

Notes UNHCR Monthly online Consultations with NGOs

Date	24 February 2021
Session Title	Dialogue between NGOs and the High Commissioner for Refugees
Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, • Ignacio Packer, ICVA's Executive Director
Moderator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominique Hyde, Director, Division of External Relations, UNHCR
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 140+, mostly NGOs and UNHCR staff

Executive summary

The consultation focused on UNHCR and NGO partnership developments in 2020, and priorities for 2021 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of partnership developments, 2020 was a difficult year for humanitarian actors, but also a year of opportunities to strengthen UNHCR-NGOs partnerships with various exchanges. 22 virtual Monthly Consultations have been organized, originally on the COVID-19 pandemic, but now include other topics, paving the way for a new way of working together. In addition, the Annual NGO Consultation was successfully held online last year. In line with UNHCR's decentralization, Regional NGO Consultations will be convened in 2021, while there will be no consultation at global level this year. UNHCR also highlighted that 2020 also witnessed deepened relationships with Faith-Based-Organisations (FBOs) and Refugee-led-organisations (RLOs) in advancing the localization agenda. Another notable development is partnership reforms, such as greater budgetary flexibility and shortening the partnership project agreements, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the partnership. As a key priority in 2021, participants stressed the need to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccines for all people on the move. Emphasis should be equally put on the short-term effects of the pandemic, for example regarding the access to vaccinations, and long-term socio-economic impacts. The discussion also highlighted some of the most negative impacts of containment measures taken by some State actors, including on access to international protection and durable solutions (e.g. border closures, pushbacks, interruption of education for millions of children, a rise in gender-based violence (GBV), and a drop in resettlement departures). UNHCR and NGOs, as partners, recognized the need to be more vocal together, notably through advocacy for resource mobilization to address, inter alia, the increase of GBV and access to education for refugee children; and joint advocacy for the inclusion of displaced populations and stateless persons in national vaccination plans but also beyond the health area, in existing mechanisms and services.

Major points arising from speakers

UNHCR:

- Partnership with NGOs is crucial for UNHCR. Therefore, in 2020, UNHCR deepened its relationships with NGOs, but also specifically with FBOs and RLOs, advancing the localization agenda. The first ever Innovation Award dedicated for the latter also contributed to deepening such engagement.
- Since March 2020, [22 consultations have been held](#) with the NGO partners, a very useful way to exchange, not only on the current pandemic.
- In line with UNHCR decentralisation process, in 2021, we will hold UNHCR-NGO regional consultations, and the outcome of these meetings will feed into the 2022 Global NGO Consultations. The regional consultations might be opportunities to have more granular, specific exchanges about the issues that we want to address together at regional levels and then bring it to a bigger annual consultation in 2022.
- We have disbursed 1.5 billion dollars through partners, most of it through NGO partners, an increase due to COVID-19 related expenses.
- In 2020, we have had agreements with 1,147 NGO partners. It shows a growing modality of cooperation, in particular with the number of local partners that is increasing.
- We have received from donors in 2020 just below half a billion dollars for COVID-related expenses and we were able to spend about one-fourth of it through NGO projects. This is not enormous but a growing number compared to previous years.
- Collectively we put a lot of emphasis on trying to simplify and streamline our partnership agreements, achieve greater flexibility, simplify bureaucracy, and reduce reporting.
- As of mid-January 2021, we had already signed 840 agreements, 320 more than the equivalent period in 2020.
- UNHCR new Results-Based Management approach in our programming, planning, budgeting implementation, monitoring and evaluation will enhance the effectiveness of our relationship with all partners including NGOs.

