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UNHCR and NGOs further advocate for forcibly displaced people's rights and inclusion in State policies in Southern Africa

The third UNHCR-NGO Regional consultations in Southern Africa took place on 5 and 6 July, and deliberated, among other key issues, on how to better foster the inclusion of forcibly displaced people in national systems and services in the countries hosting them. The discussions also focused on the role of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Representatives of approximately 100 international and national refugee-led organizations, as well as of from the civil society, attended the virtual event co-convened by International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and UNHCR.

UNHCR has a long-standing commitment to work together with NGOs and civil society organizations and refugee-led organizations, recognizing their critical role in providing protection and finding solutions forcibly displaced people. Collaboration between agencies is fundamental especially as the number of forcibly displaced people increases daily worldwide. By the end 2022, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons across the world reached a staggering 108.4 million people. Today, over 1 in every 74 people have been displaced globally.

“The frontline work of national, international NGOs, refugee-led organizations and civil society is critical for our collective response to assist and protect people forced to flee” said Valentin Tapsoba, UNHCR Regional Director for Southern Africa, while addressing the NGO participants. “Your closeness to the people we serve offers unique insight into the needs, activities, and impact we have on the ground”.

The first session of the consultations tackled ways in enhancing sustainable solutions for the inclusion of all forcibly displaced persons in Southern Africa. Reservations to the 1951 Refugee Convention and national asylum legislations continue to deprive displaced populations of fundamental rights. Limitations to their freedom of movement in some hosting countries, administrative challenges to obtain legal documents and restrictions to education and employment often seriously hinder refugees’ ability to integrate successfully into society and to exercise their rights.

The second session explored the role of women and women’s organizations in positively impacting forced displacement situations through the prevention of violence and conflict, and peacebuilding. Displaced women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), survival sex, abuses, rapes, especially in regions ridden by conflicts such as eastern DRC or northern Mozambique.

“The aim of the consultation is to enable us to work better individually and jointly with and for the people we serve,” said Addis Tesfa, ICVA Regional Representative for East and Southern

Africa. “This is an excellent opportunity to discuss what goes well in partnership but also to raise concern and propose solutions.”

Several critical recommendations came out of the fruitful exchanges. UNHCR and partners must also strengthen social cohesion and promote community integration and self-reliance by fostering dialogue, cultural exchange, and initiatives that bring together forcibly displaced individuals and host communities. They also need to further advocate with States for access to quality education - especially to tertiary education - and health care services, including psychosocial support, for forcibly displaced people.

UNHCR and NGOs call on hosting countries to safeguard the rights of those who have been forcibly displaced, including access to legal assistance, documentation, asylum procedures, and livelihood activities to promote self-reliance.

Recommendations also highlight the necessity to strengthen women’s participation in decision-making, planning, and implementation when it comes to displacement and SGBV issues. UNHCR and NGOs wish to push donors, States, and local actors to invest in women-led initiatives, and better respond to the specific needs of women and girls to reduce protection risks and promote self-reliance.

Recommendations from the enriching deliberations will inform regional priorities and organizational strategies of UNHCR, NGOs and other civil society actors in the Southern Africa region. They will also be presented at the annual meeting of the UNHCR’s Executive Committee in October 2023, at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in December 2023, and will also inform and support the global NGO consultations to be held in Geneva in June 2024.

The first and second UNHCR-NGO Regional Consultations on Southern Africa were held in 2019 and 2021.

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*As of May 2023, the 16 countries covered by the UNHCR Regional Bureau hosted 8.3 million people forced to flee, including around 1 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 6.9 million conflict IDPs. In addition, southern Africa also hosts nearly 1 million people who were internally displaced by natural disasters and the effects of climate change.

*While there have been efforts to promote socio-economic inclusion of displaced people throughout the region - for example - through projects that foster self-reliance - more needs to be done. Of the 146 GRF pledges in the region, 62 address law and policy reform, inclusion in national development, local integration, social cohesion, access to education and jobs, and development of hosting areas. However, most of these are only at the early stages of implementation.