Regional Bureaus Directors indicated increasing number of operations going into telework or remote delivery and working closely with NGOs on what can be repositioned and what can be put in place at early stages, on how to keep in touch with each other and how to adapt and focus more on those critical tasks that need to happen.
- On inter-agency issues, the UNSG launched with OCHA and other colleagues a global appeal, of which we are part, USD 2 billion initially. Strong upfront notice to the international community that this will be updated on a regular basis. About 250 million are requested by UNHCR to focus on the areas mentioned earlier and others.
- There is a strong focus on our advocacy on refugees, other Persons of Concerns (PoCs), their rights, ensuring we are not agreeing on certain regulations and restrictions on asylum, etc.
- Having a strong advocacy point going along the operations and program delivery.
- Major point we are making to donors: the resources/funds they put in place for COVID-19 should be additional to what we need for existing situations. The worst thing we can have now is an emergency on top of an emergency and underfunded initial emergency with COVID-19 on top. PoCs would suffer twice. A strong call and we are getting good indications from donors.
- UNHCR pre-position is focused on highest risk countries at this stage with large populations of refugees, IDPs, in camps and settlements, urban settings. Looking at areas where health systems are not able to respond or respond adequately.
- Moved about USD 60 to 70 million to operations already and moving out more resources. We are not waiting for dollars to be received to move resources.
- L2 gives us additional operational authority to access material and financial resources, puts also in place exceptional measures for procurement and supplies.
- We are involved in a detailed inter-agency conversation on how we can consolidate some of that. We have seen a bit of competition for instance, price gouging, so we try to come as a unified system.
- Trying to use our diplomatic entries with governments on issues such as Medevac.
- Speaking on Inter-Agency focus, last evening, participating in a call with the UN system, with regard to Medevac and supplies in particular, there was a strong call to ensure we are not speaking about the UN system alone but also of course including partners. We will continue keeping NGO updated on that.
- We tried to reduce increasing anxiety and put in place a telemedicine system, with International SOS, where thousands of doctors are able to talk to colleagues in several languages about health concerns. We found it a useful tool, especially on mental health.
- Working closely with inter-agency on those issued and related guidance. Pleased to see for example the guidance on gender and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse guidance finalized this week and sent out through IASC.
- On flexibility and simplification, NGOs know we were already adapting considerably our framework for collaboration with NGOs. Needless to say, we are trying to expand key aspects that will make easier for you to respond.
- Committed to localization, local NGOs and local partners are considered to be at the frontline and need to be supported.
- Know the circumstances are now forcing substantial changes to NGO partners' 2020 plans, something we will clearly take into account and we will work together to see how we can adapt and look for potential new partnership opportunities.



- In terms of temporary measures, we will maintain this consultation with NGOs and see how it works. The time calls for much more flexibility and efficiency.
- Strong call in all discussions the HC has with donors, bilaterally and also collectively as part of the Donors Group, to ensure they also provide their resources flexibly to us, so we can also provide flexibility to NGOs, including on reporting arrangements, making sure we can get resources more quickly.
- Several asks from you:
 1. we are all forced to rethink our plans, but should do it aiming to continue implementing as much as possible with broader and longer-term engagement related to the GCR and the commitments made at the GRF generally.
share as much information as you can, on how you respond creatively to COVID-19; who is able to remain from your team to reach the most vulnerable; what are the best practices you can share with us and how we can potentially scale up those approaches; with closing borders, localization becomes the obvious, so we are interested to learn how INGOs are facilitating or expediting this and what are the lessons learned that others can draw from.
 2. How do we advert vulnerabilities in times like that? How to address risks of fraud and corruption?
 3. Making the point: how we can see humanitarian exemptions even increased further, particularly in COVID-19 impacted countries that might be under limitations?