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- One priority we all share is “exit from COVID”, exit from its lingering effects, short and long-term effects, not only the health effects but also on its far-reaching socio-economic impacts, protection, funding, etc.
- What lessons did we learn from the pandemic? First, we learned a lot in terms of preparedness, partnership, communication, the involvement of local communities; important questions that we already look at and it will be good in the next months to reflect with NGOs on those issues and try to draw lessons to be better prepared in the future.
- One important preventive priority is the vaccinations of displaced and stateless populations.
- On the pandemic’s socio-economic impacts (e.g. on education, livelihoods), a lot of emphasis on our part will be placed on our partnership with development organizations, such as the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, African Development Bank. COVID-19 has been an accelerator of these partnerships, and there is scope for closing the gap and making the Nexus more operational. We are strengthening that link as a big priority.
- In terms of marginalization and exclusion, how can we ensure displacement issues are heard, especially when it comes to the economic impacts? Economic rescue packages are political and there is less immediate evidence about the inclusion of people on the move. There is evidence with vaccination but not with the economic package.
- We also need to look at protection impacts. One obvious impact on protection is the closure of borders, limiting the ability to access territory and the pretext that some countries may have resorted to in imposing restrictions that might endure, even after the pandemic.
- Other protection concerns are linked to the rise in GBV and the externalization trend in countries, particularly in Europe. In that respect, one priority for UNHCR will be our interaction with the European Commission and EU Member States on the rolling out of the European Pact on Asylum and Migration, which is not a perfect Pact but under the circumstances probably the best that we could obtain.
- The follow-up to the Global Refugee Forum is also another priority for UNHCR with the High-Level Officials Meeting in December 2021. The aim of the event will be to take stock of the advances made from the last Forum and inject new energy for those pledges to be fulfilled; it will be very necessary after two years and the pandemic.

ICVA:

- Space for UNHCR-NGO dialogue, at global and regional levels, such as the monthly consultations remains crucial.
- The priority is very much to strengthen our partnership for 2021.
- We share UNHCR observations on existing negative trends caused by the pandemic, on access to territory, on GBV, the millions of children displaced and out of school, on the limited access to durable solutions and particularly the low resettlement figures.
- It is important to shed a light on climate change. Yesterday, the UN Security Council discussed the need for collective action to address risks climate change poses for peace and security, linking to food production, and access to water.
- The climate crisis also is requiring major adaptations of our sector including with new climate partnerships.
- We are very encouraged with ongoing discussions and [the January UNHCR-NGO consultation](#) around UNHCR’s Framework for Climate Action.
- We have to advance in partnership and in solidarity. For many NGOs, it is a top priority to support the re-thinking, and re-imagining of our respective goals and contributions to adapt to these different disruptions.
- It is an important moment for ICVA as we are in the midst of finalizing the [ICVA 2030 Strategy](#), which will be adopted at our General Assembly. We aim to transform our organizations and the network around five key issues:
 - 1) Be more forceful, more engaged on principled humanitarian action;
 - 2) Better integrate elements of diversity and inclusion;
 - 3) Develop our engagement on climate change issues;
 - 4) Better link the different levels of discussions at regional and global levels and very much have the granularity of the specific;
 - 5) Proactively engage in agile collaborative partnerships.
- There were a number of good news since January, which provide good hooks for joint advocacy, concrete work, and positive outcome, e.g. Colombia’s recent decision to regularize Venezuelan refugees and migrants; Portugal decision to adapt its asylum systems; and the new Biden administration should bring a series of positive dynamics.

Major points arising from discussions

Protection

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- UNHCR always stands ready to discuss with NGOs on protection and acknowledge that collectively, we need to be a bit more sophisticated in terms of mentioning protection. Protection is a specific set of issues, it is not everything and it is founded on norms or laws that we need to refer to. It requires also some specific knowledge and expertise. UNHCR invites all to be very well coordinated on protection matters and use that label in a strategic way that shows the added value of using it when we can.

Gender equality and gender-based violence

- Aside from access to territory, the other biggest protection challenge UNHCR and NGOs are facing is an increase in gender-based violence and gender discrimination linked to the COVID-19 response.
- In June 2021, Islamic Relief Worldwide will formally launch the [Islamic Gender Justice Declaration](#). They are working together with FBOs, NGOs, refugee and host communities and hopes that UNHCR and other agencies will join in supporting this pioneering initiative.
- Women's Refugee Commission conducted a [recent assessment](#) and found that access to contraception and sexual and reproductive health services was very negatively impacted for women and girls and asked how UNHCR will ensure this access.
- The gender inequality gap also relates to nationality laws and people have not had the same access to COVID-19 relief, social protection programmes, etc.
- CARE International raised that there is global evidence that funding women's organizations comes a long way in preventing, responding and mitigating GBV and in ensuring we deliver gender-responsive interventions. It asked what UNHCR's plans are in 2021 and beyond to accelerate funding to national and local civil society organizations and to women's organizations, including refugee and IDP-led women's organizations.
- An aspect of responding to GBV is resource mobilization. UNHCR has resources dedicated to action against GBV and other gender-related issues in the COVID-19 response context. UNHCR is also reaching out to close partners in the UN system (e.g. UNFPA) to try to harmonize interventions.

