

High Commissioner's Dialogue

on Protection Challenges:

Protection and Resilience during Pandemics

Concept Note

Introduction

This note introduces the concept for the 2020 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. The Dialogue will focus on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the protection and resilience of refugees and people who are internally displaced or stateless and their host communities. Participants will reflect upon how the protection landscape has changed and how to address the pressing protection, resilience, and solutions questions that have emerged, building upon the international refugee protection regime and principles and arrangements set out in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). They will be asked to consider how to amplify innovative, promising practices to mitigate the protection, health, and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on persons of concern and their host communities, strengthen the current response, and prepare for future outbreaks.

Background

The measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic have significant consequences for the protection, health, socio-economic welfare, and resilience of forcibly displaced and stateless people and their host communities. They have also affected opportunities to identify solutions in some instances and delayed solutions in others. The actions that States and other actors take now could shape what international protection will look like in future pandemics. Efforts need to include a focus on strengthening protection foundations and building resilience, drawing upon the international refugee protection regime, including the 1951 Refugee Convention; the principles of protection, responsibility-sharing and inclusion in the GCR; and relevant pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019.

The global fight against the pandemic has posed challenges for the institution of **asylum**. In some cases, it triggered regressive measures, and borders were closed on public health grounds. In other instances, innovative approaches enabled the continued functioning of asylum systems, through, for example, the automatic or remote renewal of documentation for

asylum-seekers, remote registration and interviewing, accelerated processing of asylum cases, and health screenings and quarantines upon arrival. Such arrangements enable States to continue admitting those in need of international protection, while protecting the health of their nationals. The Asylum Capacity Support Group set out in the GCR could help to identify and support such adaptations.

The COVID-19 outbreak has also heightened the vulnerabilities of individuals with **specific protection needs**, such as individuals at increased risk of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), women and girls as well as men and boys in vulnerable situations, and people who are elderly, have disabilities, or are in detention. In the context of COVID-19, the United Nations Secretary-General affirmed that people and their rights need to be at the front and centre of the response, a principle that is central to the GCR. This requires assessing needs and developing responses through an age, gender, and diversity lens to ensure that no one is left behind. In recognition of this, some actors have taken measures such as releasing individuals from immigration detention and providing mobile access to support survivors of SGBV.

The pandemic is testing the **resilience** of refugees and their host communities and has far-reaching consequences. Access to health services and education are constrained. Many people are losing their livelihoods, resulting in increased poverty and leading some forcibly displaced people who were self-reliant to become dependent on aid. In line with the GCR principle of inclusion, many States and other actors have attempted to address the impact through inclusive approaches to building resilience, both in the emergency response and for the medium and longer term.

Some major refugee-hosting countries are including forcibly displaced people in national *emergency* responses to build their resilience, contain the spread of infection, respond to health crises, and mitigate the socio-economic impact on the wider community. Other countries and donors have supported these efforts with financial, material, and technical contributions in demonstration of solidarity and burden-sharing. In keeping with the multi-stakeholder and partnership approach set out in the GCR, key actors in the frontline response, such as cities, refugee-led organizations, faith actors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are taking innovative steps to enhance the capacity of communities to cope. For example, many are engaging refugees who are health professionals to support national healthcare systems and to create networks to assist the most vulnerable members of the community.

With a view to mitigating some of the *longer-term* socio-economic effects on resilience, development actors, the private sector, donors, and international organizations are working with host countries to determine how best to ensure that national systems can cope and prepare for the future. Some are considering immediate measures to address the impact on forcibly displaced and stateless people and their host communities, and others are considering how to support building inclusive national health, education, and social protection systems in preparation for future emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped people fleeing war and persecution. Ensuring protection by safeguarding access to asylum and strengthening and adapting asylum systems remains a critical and life-saving international responsibility, together with addressing specific protection needs and building resilience in the face of the pandemic. New and innovative approaches developed in the face of the current pandemic can inform thinking in terms of how to respond to, mitigate, and prepare for protection and solutions challenges both now and in the future.

Outcomes

The 2020 High Commissioner's Dialogue will aim to:

- **catalogue promising practices** and lessons learned in the pandemic to promote protection, access to services, and resilience, with positive outcomes for refugees and people who are internally displaced or stateless and their host communities;
- identify opportunities to broaden and **deepen the cooperation** between UNHCR, humanitarian and development actors, and host countries to strengthen asylum systems, address specific protection needs, and build resilience in the face of a pandemic; and
- develop **recommendations** to inform future capacity-building, policies, and guidelines.

A **summary** of key discussion takeaways related to good practices, lessons learned, multi-stakeholder engagement, and recommendations will be compiled in an online outcome document following the Dialogue.

Structure

The Dialogue will be structured around the following key challenges to the protection and solutions system that have emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Strengthening and adapting asylum systems

- safeguarding access to asylum
- protection instruments, frameworks, and arrangements (including the Asylum Capacity Support Group)
- innovative approaches and practices in asylum processing
- civil registration to prevent statelessness and facilitate access to essential services

Addressing specific protection needs

- addressing protection risks posed by the pandemic and its socio-economic impact
- addressing risks posed by stigma, discrimination, and xenophobia
- protection through inclusion in social safety nets and emergency planning
- emergency protection measures for specific groups (such as access to distance learning and accelerated education for children)
- dual protection challenges arising from climate-related disasters during a pandemic, where social distancing is critical

Building resilience

- support for measures by host countries towards inclusion in emergency planning and in national services and social protection policies in the medium and longer term
- innovative approaches by frontline responders, such as cities (building on the outcomes of the 2018 High Commissioner's Dialogue), refugees, refugee-led organizations, faith actors, NGOs, and civil society in the response
- approaches to including refugees and people who are internally displaced or stateless as contributors to preparedness planning and emergency responses

Cross-cutting considerations

Across each area (asylum, protection needs, and resilience), the following will be considered:

- **GCR principles and arrangements** that can support preparedness, mitigation, and response;
- an **age, gender and diversity** perspective, with an emphasis on women and girls, individuals at risk of SGBV, people with disabilities, children, and the elderly;
- **lessons learned** from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- links with **climate change and disaster displacement**, and increased vulnerabilities to pandemics for displaced people who are often in climate hotspots;
- **promising practices** and innovative approaches related to inclusion and response capacity;
- supporting and accelerating **relevant pledges made at the GRF** towards health; water sanitation and hygiene; education; energy; protection capacity; meeting basic needs; and livelihoods, and

- broadening and deepening **multi-stakeholder engagement** and a whole-of society approach through enhanced partnerships with refugee-led organizations, NGOs, host communities, development actors, the private sector, cities and local authorities, and faith actors, inter alia.

Programme

From **October to December**, UNHCR will host a **series of five virtual sessions** related to the theme of the Dialogue, drawing upon the above discussion topics, as follows:

Date	Topic
October 21 15:00-17:00 hrs (CEST) (virtual)	Opening
November 4 15:00-17:00 hrs (CET) (virtual)	Protection considerations (support for asylum systems, specific needs)
November 18 15:00-17:00 hrs (CET) (virtual)	Resilience and inclusion (emergency and longer-term approaches)
December 2 16:00-17:30 hrs (CET) (virtual)	Climate action (lessons learned from the pandemic for protection, mitigation, and adaptation)
December 9 14:00-16:00 hrs (CET)	Reflection on outcomes of the virtual dialogues and the way forward (Chaired by the High Commissioner for Refugees)

More information will be made available in due course, including on the [website](#) of the 2020 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

UNHCR

11 November 2020