



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

Theme: Addressing IDP vulnerabilities in the context of COVID-19

01 July 2020

Online

Participants:

UNHCR moderator:

- Arafat Jamal, Head of Partnership, and Coordination Service

Panelists:

- Sumbul Rizvi, Principal Advisor on Internal Displacement, UNHCR
- George Okoth-Obbo, Head of Secretariat of the UN High Level-Panel on Internal Displacement

NGOs:

- About 60+, mostly NGOs.

Sumbul Rizvi

- Slide 2: main issues in relation to internal displacement and the very specific impacts of COVID-19 on internally displaced people (IDPs). They face a variety of impacts, including:
 - loss of life, especially in the context of natural disasters, including situations of persecution; loss of livelihoods, a very significant one for IDPs, losing homes, belongings, culture, security.
 - limited trust in national prevention and response systems.
 - deprivation of familiar environment, a limitation on IDPs' ability to survive and manage at an absolute minimum any additional shock, whether it is Ebola, locust, or COVID-19.
- Pandemic related impacts can be very far-reaching, and have to be anticipated by States as primary duty-bearer of their own nationals and provide services and aid to mitigate risks.
- The anticipation of the needs has to be across the spectrum of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. The needs of IDPs in the COVID context cannot be limited to humanitarian aspects alone.
- Slide 3: IDMC's [latest global report](#) on internal displacement. 45.7 million internally displaced as a result of conflict and violence: high and a big concern. Another large number is over 5 million IDPs as a result of natural disasters.
- Slide 4: UNHCR [global trends report for 2019](#), released in June. 79.5 million forcibly displaced of which 45.7 million IDPs.
- Slide 5: the prominent pandemic related risks for IDPs:
 - Barriers to accessing national health systems: important to remember and recognize, because there is sometimes misunderstanding or misinterpretation especially by development actors and international financial institutions that IDPs are nationals of their own countries and therefore there is an assumption that they have access to rights.
 - Crowded living conditions can accelerate spread of the virus and social distancing is impossible, whether you are in a little tent, a collective center, in an IDP site, in a queue to access to assistance.
 - Poor nutrition leads to weakened immunity. We know through WHO, UNICEF, etc. that in the IDP context – and generally in the forced displacement context – poor nutrition brings higher risks, especially the most vulnerable.
 - Loss of livelihoods is another critical risk which transcends communities in this particular context. For IDPs, and forcibly displaced populations there is a significantly higher risk of exploitation and abuse which could be attributed to coping mechanisms but also survival.



- People are even more vulnerable because they may be stuck in situations where they may not be able to flee from conflict zones or precarious camps, but may want to move further.
- Another limitation based on UNHCR field experiences and feedback from NGO partners is that the information available that may be provided by a State to its nationals generally does not include the specific needs of IDPs.
- Tensions may appear or be aggravated with host communities, which may already be in precarious situations themselves and even more due to COVID-19 related restrictions.
- Slide 6: practical challenges for people grappling with the pandemic, as witnessed by UNHCR field operations, Regional Bureaus, and reported back regularly through our headquarters.
- Poverty drives a lot of IDPs to abandon quarantine measures in order to survive and get money for their families.
- Limited access to preventive measures, including at work, which may be exposing them to complex situations and exposure to the pandemic. Even if they had funds to buy masks, those were often not readily available in the early days of the pandemic. In many locations, masks are not provided at work and are not affordable. We have reports about IDPs using scarves as masks to mitigate the risk.
- Mental health and psychosocial support programs, due to the prohibition on mass gatherings that is not a possibility.
- Climate and conflict-induced incidents on top of COVID-19 still continue, e.g. in Ethiopia and in Somalia where they have a Cholera outbreak on top of COVID-19; the measles outbreak in DRC; the expanse of the Locust in most of Horn in East Africa and in other parts of the world.
- People who received remittances from relatives and friends abroad now face a very significant reduction in the transfer of remittances in the COVID-19 context. E.g. in Syria, this increases the suffering of over 6 million IDPs.
- Movement of IDPs from rural areas to towns, largely for assistance and protection, in search of livelihoods, another risk that they are exposing themselves and their families to.
- Food supplies are becoming more problematic across most IDP operations, in Africa in particular because of rising prices in urban areas, the limitations of transportations.
- Slide 7: priority areas for cooperation.
- Advocacy, including with local, national, and regional with State authorities.
- Inclusion of IDPs within the State systems, notably health facilities and also facilities relating to livelihood programs.
- Community engagement, information sharing from us.
- UNHCR stepped up as an immediate response to the IDPs including significant cash response mechanisms. In the last three months, we have delivered a significant cash disbursement with \$10 million to IDPs in thirteen country operations.
- Peaceful coexistence interventions. Programming must ensure bridges between the humanitarian and the development actors.
- Remote programming. The Global Protection Cluster is working concretely on the prediction impact of remote management.
- Slide 8: UNHCR written submission to the High-Level Panel on internal displacement is available on [the Panel's website](#) but there are four specific imperatives that we have noted for consideration to the Panel:
- Amplifying the SG's appeal for a global ceasefire: Conflict is not only a key root cause of internal displacement but cease fire will prevent further displacement and potentially offer Solutions for some cases.
- IDPs inclusion in national programs and social safety nets, responding to the medium and long-term social-economic impact, which is already devastating impoverished communities amongst the forcibly displaced.



