



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

8 April 2020  
Online

### Participants:

#### UNHCR:

- Filippo Grandi, High-Commissioner
- Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection
- Grainne O'Hara, Director, Division of International Protection
- Arafat Jamal, Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service
- Rob Hurt, Head, Implementation Management and Assurance Service
- Sajjad Malik, Director, Division of Resilience and Solutions

#### NGOs:

- About 130 participants, mostly NGOs.

### Arafat Jamal

- The meeting will be focused *inter alia* on business continuity, preparedness, protection, contracts & flexibility, and any other COVID-19 related subject you may wish to bring to the attention of the HC.

### Filippo Grandi

- This meeting is part of a series we started with NGO partners since the beginning of the crisis; partners with whom we have financial agreements, some with whom we partner in other ways, but nevertheless all of us engaging in the response to the crisis.
- Absolutely ready to continue doing this if NGOs are interested and we would appreciate if you could indicate that and we can continue to diversify the topics we have discussed with you and any suggestion will be extremely welcome.
- My objective is to outline the crisis scene through UNHCR perspective and offer some replies to the many questions received. There are also some questions on UNHCR's side. Thinking and actions are more advanced on some topics than on others, some questions are more difficult to answer, but it is useful to put everything on the table and to work together in this spirit of mutual support, advice, and reinforcement.
- Our approach has been structured around 4 key tracks:
  1. From the beginning, we have been advocating for the inclusion in responses to the COVID-19 emergency, of refugees, displaced people, stateless people (who are often forgotten), and host communities. It is our master track, including them in health responses. We have told governments to include them in further responses, especially on the social protection side, which we can see becoming a parallel emergency, a parallel track, on which we will need to focus more and more. We have advocated with governments and donors.
  2. Direct involvement of UNHCR with partners specially focusing on those countries where, because of the nature of displacement, because of the quantity and the scarcity of resources available, some people are particularly vulnerable and exposed. This is based on the realization that inclusion of these people, especially in country hosting large refugee populations with scarce resources and weak health and social structures, requires additional support.



3. Vigilance on protection aspects in a time of increased constraints and limitations (e.g. closure of borders). We need to remain vigilant and advocate for non-permanent obstacles being erected and push back on excesses.
4. Staying and delivering and what it takes for humanitarian to stay and deliver in situations where, ourselves, we need protection especially from the health point of view.

These four areas, inclusion, stepping up action, protection, staying and delivering, have been really informing our way forward.

- On the advocacy on inclusion, from the health point of view, the argument of inclusion has worked more easily than usual because governments understand that to exclude a population, whether they like the population or not, whether they are nationals or not, is suicidal from the health prevention point of view.
- The bigger problem in terms of inclusion, we are already seeing it in some areas, is in socio-economic measures that governments are already taking to counter the increased vulnerabilities of those losing their jobs and livelihoods, daily wages, etc. Many of those people are refugees, IDPs or stateless. Advocating for inclusion in national response has been more challenging here and it is going to be more challenging.
- This week, in my interaction with our regional Bureaus, one of the most dramatic feedback came from Venezuela, from countries hosting 5 million Venezuelans. The situation of Venezuelans, many of whom are being rapidly precipitated into serious situation of deep poverty, even more than ever, exemplify the difficulty of this inclusion drive.
- This goes far beyond than we can do, other than step up our cash programs. We try to advocate with governments, with donors in particular, not to step back from funding and to support existing programs. We ask them not to move money from existing programs, we can do some realignment but we ask to be allowed to maintain them. We ask for additional funding because many existing programs support vulnerable people already.
- I wrote officially to the World Bank, IFIs, bilateral actors, talking to partners, asking them to allocate vast resources to strengthen health and social protection systems of countries affected, particularly large host countries.
- We build on the work done before the COVID crisis on inclusion in the context of the GCR and in some countries, we benefit from having CRRF, particularly in Africa, that includes development actors. Dynamics and mechanisms are there, the resources have been allocated and match in this particular crisis.
- UNHCR humanitarian response and for which we have asked additional resources are health and related sector, water and sanitation, shelter in many places, communication on health issues especially with refugees and other persons of concern and cash as a first step toward meeting increased vulnerability.
- Those 2-3 key areas of common interest between UNHCR and partners and where our partnership is extremely important and useful. Many NGOs are frontline provider of assistance and it is also an area where partnership risks being more challenged unless we move to business as usual.
- Responding to the UNSG request to participate to the UN Interagency Appeal, we have requested about USD 250 million, which is less than we thought necessary but we have to stay within an Interagency Framework and we did not want to cause undue competition, which happens but we try to minimize it. We already have received about 60-65% of those funds, a fairly good result. We want to stress that the appeal was done in a rush without involvement of NGO partners, but implementation will go through NGOs for a big percentage, as we always do. The UN appeal will now be revised, the timeframe for the revision is the rest of the month for the issuance early May, we have all (humanitarian agencies) made a pitch to include NGOs in the next appeal and we will continue to advocate for that.