Ritu Shroff

- Opening dialogue that is taking place.
- Kelly already touched on pressing issues related to our collective response to COVID-19 and Rob Hurt has worked to come with practical, tangible ways to better help immediately partners during this crisis.
- On our longer-term trajectory: before the crisis we had an ongoing dialogue with NGOs on how we improve our partnerships. Meetings were held in January and March this year, we discussed with some NGOs the challenges we have, the current frameworks and policy procedures, and where we need to introduce reforms.
- All of this is part of the ongoing overall transformation within UNHCR, on planning, implementation, on resources-based management. The aim is to make UNHCR's work more impactful but what does it mean really?
- The GCR further reinforced the notion that plans and strategies should be developed in partnership with others and as part of a larger agenda and longer set of outcomes on inclusion and solutions we are driving towards along with others. So all this needs to be reflected more clearly and constantly in our own plans and strategies.
- We need to be honest and build on our expertise and strategic planning. This is where we are now on this longer-term trajectory.
- While we do this, we need to make sure our processes are simplified and that we delegate more to the ground.
- Have spoken with our partnership management colleagues and we introduced changes already on simplification of delegation to field level, allocations, budget modifications, etc. and we are also developing a new planning and resource-based management system with a revised set of corporate results and indicators changes in our budgeting processes.
- We think the partner management reform is in place in the context of broader reform but this broader reform will also have positive effects on partners in terms of monitoring, reporting, budgeting, resources and monitoring. This is a longer-term process, which is taking a bit more time but should be critical.



- We also invest in business continuity and we are shoring-up our preparedness and response actions which many of NGOs are involved in.
- We are also gathering information on long term implications of COVID-19, on public health impact, protection, economic impact for PoCs as well as implications on how we work, and we continue to deliver. All this is linked to partners.
- All these transformations, whether we are talking about planning, partner management, results-based management, are being taken in close collaboration with UN sister agencies and part of the UN reform.
- Hope to see as a result of these changes, more consistencies with our sister agencies, collaborative approaches and common approach, coherence rather than differences.

Rob Hurt

- We see a lot of interest in this matter from the large participation to this call. I looked at the long list of questions received in advance.
- Slide 2: Reforms we have in mind encompass a large category of reforms, are quite transformative and go to the heart of a lot of issues NGO partners have brought to our attention for months and years. The reforms are ambitious, they have been established to move us from a compliance, risk-averse paradigm to a results driven, risk aware paradigm.
- Those reforms involve:
 - better, simplified analysis and treatment of risk during planning and implementation phases.
 - increased emphasis on results and less emphasis on auditing and compliance checks.
 - greater accountability on results, accompanied greater control over resources
 - simplified procedures including through automation.
 - improved detection and response to allegations of impropriety and crimes.
- Slide 3: These are underlying principles in another format, and it is around the concept of “results matter most”. We are not saying compliance is not important, but what we want is results and therefore we have to look at a regulatory framework to see if it is leading to results, if it is fit for purpose.
- Slide 4: In January we had timed overall reforms with 14 different initiatives, most would be implemented by the end of 2020, in time for the new agreement for 2021.
- Looking at revisions of policies and procedures, which in some cases have taken several years to develop and consultations to put in place, e.g. partner selection process, simplifying agreement, the creation of new template – templates that already exist but not fit for purpose, finding better data-sharing agreements, simplifying project budget management, personnel rules, risk management procedures, improving monitoring and verification including through the real-time monitoring techniques, further delegation of authorities, introduction of project management system, strengthening and handling integrity issues, PSEA, safeguarding oversight diligence, improved procedures around multi-year planning and multi-year agreements.
- Many NGOs will see in the 14 initiatives the issues you have brought to UNHCR’s attention in the past are going to be tackled.
- Slide 5: But now, COVID-19 has happened. Social distancing, traveling restrictions, etc. means we have to re-plan our reforms. In some cases, this means we have to accelerate some reforms and initiatives and accept the additional risks that comes from a hurried or speedily implementation. We will also have to implement exceptional, temporary measures to bring about flexibility that would not exist otherwise, addressed through the systematic performance which is necessary to respond to this new world.



