

NGO Statement on the Oral Update on the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges

This statement was drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and reflects a diversity of views.

Year after year, the number of people who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict, violence, disasters, and climate change reaches a new, unprecedented scale – surpassing the previously “unprecedented” levels of the year prior. The [2022 Global Humanitarian Overview](#) reported “record levels” of displacement, and in May, the number of forcibly displaced people globally [exceeded 100 million](#), with the escalation of conflict in Ukraine tipping us towards this milestone.

Yet this issue extends beyond a matter of sheer magnitude. As crises grow more protracted in nature, refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are displaced for longer – [10 years on average](#) – and many face a diminishing likelihood of [returning home](#). Forcibly displaced people may also be living in increasingly fragile conditions, with 85% of the world's refugees currently residing in [lower-income countries](#). It is therefore clear that, as the systems and institutions in countries hosting displaced people are increasingly stretched, and as climate change, pandemics, and other dynamics add complexity to traditional humanitarian response, development-oriented approaches must be considered from the early stages to achieve real and lasting solutions.

We welcome UNHCR's commitment to improving cooperation between humanitarian and development efforts in order to advance sustainable solutions for forcibly displaced persons, as reflected by the choice of this year's [theme for the High-Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges](#) and the emphasis on mainstreaming development engagement in [UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2022-2026](#). Broad commitments to development-oriented approaches in the [report of the UN Secretary General's high-level panel on internal displacement](#) and his [Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) are also encouraging.

Now we must look at how best to translate these commitments and policy priorities into concrete action, with clear and measurable targets. National and international NGOs, including refugee-led organisations, have a critical role to play in this endeavour. Working alongside UNHCR in many contexts of displacement, our collective experiences can not only shed light on past challenges and failures, but also draw lessons and identify opportunities. In this statement, we highlight four such challenges, all with inclusion at the centre:

- First, inclusion in societal structures
- Second, inclusion in decision-making
- And third, inclusion in the response

We also offer corresponding recommendations for how member states, UNHCR, and other aid actors can adopt more inclusive, development-oriented approaches in order to achieve stronger protection outcomes and better, more durable solutions for displaced people. To close, we offer a fourth challenge with a broader reflection on global allocation of resources, particularly in contexts where people have endured displacement for years or even decades.

Challenge 1: Inclusion of displaced people in societal structures

Forcibly displaced people often remain excluded from local systems and services, and are left unable to meet basic needs without exhausting their resources. Solutions require legal frameworks that form the basis for enabling inclusion, accompanied by policies aimed at removing [structural barriers](#), such as the right to work and access to health, education, legal documentation, and freedom of movement – as well as specific barriers linked to gender, age, and diversity.

In multiple refugee contexts, broad legislation has been developed to establish the legal basis for refugee rights and protection, along with specific legislation about full economic inclusion, such as the 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance, focused on refugees, returnees, and host communities in the “IGAD” region, and the 2016 Jordan Compact which granted access to work permits for Syrian refugees. Such legislation is critically necessary in *all* refugee-hosting contexts.

Implementation of said legal and policy frameworks also remains a challenge, evidenced by the fact that 55% of refugees live in countries where their [right to work is hindered](#) – despite this right being enshrined in international law for over 70 years through Article 26 of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Barriers to practical implementation are often interlinked and compounding, as are the potential benefits should these barriers be removed. For example, challenges in accessing documentation and acquiring a legal identity impact on obtaining a work permit, accessing finance, and overall freedom of movement. In turn, obtaining the right to legal employment offers pathways for accessing membership in trade cooperatives, social security schemes, and justice mechanisms – thus reducing the risks of exploitation that come through informal work.

In addition to economic inclusion, it is essential that displaced and stateless people also have equitable access to services, including education, healthcare but also security and protection against violence, neglect, exploitation, and abuse. Hosting states and the international community as a whole must strengthen and sufficiently resource national protection systems that include displaced populations. All states should provide unfettered access to secondary education on an equal basis that respects diverse needs, abilities and capacities, free from all forms of discrimination.

To promote inclusion of displaced populations in societal structures (including economic inclusion but also access to services and protection), we urge UNHCR to continue working with all hosting member states to develop the required legal and policy frameworks. Specifically, UNHCR could further highlight, valorise, and promote lessons and best practices from existing national policies that can form the foundation for integration and durable solutions everywhere.

Challenge 2: Inclusion of displaced people in decision making

Top-down decisions about how to prioritize and allocate resources within a crisis minimize local ownership and are unsustainable in the long term. The first step in addressing this challenge is for decision-makers to establish mechanisms that allow affected people to voice their needs and concerns, and in turn incorporate these voices into the design of durable solutions.

