



## UNHCR's eighth meeting with NGOs partners on preparedness and response to Covid-19 in refugee situations

*Localization and COVID-19 Prevention and Response*  
*6 May 2020*  
*Online*

### **Participants:**

- Arafat Jamal, UNHCR Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service
- Grainne O'Hara, UNHCR Director of International Protection
- Jeremy Wellard, ICVA Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific
- Shaza Airihawi, Global Refugee-led Network, Member of the Steering Committee
- David Fisher, IFRC Manager, Policy and Diplomacy Unit

### NGOs:

- About 90+ NGOs.

### **Arafat Jamal**

- One of our credos is to stay and deliver. Local organizations have no choice to stay and our challenge is to help them to deliver.
- We would like to look at how it is being done in practice and hear about challenges.
- The theme has linkage with other streams, e.g. FBOs.

### **Jeremy Wellard**

- For ICVA, a network of global and local NGOs, localization has long been an important theme.
- Localization is a process in which all humanitarians need to engage to strengthen local and national actions, and ensure principled and effective humanitarian action.
- Engagement on localization since the Global Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain;
- many actors including NGOs have gone their own way on localization. Analysis shows the overall success was limited in some cases and perspectives certainly have remained hard.
- With COVID-19, we see challenges. It highlights the need for increased consistency and broader agreement on approaches to localization between a wider range of stakeholders.
- We also see the need for a rapid shift in how the diversity of local and national actors can become engaged more quickly, effectively, respectfully, and truly acknowledge the roles they play.
- With COVID, we face the need to consider what more can be done to leverage different and complementary roles, particularly local and national actors in humanitarian response.
- To paraphrase what was stated in the GHRP "we have now the necessity to actually do what we have been saying we were going to do for many years".
- Highlighting five points regarding NGO operations in the COVID-19 context in refugee and humanitarian settings with the aim to focus on some key opportunities and challenges from an NGO perspective. I am going to avoid a focus on finance, although this is a critical issue, it has been discussed in previous weekly meetings.
  - 1) Community engagement
    - The initial stages of preparedness for the COVID-19 emergency have seen a necessary prioritization on community engagement and risk communication efforts.
    - It is undeniable that, at this time, local actors are the best placed to engage with communities. Even under lockdown or restricted movements, our local people are still



within their own communities, they can still see and understand the needs and respond to what is happening around them.

- There are positive examples where NGOs are providing critical services, e.g. on-demand translation; language services are delivering information to communities; radio and TV broadcasts; online forums and discussing local issues in local languages.
  - NGOs working in refugee and displacement settings also need to consider what it means to be a local actor not only from their own perspective but from the perspective of the displaced and the host communities and how this may differ in the COVID context.
  - We see a need to build a greater diversity of local civil society support around mechanisms to effectively support a whole community, particularly in areas related to protection issues. In some way, community engagement plus localization builds together to give us a whole-of-society approach which may prove to be more effective than mechanisms that have been working to this day.
- 2) Local leadership
- Humanitarian leadership at this time can be considered from a broader and more inclusive perspective, not just international leadership of the sector but looking beyond this to the broader idea of local leadership and what this means particularly when NGOs are seeking to engage remotely or with limited access.
  - We see already building new models of support to strengthen relationships with local civil society leaders, local community leaders, and to engage emerging leaders within different populations.
  - There have been a number of reports shared recently on NGOs experience working in Ebola-affected countries, around the role of faith-based leaders and how they can play a key role in the response. A number of faith-based networks have done extensive work on their own approaches to localization which have been published recently.
  - We also have seen recent reports from a number of NGOs on implementing the intersection of gender and localization and how NGOs must continue to support and strengthen local women's leadership. This is critical now in the context of COVID to support the role women play in providing essential services in their communities during the emergency.
- 3) Coordination
- There has been a challenge throughout the last few years of effectively engaging local and national NGOs in coordination mechanisms and this does continue but there is an opportunity to look for the silver lining to rethink the levels of participation or engagement by national NGOs in coordination mechanisms at national or at local levels.
  - ICVA has recently done research on the engagement of national NGOs in coordination and this actually demonstrated clear steps that can make coordination more inclusive such as translating meeting notes into local language, ensuring national actors are consulted in agenda-setting and allowing shadowing or twinning of local actors with more experienced NGO representatives.
  - Holding meetings in a virtual space may be an opportunity also for greater participation by allowing local NGO representatives to join but it also means that actors who previously joined may be excluded because of lack of Internet or poor connections.
  - It is important to highlight advocacy such as the recent call for providing technical support to local actors, to facilitate communication and coordination.
  - Although coordination structures are slow to change at national or response levels, there were quick engagement and adaptation at local levels on coordination in the COVID context.