- Slide 6: We issued guidance last week to our Regional Bureaus and through these, to our country operations. This is high-level guidance on partnership management. The L2 declaration also brings about simplified procedures to relevant partners.
- Key messages embedded in the guidance are more important than the specific measures we talked about. The key messages are: we really need to engage partners in good faith dialogue and discussions; we have to apply the Principles of Partnership, that you regularly bring to our attention and sometimes consider we do not apply.
- We have to accommodate reasonable requests and try to not overcomplicate things. For instance, before jumping or rushing into formal projects amendments – a process which can take significant time – we should be documenting informal agreements and take a little time before going to a formal agreement project. We need to reduce the burden that staff and partners staff at country level will be bearing.
- We need to revisit the reporting requirements that are in project agreements or for those that are not in project agreements, that is add on an *ad hoc* basis, and reduce them to an absolute minimum or as close to the minimum as possible.
- We encourage our operations to be flexible in allowing elements of partners' business continuity plans to be charged to UNHCR projects and we need to be transparent.
- Moving forward, we will be asking ourselves – all of us including donors – whether and the extent to which our regional plans and programs need to adjust. There is a very real possibility that in addition to significant amendments to our project agreements, some might need to be terminated on the basis of *force majeure* for example. We need to be respectful of this fact but transparent and honest about it.
- Slide 7: With regard to specifics of guidance, normally our project agreement allows for 20% budgetary flexibility and this will be increased to 30% budgetary flexibility adjustment. This should reduce the need for amendments down the track.
- Will allow overtime to be charged to projects, even if it means maximum personnel contributions limit (that should normally be enforced strictly) is exceeded.
- Asked our operations to document how partners will track and monitor attendance in the absence of traditional timesheets. This will be an important reference for later, at the stage of verification and audit, to ensure we do not have findings of ineligible expenditures because of a lack of timesheet documents, attendance at work. It is up to partners to inform us on how they will be tracking and monitoring attendance of their staff.
- We are giving the possibility to our representatives to release the next installment under a project agreement, before the submission and clearance of the current project financial report for the current period.
- We heard several partners have challenges in submitting their project financial report, we will allow nevertheless the representatives to release installments under the next project agreement. We need to insist that our representatives do consider the risks in each and every case but judgement should be exercised in good faith and transparently.
- We encourage our project control colleagues and auditors to conduct financial verification and audits through remote or desktop reviews when possible.
- We would like to avoid the need for suspension or delays in verifications. If the auditors feel, in their professional judgment, they can provide the insurance required through desktop and remote reviews, then we encourage them to do that.
- We should not apply pressure on partners to terminate work contracts of employees or PoCs which are charged to UNHCR projects solely because they are not able to turn out to work because of social distancing issues.
- We should allow as eligible the expenditures incurred prior to the announcement of travel and social distancing restrictions and which cannot be reimbursed or recovered. i.e. if a



seminar or workshop or travel has been organized prior to the restrictions and the partner has been unable to recover any amount that have been committed or paid.

