



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

29 April 2020
Online

Participants:

UNHCR:

- Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection
- Arafat Jamal, Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service

NGOs:

- About 90 participants, mostly NGOs.

Gillian Triggs

- The High Commissioner recently spoke to a smaller faith-based NGO group. He was keen on ensuring we had a wider opportunity to hear NGO perspectives and to think about how we can work together in advocacy in these very difficult times with the COVID emergency; an emergency that builds on other emergencies or other crises.
- Emphasizing the fact that we are working together with similar values. We are responding to the crisis from a common approach: every person is entitled to dignity and respect including asylum seekers, refugees, forcibly displaced within their own country, many millions unknown who are stateless.
- Knowing that this is part of your own faith-based groups' affirmation of welcoming, but it also reflects the underlying principles of the Global Compact on Refugees that the international community signed on two years ago.
- The key message is that we will share the responsibility and the burden for the persons of concern with civil society, faith-based groups, parliamentarians, academics, the business community.
- We want to mention how valuable faith-based groups are in helping to make these core arguments. You are respected figures within your communities, and you can be very effective in communicating the core messages to prevent, support, and care in the COVID-19 response. You have the capacity, continuous advocacy abilities both with your communities and governments to respond to issue such as discrimination and xenophobia.
- For several years UNHCR has built on a Protection Dialogue and the HC has made a personal commitment to reinvigorating the dialogue to ensure we can continue to work over what is going to be a major challenge in coming months and years for the persons of concern.
- The current protection challenges are the right to seek asylum, to enjoy asylum, and an absolute prohibition on the return of a person seeking international protection to a place of persecution, life-threatening, danger, and discrimination.
- The situation prompted by COVID-19 has been that we now have some of the greatest threats to those normative provisions of refugee law and human rights law. We have seen the 70-year history of the Refugee Convention and the role of UNHCR under threat. 167 countries have fully or partially closed their borders to contain the



spread of the virus and 60 States make absolutely no exception for asylum seekers or humanitarian workers, significantly curtailing the right of access to asylum.

- We are aware of many examples of deportations and *refoulement* of refugees and asylum seekers without COVID testing.
- While they may sometimes be reasonable and appropriate in the short-term, we are concerned that those measures will be maintained in the long-term, thus eroding fundamental norms. The advances made globally for the principles that underlie refugee work may regress.
- It is often said that COVID-19 is not discriminating, anyone can get it, but we know that the impact of COVID-19 is highly discriminating. It is discriminatory on those who are the weakest in our communities.
- We see COVID-19 impacts from the field and from other sources. We are learning on the loss of livelihoods, affecting 70% of refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people, who are in urban areas. There are many people in camps, but they are being supported in various ways and are not vulnerable in the context of economies. A number of people of concern are in the informal economy, they have unstable jobs, casual contracts and they are the first to go when there is economic contraction.
- We are starting to see real concerns for urban refugees, they are losing their jobs and it is creating tensions within a lockdown.
- We are seeing also a rise in gender-based violence, globally not only with the persons of concern but also with refugees, especially urban refugees.
- We are also concerned about the fact that 1.5 billion children are not within an education system and we think there is a risk of a generational gap for young people, particularly in vulnerable environments.
- There are many other aspects of concern, i.e. people with disabilities, elderly people are particularly vulnerable to the health pandemic but also vulnerable to the economic contraction and other stresses within the community.
- In the next few months we are expecting, particularly in Africa, a significant rise in food insecurity. WFP is now warning of the risk of millions of deaths from starvation.
- We have to work on the longer-term and not only on the health aspects of COVID.
- One of the most important ways is to encourage and support host countries to provide self-sufficiency mechanisms for integration and inclusion of persons of concern, whether they are internally displaced, in conflicts, e.g. in Idlib, in the Sahel or in Libya but also those who cross borders, refugees and asylum seekers who are not able to have access to safety, social welfare safety and in some cases are simply excluded from the opportunities for assistance within the countries.
- Inclusion, cohabitation, welcoming are initiatives that need to be promoted through advocacy to avoid discriminatory exclusion of peoples of concern from these services and to push back against stigmatization, xenophobia, and all forms of discrimination.
- Returning then to faith-based groups and their importance in putting that advocacy message. You can be effective in making sure that we can achieve that at the local level. Localization, working through our partners and NGOs has become an enormously important part of our work.



- We know that faith-based organizations are especially able to deliver that message in ways that can reach out and work for the implementation of mental health programs, psychosocial programming and using technology.
- To conclude, bringing us back to the core values of respect and dignity and the core values of the Global Compact on Refugees, no other emergency than COVID-19 has demonstrated so much why we have to work together. The pandemic has demonstrated the weaknesses across the world, inequality, fragile systems and lack of livelihoods for the most vulnerable.

