

Background Note

Session on Localization of humanitarian action and engagement with communities in the COVID-19 context

Regional NGO Consultations for the EHAGL region, 28 June 2021

Community-based organizations (including RLOs) are often the first responders in humanitarian emergencies and can provide support and services in areas where UNHCR and partners have limited or no access. Given their ability to provide contextual knowledge, implement local-context specific programs and provide culturally-sensitive services based on their understanding of the challenges and needs of persons of concern, local NGOs play a key role in delivering protection and assistance on the ground. Working with and investing in these local actors as equal and strategic partners, is a priority for an effective response to any forced displacement situation. Empowerment of local NGOs as part of the localization agenda therefore is a crucial element for strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian responses.

The importance of engaging with local NGOs, refugees and other persons of concern, and host communities is reflected in [UNHCR's community-based protection approach](#), its Human Rights Engagement Strategy¹, participatory assessment tools and in its [Age, Gender and Diversity Policy](#). Through these policies UNHCR committed itself to put people of concern at the centre of all decisions that affect their lives and to ensure accountability to affected people.

The emergence of localization as a key commitment during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit presented a shift within the humanitarian coordination structure towards a response system that was “as local as possible and as international as necessary.”² UNHCR, like other UN agencies, donors and civil society actors, made the [commitment](#) at the World Humanitarian Summit to “empower national and local humanitarian action” and thus, to work towards greater localization. Under the Grand Bargain international organizations and key donors also committed themselves to increase the amount of funding that is channeled as directly as possible to national and local organizations, support multi-year investment in their capacities, remove barriers to equal partnerships, and promote local leadership and local voices in coordination and decision-making.³

Moreover, the [New York Declaration](#) and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) (GCR) embrace a “whole of society approach” and emphasize the importance of engaging directly with forcibly displaced persons themselves. The GCR acknowledges that: “Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist. Relevant actors will, wherever possible, continue to develop and support consultative processes that enable refugees and host community members to assist in designing appropriate, accessible and inclusive responses.”⁴

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/5fb681264.pdf>

² Agenda for Humanity, 2016, p.5.

³ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

⁴ GCR, para. 34).

The [UN Guidance Note](#) on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space issued in September 2020⁵ reflects the UN system-wide commitment that promoting and protecting civic space – the space that allows different voices to be heard and influence decisions – is central to all our work. Diversity, including gender diversity, is a critical component of participation, which may require special efforts to reach out to people and groups whose voices may otherwise not be heard, such as refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons.

In May 2021, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee issued [IASC Interim Guidance on Localization and the COVID-19 Response](#), which recognizes that “Localization is both a necessity and an opportunity for effectively meeting humanitarian needs and recovery efforts post COVID-19” and outlines how the international humanitarian community can adapt its delivery modalities in response to COVID-19 consistent with existing commitments on localization of aid, strengthening partnerships with local and national actors, and operating effectively in an environment affected by COVID-19. The IASC Guidance Note focuses on responsible partnership based on equality, mutual respect, mutual accountability, trust and understanding, and a sharing of capacities and information. Responsible partnership practices include local leadership and meaningful participation (inclusivity and diversity) in coordination mechanisms. Recognizing refugee-led community-based organizations as valued and equal partners is integral to protecting refugee rights. It also builds long term resilience in communities deeply affected by exclusion, trauma and uncertainty.

Despite the above-described developments and shared views amongst humanitarian stakeholders regarding the crucial importance of building partnerships with local NGOs and ensuring their meaningful participation at country, regional and global level, there remain significant challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed local NGOs at the frontline of the response, in ensuring continuity of service to persons of concern as well as in the COVID-19 response. For example, in camps and settlements where social distancing was almost impossible, through local organizations, refugees produced and distributed face masks while sharing information on COVID-19 prevention measures. The increased need for localization in the context of COVID-19 provides an opportunity to review and strengthen partnerships with local actors based on a spirit of equality, and this informs this year’s Regional NGO consultation forum.

While the principle of localization is widely endorsed, including with the Global Compact on Refugees and the Grand Bargain, there is still a need to increase meaningful participation of and partnerships with local actors to address humanitarian challenges faced by persons of concern. However, the modalities to develop localized responses are multifaceted and often slow to take root within our institutions. This goes well beyond directing additional resources to national NGOs to deliver services and encompasses the development of various forms of partnerships with local civil society actors and the strengthening of community-based approaches. Building on renewed dynamics emerging from the pandemic, consultations with NGOs can support a transformative outcome in the localization agenda.

⁵ The Guidance Note was prepared pursuant to the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, launched before the Human Rights Council in February 2020. [The Highest Aspiration A Call To Action For Human Right English.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

“Localization of humanitarian action and engagement with communities in the COVID-19 context” is the cross-cutting theme of the Regional NGO Consultations organized by UNHCR in collaboration with ICVA in all geographic regions in 2021, as well as the Global NGO Consultations in 2022. Therefore, the first day of the regional NGO consultation forum will be dedicated to discussions on the localization agenda, inviting local NGOs, including refugee-led organizations (RLOs), to share the experience of refugees and local communities towards preventing and responding to COVID-19, reflecting on challenges, opportunities and share recommendations to strengthen collaboration with UNHCR and other relevant partners.

Outline of the session

28 June 9:30 to 12:30 (with a 30-minutes break), moderated by Josephine Ngebeh, Senior Community-Based Protection Officer:

- Introduction on Localization by Stella Ogunlade, Chief of Civil Society Section, PCS
- Review progress, challenges and opportunities in the “localization agenda” within the region;
- Review and further develop the “inclusion agenda” within the region, with a focus on the socio-economic inclusion of refugees in response to the COVID-19 crisis;
- Analyze collective responses to the challenges and opportunities of engaging with refugee and host communities (innovative approaches, new synergies, ways of working more efficiently) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, identify critical gaps and define key steps for the way forward.
- The NGO consultations will be concluded with key recommendations from the substantive sessions and the adoption of a plan for joint strategic advocacy.

Guiding Questions

1. How have local NGOs been involved during the COVID-19 pandemic in EHAGL region? What structural or innovative changes did local NGOs undergo to respond to the pandemic and/or ensure continuity of service within the communities?
2. How can local NGOs contribute to the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and refugee returnees as part of the COVID-19 response?
3. What are the main challenges faced by community-based organizations and RLOs and how can these be addressed most effectively?
4. What needs to change to ensure local NGOs meaningfully engage in coordination mechanisms at local, national and international levels?
5. How can the partnerships between UNHCR and local NGOs/RLOs be further strengthened to enhance collective action and effectiveness of humanitarian responses? Opportunities for joint advocacy?

A separate technical session on UNHCR-NGO partnership dynamics, including partnership reforms and the implications of the new Results Based Management system will be held with implementing partners outside the framework of the NGO consultations (tentatively second half of July).