- In some cases, particularly with COVID, NGOs understand and engage with local governments, which are key stakeholders to enable or restrict access when lockdown measures are in place.
  - On coordination between the government health response and the broader humanitarian response, NGOs have a local presence with established connections in humanitarian development programs and build on these relationships to support continued engagement. NGOs that are working in a mix of humanitarian and development programs, in protracted refugee and displacement settings can extend their ongoing work and adapt quickly.
  - We see opportunities to engage in cross-cutting issues with governments, with humanitarian sector around Health, on Protection, Education and Livelihoods. These can be strengthened.
- 4) Capacity in partnerships
- One of the early predictions in relation to COVID-19 was that there will be a shift in the ongoing role of INGOs to providing more support, guidance and expertise remotely and to some extent we are seeing this happen.
  - We also see some quick changes in the way international actors are offering up their support, their complementary approaches and we will probably be going to see more investment in online sharing and remote guidance and support.
  - We need to also consider that a lot of this support may come from local partners themselves.
  - In localization circles, there has been growing use of the term “capacity sharing” and perhaps we are going to see now that it will be given more widespread and genuine consideration.
  - On the ability of NGOs to scale up their responses and particularly around staffing levels. We are seeing some clear indications from some responses, of significant impacts on NGO staffing particularly international NGOs starting with large numbers of staff being restricted to capitals or having to leave due to their organization’s safety requirements. We are now seeing a situation where capacity, particularly in an operational sense, is very much local.
  - We are also going to see an ambition to form new partnerships between local, national and international actors quickly and completely in a remote fashion.
  - One issue ICVA has been working on is related to discussions on effective management of risk-sharing between international, local and national partners. These discussions also continue and can be strengthened and supporting efforts from UN agencies, donors, etc.
- 5) Localization and advocacy.
- Not always discussed but advocacy with governments regarding protection, issues related to persons with a disability, older persons, migrants, refugees, displaced people are critical and often being led by local and national NGO actors in their own ways and through their own relevant NGO networks or NGO forums. Important to note that these actors are well placed to engage their own governments on issues related to principles, right space, whole-of-society response. This advocacy is underway in many cases even if it is not necessarily as widely recognized by the broader humanitarian sector.
  - We are seeing positive engagement by some NGOs in leading advocacy from a local level to campaign against the stigmatization of international humanitarian assistance, particularly where governments are restricting contact by international organizations and staff from the communities they have been serving traditionally.
  - Localization does not mean only local action, it does require a complementary and open engagement with a whole range of different stakeholders and we have seen good examples of stronger messaging in this regard through collective advocacy from



networks of NGOs, e.g. NIA, APPRN, ICVA and others like Start Network, trying to ensure that the messaging is supportive of strengthening local and national action, inclusive of local national and international actors but also continues to ensure the key messages around principled and effective humanitarian assistance.

### **Shaza Airihawi**

- The Global Refugee Led-Network (GRN) is a refugee-led effort, present in six regions, in North and South America, Europe, Africa, MENA, Asia and the Pacific. We have a Steering Committee representing the six regions. We are trying to shape national and local policies. We cannot work globally with the same response.
- We had four regional consultations in MENA, Africa, Europe and Asia & Pacific. We are planning consultations in the other two regions.
- The coronavirus dramatically affects the health and economic stability of the entire population. However, it is disproportionately hitting vulnerable people such as refugees, migrants, stateless persons and asylum seekers. It is not only a group of people who are experiencing health and economic crisis but also now food and insecurity.
- GRN held an online global conference on 8 April 2020 on refugee leadership in response to COVID. We had more than 200 persons in the conference: refugees, former refugees, asylum seekers from all regions, NGOs and many stakeholders.
- Refugees around the globe are living in limbo. Asylum seekers have been stopped in their attempts to cross the borders.
- In many camps, there is a total lack of awareness about the dangerosity of COVID-19 as well as lack of information about sanitary procedures such as handwashing. Many camps are overcrowded, there is a lack of soap, medical necessity and essential supplies.
- Refugees who were relying on independent or informal work are also affected by COVID and they find themselves self-isolated in their home, facing an eviction risk.
- The global lockdown put people in a dangerous situation because either national or regional authority are not able to help and refugees who were previously living on a day-by-day basis are now experiencing food scarcity or complete lockdown of food.
- Some refugees are being held in detention centers, living in inhuman conditions.
- We are looking at the impact of coronavirus on refugees. It is affecting, from a gender perspective, women and girls more and we can see that in the increase of sexual harassment, survival sexual relationship, domestic abuse. Many problems happened in the shelters. In this situation, it is hard to report and find someone to respond, in addition to language barriers.
- Refugees are the first and most resilient responders to this coronavirus pandemic because they are collecting important refugee initiatives like translating information, trying to have the doctors among themselves engaged.
- It is time to look at refugees as partners, to enhance their capacities and work together in such a situation.
- Local organizations are the main actor in the COVID situation.
- Encouraging everyone to work with us, refugees, to have a better partnership with refugees, enhancing capacity building, joining GRN pledge on refugee meaningful participation.

