**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**
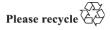
**Standing Committee**
**69th meeting**

# Community-based protection and accountability to affected populations

*Summary*

The New York Declaration recognizes the importance of humanitarian responses that are age- and gender-sensitive, with a particular emphasis on the protection of persons with specific needs, and that are, from the outset, designed with host countries and communities in mind. The complex nature, scale and longevity of forced displacement today requires coordinated, targeted efforts to ensure that humanitarian responses are inclusive of all groups and communities. A community-based protection approach is thus critical, building upon the resources and capacities of displaced and host communities and empowering them to be more resilient. This paper provides an update on UNHCR's efforts to strengthen community-based protection and ensure accountability towards persons of concern, including areas of progress and main challenges.

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# I. Introduction

1.      UNHCR's strategic directions 2017-2021[1] emphasize that providing protection to a growing number of forcibly displaced persons across the world, in an effective and accountable manner, can only be achieved by understanding their needs, tapping into their capacities and pursuing solutions devised jointly with them. This is also reflected in the New York Declaration and the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF), which calls for a people-centred approach with a particular emphasis on the protection and empowerment of women and children and persons with specific needs.

2.      Underpinning the community-based approach to protection is UNHCR's age, gender and diversity (AGD) policy, according to which all persons of concern, regardless of their age, their gender or specific identity group, are not just consulted, but meaningfully engaged in all decisions and actions that affect their lives. This approach supports respect for diversity, promotes peaceful coexistence and is essential to an effective humanitarian response. Removing barriers to inclusion in national systems also has positive, sustainable outcomes for both refugee and host communities alike, including economically and socially. Investing in community-based protection also helps build social cohesion among communities.

3.      This paper sets out areas of progress and challenges that UNHCR faces in the application of community-based protection in varied and complex contexts of forced displacement. It also provides examples of how inclusive community-based programming has the potential to foster stability and build social cohesion within and between the displaced and host communities.

# II. Capacity-building

4.      Treating persons of concern as equal partners, and placing them at the centre of decision-making, requires UNHCR and partner staff to be equipped with the necessary tools and skills to operationalize a community-based approach to protection. When staff lack proper training and knowledge, protection problems can be exacerbated. This can impede the resilience and self-reliance of displaced communities, leading to long-term aid dependency and diminishing confidence and trust in UNHCR and its partners. It can also damage community structures and create or aggravate tensions, including with host communities, through the marginalization of certain groups and individuals.

5.      UNHCR has, therefore, undertaken a number of initiatives to mainstream community-based and participatory approaches across programming sectors and to equip staff with the knowledge, skills and resources to operationalize community-based protection. In 2016, UNHCR developed and piloted its first comprehensive community-based protection learning programme, with 28 national and international staff members from 13 countries participating. UNHCR also launched a "programming for protection" learning programme, which targets operations as a whole rather than individuals. Both programmes emphasize the importance of multi-functional teams to improve programming and to strengthen accountability to persons of concern. Accountability is strengthened by building relationships within communities, maintaining effective feedback mechanisms and ensuring that the priorities and views of the communities concerned directly inform planning and programming. These pilot initiatives were well-received by field teams and are being included in UNHCR's catalogue of learning programmes.

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[1]   Available from http://www.unhcr.org/5894558d4.pdf.

6.      Additional efforts to advance the operationalization of community-based protection include the publication of community-based protection briefs that describe successful field practices, as well as the launch of a publicly-accessible online community of practice to facilitate peer learning and the exchange of experience between humanitarian and protection actors globally.   UNHCR has also developed guidance on protection and cash-based interventions (CBIs)[2], which the Office is committed to scaling up in order to strengthen choice and the self-reliance of persons of concern.  This guidance has been integrated into the CBI learning programme and related tools.  CBI specialists in a number of operations and at Headquarters have been trained to integrate protection and its underpinning age, gender and diversity, and participatory approaches into their work.  These measures related to CBIs are another means of operationalizing community-based protection and accountability to persons of concern.

# III.   Areas of progress and main challenges

## A.   Protection of persons at heightened risk

7.      The CRRF calls for the establishment of supportive systems and networks that involve refugees and host communities and are age- and gender-sensitive, with a particular emphasis on targeted assistance and protection arrangements for persons with specific needs.  This could include women and children at risk, unaccompanied and separated children, victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), people with disabilities and other diverse groups. UNHCR holds structured dialogues with all groups in a community in order to identify their concerns, risks and needs, skills and capacities, and proposed solutions.  These participatory assessments are critical to promoting inclusive, rights-based protection and solutions programming that responds to the priorities of displaced communities and benefits all individuals equally.

8.      UNHCR's experience has shown the value of including refugees in national systems and promoting equality and non-discriminatory access to rights and services, as well as opportunities, for all persons, irrespective of age, gender or other diversity factors.  This mitigates the marginalization and isolation that can lead to exploitation and abuse and that sow the seeds of instability.  However, inclusion, equality and non-discrimination remain challenges, and UNHCR has strengthened its attention in this regard to groups at heightened risk, such as children; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons; and persons with disabilities.