- In our advocacy with donors, I have argued for flexibility of resources, on what is allocated to us now and also for retroactive flexibility on funds, pledges made earlier so that those can be reallocated. Results are mixed. The usual suspects, the Nordic countries, UK, and few others have been extremely flexible in allocating resources. Others have continued to earmark which makes the whole operation more complicated, but we continue to push back on that.
- Main point to UNHCR Regional Bureau on the discussion on flexibility: Flexibility applies also to our interaction with those of you that have financial transactions, detailing the areas of flexibility on which we have worked. We continue to push further on all of this, we have to keep donors informed, work with our UN partners, to ensure a minimum of consistency.
- On localization: Civil society organizations are there, on the ground. We talk about stay and deliver, but CSOs stay, and we have to support them to deliver.
- On Humanitarian exemptions in countries where movement is limited because of lock downs, we advocate for humanitarian workers to be considered just as medical actors or other essential workers. UNHCR and Mark Lowcock have pushed on this and we will continue to push locally and globally.
- We have a big problem for supplies that are in great demand like PPEs. We are part of a UN interagency group trying to minimize competition, streamline procurement and transport but we are facing huge challenges. Things are going slowly and we cannot reach the type and size that we would like to deliver.
- We are working also on evacuation arrangements/Medevacs, that will be open to others as well, we made progress in countries such as Kenya. We also had a few cases of UNHCR colleagues evacuated after being infected by COVID-19. This is not easy. We try to work on establishing systems that are more predictable and less prone to negotiations etc.
- All of this is made to help us to stay and deliver. There are places where UNHCR and NGOs are not enough visible and present, there are hesitation and discrepancies in how we act, it is important that we all back up each other to stay and deliver. Staying may be difficult where medical facilities are extremely fragile and where communication and transportation practically disappear, we must stay to the extent possible and be present, it is a big challenge.
- We face examples like in South Sudan, where we see hostility toward international staff, as additional challenge. Carriers of the virus have been stigmatized and marginalized.
- On the protection side, vigilance is key. The advocacy on open borders, fair procedures to be applied to asylum seekers, the need to not push back people that need protection, around non-detention, all of this is difficult under normal circumstances and even more in this situation. I made statements with OHCHR, WHO, IOM, we are working with UNICEF on a statement related to children and women protection.
- Two areas on which we want to be vigilant and active: advocate continuously that measures must be temporary and we raise this also publicly, and sometime more silently on excessive response, deportation, continuation of repatriation from Tanzania to Burundi, etc.
- We developed a dashboard of protection practices, risks and constraints. We use it to raise issues when necessary. This would benefit from your inputs and advice.
- I have shared with IASC a set of protection messages that we will continue to update that can help you in your advocacy and in supporting our advocacy. This relates to borders, *refoulements*, the high risk of increased SGBV and even SEA. We have contributed to guidance through the IASC.
- With regard to SEA, UNHCR is the IASC champion, we are planning a number of activities in the next IASC. SEA is a high risk, it is very clear, closely linked to increased vulnerabilities, girls not going to school, access to education, girls in families wherever livelihoods have decreased or disappear, etc.