Arafat Jamal

- We stand as UNHCR with our faith-based engagement. Since the start of COVID, the ways of working changed, we have had to readjust and one thing that has come out strongly is the role of faith actors in an operational sense, how to react in a time of crisis and that puts the emphasis on all of you who have those links with your communities and your congregations.
- The HC has taken a personal interest in the idea of doing something more with faith-actors. The impetus behind is first the recognition of how things are actually working on the ground during COVID and second give more energy to this.
- There is a whole other dimension to people's lives. FBOs tend to be approached in an instrumental fashion, e.g. to gather an imam or priest and get that person to talk about female genital mutilation for instance. It has been a private, marginalized and then an instrumentalized approach. We want to move beyond that.
- There are four emerging themes from our engagement with FBOs:
 - 1) Localization: Our credo at the moment is stay and deliver. But it is not possible to fly and deliver anymore. However, there are always people who stay, and our role should be to help most people who do stay to help them to deliver. A lot of those people who stay are part of FBOs. For those of you who are participating in IASC meetings, you will have noticed that localization is a big theme.
 - 2) Engaging in an interfaith campaign around some of the issues that we are dealing with, we have not defined the subject matter yet.
 - 3) Advocacy and protection, particularly around issues of hate, stigmatization and marginalization.
- Finally, you are familiar with the 2012 HC Dialogue on Protection Challenges. The HC would like to revive the Dialogue to re-energize our approach with faith actors. So, we would like to lead up to another dialogue with all of you. We are in the process of taking your opinions and ideas from everyone.
- I would also make the point on the regions. We had a fruitful discussion with one of our regions and we can set a certain tone at headquarters, but the context and the real nitty-gritty will happen at the regional and the country level.

Q&A.

Islamic Relief Worldwide

- First time hearing UNHCR express a clear roadmap and a different way of thinking. We are in a positive place.



- Regarding localization, we are faith-based organizations, not local faith communities. We are a real mixture. Some of us, e.g. colleagues from World Federation, have an operational wing and then they have a communion of churches. IRW is a pure and simple INGO and we are very different, so it is tricky. This is not a criticism of anyone but to reflect on why it is not always been easy to be collective in these issues even though we do speak collectively on few things.
- From the localization perspective, we need to recognize that we ourselves sometimes do not have the connections with the local faith communities that we would like to have, partly because of our make-up, partly because of challenges, for many other reasons. That is one of the things we want to work on with UNHCR.
- The GRF pledge we made with LWF last year was exactly to bring FBOs and UNHCR to talk about these issues. Let's think about how we can work with others because there is opportunities to connect the work that religious communities, at local, regional, national levels are doing in Europe, in third-country context, in the Sahel, in Northern Jordan or in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon.
- On GBV and child protection, the concerns are huge and so how could we potentially look at a number of contexts where FBOs have active offices, collective projects and programs and how could we start reaching out to those local faith communities to try and reduce or mitigate massive impact on protection concerns. E.g. Faith action for children on the move coalition was very active at the GRF, that is something that we could look at and there are methodologies in place, we have training packages in place, which we could look to scale up. We have the methodologies around channels of hope, which was a World Vision methodology that Islamic Relief has adapted. There is a lot of practical things that are already in place that would be great for us to take forward.

Joint Learning Initiative

- We have examples of good practices with local faith actors working with refugees. We know from research and evidence base of all these great examples of local people being able to take a large role in the response.
- With the Berkeley Center Georgetown University, we put together a [faith resource repository](#) where we are adding inputs on a daily basis. It also covers religious responses to COVID around the world. We still hope to do more analysis but if you want a central place to find resource it is there.
- We are happy to be part of the discussion and to provide examples on research and evidence of how UN agencies, INGOs work in the implementation of programs and how we can do that better in the future.

World Anglican Alliance

- What initiatives are being taken or what challenges are arising from partnering to work with embedded communities of faith in refugee communities?
- We are aware that there are many mosques, churches, different religious institutions embedded in the communities and often in our experience, we have found that in times of crisis, local NGOs and UN offices try to engage the churches but often the relationship is not really strong.



- Are there any resources or any studies that have identified what the main challenges have proven to be in trying to partner with those embedded populations that have such a high trust with their own communities and can be such a powerful tool for good in their environments?

HIAS

- A-HC Triggs framed how faith-based organizations work is squarely within the human rights framework to protect and include refugees.
- Heartened to hear the reference to the HC Dialogue of 2012 on faith and protection. We were involved in the dialogue work. We would certainly support revisiting a dialogue or another platform where we can come together in that way across faiths and across different types of FBOs, some operational, some more advocacy-based.
- The support that we see for refugees through interfaith engagement is so powerful. We see it at the programmatic level where we are working with different organizations, e.g. USA, Greece, Latin America, Chad.
- What has been powerful is the advocacy work that we can do together and that we have seen so clearly in the United States and globally, to create welcoming spaces for refugees but also to work against the dangerous xenophobia and discriminatory attitudes toward faith communities.

International Catholic Migration Commission

- ICMC appreciated UNHCR assistance to us in both Jordan and Malaysia so that we could get permission to deliver much-needed cash assistance and SGBV protection services despite the lockdown regulations in those countries.
- How does UNHCR envision stronger operational and advocacy partnerships with FBOs and with religious leaders to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers have equitable access to health care, including COVID-19 treatment and vaccination, when these become available as well as economic and psychosocial assistance during this pandemic and beyond?

