

UNHCR Asia-Pacific Annual Consultations with NGOs 2021
“Socio-economic inclusion of refugees in the COVID context”

Concept Note

Background

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has infected over 147 million people worldwide and claimed the lives of over 3.1 million. The spread of COVID-19 continues to have a devastated impact in many countries’ health and economic systems and disrupted more than a billion children’s education. This has been particularly true for developing countries, which host 85 per cent of the world’s refugee population. Providing forcibly displaced people with adequate healthcare and maintaining their social and economic well-being presents challenges for host countries and the international community. By the middle of 2020, Asia and the Pacific had 4.2 million refugees, 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and over 200,000 asylum-seekers and returnees, as well as 2.3 million stateless people.

In Asia and the Pacific, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need to ensure that forcibly displaced populations are included in national systems. Most countries quickly included refugees and asylum-seekers in their public health responses. UNHCR and civil society also advocated inclusion of displaced people in national vaccination plans. Despite these efforts, the pandemic exacerbated the exclusion refugees already faced in other ways, including education, livelihoods and social safety nets.

The Secretary-General’s call for shared responsibility and global solidarity in response to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 resonates with the principle of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) principles of burden- and responsibility-sharing. The global challenges posed by the pandemic require international cooperation through concrete, practical immediate and future measures to support low- and middle-income host countries whose health and social protection systems are already strained.

UNHCR’s Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), is organizing the 2021 Regional Consultations with NGOs. After consultations with partners, the theme selected for this regional consultation will be: “Socio-economic inclusion of refugees in the COVID context”. The global theme for the 2022 Annual Consultations with NGOs will be “Localization”, which will be included in the regional consultations as a stand-alone session.

Objectives and outcomes

Building on the above background and inspired by the key objectives of the GCR and its related commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), the Annual Consultations will pursue the following objectives:

- Reinforce a trust-centred partnership and develop joint actions to address challenges and seize opportunities to promote protection and solutions for those forcibly displaced.

- Develop recommendations to inform future collaboration between UNHCR and NGOs on socio-economic inclusion efforts, including, where possible, on advocacy, operations building on positive examples and best practices.
- Feed into the 2022 Global Annual UNHCR Consultations with NGOs and its theme “Localization” with the outcomes of the debate in Asia-Pacific.

Preliminary Agenda

Monday, 21 June 2021

14:00-14:30 Opening remarks by the Deputy Director and the co-organizers

14:30-15:00 Conversation with the Director on the socio-economic inclusion of refugees in the COVID context

15:00-16:30 Socio-economic inclusion of refugees in the COVID context: access to education, health and socio-economic opportunities for refugees

The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic are dire. The World Bank has estimated COVID-19 will cause the fourth-worst global recession in the past 150 years¹ and the worst downturn since the Great Depression.² The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that nearly half of the global workforce is at risk of losing their livelihoods.³ COVID-19 led to widespread loss of livelihoods among refugee populations, which affected their self-reliance and increased protection concerns. Without jobs and access to income, many refugees suffer from increased food insecurity, inability to pay rent, and debt arising from vital health care costs. The number of SGBV cases increased significantly. Many refugee children lost their opportunity to access formal or informal education. Many refugees have also been targets of xenophobia, discrimination, stigma, and abuse. However, inclusion of refugees in responses to the pandemic is a positive example. As many countries focus on socio-economic recovery, there are opportunities to advocate and work with partners to ensure an inclusive approach.

Against this backdrop, the session will discuss the collective efforts of the international community and host countries in the Asia and Pacific region to ensure the inclusion of refugees in national systems and responses. It will shed light on what has been done so far and what is needed to achieve inclusion in terms of advocacy with governments and tailored assistance programmes for both refugees and host countries. It will highlight the role of development actors to achieve socio-economic inclusion.

¹ Richard Partington, “World Bank warns Covid-19 pandemic risks dramatic rise in poverty,” The Guardian, June 8, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/08/world-bank-warns-covid-19-pandemic-risks-dramatic-rise-in-poverty>.

² “World Economic Outlook: A Crisis like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery.” International Monetary Fund, June, 2020.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>, and Larry Elliot, “‘Great Lockdown’ to rival Great Depression with 2% hit to global economy, says IMF,” The Guardian, April 14, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/14/great-lockdown-coronavirus-to-rival-great-depression-with-3-hit-to-global-economy-says-imf>

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), “ILO: As job losses escalate, nearly half of global workforce at risk of losing livelihoods,” April 29, 2020. https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang-en/index.htm

Wednesday, 23 June 2021

14:30-16:00 Opportunities and challenges for localization of humanitarian action and engagement with communities