## Q&A

### Lutheran Worldwide Federation / SCHR

- Thanks, UNHCR on proactive and inclusive approach. Given the context of UN family, we give you credits for a positive role and hope others will look at what UNHCR is doing. Request the continued leadership and push from UNHCR. We know how challenging this is.
- We also wish to highlight that in some countries, some UNHCR staff may not be able to switch from protracted to emergency response, they lack the DNA. We have had difficult experiences in some countries where we see slow and uncoordinated response and reluctance to share core documents necessary for us to work together.
- Important to make sure all of your offices have a humanitarian focal point that can lead, making sure the leadership is there.
- Role of faith-based organization in the field: in traumatizing times, important to use the particular contacts that faith leaders have with refugees to 1) amplify the health messaging and protection messages 2) work on MHPSS and address GBV.
- Thank you for the work done on practical level and on funding, for reminding safeguards and administrative support as NGOs are facing massive fundraising challenges.

### Oxfam

- Underscore appreciation for the leadership and the commitments to the Principles of Partnership, to creating flexible funding mechanisms and ensuring key protection issues are not behind some of policies of closed borders that can have a long term impact.
- What else can we all do to create enabling environments, about flexible funding and more rapid flexibility for agreements?
- We need to bring the Grand Bargain commitments to life.
- The message should also trickle down to the country level. Messages are clear at IASC level but in some countries, our staff are experiencing extra bureaucratic requirements rather than ease.

### Norwegian Refugee Council

- There are now hundreds of COVID-19 related projects and programs and we need to make clear that we are putting enough safeguards in place, so our staff is not infected, and we do not spread the virus.
- A lot of new partnerships are emerging.
- UNHCR has been transparent, communicative, collaborative and transparent and being a flexible donor, which is in contrast with 2 years back, when I said that UNHCR was among our most difficult donors. That is progress and Robert Hurt has been a big help in this.
- My message is you need to help bring the UN into being a leader as flexible, good and responsive donor.
- We are the front line actors on this more than the UN agencies. The global appeal was not prepared with NGO partners. With only 5% of the appeal going to NGOs, this didn't look good. A measure of inclusiveness has to come, 30% of those USD 2 billion have to go to NGOs, otherwise this will not be right.
- If we are to stay and deliver, air bridges are fundamental and needs to come now. We also need medevac options in many places. In some countries, the last plane left weeks ago. This is going to paralyze work.
- On the so called exemptions, we should be careful not to call those 'exemptions', in a world of xenophobia, let's call then the ability for us to help the countries and the communities we serve.



- MENA is under lock down, there are 200-300 permits given to humanitarians in a given country when we would need 10 000. This is a job for the Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN, and NGOs can provide support by NGO but UN has to take the lead.
- There are a lot of plans, led by UN on quarantine for UN staff, evacuation of UN staff, that has to be for the humanitarian community as a whole, making sure that we are in the same boat, helping to ramp up, stay and deliver, associating national staff.

### **RefugePoint**

- It is an exponential crisis, needing coordination.
- On local response in Nairobi: RefugePoint staff work with refugee leaders, who are telling us their urgent needs include information, people are afraid of food scarcity and how to pay rent as livelihoods have disappeared overnight.
- There is a time sensitivity around response: some refugee have been able to pivot despite a rise in xenophobia and they are supporting host communities, e.g. by doing face masks. Are there ways to highlight how refugees are supporting their host communities?
- On private funding, which is a significant portion of UNHCR's unrestricted funding: We are part of a donors network, looking at what can be done as individuals and as networks of donors. There is not so much sense to highlight an individual organization but we need to highlight a collective response, not sure that highlight UNHCR appeal will resonate with them, but highlight locations and places where there is collective actions.
- On the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative: we are advancing self-reliance and co-created a self-reliance index. Now, the response has been refocused on immediate survival needs, but we cannot lose sight of the importance of self-reliance. We are a network of twenty-five NGOs to promote self-reliance in service of COVID-19 response, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and other ways, how we can put the initiative at the service of the COVID-19 response.