### **David Fisher**

- UNHCR is a direct partner with many of our members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- I will speak about the Grand Bargain process and IASC.
- In 2016 most of the major donors and big agencies signed the Grand Bargain that included commitments around localization, although we did not use the term but those included



channeling more money as directly as possible to local actors, commitments on improving the nature of our partnerships, the leadership of local actors, their participation and coordination and also support for their long-term capacity.

- There has been good progress in some of these areas. Since the agreement was signed, stakeholders have continued to work together on projects and attempts to help each other to meet their commitments.
- Together with Switzerland we are helping to convene the localization workstream and over the last years, we have looked at what the barriers and challenges are, if we can learn lessons and be a catalyst for action. We also organized a series of regional consultations on this.
- Recent research came up with top-level lessons on funding, coordination, capacity issues, issues on women's rights organizations, on humanitarian organizations and also how you can work best with our intermediate organization to support localization.
- One of the less successful aspects of the Grand Bargain is the lack of direct funding from donor agencies through local organizations. In many places, even with a lot of progress made, many local actors often feel like they are just subcontractors.
- The Red Cross has a broad mandate but some of the requirements that come down from the partners are very specific to their mandates and their way of looking at the world. Some of those are pre-programmed by their back donors as well but not all of them, so it can sometimes be difficult when you are receiving funding from one agency that has a particular mandate, e.g. children. A more holistic approach might make more sense.
- Another issue is short term contractual, subcontracting arrangements. Some enthusiasm about the pool fund, especially the UN country-based pool funds, even though they are not necessarily a walk in the park in terms of access especially for newer organizations or those that have not previously been used to humanitarian response.
- Another issue is capacity, with the idea that international actors know everything, come in, and will build up.
- One of the major issues of financing is about risk. Donors and governments are less willing to take risk and another issue is how flexible they are.
- We have two types of contrasting examples: in Bangladesh there has been a lot of discussion about localization before 2017 and unfortunately in the first couple of months of the crisis a lot of good intentions went out the window, there was just a sense that everything is going so fast, with a huge influx, with no time to do things in a new way, with the idea to deploy international staff, think traditionally and will go back to the partnership approach later. In Bangladesh, there are refugee-led organizations (RLOs) as well as local organizations that improved the situation, but it is an important lesson that localization works well also at the emergency stage if we are creative, agile and try hard.
- Opposite example with an earthquake in Indonesia, similar to the COVID situation where the government was basically very restrictive in terms of international personnel coming and required working with local partnerships. It created more space for local leadership, more space for direct delivery and it shows that it can work.
- We are working with UNICEF and a number of other agencies to come up with an interim guidance document. There is already some very good language about the importance of localization, working with local actors and promoting their leadership in the GHRP.
- One of the key things that we are talking about is the issue of safety and well-being of the staff and volunteers of local partners. This is critical. There has been a tendency in the past to essentially shift the physical threats down to local actors in ways that can sometimes be extremely shocking and even though international actors do not have a legal duty of care to their staff or volunteers' partners. We do have a moral duty to work on this and we cannot leave our members by themselves.



- Some volunteers are not adequately insured and even with an insurance you have clauses that exclude a pandemic like COVID. There are also places without adequate public health care. You cannot leave them to their own medical devices. Many actors are struggling to have PPEs.
- Importance on having respectful and equal attitudes in our partnerships, and flexibility.
- We ask to be more supportive in assisting local leadership

#### **Arafat Jamal**

- Thank you for drawing us to some of the practical challenges and hurdles that we need to work to overcome in localization.

#### **Grainne O'Hara**

- Agreeing with what has been said by all the interveners and the general audience about how important it is for us to step up commitments and always try to look at the potential silver lining in catastrophic and challenging situations. It is one lesson we are being reminded of and re-learning and being obliged to step up with more action through COVID-19.
- Precisely how much all of us rely on refugees, IDPs, recently returned, stateless persons as first responders? We have individuals across all of those populations of concern that are extremely qualified. In some countries, where flexibility is being allowed, those populations are contributing in Health and other sectors. This is a wake-up call and reminder to all of us.
- At the Division of International Protection, we are committed, in all possible ways through our outreach and our age, gender, and diversity approach which brings us into contact with a lot of RLOs and refugees.
- We also follow-up the Forum and its momentum and how it has been impacted and potentially slowed a little by COVID-19 but it is alive. Through the Forum engagement we identified many opportunities where we could see more substantive and respectful approaches to RLOs' involvement.
- We faced some criticism ourselves for not using the Forum to have more visible presence of refugee organizations, we acknowledge that like all of these major events, there is constraints with travel capacity, visa and many other things. We did our best but the readout on the Forum is a reminder to us also to step up in the future. This is something we are looking closely at for this year's HC Dialogue.