Local actors are critical in every humanitarian operation and more vital in the current context shaped by restrictions on travel and movement because of COVID-19. Local actors include local NGOs, refugees and internally displaced communities, local government, women’s networks, youth organizations, indigenous groups, faith-based organizations, human rights organizations, trade unions, and other specific-interest groups which are needed to ensure a complete response – a response that reaches the most vulnerable people and considers the gender impact of emergencies. Further international emergency travel and movement restrictions are impeding the international community to surge international staff and supplies at the usual scale and speed to provide expertise, capacity and support to staff and partners that are already working on the ground. While local actors are also affected by preventative measures, they retain a comparatively greater possibility to maintain and potentially scale up operations, provided they are given the means to do so. Therefore, localization is both a necessity and an opportunity for effectively meeting humanitarian needs, and recovery efforts post COVID-19.⁴

Friday, 25 June 2021

14:30-16:00 Climate change and UNHCR Strategic Framework for Climate Action

“If we fail to meet the challenge, all our other challenges will just become greater and threaten to swallow us. Climate change is, quite simply, an existential threat for most life on the planet – including, and especially, the life of humankind. That is why we must use all our resources to build a sense of urgency.”⁵

The impacts of climate change are numerous. Limited natural resources, such as drinking water, are likely to become even scarcer in many parts of the world. Crops and livestock struggle to survive in climate change ‘hotspots’ where conditions become too hot and dry or too cold and wet, threatening livelihoods and exacerbating food insecurity.

People are trying to adapt to the changing environment, including refugees, internally displaced people and stateless persons many of whom live in these climate ‘hotspots’ where they typically lack the resources to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment. Many are also being forcibly displaced from their homes by climate change and disasters or are relocating to survive. New displacement patterns and competition over depleted natural resources can spark conflict between communities or compound pre-existing vulnerabilities.

“Forced displacement across borders can stem from the interaction between climate change and disasters with conflict and violence, or it can arise from natural or human-made disasters alone. Either situation

⁴ https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Interim%20Guidance%20on%20Localisation%20and%20the%20COVID-19%20Response_0.pdf

⁵ António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, Remarks at Austrian World Summit in Vienna 15 May 2018. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-05-15/remarks-austrian-world-summit>

can trigger international protection needs,” said Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHCR Strategic Framework for Climate Action sets out the parameters for UNHCR’s response to the growing global climate emergency to be implemented through context-specific action-driven plans developed at regional level in close collaboration with country operations, and in close partnership with affected communities, host governments, UN Country Teams, and other stakeholders. The framework supports international commitments related to climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation under the GCR, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of disasters and climate change, and aligns with several SDG goals.⁶ The session will raise awareness of the UNHCR Framework for Climate Action. It will discuss how to operationalize the framework and identify areas of collaboration with NGOs in Asia-Pacific.

Monday, 28 June 2021

14:30-16:00 Regional review and stocktaking on the Global Refugee Forum

The GCR and GRF have been instrumental in promoting collaboration and mobilizing engagement of new stakeholders in refugee response. A wide range of actors participated in the 2019 GRF, resulting in a broad range of diverse commitments to further realization of GCR objectives. This session will aim to take stock of where we stand in the region in terms of progress, key areas not yet covered by current pledges where additional support is needed, and with a focus on putting the “whole of society” approach into practice and particular emphasis on the important role of civil society and NGOs.

Tuesday, 29 June 2021

14:30-16:00 UNHCR partnership session (Side Event)

The session will provide an opportunity to assess progress made in 2020 to improve the framework for working with funded partnerships; and discuss on-going / planned reforms to further improve UNHCR’s framework. The session will cover the reform of the selection/retention of partners, improvements to the UN Partner Portal that should improve efficiency of registration, simplification of budgeting and financial aspects of partnership agreements, simplification of reporting requirements, and ongoing work to systematize current processes. The meeting will also examine ongoing efforts to ensure greater accessibility to UNHCR partnership opportunities for small, refugee-led organizations.

Wednesday, 30 June 2021

14:30-16:00 How can NGOs and UNHCR cooperate to improve stateless persons’ access to health, education, and livelihoods?

Statelessness is caused by gaps in nationality laws, discrimination, State succession, and deliberate policies of denial or deprivation of nationality. Lack of identity documents and/or legal status affects

⁶ https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/EN_Protection_Agenda_Volume_I_-low_res.pdf



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people who have lived in the same place for generations, as well as refugees and migrants. Statelessness remains a largely hidden phenomenon in our region, due to the incompleteness of data. When a person lacks a nationality, they are deprived of the rights and duties attached to belonging to a State, which leads to violations of other human rights, including the right to healthcare, education, and livelihood. Cooperation between NGOs and UNHCR towards access to identity documents as well as identifying short and medium measures to ensure access to healthcare, education and livelihood for stateless people during and beyond the COVID pandemic is of urgency in the Asia Pacific given the high number of people affected here. Identifying advocacy opportunities, common challenges, positive examples and best practices can build a base of a mutual strategy towards ensuring socio-economic rights for stateless people.

16:00-17:00 Closing remarks by the Director and closing remarks from the co-organizers