- We should do everything possible to allow documentation normally sent in hard copy format, to be submitted in electronic form. We still encouraged original copies to be kept in usual archives for the purpose of later verification and audit.
- The L2 declaration activates simpler procedures at country level for representatives to be able to engage new partners under new projects.
- These are some specifics included in the guidance already communicated to the Regional Bureaus.
- Slide 8: Some issues remain under further considerations. For ex. we will continue to reflect on the budgetary flexibility at the output level, which could be increased beyond 30%.
- Looking at globally applicable instructions that will ensure simplified results chains, and instructions on budgeting, to reduce the burden that comes from the creation of new agreements and amendments to existing agreements.
- Will see whether we can accept more personnel-related costs as eligible expenditures against personnel lines, i.e. some of NGOs have highlighted the expenses you have to incur because you had to relocate staff out of country or engage exceptional expenditures to mobilize / redeploy personnel in ways otherwise not planned.
- We will issue clear guidance on eligible expenditures for staff when they are working remotely.
- Looking at possibility to increase the type of documentation that can be submitted in electronic format without the need for a physical signature.
- Looking for possibility of waiving or delaying timeframes for submission of quarter one financial reports, while also possibly waiving or adjusting timeframes for later reporting (e.g. mid-year review).
- Looking to reducing the minimum number of performance verifications to be conducted. Having in mind training staff on provision around *force majeure* to address misconceptions and misunderstandings that exist.
- All of the above are not commitments *per se* but we are looking into it actively and to the extent possible, we will look for more flexible arrangements than those previously listed.
- Other request coming from partners include the possibility of decoupling the payment of program support cost (PISC) from actual expenditures. This would give them the badly needed insurance that the 7% would be guaranteed effectively.
- A second request that comes through and stands out is for a blanket global extension of implementation periods.
- Third request: to the extent possible, partners want UNHCR to issue instructions that will be implemented consistently globally with limited discretion of our country operations to determine case by case measures.
- We would be guided to the extent that these measures will be also taken up by other UN agencies and/or donors. Cannot guarantee we will be accommodating all these things, but I did want to flag we do hear you and consider all things and welcome all suggestions on how to make things easier and continue deliver for PoCs.
- Slide 9: as next steps, we have an open dialogue with UN sister agencies, including UNICEF, WFP, UNFPA, FAO, UN Women, OCHA and also country based pool funds.
- Looking to harmonize our approaches were appropriate for our individual organizations.
- Some of our measures are simply not applicable to other organizations and measures they may be announcing might not be applicable to us.



- We are also advocating with donor governments to acknowledge and accept exceptional measures, taking into account recent guidance from DFID, ECHO, USAID, etc. These are a good and real indication of appetite from key donors to allow flexibility.
- We will be reporting back as soon as possible to the IASC Results Group 5, communicating more measures that would be harmonious and alive and we will continue to monitor and adjust these measures as necessary in the coming months.
- Understatement to say it is incredibly difficult to predict how the months ahead will play out, what it will mean for operations, etc. We need to be mindful of the challenges we will go through this year and in planning for next year. Reprogramming will be necessary.
- The PPT presentation will be made available.
- Ask patience for the guidance. Over the next couple of days we will have key meetings that may bring extra measures and details.

Q&A

RefugePoint

- Some organizations face the rather unique situation of having UNHCR's affiliate workforce and contracts, which are currently confirmed until June 30th. There is a natural concern that staff might find themselves without contracts and then unable to depart from their duty station countries if those contracts are not extended and travel restrictions remain in place at that time. What is UNHCR current contingency planning for affiliate workforce in that situation?

Danish Refugee Council

- All this is good news from DRC perspective. We recognize the efforts and compromises on many of those principles and statements and it is much appreciated.
- One point though tis the fear we will have very different interpretations across the regions and country programs that might be difficult to handle.

Rob Hurt

- To DRC: hear you and this resonates with the points you raised with us before. This message came loud and clear on communication including with UN organizations. You want to ensure there is consistent application of guidance across our operations. All I can do at this point is reassure you that the guidance issued to the Regional Bureaus will be supplemented by more detailed instructions on each of the different issues, programs particularly.
- Yesterday we had the first of two internal webinars on the guidance (second one today). Over 500 people attend the webinars. This is an attempt by us, to ensure we are collecting the real practical issues that our colleagues on the grounds are facing so that we can supplement the guidance on this basis.
- I will continue to welcome partners reaching out to me with questions or to bring elements to my attention. I will not be able to provide details to everybody, but the online meetings are useful, and we could use other meetings like that to address some of these points.
- To RefugePoint: very valid point raised on contracts ending at the end of June. I would need to put this back to the team and discuss. We are looking at ensuring we can allow partners to charge personnel costs for more categories of expenditures that would ordinarily be the case. Maybe this can apply to this type of situations.