#### **Q&A**

##### **University of Oxford**

- This is a real opportunity in the context of the GCR which stresses the whole-of-society approach. emphasizing clearly the role of local actors. We saw in the GRF a real space for increasing refugee participation and there was a real momentum towards the refugee participation pledges and with the GRLN pledge.
- This is the opportunity to make commitments actionable, to translate those commitments and that emerging global rhetoric into transformation in programming and local practice.
- Encouraging to build out the knowledge base and building substantive evidence base in this area that can help to guide and shape the practice, particularly for donors and governments.
- We had fantastic comments from RLOs about the need to change practice towards more earmarked funding, changing restrictions around indirect costs, no-cost extensions.
- In comparison with NGOs, RLOs face significant restrictions.
- The question is what is the knowledge base that can facilitate that kind of evidence to show the conditions under which local actors specifically RLOs can be efficient, effective, accountable, legitimate.



- How can we build a systematic mapping, tracking overtime and build evidence generation into the piloting and the search for good practices in this area?
- I have been working on some of these questions for the last couple of years would be delighted to work with anybody who is interested in those questions.

#### **Oxfam**

- On pulled funding, is UNHCR thinking of creative solutions that could potentially build on pulled funding models, e.g. similar to UN Women and humanitarian and peace fund?
- The speakers mentioned innovative ways in which RLOs are trying to find solutions quickly. Are there good examples, solutions that you can share with us as a community on trying to bridge and create solutions more quickly for refugees and migrants communities?

#### **Women's Refugee Commission**

- Are there lessons that can be taken from the refugee experience around localization whether it is through the GRN or through the whole process of the GRF/the GCR that we can extract and start to try and influence the HLP on Internal Displacement? There is always a challenge of localization when it comes to governments dealing with refugee organizations but with IDP organizations that can also be potentially even more challenging when those governments have often been responsible for displacement within their countries.
- Do you see a danger of risk aversion potentially becoming greater now with COVID and the real risk of countries continuing the lockdown or becoming much more nationally focused? What can we do for collective advocacy *vis-à-vis* donors to reduce that risk aversion?

#### **Unidentified stakeholder**

- Fantastic to hear the push from UNHCR and global actors on RLOs' role and about direct and unrestricted funding to them. How has this message been communicated within UNHCR in other places? E.g. in Indonesia, UNHCR-led coordination meetings happen without RLOs.
- Around the evidence-base, there is a lot of thinking but not a lot of action on it. When you are on the frontline of communications and research unless that is your main focus it goes down the line. Are there examples where research partners have actually teamed up with RLOs to document and research their work, their impact and their models?

#### **Shaza Airihawi**

- A few examples: in camps there are Sudanese refugees making soup at local level and they are distributed for free for all in the camps; in Germany, RLOs are trying to have the tools provided from WHO to translate it in several languages and also making online training for refugees who are living in Germany and are not able to know the language yet.
- There are also examples of refugees working as tailors, creating masks and selling the masks for low prices for everyone in the refugee and host community. Examples of refugees working in restaurants also and providing food; there are a lot of initiatives from refugees.
- We are planning an event on 15 May to discuss at the European level what is the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and see how we can deal with that. Everyone interested can join.
- We need to learn to think how we can incorporate more deeper with all actors in the community, how we can work together through a whole-of-society approach.

#### **Jeremy Wellard**

- Knowledge based on the evidence is a critical point. We are still in a situation where the vast majority of research and evidence base is commissioned by or delivered by international actors, talking about localization and with their partners as part of the process.



- The genesis of this research and this evidence is how genuinely localized this whole approach is. It has been positive in the past couple of years to see a number of the research institutes ensuring that they have localized their own practice. They are now partnering with local research organizations on the work they do related to localization. Those researchers can no longer travel so far to conduct their analysis directly, so this is again going to be one of those silver lining cases but it is just an assumption.

**David Fisher**

- The case still needs to be made and part of this is about what the real risks are and what the real benefits are.

**Arafat Jamal**

- Next week's meeting will be with WHO and Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director at WHO Emergencies Unit.