### **Danish Refugee Council**

- Appreciation to UNHCR for the response and flexibility to amend rules in challenging times. This will have great impact on collaboration.
- However, we would also want to see this applied consistently and coherently across regions, Bureaus, offices. We are encouraged to see you have conducted webinars and trainings to that effect. There is a need for a message on the necessity of ensuring the policy in coherently implemented.
- We work to continue delivering and using time for reprogramming our response. However, many operations are in suspension or partial suspension due to government constraints. We are also now working to continue as many life-saving programs as possible and we are also including activities focusing on COVID-19 response. More than 50% of our country operations are concerned.
- On the access issue. The implication of further restrictions and lock downs will affect the most vulnerable. We are trying to play a role to make sure the virus is not spread but we are asking support from the HCTs and directly through UNHCR to advocate for maintained humanitarian access for personnel, goods, transports and support evacuation mechanisms.
- Restrictions do not only impact only INGO but also local NGOs which lack supplies, PPEs, etc.
- We also see that COVID-19 has a potential to have a positive impact supporting or unblocking discussion on access in some places, e.g. in Yemen.
- Hope the statement of the UNSG on moving restrictions will be a starting point for more exceptions to access restrictions. Air transport four help a lot.



### **Save the Children**

- UNHCR's approach is very good at the moment also because others are very bad. We need cloning of your partnership approach.
- We encourage all of us, perhaps through SCHR, ICVA or a combination, to keep a tracker of countries where we do not see this flexibility and develop a name and shame list.
- We need funding to stay and deliver.
- Education: funding is not coming through in countries like Uganda and we are worried that the rhetoric is not followed by action.

### **Act for Peace / APRRN**

- Localization operationalizing the GRF pledges remains at the center.
- Refugees are frontline responders. Ensuring refugee meaningful participation in the development of COVID-19 responses is vital and in line with the GCR. What are the steps UNHCR might be taking in this regard and the opportunities for joint advocacy, especially on access to right and health?
- Is UNHCR considering how pledges can be incorporate in COVID-19 adjustments and how to maintain commitments to the pledges' implementation? APRRN is ready to support this effort.
- The situation of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar camp is potentially catastrophic, particularly with telecommunication restrictions, the limitation of WASH facilities, unequal access to COVID-19 testing and health services, restrictions on humanitarian response. In Bangladesh, we would like to learn what UNHCR is doing to ensure equal access to timely COVID-19 testing, treatment for refugees in Cox's Bazar, including learning more on restoring telecommunication in the camp.
- In Malaysia, we would like to know how UNHCR is responding to the recent arrival of boats carrying hundreds of Rohingyas? We would like to receive information on contingency planning with the potential of more arrival of boats in the south region.

### **HIAS**

- Last week we had a great briefing with Rob Hurt and we appreciated the letter mentioning guidance to the Bureaus. When will the guidance be shared with partners? It would help us in the field.
- Thanks for the strong high-level guidance on protection issues such as the key legal guidance on access to territory. How can UNHCR be more aggressive and specific where protection problems are directly encountered, e.g. US now stopped all asylum screening at the border with Mexico and being are being returned. We could use you voice.

### **Plan international**

- Concern about humanitarian access that remains critical in many countries where we are operating, and we have not achieved it everywhere.
- Would like to know whether progress has been made and the key areas of concern. What else can be done from our side to coordinate more effectively?
- In the area of Protection, we worked with UNICEF on violence against women and children and we would like to know in which way we can contribute with our own statement and insights from the field.
- On the dashboard being developed by UNHCR, we would like to know where it is available, and how we can contribute to make this dashboard alive?

### **InterAction**



- All asks are about lessening the bureaucracy. We asked UNHCR for major changes in its bureaucracy and alignments two years ago. We recognize how difficult it was.
- This is driven by a change in the forces of NGOs for those that have a development orientation and have to get into a humanitarian orientation, at least for the smaller donor.
- Big donors are not making out the gaps and it will be resulting in overtime and be a challenge in NGO frontline capacity.
- We need a closer relationship with UNHCR and the UN to deliver.
- Agree on all the points made on access and advocacy
- Want to stress that what we need is on speed of funding. NGOs are responding right now, we need additional funding and ways to move funding rapidly to local groups or NGOs.