- Urge States and development partners to ensure that IDPs benefit from all the State-led initiatives including from countries which are benefiting from international financial support.
- Advocate against any move that risk forced returns to insecure places of origin on the basis of exceptional measures, which States are adopting within the response to the pandemic.

George Okoth-Obbo

- The work of the Panel has brought me on a day-to-day basis in deep interaction with NGOs. We work with them more frequently than I did at UNHCR and today's meeting is the continuation of that engagement.
- The Panel has been asked to do a review of the internal displacement issue with particular emphasis on the problematics that need new energy, new drive to reach Solutions.
- COVID-19 was not an issue when the Panel's terms of reference were established but subsequent events have shed light on the interface between this pandemic and the landscape of internal displacement questions.
- The Panel decided to look into COVID-19 and its relationship to internal displacement. The Panel is now gathering information, analysis, and starting to detect the issues, including those presented by UNHCR: an enumeration of the risks IDPs are facing with COVID-19.
- However, the Panel is struggling with the evidence and the data. E.g. There is a lack of information on IDPs who are excluded from health systems.
- We have written to 30 humanitarian coordinators to warn them on the risks of IDPs exposure to COVID-19.
- The narrative in the policy dialogues, including UNHCR, is framed for refugees and migrants. For example, much is centred around the question of instrumentalized citizenship.
- A lot of what has been highlighted has to do with the vulnerabilities and responses needed.
- Importance of what are the implications, looking to the future. The Secretariat is looking at:
 - 1) the integrity of national accountability for IDPs. Repeating the question that the Panel is also investigating: is the rhetoric of displacement sufficient? E.g. one theme emphasized very strongly is the inability to implement social distancing in crowded conditions, but this is not a pathology that is unique to internal displacement but also for marginalized societies. So where is the red line between the case that absolutely has to be made on behalf of IDPs but must be made for a large pathology, for the larger population? How is national accountability going to be exercised and implemented? First and foremost, it is a displacement issue or fundamentally a question of marginalization?
 - 2) on the integrity of the international humanitarian response system. If we are looking at donors who are themselves going to be reviewing their financial resources in view of the enlarged obligations at home, can we count on the integrity of the financial part of the international humanitarian system?
- The Panel is also looking at the different policy issues that it can highlight in its recommendations. The first one would be: camps have to end; it is an obvious one. How the players can work together to make this a reality?
- The four priority areas mentioned by UNHCR for cooperation are part of the Panel's agenda. The strongest recommendation would probably be at the frontier of national accountability and national capacity procedures in supporting countries.

Q&A ICVA

- Due to the pandemic, has the Panel planned to devote more attention to health and socio-economic parameters of IDP responses? If so, could you provide preliminary conclusions?
- Do you have an overview of how much of the written submissions received by the Panel have addressed specific challenges related to the pandemic?



- Could UNHCR provide an update on [UNHCR's Initiative on Internal Displacement](#) and how its roll-out has been affected by the pandemic? How are NGOs involved in the Initiative?

Lutheran World Federation

- Beyond written statements, how can we practically support the Panel? We discussed it in terms of technical support or evidence-based that NGO networks could provide, but maybe if you have any particular specific asks for NGOs an NGO networks.