Child protection and access to education

- COVID-19 has further compounded child protection risks and child rights violations including physical and sexual violence, child marriage, child labour, neglect, and absence from learning, particularly for girls.
- Save the Children, World Vision International and others flagged that there is a hidden crisis in the making on Education, with hundreds of millions of kids out of school and millions of them being at risk of never going back at all, or certainly missing out on the large chunk of their education.
- Education will continue to be a big focus for UNHCR. UNHCR is concerned about the return to school of children in the current pandemic context, which often does not include particularly marginalized people on the move. This is the direct effect not of the schools closing and reopening but of poverty and growing poverty in communities. Girls are more impacted and there is a direct correlation with early marriage and other forms of exploitation. It is very worrying and UNHCR is focusing on it in a very specific manner, both in terms of advocacy and resources requests.
- Education is meant to mobilize resources that we can invest, specifically to ensure we go back at least to pre-COVID-19 ratios. UNHCR is working on [various levels of education](#), e.g., initiative « 15 by 30 » for tertiary education. The rate of enrollment in tertiary education is abysmal for refugees with about 3% accessing tertiary education and we want to bring it to 15% by 2030, aligning our steps to the overall Sustainable Development Goals.

COVID-19 vaccines

- Several NGOs shared great concerns about equity of access to vaccines and recovery efforts. For example, Oxfam raised that the question of vaccine access and vaccine equity should be taken seriously. In some of our work around public opinion, there could be a long-term opportunity for us to re-calibrate this notion of what justice for displaced population means, with a feminist lens.
- Inclusion is key. The UNHCR-GAVI MoU signed recently focuses on a new initiative to ensure equitable access to vaccines for people on the move including COVID-19 vaccines.
- The role that first-line responders can play in rolling out the vaccines is also key, especially for marginalized people.
- UNHCR has asked and is campaigning hard to mobilize resources for vaccination and other health-related activities. The cost of vaccination is not just the vaccine, it includes the logistics, especially in very remote areas.

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- 106 countries have officially said that they will include all of our people of concern in their vaccination campaigns. In some other 30-40 countries, discussions are moving forward. Our goal is to ensure that no country excludes refugees, displaced and stateless populations from their national vaccination plans, unless there is a grave problem of resources.
- Women's Refugee Commission asked how to ensure stateless individuals are included in national vaccination plans. UNHCR has been trying to work both on the legislative and operational sides to include stateless people but it is a big challenge and NGOs' support is welcome.

Funding

- UNHCR joined the UN interagency appeal for COVID-19 in 2020. For 2021, it was decided not to have a joint appeal but a specific COVID-19 appeal for funding by UN agencies and organizations.
- UNHCR estimated an overall extra need around [\\$900 million for 2021](#). UNHCR will cover only half of the needs and will need advocacy from partners to get extra funding.
- Norwegian Refugee Council [recommends](#) working together to campaign and advocate for a smarter approach to protection financing.
- UNHCR is coordinating the Global Protection Cluster and has the responsibility to mobilize protection resources. It was suggested to work on how to improve the way we raise and mobilize resources for protection activities.
- International Rescue Committee acknowledged that one of their priority is to lead the way in promoting higher funding flexibility for partners. Recognizing the efforts led by Robert Hurt on the wider UNHCR partnership reforms, however, in the context of funding, IRC also flagged a need for improvements on the volume, the duration, and the timeliness of funding. This means more funding down the transaction chain; setting a target to cascade multi-year funding to deal with the often-protracted nature of today's refugee crises. It also means agreeing on a reasonable timeframe (e.g. within a quarter of the original donor funding allocation) for cascading funds so that those closest to the action have the means to intervene promptly and have equitable access to the vaccines that were mentioned.

