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69th meeting of the Standing Committee

Agenda item: Community-based protection and accountability to affected populations

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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, and Partners,

It is my pleasure to introduce the Conference Room Paper on community-based protection and accountability to affected populations, which focuses us on the people that UNHCR serves: those whose lives have been torn apart by conflict and displacement. They deserve to be central to our discussions, and more importantly, central to our actions.

Underpinning UNHCR's Strategic Directions is the recognition that only by building partnerships with persons of concern can we safeguard their rights and promote their dignity. Persons of concern are entitled to equal and active participation in decisions that affect their lives, regardless of their age, gender or diversity characteristics.

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Participation is also essential for effective protection, assistance and solutions programmes which support individuals to rebuild their lives and contribute to the safety and prosperity of their families, communities and societies.

To achieve this we must build a foundation of trust, collaboration and mutual respect, which is characteristic of true partnership, with persons of concern. Thus our colleagues around the world work directly with displaced and host communities and civil society, in a spirit of inclusion and participation, to build connections and counter exclusion and marginalization, which as we see in disturbing trends, can fuel racism, xenophobia and discrimination, and sows the seeds of instability.

The Conference Room Paper before you sets out some of the efforts UNHCR has made to promote partnership with asylum seekers, refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons and to embed community-based and participatory approaches across all operational areas, by equipping staff with the relevant knowledge, skills and practical tools

they need. Key among those are efforts taken to improve UNHCR's accountability to persons of concern, which is central to our protection mandate. Accountability starts with programmes that are built around the priorities, needs, capacities and voices of persons of concern. As the paper outlines, advances in community-based protection and age, gender and diversity approaches are essential means of meeting our accountability commitments. UNHCR's achievements in this regard will be consolidated with the issuance of a new policy on accountability to affected populations, which we expect to issue shortly.

Accountability and community-based protection take on even greater importance in urban contexts, which have become the norm. Today, six out ten of the world's 65.6 million forcibly displaced persons live in urban areas, benefitting from the hospitality and generosity of their host communities. However urban areas also present specific protection challenges, and persons of concern often face exploitation and abuse, and are forced to resort to high risk behavior, as a result of protection and assistance gaps combined with increased pressure on

services. In many urban settings, these dynamics can lead to tension between displaced and host communities. In these contexts, with multiple risks facing dispersed populations, community-based protection work that promotes empowered and inclusive communities is even more critical. Refugees are serving as key agents of community-based protection in a growing number of UNHCR operations in urban areas. To name but one example, in Lebanon, refugee outreach volunteers serve as a direct link between refugee families and communities on the one hand and UNHCR and its partners on the other.

These approaches take on even greater urgency in insecure contexts, where our proximity with communities to assist and monitor protection is limited. This is particularly the case in internal displacement situations where persons of concern are stranded in areas of active conflict. In these situations the community members themselves play a pivotal role in facilitating protection. In Syria, for example, UNHCR-trained community volunteers play a critical role in information dissemination and referral to services, particularly for

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persons with specific needs. They also play an accountability role, pointing out programmatic gaps, so that corrective action can be taken.

These complex operating environments pose particular challenges for groups that face heightened risk, often as a result of their age, gender, or other diversity characteristics. Protecting them requires an inclusive, rights-based approach that responds to the priorities, needs and capacities within displaced communities, and brings them together with host communities. The Conference Room Paper highlights our work with groups at heightened risk and the importance of engaging with them as we support the larger community they are part of. As an illustration, let me touch specifically upon displaced children and youth, and the successes we have seen when we partner with them.

In 2016, some 75,000 unaccompanied and separated children lodged asylum applications in 70 countries. A failure to engage and include them would have devastating consequences, not only on them, but on

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their communities and those who host them. But investing in their talents and potential, pays substantial, lasting dividends.

Last year's global refugee youth consultations provided the space and opportunity for refugee and host country youth in eight countries to convene and develop action plans to address their protection risks and to promote peaceful coexistence. Two weeks ago, some of these same refugee youth representatives reconvened in Geneva to raise their voices in multi-stakeholder discussions on the development of the Global Compact on Refugees during UNHCR's Annual Consultations with NGOs. These young people's powerful stories and the workable solutions they propose remind us of the resilience that is characteristic of people who have felt the painful consequences of conflict and forced displacement. At each of these events, young refugees have all appealed to the international community to give refugees the opportunity to bring their ideas and skills to contribute to the development of their host communities.

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Similarly, successes in the protection of people with disabilities and those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities have also in many instances been achieved with the support and engagement of persons of concern themselves and host community groups such as national Disabled Persons Organisations and civil society groups working on specific services for and the rights of marginalized groups.

In conclusion, the New York Declaration, acknowledges that the complex nature, scale, and longevity of humanitarian crises today requires coordinated, targeted efforts to ensure that responses are designed from the outset with all communities and solutions in mind.

Concerns about strains on resources and social harmony are better addressed if refugees and IDPs are supported to be self-reliant as quickly as possible. A community-based protection approach is thus critical, to build upon the resources and capacities of displaced and host communities, while providing the assistance that they themselves request and prioritize. This supports resilient and empowered communities that maintain agency and control over their

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lives, avoiding a descent towards dependency, and building cohesion and stability that benefits everyone.

Thank you.