### **International Rescue Committee**

- Focus on areas where we need to do much better:
  1. The narrative needs to be improved in a particular way: we are failing to get across the point that, in most humanitarian emergencies where we work, we still have few weeks to do vital preventive work, with hand-washing stations, fever checking, triage facilities, isolation centers. We are in a position where the prevention agenda remains highly relevant before the disease fully hits and I would like to see us having the narrative on the urgency on the frontline, for basic preventive work.
  2. On Funding: Good to hear UNHCR gets 60-65% of the funding asked for, but we do not have that money. It does not look good; it is not good because it is not getting the money where it needs to be. Emphasize NRC call that 30% needs to go through our NGOs and our local staff to make sure it goes to serving people in need.
  3. Strongly endorsed the need for that flexibility to be followed by all your people around the world. The message needs to be received by all UNHCR staff. An additional dimension of flexibility that needs to be highlighted is: multi-year commitments are even more important in those times.
- If we could get these three points right, we could make a big difference.

### **ICVA**

- We have been working together on the Principles of Partnership; on PPAs, joint and complementary advocacy, etc.
- You heard how NGOs are preparing to do so much, how to scale up and one question is how to bring reinforcement to national and local actors.
- The ability to effectively communicate with affected people is also a priority and key program component.
- We know all humanitarian actors have to consider protection in all their actions; adhere consistently to a principled approach to humanitarian action, regardless of the political dynamics driving or influencing a crisis; and contribute to preventing, stopping, reporting on and remedying risks, violations and harm experienced by affected persons in crisis. But the challenges are huge in terms of the choices which are being taken.
- We probably face two particularly important choices:
  - 1) Between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment consequence on the centrality of protection;
  - 2) The second is probably between nationalist isolation and global solidarity.
- What can we do better to keep the centrality of protection with the measures taken now and for the world we will be living afterwards?

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



- With the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns, we see SGBV increasing and in some countries, a doubling of domestic violence.
- How is UNHCR planning to work, with partners, to ensure women and girls in displacement settings continue to have access to GBV services, and safe spaces within COVID-19 response?
- What we can do in messages to prevent domestic violence and SGBV among refugees, IDPs and host communities?
- How best can advocacy NGOs, like WRC, support this effort?

#### **Islamic Relief Worldwide**

- Support behind the crucial importance of prevention now, we are doing this in Yemen and Northern Syria and we see it can make a massive difference.
- Appreciate the pushing for continued funding for existing crises.
- Refer to the strong UNSG call for a global ceasefire. It should be much more recognized.
- Important public health guidelines, informed from Islamic teaching is being developed by IRW. Happy to share with UNHCR.

#### **Filippo Grandi**

- May not answer everything but will ensure we follow-up very scrupulously on what you have requested.
- We have over 400 offices and sub-offices worldwide. Inevitably, not all of them are geared up for an emergency. I am ready to say that. We are not structured in that way and actually nobody has been exposed to a situation where the emergency is everywhere, and complicated by the fact that we, ourselves, humanitarian workers are exposed to that and at risk to spread the virus.
- Assure you that it is not an easy exercise and we are trying to balance the guidelines we are putting out and the fact that people are very busy in responding. Taking in consideration different aspects and to be frank, nobody was prepared for this. We are all learning on this.
- We need to bring our colleagues up to speed on the various aspect of the emergency, put out blueprint for the space in which we can operate because that's what they need, they need to have a definition of what they cannot do and can do. It is complicated.
- Many questions you raised are extremely pertinent and do not have a quick answer.
- Agree with IRC: main work on inclusion and response is about preventive action. Maybe not anymore on the social inclusion aspect, but on the health part, surely. It is the message we are passing to donors and to funders.
- Realize we are operating in context where we work with domestic partners.
- We are operating in context in which donors are powerfully distracted by domestic responses in their own countries. Prevention resonates with our interlocutors.
- We need to talk forcefully about the future of aid, both for the humanitarian and the development dimensions. If not, we will have serious problem.
- On the flexibility issue, I agree. The work that is happening now is an acceleration of what we already started. We will continue to accelerate it. The main issue is with donors and we will explain them what we do with the resources. I heard the messages and it has to go back down to our offices. Some have got the messages, some have not, and we will work on how to ensure these instructions are implemented in a consistent way across the world and ensure your own people are equally well informed. Rob is working on a second round of flexibility measures, so the communication will continue.