9.      Approximately half of the world's refugees are children, many of whom were forced to flee their homes without their parents or were separated during flight and face heightened protection risks[3].   Some 75,000 unaccompanied and separated children lodged asylum applications in 70 countries in 2016.  Dedicated programming for children and youth and targeted efforts to support their learning and development are critical to an effective protection and solutions response.  Children who do not attend school are more exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse, and less able to take advantage of opportunities for solutions.  Through the "Educate A Child" programme, UNHCR was able to enrol nearly 252,000 children in 12 countries (14 operations) in 2016.[4] More broadly, the Office increased enrolment rates of displaced primary children in 61 countries, and specific measures were undertaken to increase school attendance rates by girls, increase the number of female

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[2]   More information on UNHCR's work on CBIs may be found in EC/68/SC/CRP.16.

[3]   The background paper prepared by UNHCR for the High Commissioner's 2016 Dialogue on Protection Challenges discusses the risks faced by children who move across international borders in search of protection and some of the measures to address them; see http://www.unhcr.org/583d8e597.

[4]   Further information on UNHCR's achievements on education may be found in EC/68/SC/CRP.20.

teachers and prevent and respond to SGBV through education programming. UNHCR also promotes equitable access for young women to tertiary education. In 2016, the DAFI scholarship programme (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) achieved a female participation rate of 40 per cent.

10. Efforts to support the resilience of adolescents and youth and engage them in the protection of their communities were expanded in 2016. In particular, the global refugee youth consultations provided the space and opportunity for refugee and host country youth to develop solutions to the challenges that their communities face. Youth in eight countries developed and initiated action plans to address their protection risks, including SGBV, and to promote peaceful coexistence. As effective advocates for change and development, a number of youth representatives participated in UNHCR's consultations with non-governmental organizations, as well as in the 2016 High Commissioners Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

11. Forcibly displaced LGBTI persons constitute another group at heightened risk, facing daily violence, discrimination and persecution in many parts of the world, particularly during displacement. It is essential that UNHCR's programmes be inclusive and that staff have the capacity to respond to their specific risks. UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have developed a comprehensive training programme on the protection of forcibly displaced LGBTI persons. The training has helped strengthen outreach to LGBTI people and has established safe spaces where these individuals can express their concerns confidentially, without fear of judgment or reprisal.

12. While the World Health Organization estimates that persons with disabilities make up an estimated 15 per cent of the general population, they are under-identified in forced displacement settings and, thus, their specific needs are often unmet. Thus, they often face barriers to accessing assistance and protection, and their capacities are often untapped. Although recognizing that persons with disabilities may face particular protection risks, UNHCR is moving away from an approach that addresses their specific needs in isolation. Instead, UNHCR is promoting disability inclusion as a core part of the response. This requires investment in awareness-raising and capacity-building in order to achieve disability inclusion at the institutional level. At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, UNHCR endorsed the "Charter on inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action" and helped steer multi-stakeholder efforts to ensure persons with disabilities were included in the proceedings and outcomes more broadly.

13. UNHCR's efforts on behalf of persons with disabilities illustrate how engaging with people from both displaced and host communities who face similar challenges, stigma and discrimination, can serve as a bridge between the two communities and help build cohesion and support networks. In Ukraine, for example, UNHCR has partnered with the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities on the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Local organizations are also being supported to implement community-based interventions that bring together persons with disabilities from both host and displaced populations, with the aim of strengthening social networks. The Office hopes to expand such approaches in other operations and with other groups.

## B. Accountability to affected populations

14. UNHCR is committed to advancing accountability to affected populations (AAP), by supporting the achievement of quality and effective protection and assistance for all persons of concern, regardless of age, gender and diversity. These efforts and community-based protection programming are mutually reinforcing and essential for the accurate diagnosis of protection risks that inform effective programming. In 2016, UNHCR sought to bring coherence to existing accountability-related initiatives and policies, with the aim of achieving

consistent implementation of our AAP commitments. This work will be further advanced with the issuance of a new policy on accountability to affected populations. The policy, which is expected to be published shortly, outlines UNHCR's commitments.

15.     Implementation of the accountability policy includes: a) soliciting feedback from persons of concern to inform programming, b) responding to feedback from persons of concern, and c) documenting and reporting on accountability efforts. To operationalize the policy, UNHCR is using innovative means of communicating with persons of concern in order to support immediate responses to accountability failures, such as gaps in protection that can lead to sexual exploitation and abuse. A focus for 2017 is to replicate successful feedback models, such as those in Lebanon, which employ multiple communication channels, including the use of text messaging, social media, counselling and information desks, community centers and outreach volunteers. Similar multi-pronged feedback mechanisms are in place elsewhere, including in Costa Rica and Kenya.