Sumbul Rizvi

- To ICVA, happy to have a separate conversation on UNHCR's Initiative, released in September 2019. The IDP Initiative builds on [UNHCR's IDP policy](#) informed by several consultations with NGOs.
- The IDP Initiative is a specific tool to showcase what UNHCR is doing and can do along with its partners, across the range of our partnerships, operational and implementing, the range of our coordination work with our 3 clusters coordination leadership as well as on our operational delivery and commitment as provider.
- We have operations in 33 IDP contexts and we have picked one country from each regional Bureaus (although from the horn in East Africa Bureau we have included three countries because the situation shifted considerably in the case of Sudan and there are opportunities there for a potential solution for people displaced).
- In that context, we rolled out the IDP Initiative last March at UNHCR's Standing Committee.
- [Slides 9 & 10](#): with the pandemic, we were suddenly in a global emergency and it required us to respond. The IDP Initiative help provide a clear focus direction in terms of how we were operationalizing the IDP Policy and what are the priority issues.
- We shifted tracks very quickly on this planned staggered approach and work with the regional Bureaus and country operations to give us information on what they are doing on cash, on ensuring that adequate community awareness programs are being undertaken with IDP communities, about urban IDPs, about mixed operations with refugees and IDPs, etc.
- All local partners, local communities, IDPs communities, have come together to be more creative and innovative. So, on the one hand, the pandemic has provided us a hook up to learn and to push forward on the IDP Initiative and operationalize in a more coherent and consistent way. On the other hand, the limitations we are all facing have also hit us badly.
- Programming planning for 2021 is also a big challenge with uncertainty about how much can be build up to continue our programs in 2021, with the larger economic situation and several other parameters.
- We should indeed have a more concerted understanding of what IDPs' needs are, especially from a development angle, and engagement with financial institutions in both humanitarian-development areas. In this emergency, there is an opportunity for us, as an international community, to show through practical action how we can address the nexus issue.

Arafat Jamal

- The assertion that IDPs might be poorer cousins of refugees is not surprising to us, but it might be more surprising to hear that in some cases IDPs are more privileged than national counterparts. Would you have any thoughts you want to share with us on this perspective?

George Okoth-Obbo

- About the health and social issues that have been accentuated for IDPs by the COVID situation. The pandemic impacted the Panel's plans in an extreme way. We lost three months of work time and then it also affected some key methodologies mentioned in the Panel's ToRs, e.g. consultations with IDPs and host communities.



- We have disaggregated information received from the written submissions, 163 recommendations, each one of these being transcribed into actual statements that the Panel will consider as such and that includes all the questions that have been received around the impact of COVID-19.
- The Panel is nowhere near starting to formulate its conclusions.
- To LWF: the constituency of NGOs is one of the most active and dynamic for the Panel's process.
- Our work into the workstreams and the concept of it is to formulate a set of themes and questions that we can then look at in a more focused way. E.g. the role and engagement of the NGOs had been crucial in allowing us to go deeper.
- We had [an event](#) hosted by ICVA few days ago that allowed us more exploration on the Solutions, and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- We look forward to continuing this partnership and we welcome very much from LWF, from other NGOs, their continued handshake with us in a proactive way.
- Relating to the Panel work, COVID-19 has impacted the consultation with IDPs and host communities, the partial solution is to work with the partners including UNHCR and others on the ground through the different platforms and mechanisms they already have. We will try to use those mechanisms to have a feedback mechanism from the IDPs.
- Acknowledge that NGOs are a very important partners with whom we are organizing this mechanism globally. They will continue to be even more important with this process taking place on the ground.
- IDPs are not more privileged but there are operations where assistance may be provided to IDPs and contrast with the response from the government to nationals.
- IDPs plight are completely unspeakable in the context of the citizenry, e.g. land.
- The whole pathology now of accountability and citizenry is much higher. These questions need to be seen because the engagement point with the national responsibility holders, when the conversation is around protection, is the tendency to internationalize and humanitarianize those questions.
- Approached as an issue of the effective citizenry, it points much more, as it should, to this floor of accountability to your population.
- Speaking from my own point of view, the status debate of IDPs versus refugees is even more visible when looking at IDPs versus ordinary citizens.

