



NGO ExCom Side Event - 14 October 2022

'What's stopping us?: Acting on the 'lessons learned' from system-wide shocks' Summary

Introduction

On 14 October, in the margins of [UNHCR 73rd Executive Committee Meeting](#), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) organized an NGO side event titled, '[What's stopping us?: Acting on the 'lessons learned' from system-wide shocks'](#)'.

The objectives of the side event were first, to call for system reforms and equitable financing in response to forced displacement, second, to scale-up support to address the food and protection crisis, and third, to reverse inequitable and discriminatory approaches to the international protection of refugees. The notion of equity was key in the approach to the side event. Despite constant calls for better responsibility-sharing to respond to the growing and massive scale of displacement and some strong support, there is still a growing gap between the needs identified and the response received.

In addition, in recent years, conflicts, climate change and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated the needs of people forcibly displaced. In recent months, the escalation of the war in Ukraine has had repercussions on rising inflation, food and energy insecurity, and supply-chain issues and weighed heavily upon displaced communities. NGOs convened the side event to discuss these pressing humanitarian issues, how they inter-relate, and what the lessons of the past tell us about how to respond moving forward. Rather than wait for the next 'unprecedented' disaster or tragic milestone, more equity in the humanitarian sector and system reform in favor of a more general paradigm shift to address forced displacement are needed. How many times we can say each new crisis is an opportunity to 'learn' and how many times can we try to cope in the same way with year-by-year record-setting displacement figures with huge funding gaps?

Overview of presentations

Ms. Kaela Glass, Head of Partnership Unit for [the Norwegian Refugee Council \(NRC\)](#) in Geneva highlighted the increase in humanitarian needs and the impacts of climate, conflict, COVID-19, and the cost of living. Citing a recent [OECD report](#), she emphasized that overall fragility worldwide has reached the highest level ever due to the above multidimensional crisis impacts.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the system observed some moves toward quality funding and enhanced flexibility, including from UNHCR and governments, that enabled a timelier response and allowed frontline responders to adjust existing programmes to address new needs. However, classic prioritisation dilemmas were also amplified by the sheer number of countries considered at risk. The criteria used to prioritize countries for resource allocations varied widely across health, humanitarian, and development financing stakeholders, and were not always transparently shared explained Ms. Glass.

One of the **lessons learned** from these impacts is that we need to build a more holistic financing ecosystem that can move money quickly and flexibly to where it is needed most—perhaps a new set of rules is needed that prioritizes the most vulnerable and revisits allocation criteria within other parts of the ecosystem, inclusive of International Financial Institutions and bilateral development donors.

On the Ukraine crisis, Ms. Glass noted the immense support generated, with the initial Ukraine Flash Appeal funded at nearly 90% within a few months. **What we re-learned** is that this **funding needs to reach frontline responders in a timely manner** to be most effective and to make available resources more immediately actionable. Similar to the COVID-19 response, simplified administrative procedures, harmonised due diligence processes, and fast-tracked applications worked. Yet, it also highlighted that **to respond with a global view to emerging needs more adequately and equitably**,



we must seriously examine the funding gap, the financial inequities of the global response, and the links to the broader aid financing ecosystem.

Some reflections also noted that humanitarian financing will not rise enough in the short term to cover the growth in needs. Therefore, we need to capitalize on the growing body of learning generated from financing mechanisms already operating in spaces of forced displacement showing that longer-term, more holistic investments are the only way to see longer-term impacts.

There are also significant resources flowing to humanitarian contexts outside of Humanitarian Response Plans/Refugee Response Plans. Higher-level dialogue is required with non-traditional actors to better align the resources already available to prioritised needs.

On the broader ecosystem and financing landscape, appeal requirements are at historically high levels. There are also grave inequities between contexts despite record-high levels of funding. For example, in contrast to the Ukraine Flash Appeal, Venezuela is funded at 16.5% and Myanmar at 21%. Additionally, [NRC's global neglected crisis report](#) revealed that 10 of the most neglected crises in 2021 were on the African continent.

Ms. Glass also emphasized that development and climate-related financing have an important role to play in building resilience to and enabling recovery from crisis and we need to apply these tools in protracted forced displacement settings in a way that complements humanitarian action. Moving beyond the argument of 'getting more humanitarian funding, or the idea of taking wider development assistance to pay for humanitarian needs, we do need to press for stronger alignment across these mechanisms to ensure comprehensive, durable responses.

Ms. Mary Njeri, Director, Global Hunger Response, World Vision International, demonstrated that the recent trends in global food insecurity including since the developments in Ukraine is negatively impacting forcibly displaced population.

Ms. Njeri indicated recent trends and data on the hunger crisis. She cited the latest [Hunger Hotspots Report](#), by FAO and WFP which warned that between October 2022 and January 2023 acute food insecurity is likely to deteriorate further in 19 countries or situations. Up to 205 million people are expected to face acute food insecurity and need urgent assistance in 45 countries. In [FAO's 'Crops Prospects and Food Situation'](#) from September 2022, FAO assesses that globally 45 countries, including 33 in Africa need external assistance for food.