- On the logistics and movement side, WFP is the agency in the lead in organizing additional air transport. We are working with them on that. They are doing their best but under a lot of constraints. They need help.
- On humanitarian exemptions, you may not like the term, but it is quite powerful when you equate humanitarian workers with medical staff for examples and you make that identification, it is something that governments understand, and some have responded. In some countries it has not been successful, we will continue to do that more systematically, with Humanitarian Coordinators and with other partners.
- Many of you have complained about the UN, I am trying to pass the messages within the UN system. It is useful to have heard you and I will bring those issues into UN discussions. We are trying to push through some of these points.
- On funding, we were not happy of the limited or absence of NGOs in the first appeal. Bear in mind that in addition to the USD 100 million, part of what is given to us for COVID-19 (we have a small part of the appeal, 10%), will go directly to NGOs and we have tried to push it out immediately, to the field and then to you. Some of it will go to central issues, like procuring PPEs, which needs to be centralized.
- For the revised appeal in May, we hope this will include NGOs better and we will campaign for that.
- On private donors and highlighting local situations, we are trying with private and State donors to balance, e.g. in Bangladesh we have received more funds compared to some parts of Africa. We are trying to make that point and try to orient where it has to be unearmarked. We can communicate more with NGOs which do fundraising and ask the same message. The key message is the more unearmarked it is, the easier it is to obtain flexibility in their use.
- About refugee participation, it is a complex issue. There was a mention of activities in Kenya, we have ourselves step up activities, for example for soap production.
- On a bigger scale how do we involve more refugees, it is not just good to do it, it is a necessity. A number of our offices have started discussions with refugee leaders, especially in large camps, to see what they need in case they are cut off in interaction with humanitarian workers.
- Save the Children raised the issue of how small Education was considered in the appeal. Correct but remember we are making a strong pitch for existing programs to continue.
- Some donors have worryingly stated that Education is not a priority now. We need to be very vocal, if you don't have Education you cannot have the lifesaving health education and it is much more than that, it is on all the progress we have made.
- There was an important point on faith-based organizations, especially on communication with refugees. Next week, I intend to reach out to FBOs to have a specific discussion on areas where this can be useful. We see the value of a closer engagement.
- On protection, raised by HIAS, you are asking us to be more vocal. I can tell you where the issues are, there are clearly on the US-Mexican border, in Central America in general, around Venezuela and Venezuelans going back. How you qualify that return, I do not know, induced, forced, spontaneous? I asked Gillian and her team to look at Central America and Venezuelan situation.
- We have also the Tanzania and Burundi situation, extremely worrying because there is a relative denial of the emergency and additional push for repatriation.
- We are worried also for other situations (like in Greece) but those have come up as the most urgent, the most dramatic ones.
- On how can we be more vocal? We have to balance that. We will be more vocal when we think it can bring results. We may have division of labour and consult with you on what to say etc.



- There was a question around Malaysia. We raised this with the Malaysian authorities, and they have been forthcoming, it does not mean it will continue if more boats are coming, but at least for now, dialogues with the new Malaysian government have been relatively positive.
- On the dashboard, it is an internal digest of issues but I hear what you are saying. How can we share this information more with NGOs, in addition to the protection messages, so advocacy can be mutually reinforcing.
- We did not forget we were working with States and other partners on pledges implementation. It is a challenge as some pledges may have to be delayed and there are opportunities to make new pledges, on health sector, but not only, in the social protection sector too. The GRF team is working on that and stay tuned because we will come back with ideas to somehow redirect the follow-up to the GRF to make it relevant to the situation and sustain the momentum we achieved in December.

#### **Arafat Jamal**

- Next week's meeting will be with Dominique Hyde, Director of External Relations and will focus on communications, and outreach to government.
- We might adjust timing because of the switch to summer daylight saving time in Europe.