CAFOD

- Could UNHCR elaborate on how these ideas might translate into new, energized engagement between UNHCR and possibly wider UN agencies with programmatic faith-based organizations working with local FBOs?
- Is there a scope to go beyond the preexisting partners and catalyzing new partnerships with local FBOs that have not been engaged so far and get new and additional funding to support their effort?

Act Alliance

- Around localization and the involvement of local faith actors in humanitarian responses and the area of addressing the vulnerabilities of the persons of concern, which possibilities do you see as UNHCR in engaging on those themes?
- We have started conversations with our members, e.g. LWF, around joint advocacy and we are looking at how to pursue this further but the question is also what kind



of operational modalities do you foresee for a stronger response to COVID-19 to specific situations of refugees, people of concern in that specific response?

Lutheran World Federation

- Is there more thought on the area of faith sensitivity especially the psychosocial support that was mentioned by A-HC earlier for the staff in the field? Would there be any development on that?
- At the global level and headquarters level, there is a lot of strong push from the HC which is very good but I am wondering how we translate that more towards the ground, e.g. in LWF cases we have both faith leaders like Bishop Bedford-Strohm in Germany and Archbishop Jackelén in Sweden who are strong advocates for refugees and yet we also have faith communities on the ground without member churches so it will be interesting to see how we can share that experience.

Gillan Triggs

- The point that is coming through loud and clear from the previous meeting and from this one, is how to get from these grand aspirations to the field, how do we actually translate these objectives at the grassroots level? That is the challenge.
- We have been given some bases. What we have to do is to get down to the granular level of saying what your respective grassroots organizations are, what the contacts are, and try to set up a network of people that brings these aspirations for advocacy down to the villages, towns, communities, refugee communities.
- How do we go about this in practice? We are going to have to look for better funding in order to promote work. I point out the UNSG appeal for 2 billion, which will be revised shortly but it is now better understood that the funding must be made available to NGOs, who are themselves suffering from a lack of resources. We need to be sure that we have empowered them with the resources that they need and that obviously includes faith-based groups.
- Speaking on how we have had to rethink our work at UNHCR as a consequence of COVID-19 with the lockdowns, the inaccessibility, the difficulty of getting our local or international staff into refugee and IDP areas. It has been a revolution not so much in the technology itself but the fact that we are actually learning to use it and use it constantly in order to reach the communities we want to reach.
- At the operational level, we are setting up call centers, WhatsApp communications, telephone calls, e.g. voluntary organizations have been lending their phones to women survivors of domestic violence who no longer have the benefit of shelters.
- The operational figures that I am getting back from the field suggest that we are now getting thousands of calls looking for support. The overwhelming majority of them are relating to cash needs to cope with the loss of jobs, livelihood and socio/psychosocial support. We are able through these technologies to reach thousands of people and to get them connected so we will be stepping up the technological capacity. We would want to do that with local partners and with local faith-based groups.



- In particular, the call centers have proved to be extremely successful, they are expensive to run but at UNHCR we are now looking at ways in which we can step up, to scale up the access to call centers.
- It is going to be a way of working in the short to medium term; long term remains to be seen.
- In some cases, there can be challenges with faith-based organization working with refugee communities and faith-based groups within those refugee communities, something I would like to look at and get a little bit more information on.
- I am pleased that you can all see the value of that past HC Dialogue. The importance of interfaith advocacy is very powerful.
- As for the campaign, we do need to get some ideas on how that campaign might be managed but certainly at an interfaith level, we can be very effective in putting core protection ideas.
- The point has been raised about how we ensure partnerships to advocate for equitable access to health and to other forms of social and psycho-social services, it is at the core of what we do, non-discriminatory access to those services through inclusion in those communities. They are simple messages, but they require a great deal of advocacy and commitment and I know that the faith-based organizations would provide a very high level of credibility but also bring us to the level at the field.
- We have the infrastructure to start to put faith-based groups in these local environments together with us to try to develop advocacy, work with local governments. One of the aspects of the Global Compact is working much more closely with local government, municipal authorities, parliamentarians and scholars to try to find ways of bringing these messages at a local level and those are all ways in which we can work together. I suggest that we develop some sort of preliminary draft ideas that we could circulate to see if we can progress on how we think these advocacy messages can be developed and brought down to the field level.

Arafat Jamal

- On how this works in the field and what are the next steps, we are enthusiastic about this engagement with faith-based organizations. At the same time that does not mean that we will be operating a separate regime for faith NGOs. It will be the same channels as ever, however what you can expect is maybe more of a two-way dialogue on how this should work. We have mentioned localization in particular that we would like to see being implemented in a stronger fashion.
- Looking at FBOs brings us the voice of some of the people that we might not hear, and bringing our voice as well to those people. It is more shifting how we approach it rather than actually changing any of our rules which would not change.
- The more we have successful examples, the more the argument starts to take weight. Some of you have noted a change of tone and there is a lot of convincing to be done. There is a great value in a specific type of approach that is based in faith, but we need to also build together those successful examples.
- On the dialogue itself, we are excited to revive that and we looked forward.
- Do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to build upon today's inputs.
- [UNHCR's survey](#) available for NGOs to give their feedback on the weekly meetings.