The hunger crisis is being driven by conflict, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, high inflation, climate change and variations such as drought or floods, and soaring food, fertiliser, and fuel prices resulting from the Ukraine conflict. For displaced children and their families, who often rely on humanitarian aid, this is a catastrophe on top of a catastrophe as they are already amongst the most vulnerable and at-risk populations in the world, and they now face increased health, protection, and education challenges, as well as psychosocial distress.

Conflict has further caused the displacement of millions of vulnerable children and their families and made them extremely susceptible to hunger. Refugees and internally displaced populations are overrepresented in the informal labour sector, which has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic-related restrictions.

Ms. Njeri further explained that, this year, World Vision International published the report '[Hungry and unprotected children: The forgotten refugees](#)'. The findings and recommendations of the report are based on a survey conducted earlier in the year, that covered 466 forcibly displaced households in 11 countries. The outcomes show that the challenges have been multiplying and more children are becoming exposed to increasing risks, including in places like Afghanistan and Somalia. Hunger is not only a food crisis but also health, nutrition, education, protection, livelihoods, economic and social crisis.

Overall, the gap between needs and available resources to meet those needs is widening and **one of the most important lessons that we seem to keep failing to learn is that in the race against hunger, time is of the essence, to avoid deaths including for children. Anticipatory action, and early warning**



resulting in early action, is absolutely crucial to avoid catastrophic impacts. If funding is late, if access delays the provision of assistance, people die, or lives are changed forever, reminded Ms. Njeri. Shocks - especially those related to climate change - are becoming increasingly frequent and closer in time to each other, leaving people little time to recover from the previous crisis before the next one hits, and we should not be distracted from working on sustainability. It is crucial to not lose sight of what needs to be done and commit to keep investing in resilience and self-reliance.

There are several other areas where we should build on previous learning, recommended by Ms. Njeri, particularly **coordination amongst various initiatives to combat hunger, but also effective integrated programming, and bridges across the triple nexus.**

Lastly, the crisis in Ukraine demonstrated how various actors – from those displaced, to governments, the media, the private sector, regional organizations, and the general public, can come together and it affects the outcomes of a refugee crisis. We have seen that solidarity is possible and powerful.

Mr. Amer Alkayed, Chairperson of the [Global Refugee-led Network](#), a global network of refugee-led initiatives affirmed that there are still no formal mechanisms for refugees to be formally engaged in the UNHCR Executive Committee, although some Member States included refugees in their delegations. There was therefore [a statement from refugees](#) that could not be delivered during the 73rd Executive Committee.

Mr. Alkayed observed four main areas UNHCR and Executive Committee members should prioritize.

First, protection must apply indiscriminately, and the specific needs of vulnerable communities

needs to be addressed. For example, the Temporary Protection Directive to Ukrainians fleeing Russian insurgence was a promising step, but infrequently used, and it also highlighted great disparities in treatment towards different refugee groups pointed out by Mr. Alkayed.

Simultaneously, pushbacks occurred at southern European borders, and European policy and funding to offshoring refugees and migrants outside of the European Union continued. Additionally, protection must consider the vulnerable group's needs, including but not limited to women, children, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+. To do so, Mr. Alkayed advocated that Member States and international organizations ensure an Age, Gender, and Diversity mainstreaming approach to refugee inclusion, to integrate it into all actions around refugee policy through a diversity of voices at the decision-making table, but also tailoring policy with perspectives from refugee-led organizations working at the local level, faith-based and women-led organizations.

Mr. Alkayed advised that protection must also apply to vulnerable communities that are often overlooked, like journalists and people without legal identity and identification. This is an issue for Venezuelans and their children that are often stateless. One way to address it is to enable the identification of documents to be accessed digitally. The United Nations Task Force on Digital Identity must work with the forcibly displaced community to address this issue.

Second, the gaps between policies and practices should be identified and closed through

localization. For example, refugees' right to work is enshrined in international law and national policies in Uganda. Nevertheless, the refugee community in Uganda struggles to activate this right, due to the difficulty of obtaining a passport, and, by extension, a work permit as demonstrated by The Africa Network of Refugees. Similar examples are seen in Latin America and Europe. States and international organizations must actively seek out refugee and local organizations to learn how the implementation of policy is being hindered on the ground, and resolve this when it happens. These efforts should include creating a mandate to partner with local refugee organizations.

Third, durable solutions for protection issues should be found through inclusion. This includes not only refugee advocates who have already been active around these processes, but running information and capacity-building campaigns for all refugees from the conflict, especially those in rural areas and have less internet access. Furthermore, the necessity of refugee involvement should be codified in any peace agreement, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan.