ICVA

- Localization efforts: The need to rely more significantly on local and national partners in many response scenarios came out strongly in the global HRP language. Can you share comments



and efforts to enhance partnership with local partners and in particular around extraordinary measures, capacity strengthening, PISC ratio?

- Sustainable funding issue, for a number of NGOs, because of the financial implication of COVID, crisis, we have seen some effects on cost-sharing, indirect cost, etc. How might we need adjustments?
- Highlight again the need to be clear in communication to the field and the need to keep NGOs in the loop

International Rescue Committee

- Thanks to UNHCR engagement to improve partnership, well before COVID-19 and during the COVID-19 crisis.
- On the guidance you mentioned to UNHCR's country operations, those are welcome *per se*, to not overcomplicated informal agreement revisions, rush to project amendments, etc. Concern is that these revisions are agreed, but then staff turn-over and then audit comes and as partners we get into trouble because we have changed something and it is not properly documented. How we can avoid this issue?

InterAction

- Thanks, and echoing the sentiment that a lot of NGO concerns are being addressed and the level of thought that has gone into this is clear.
- Glad this discussion continues with other UN agencies. In the context of the One UN approach, maybe UNHCR can share its approach. We will also be sharing it to show what is possible.
- Speaking about UN Agencies, some level of discussion took place within the UN system on procurement, PPEs, other critical equipment, also on medevacs of NGO staff alongside UN staff. We want to push that NGOs are considered and prioritized in systems coming together to distribute any materials needed since obviously programs on the ground can only go as far as NGOs workers are protected in the process. We should not be thinking separately NGO staff / UN staff.
- On uniformity of application and UNHCR staff, we wonder if there would be a possibility to spot check individual country offices? From a quality perspective, yes, we can always escalate up to HQ when there is a problem, but it is probably worth randomly selecting a number of operations just to see the level of flexibility granted and check creativity approaches and see what is working. There will be opportunity to think outside of the box.

Intersos

- Thank you for the concrete move forward, through simple ways during this pandemic.
- About the guidance on the eligibility of people working by remote that are under consideration, could you share more details on that?

International Catholic Migration Commission

- On the reporting deadlines, for the moment it would be helpful to provide a blanket 10 days extension for both narrative and financial reports.

Robert Hurt

- To ICVA: points well-received on localization and sustainable funding. Others may be best placed to answer.
- To IRC: on documentation, I encourage partners to keep copy and file copies of informal agreements, e.g. in the form of email exchanges. We will be encouraging our colleagues to do the same. We will communicate to our auditors and project controllers that the guidance has



been issued. We expect them to take into account for ex. an NGO holds a particular email exchange that is not on file with UNHCR colleagues. Hope we will all be reasonable enough.

- To InterAction: good suggestion on spot checks to see what good approaches exist, etc.. Regional Bureaus will be able to help on this. We should put all eggs in one particular basket.
- To Intersos: we will be looking at this area of eligible cost. We will see what we can convey and look at what practices other UN agencies may have.
- We do not want to give the impression that we are out of the woods. A lot of work to do internally still and we are learning from different approaches taken by other UN organizations. They do have been considering issuing similar guidance, and some have issued some guidance internally. They include similar measures, tailored for those circumstances. Others are taking a different approach. Back to InterAction, we wouldn't want to give the impression we are leading the pack but we can pass the message to UN partners. We are all trying to apply as much flexibility as possible.
- To ICMC: We will discuss that internally and try to accommodate the blanket 10 day extension request.
- To NRC which commented from the chat box, this would be a good opportunity indeed to look at implementing the Money Where it Counts initiative. We haven't had time to look into this yet but appreciate the suggestion.

Arafat Jamal

- Next week's meeting, the High-Commissioner is on, do come and encourage your CEOs to participate and let us know if she/he intends to take the floor, although the call remains open to all.