## C.   Gender equality

16.     Community-based protection approaches include initiatives to ensure gender equality early on in a response. Promoting gender equality is critical to UNHCR's protection and solutions programming. The application of a community-based approach enables UNHCR to have an informed understanding of the impact of gender inequality on women and girls of concern and to better meet their needs and priorities. It also contributes to the design and delivery of responses aimed at providing equitable access and equal opportunities for women and girls, with positive consequences for men and boys as well. UNHCR is finalizing its "Revised commitments to women and girls (2017-2021)", which support gender equality in humanitarian contexts. The revised commitments are more comprehensive in scope and go beyond refugee contexts to include IDP, stateless and returnee women and girls. They also include commitments in the vital areas of health, education, cash-based interventions and access to justice. Operational guidance on gender equality is also being developed to support country operations in putting the revised commitments into practice.

17.     UNHCR is strengthening the integration of gender equality in its programming through capacity-building efforts, including the development of an e-learning course for all staff and blended learning programmes for gender focal points. A review of gender equality in UNHCR operations, conducted in 2016, identified the need to document and share good practices on gender equality. Thus, UNHCR has developed best practices on a number of initiatives undertaken in the Syria refugee host countries, such as a refugee women's network established in Turkey and an emergency shelter for women and girls in Lebanon. Gender equality practices in Asia will be documented later this year.

## D.   Working in insecure environments

18.     UNHCR regularly operates in insecure situations where the protection needs are often the greatest. This is particularly the case in situations of internal displacement which are close to active conflict, such as in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. In such environments, humanitarian access is often limited, hindering UNHCR's ability to monitor the situation and engage directly with persons of concern, which can lead to increased protection risks.

19.     The resilience of people trapped in active conflict areas is particularly affected in insecure environments. This requires humanitarian responses that are adaptive and innovative approaches that allow the protection and assistance needs of persons of concern to be identified, even when direct access is not possible. Building on the capacities and resources of a community and helping its members re-establish structures and support networks facilitate protection in these situations. The Office is working to ensure that key

field staff are trained in community-based protection and able to work in partnership with displaced people trapped in volatile situations. Efforts are ongoing to develop new ways of communicating with persons of concern and identifying and providing support remotely, encouraging local actors to use participatory approaches to ensure that the priorities of those at risk inform the emergency response.

20.     In the Syrian Arab Republic, for example, UNHCR trains local partners and community outreach volunteers on participatory methods and on the proper identification and referral of persons at risk in locations where UNHCR and partners have limited access. Community volunteers and local organizations are especially well placed to have an understanding of the protection and assistance needs of the affected population. Those needs and priorities are reported back to UNHCR and its partners to inform the emergency response. The volunteers also play a key role in information dissemination within the community, informing affected populations about the availability of services and support for persons with specific needs, and highlighting programmatic gaps.

## E.     Community-based protection in urban settings

21.     Approximately 6 out of 10 refugees falling under UNHCR's mandate live in urban areas, which presents particular challenges that demand a flexible humanitarian response. While there is no global data on the number of IDPs living in urban settings, it is believed that the majority of IDPs around the world flee towards urban areas. Refugees and IDPs may be more susceptible to exploitation and other protection risks that are specific to urban environments, and the support that UNHCR is able to bring to these situations is dependent on strong cooperation with national and local governments. The presence of refugees and IDPs in urban areas, where they need access to public services, can also put pressure on those services which are often already under strain. Furthermore, the frequent interaction of displaced and host communities in urban settings can cause tensions, particularly when there is competition over limited resources. Yet, when received and supported properly, with access to livelihoods, education, healthcare and other services, refugees and IDPs can contribute positively to their host communities, bolstering economies. For these reasons it is also crucial that UNHCR's community-based approach is adapted to and extends to host communities in urban settings, as reflected in the CRRF.

22.     In order to capitalize on the strengths of displaced communities and expand UNHCR's reach and capacity in urban areas, the Office often relies on outreach volunteer programmes. These programmes empower persons of concern to respond to protection problems in their communities and to help identify risks and individuals with specific needs. Volunteer networks are an efficient mechanism for two-way communication between UNHCR and the wider displaced and host communities, supporting increased accountability. In Lebanon, UNHCR recruited and trained a cadre of specialized child protection outreach volunteers who serve as a link between refugee families and communities on the one hand and UNHCR and its partners on the other. Also effective in urban settings are community centres, often managed by refugees, which provide a forum for displaced and host populations to participate in decision-making. In Jordan, community centres have been instrumental in ensuring that winterization items reach the families that are most at risk. The centres are accessible to the host community and help promote peaceful coexistence.

23.     Effective community-based protection work, which advances accountability to affected populations, can pay significant dividends to persons of concern and the countries that host them. However, success requires dedicated time and resources and a commitment to putting people at the centre of humanitarian response.

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