Partnership

- UNHCR and the World Bank have a good cooperation. The World Bank has two or three key instruments that UNHCR can use (e.g. the refugee window under the IDA program, and 2.2 billion rolled out), that remains invaluable.
- UNHCR-NGOs monthly consultations are a platform that can be used to change how we are working as partners and how we can strengthen also solidarity to achieve global safety. We can also work on raising awareness, not only about the mobilization of vaccines but also of resources. The Global Refugee Led-Network indicated that we need to allocate resources to all refugee led-networks.
- Fudela suggested to improve and adapt our approaches to protection and use the opportunity to link technology, promote digital communities and at the same time be close to people and have a space of good practices exchange.
- On the appetite to look again at what role should each of us play in this re-calibrated and difficult COVID-19 context and look at how all these relationships work, there is a very ancient traditional view with a pyramid where there is on the top the UN, then the international NGOs and the local NGOs and the refugee-led organizations somewhere. We need to reverse that pyramid and work towards the opposite, where everybody supports the community. That will require a lot of resets not only on UNHCR part but also from NGOs and donors. UNHCR welcomes Oxfam invitation to have a debate. All groups represented today, refugee led-organizations, FBOs, local NGOs, international NGOs, international organizations, can have a meaningful debate around some concrete issues.

Advocacy

- We need to use the current pandemic context to advocate more strongly for the inclusion of people on the move and civil society has a big role to play in advocacy. We need to be more effective in advocating for that otherwise we will not mobilize the necessary policy and resource attentions. It should be the priority number one where UNHCR and NGOs should work together.
- On externalization, especially in the European context and maybe more for European-based NGOs, it is very important that we continue to remain very vigilant. While the negative trends are still strong, UNHCR considered that the EU Pact will have a great impact on other parts of the world, particularly on Africa and the Middle East. We need to stay together in a pragmatic way but also in a very strong advocacy wave sometimes.

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- UNHCR is starting to have good discussions on the U.S. resuming resettlement. We understand that the U.S. will announce this week 62,000 slots for resettlement in 2021. It is incredible as it went down to 15,062 under the previous administration. We use the good figure strategically, not just as a logistical exercise but how this can be a message to the rest of the world that the U.S. is back and that solidarity is back.

Global Compact on Refugees and Global Refugee Forum

- According to UNHCR, a keyword of the GCR is inclusion. This was one of the real novelties of the GCR, crystalizing this notion in a global document. The idea is that we will not build parallel services because they are exclusive, but try to include people on the move in mainstream activities.
- Save the Children and World Vision International reminded that child protection should remain an area of focus for the December 2021 high-level meeting. The Global Refugee Forum in 2019 marked a seminal moment for refugee protection, yet children remained largely unprotected with just 22 pledges dedicated to child protection.
- Islamic Relief Worldwide, in partnership with the Lutheran World Federation and other FBOs, is driving forward plans for a "welcoming the stranger" future conference from a GRF pledge. This will capture how local faith actors are implementing the GCR and explore what is needed to strengthen interfaith networks.
- Many questions and topics were also raised and time did not permit to address all, notably on the expected official launch of UNHCR's Framework for Climate Action and how UNHCR plans to engage politically on this topic in 2021; requested information related to the Refugee Convention 70th Anniversary and how to capitalize on this as a hook for protection advocacy; getting more information on how NGO partners can engage and support efforts to respond to refugees within the new UNHCR Regional Bureaus structure as well as specific questions related to the EU Pact, IDPs in Iraq, Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, and the U.S. resettlement programme.

Follow-up/Action points

To UNHCR and NGOs:

- Work together to reflect, in the coming months, on lessons learned from the pandemic and how to be better prepared in the future, looking at our respective roles and partnerships, including with local actors.
- Work together, including with FBOs, refugee and host communities and other agencies on gender issues, for example through the Islamic Relief Worldwide [Islamic Gender Justice Declaration](#).
- Work together to advocate more strongly for the inclusion of displaced and stateless people into services, including and beyond health services and national vaccination plans.
- Work together to campaign and advocate for a smarter approach to protection financing, improving the way we raise, mobilize resources for protection activities.

Background documents/reports/guidance/websites

- **UNHCR-NGOs monthly consultations website:** <https://www.unhcr.org/unhcr-ngo-2021-monthly-consultations.html>
- **UNHCR Protection Dashboard:** https://im.unhcr.org/covid19_platform/
- **WHO Facebook live on 24 February on COVID-19 and vulnerable populations** with Dr. Mike Ryan and Filippo Grandi: <https://www.facebook.com/WHO/live>
- **Norwegian Refugee Council, *Breaking the glass ceiling: A smarter approach to protection financing*, November 2020:** <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/breaking-the-glass-ceiling/breaking-the-glass-ceiling---a-smarter-approach-to-protection-financing-report.pdf>
- **Islamic Relief Worldwide, more information on the Islamic Gender Justice Declaration:** <https://www.islamic-relief.org/landmark-final-consultation-on-gender-justice-declaration/>