Finally, as the backbone to all of these recommendations, refugees must be meaningfully included in all levels of decision-making about them including enabling more refugees and affected populations to consult with the Executive Committee, as observers. Over the next year, members of the Executive Committee must commit to ensuring, first, refugees are represented in decision-making forums at local, regional, and international levels; second, all refugees and affected communities can meaningfully participate in all stages of the refugee response; third, refugee-led organisations are sustainably funded with quality funding for institutional strengthening.

Open exchanges

After the perspectives and the recommendations provided by the three panelists, the floor was opened, and many interventions echoed the points made during the presentations on the need for more and equitable global solidarity. Several questions and comments were discussed around funding including its links with localization, flexible funding to refugee-led organisations and climate financing, refugees' representation, and meaningful representation.

On flexible funding to refugee-led organisations, there have been achievements made, especially when looking at how UNHCR is working with partners and reforming. The benefits and flexibilities coming to NGOs need to be cascaded. For instance, in Ukraine the level of risk-tolerance has allowed funding to be provided in a way that can reach communities, but not the same can be said for Somalia, because of counterterrorism measures and sanctions.

One Member State, using Afghanistan as an example, agreed that better humanitarian-development alignment is necessary, but noted the challenges of finding solutions while conflict is ongoing and asked about good practices in coordination to mitigate the substantial risks.

The Member State mentioned the calls for enhanced participation of refugee-led organisations and highlighted the International NGOs' (INGOs) specific role to play in that sense. Advocacy efforts are bearing fruit at the Executive Committee; however, the Member State reminded the group that ExCom is a platform for Member States, so a refugee seat is a good start, but advocacy directly with Member States is also an effective tool.

Several participants acknowledged that INGOs need to be part of the change through their responsibilities and accountabilities, looking at cascading overheads and strengthening localization.

On the role of INGOs, NRC agreed that we all have a responsibility to implement the commitments we have made, for example within fora such as the Grand Bargain, and that this change effort should be a shared responsibility across all stakeholders.

An INGO also shared its experience on **localization** and efforts to improve its own performance at programmatic level and its commitment to increase to 50% funding to local partners. At policy level, a central point of a [study last year](#) was to recognize the central role intermediaries, like UN agencies, funds and programmes, and International NGOs, play in cascading multi-year funding. However, it is not possible to cascade multi-year funding that is not received in the first place. One key question is how the funding gap is the result of a failure in the humanitarian system.

Climate financing commitments are not yet met, and a high percentage of these funds are currently in the form of loans, which is problematic for UN and INGO access, and nearly impossible for local and national actors to access due to rigorous and heavy accreditation processes.

NRC noted that their focus is not that this financing is accessed by humanitarian actors; rather it is to influence how and where this financing is used to both protect humanitarian budgets and to address root causes.



On refugee participation and meaningful engagement, first at the Executive Committee, the participation of refugees in Member States' delegations such as the U.S, Canada, and Germany was recognized and appreciated, but systemic participation is necessary, with independent refugee seats as observers. Certainly, there has been progress, but it is not enough, and challenges exist for refugee-led organisations in areas such as fundraising, not being able to operate, lack of identity document being an obstacle to participating, speaking out, but the fact that the Global Refugee Led-Network is present to the NGO ExCom side event, is an achievement. For instance, the Global Refugee Led-Network explained that they do not represent all refugees from all over the world but work for refugees from all over the world. For the refugee statement for this Executive Committee, the Network conducted consultations, and focused groups to ask for feedback and inputs, and at the end, the statement was amended and published.

Moreover, Oxfam mentioned that discussions on these important issues should be related to the broad commitments of meaningful refugee participation in decision-making processes. As for Oxfam, they value meaningful refugee participation and pledged to it at the first Global Refugee Forum.

From their side, World Vision International shared its experiences from Kenya and Uganda where efforts to involve refugees has paid off. The economic contribution of refugees was documented. When refugees are enabled to contribute to the development of the country, it demonstrates that it works. In Uganda, refugees can work and move. An outstanding issue, that continues to cause multiple problems is access to fuel energy, which is problematic for host communities and refugees themselves. The intentional inclusion of refugees at all levels including in the area of climate-induced displacement is key.

Conclusion

The NGO side event discussed key system-wide trends, highlighted the immense response to support people displaced in and from, and underlined the need to ensure the needs of other d forcibly displaced populations are supported to address food insecurity, malnutrition, and its impacts, particularly on children.

There are lessons we should have learned by now and systematic and system-wide changes are needed, showing that collective action around a rights-based approach and response and systematic change for refugees' participation and engagement in decision-making yields better protection outcomes for forcibly displaced population and their host communities.

The speakers mentioned equity and solidarity several times, relating to upcoming multi-stakeholder forums with opportunities to improve policies and frameworks such as the COP27, the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, and the preparations for the second Global Refugee Forum.