In practical terms, this often means collecting information directly from displaced people and their host communities, to obtain a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of their self-stated preferences and priorities that can then be used to design effective programming. In many protracted contexts – Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, just to cite a few examples – actors on the ground have collected a wealth of data over time for use in planning. This data sheds light on the needs, vulnerabilities, coping capacities, and intentions of crisis-affected people, as well as their perceptions on how the response has been conducted – if they have been sufficiently consulted by aid actors, and if they have been given opportunities to provide complaints and feedback.

Complaints and feedback mechanisms are also a critical tool for ensuring the inclusion of displaced people in how a response is conducted, not only during the initial emergency, but also during stabilisation, recovery, and rebuilding stages. Aid actors must therefore ensure these mechanisms are not only established, but that feedback

is systematically integrated into planning and action. This will not only improve support to displaced people, but also enhance accountability.

To promote inclusion in decision making, we urge UNHCR and other policy makers to systematically use information provided by displaced people and their host communities to design appropriate, practical, context-specific, and community-led solutions to displacement, be it local integration or creating the conditions for safe, dignified, and voluntary returns over time. We also encourage UNHCR to take a leading role in ensuring systematic uptake of feedback and complaints into strategic planning and decision-making.

Challenge 3: Inclusion of displaced people and host communities in aid programming

Displaced people and host communities continue to be perceived as ‘targets’ rather than key stakeholders of aid. This reduces not only accountability but also the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of aid action. A paradigm shift that puts displaced and host communities at the centre of coordinating and implementing interventions is needed – in turn breaking down aid siloes and replacing them with bottom-up, community-led approaches.

The structures and habits built around humanitarian responses can be enduring and resistant to change, long after the initial emergency phase of a crisis. Making coordination and decision-making processes inclusive to a wider set of actors from the start helps mitigate fragmented approaches, as for example, UNHCR has committed to doing with regards to cash coordination in refugee settings. Greater efforts should also be made to leverage local systems, structures, and capacities. Local actors have critical, specialised knowledge of their communities and are driving holistic and cost-effective responses at this territorial level. Humanitarian and development actors should therefore seek ways to plug their resources into these existing structures, in addition to making space for local actors in top-down coordination systems.

We, therefore, urge UNHCR to take a leading role in facilitating greater inclusion, ownership, and resourcing to local actors, including organisations led by forcibly displaced people. This could be achieved by shifting to a coordination and implementation model that is aligned to the [localisation agenda](#) and framed by a territorial rather than a sectoral lens. Through this approach, exogenous aid leverages local capacities to address multiple needs sustainably over time, rather than providing pre-packaged, sector-based solutions that have been developed externally.

To enable this, donors must also play a vital leadership role in fostering greater inclusion at response level. This includes breaking down “humanitarian” and “development” siloes within their own internal structures. As NGOs, we experience first-hand the inefficiencies of these siloes, as the internal humanitarian and development portfolios of donors are not always speaking to, or even aware of, each other. **We encourage donor agencies to develop flexible and integrated funding strategies that bridge this divide. Making institutional funding mechanisms more aligned and accessible to local actors, by reducing bureaucratic requirements and reorienting them around impact versus strictly compliance, is another concrete way donors can play a transformative role.**

Challenge 4: A reflection on global resource allocation

Even as we advocate for development-oriented solutions, we can’t forget about the core principles of the humanitarian community that underline how all responses should be conducted: to address needs wherever they are found, prioritise those who are most vulnerable, provide aid without discrimination, and to remain uninfluenced by political or economic agendas.

With this in mind, we welcome the incredible mobilisation of resources over the last six months to support people displaced by the conflict in Ukraine. We commend UNHCR, aid actors, donors, and host countries for their action in response to this rapidly evolving crisis. At the same time, we would also like to highlight the equally urgent need to sustain and increase aid in other contexts of sudden onset and protracted displacement. Increasingly, people are forcibly displaced by food insecurity in the world’s most fragile areas, as evidenced by projected famine in the horn

of Africa. Ongoing insecurity and conflict in a number of contexts, as well as climate-induced disasters like the recent floods in Pakistan, remain key drivers of displacement. All of these crises require additional funding and attention. We encourage the donor community to continue their support to people displaced and affected by the conflict in Ukraine. However, we urge that this generosity does not come at the expense of aid allocations to crisis-affected people in other parts of the world.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate our appreciation for UNHCR's continued service to the predicament of people forced to flee, and we renew our commitment to collaborative engagement.