

Localization Session Background Note UNHCR WCA Regional NGO Consultations

“Localization of humanitarian action and engagement with communities in the COVID-19 context” is the cross-cutting theme for the 2021 Regional NGO Consultations being organized by UNHCR’s Regional Bureaux and will also be the theme for the 2022 Global NGO Consultations. UNHCR in West and Central Africa, in collaboration with ICVA, is organizing a session dedicated to this topic to develop recommendations on how to strengthen collaboration between UNHCR and relevant local and national actors (L/NAs), including POC-led organizations¹, and to take stock of lessons learned and best practices from L/NAs and community-led initiatives in the COVID-19 context that could be replicated or scaled-up.

L/NAs, including POC-led organizations, are often the first responders in humanitarian emergencies and play a key role in delivering protection and assistance on the ground. They provide invaluable understanding of local challenges and solutions, implement local-context specific programs and provide culturally sensitive services, including for persons of concern. They can easily mobilize local networks and may offer greater access to affected populations, with the potential to contribute to more effective, efficient, and accountable humanitarian action. Most work across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus on preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience building, and remain after international actors withdraw².

L/NAs have also been on the frontline of the COVID-19 response in West and Central Africa, especially in providing food and basic services under lockdown. In camps and settlements where physical distancing is extremely challenging, refugees produced and distributed face masks and soap while sharing information on COVID-19 prevention measures and dispelling rumors. Empowerment of L/NAs as part of the localization agenda and working with them as strategic partners on an equal basis is crucial to strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian responses. The need to strengthen their role and leadership has become even more apparent because of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader climate crises.

The importance of engaging with local NGOs, refugees and other persons of concern, and host communities has always been a UNHCR priority and is reflected in [UNHCR’s community-based protection approach](#), its Human Rights Engagement Strategy³, 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. UNHCR at all stages of its protection work implements a set of activities that helps put communities at the centre of every project, by integrating communication and participation throughout the programme cycle or operation.

UNHCRs’ commitment is to provide timely, relevant and actionable life-saving and life-enhancing information to communities. It is about using the most appropriate communication approaches to listen to communities’ needs, feedback and complaints, ensuring they can actively participate and guide UNHCR actions. CEA maximizes UNHCR’s relationship with the community to help them speak out about the issues

¹ Definition:

² ECOSOC Humanitarian Segment Side event on localization

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/5fb681264.pdf>

that affect them and influence decision and policy-makers to implement positive changes. In West and Central Africa, UNHCR is implementing a multiyear Initiative on **Connectivity 4 Communication with Communities, Community engagement & Consultative** processes. This initiative aims to analyze POCs' preferred communication channels, improve access to information for POCs and steer the implementation of a digital response adapted to each context.

Also, localization emerged as a key priority during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit with a shift in discourse to “commit to as local as possible, as international as necessary”⁴. UNHCR, like other UN agencies, donors and civil society actors, made the [commitment](#) at the World Humanitarian Summit to work towards “empowering national and local humanitarian action by expanding its investment in institutional capacity building of national partners, and to support effective emergency preparedness and response by engaging proactively with first responders at the local level as leaders and equal partners and fostering their participation in the coordination mechanisms”. UNHCR also committed to “minimize the links in the humanitarian funding chain and transfer at least 25 per cent of its programme expenditures to the national first responders by the end of 2020.” In addition to increasing direct funding to L/NAs, under the Grand Bargain international organizations, including UNHCR, and key donors committed themselves to support multi-year investment in L/NAs' capacities, remove barriers to equal partnership, and promote local leadership and local voices in coordination and decision-making.⁵

With regard to refugee contexts, 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 refugees 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.”⁶ The GCR recognizes the critical role of civil society organizations, including those that are led by refugees, women, youth or persons with disabilities, in assessing community strengths and needs, inclusive and accessible planning and programme implementation, and capacity development, as applicable.

The [UN Guidance Note](#) on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space issued in September 2020⁷ delves into 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, 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 2020, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee issued the [IASC Interim Guidance on Localization and the COVID-19 Response](#), which recognizes that “localisation 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

⁴ Agenda for Humanity, 2016, p.9. <https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/AgendaforHumanity.pdf>

⁵ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

⁶ GCR, para. 34).

⁷ 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 \(un.org\)](#)

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. In June 2021, the [IASC Guidance on Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms](#) was issued to support efforts to strengthen the meaningful participation, representation, and leadership of local and national humanitarian actors (L/NAs) within IASC humanitarian coordination structures. It provides recommendations on how L/NAs can be an integral part of humanitarian coordination structures.

Despite the above-mentioned initiatives and the progress that has been made, much work around financing, capacity strengthening, coordination and partnership needs to be done to truly shift the balance to more locally-led humanitarian action as and where appropriate. In West and Central Africa there is also a gap in knowledge that must be addressed in terms of which L/NAs are working with forcibly displaced populations and where, and the capacity support that is required.

This session will allow us to reflect on how the localization agenda has evolved in WCA (challenges and opportunities), explore good practices of local and national actors (L/NAs), including refugee-led organizations, contributing to COVID-19 prevention measures and community-based protection initiatives, and identify steps and recommendations to strengthen collaboration between UNHCR and L/NAs in view of protecting and finding solutions for the forcibly displaced.

(The localization session is following on from a Partnership event, which also touches on some of the major issues around flexibility measures, simplification and financing as well as the implications of the new Results Based Management system)