Caelin Briggs

- Thanks for sharing rich written submissions, which are available on the Panels' [website](#).
- To ICVA, the COVID-19 theme is coming out in various ways. A huge number of submissions highlighted the particular risks faced by IDPs in relation to COVID-19, both from a health perspective but also from an economic, social, and protection perspective. We welcome any additional, concrete evidence you have on how it is in the field. Many submissions touched on these risks generally but without necessarily providing very concrete data or evidence for us to work on.
- We see how COVID-19 relates to the specific themes that the Panel is exploring and how COVID in some ways is a proxy for some of bigger questions we are dealing with: the willingness of different actors to proactively incorporate IDPs into COVID-19 prevention, planning, medication, and treatment plans, and how IDPs are integrated into those strategies, how different actors work together to ensure IDPs are effectively engaged in this process.
- We are not at the stage of preliminary conclusions yet and the Panel is still very much in the information gathering and discussion stage.



Women's Refugee Commission

- George mentioned that camps have to go and we fully agree with that. However, we often have those camps because of States are telling us we have to respond to internal displacement in that sort of a confined area. Those States are creating IDPs in the first place and are generally not very accountable for protecting the rights of those citizens or individuals within their countries. How are States approaching the Panel in terms of what they are willing to give up or change in their behaviour to be able to address the problem?
- The Panel needs to find creative ways of convincing those States that they need to change their means and ways of working to address root causes.
- Have States hosting IDPs provided in their written submissions any insights on how they would like to address the IDP question and Solutions and particularly in terms of the nexus?

Giovanni Cassani

- Our outreach efforts are focalized on gathering evidence, information, additional material that can then be presented to the Panel.
- The written submissions are one of the tools we used to collect feedback for the Panel. We are hoping and expecting additional submissions coming up.
- Additionally, we are working with NGOs and UN agencies to conduct consultations with IDPs and host communities. We are leaning on our partners and actors. We have identified around 30 countries where we will conduct the consultations and around 7-8 partners are volunteering for the moment.
- We also have a series of events like [the Panel Discussion on 6 July](#), where we try to get as much as possible feedback from participants to feed into the work of the Panel.
- To LWF question, all of the channels mentioned can be used but also any spontaneous submission (and we are receiving some of those at this stage), e.g. 2 pages on some specific issues or topics that any of the actors out there still strongly feels about and wish the Panel to pay attention to.
- The Panel and the EU organized [a webinar](#) on ensuring life-saving assistance and longer-term support to IDPs in the face of COVID-19, attended mostly by Member States and we have today discussion with the NGO community.

Sumbul Rizvi

- None of the work that we do on in the field can be possible without our NGO partners, not just implementing partners but also those who share a voice in advocacy in the IDP context.
- A lot of work is going on in the field with our NGO partners, our localization approaches. Our collaboration with NGOs is going to be evident in the quarterly updates we are preparing on the IDP Initiative, the first of which is to be [released next week](#). It contains stories and reflections on the pandemic, related work across the globe, showcased through the 9 IDP operations and it responds to several questions raised by ICVA and NGOs.
- To ICVA: always happy to be available for a conversation, so do not hesitate to reach out.
- At UNHCR 78th Standing Committee, we will also provide an oral update on the IDP initiative.
- This is a point in time where we are fortunate in the sense that there is attention at the global level, through the Panel, for political resolution of the broad-based issues.

George Okoth-Obbo

- To WRC, how will it be possible for government to do better? It is almost a theory of change. The Panel is posing a lot of these questions in this manner. Broadly, the part of the Panel's work is trying to answer how can these governments or other actors be encouraged to act in consonance with WRC's points? It can be framed differently, it is not an encouragement issue, it is an accountability issue.



- The Panel is working across the spectrum of issues such as the financing, actual engagement, property issues. Exploring a lot of these positive incentives or incentivization.
- Dealing with failures of accountability is clearly the second part of what the Panel will also have to deal with to arrive at more robust conclusions and critical recommendations.
- Every single accountability holder whether on the agency side or on the national authorities' side, can lean out of the window much more than it is currently.
- The work that UNHCR did within the last months is a step forward, the right thing, the necessary thing to do and the kinds of concepts that we also had about programming for example is concrete.
- We could see more special initiatives which have the ambition of bringing more and better for the benefit of IDP and the key issues that they face. There is a lot of gas in the tank and all of us can and need to step a little bit more on the accelerator.

Arafat Jamal

- One comment and question, we could not answer from an NGO: the Security Council Resolution 2504 covering Northwest Syria is about to expire this month and the question was, is this not an area where international action is required?
- Next week will focus on where we stand on our reforms with implementing partner arrangements.