

Statement to the 72nd session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Introductory Remarks by Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner

Room XIX, Palais des Nations

7 October 2021

Mr. Vice-Chairperson,
High Commissioner,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates

As the High Commissioner mentioned in his opening of this meeting of the Executive Committee, we are living in an age in which narrow self-interest prevails over the common good. Politicians, and their constituents, see the world as a zero-sum game, in which the self-interest of the nation, often one informed by short-term wins, trumps the longer-term benefits of collaboration and engagement beyond borders.

This has dramatic consequences, and is leading our world to a precipice. In his recent address to the General Assembly, Secretary General Guterres called all member states to bridge the peace divide, noting the distant dream which peace and stability remains for many around the world.

We see these dramatic consequences of this peace divide first-hand. We see the people of Ethiopia, who until recently saw their future as holding promises of increased prosperity thanks to strong economic growth, now face an uncertain future. Today, nearly a year since the outbreak of hostilities in the Tigray region, conflict has spread to other regions in the country, over two million people have been displaced by the conflict, and some 400,000 are facing famine-like conditions.

We also see this in Afghanistan, where as we have discussed this week, the dramatic events of recent months have led over 600,000 people to have been displaced by conflict, and over 18 million people are in need of humanitarian and protection aid. And the country's future trajectory remains uncertain, with many fearing collapse – an eventuality which would come with unspeakable consequences for the country and region.

And we see this in Central America, where in May this year I witnessed the hardships, challenges and humanitarian needs driven by the combination of poverty, recurrent climate shocks, violence, limited access to services, and ultimately, forced displacement. Nealy 900,000 people originating from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras remain forcibly displaced, an almost 50-fold increase over ten years, and last year 12 per cent of all new asylum applications were by nationals of these three countries.

These are but three instances in which UNHCR, and the international community, have had to mobilise to address the consequences of our fractured world. And they come on top of our response to other situations of forced displacement across the globe, all coming with their own share of uncertainty and instability.

Mr. Vice-Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,

The instability of our world is unfortunately not new, though it is an accelerating trend. This requires an exceptional degree of agility, flexibility, and adaptability from our institution – all attributes that we have pursued and nurtured through an aggressive transformation agenda in recent years.

Now, some of you may be reminded of Greta Thunberg's recent speech at the Youth4Climate summit in Madrid, when she excoriated global leaders for their promises to address the climate emergency, dismissing these as "blah, blah, blah."

But agility, flexibility, and adaptability are more than buzzwords to UNHCR, and not empty promises made to distract from core issues.

These are more than buzzwords because we are acutely aware that agility, flexibility, and adaptability are not the words most commonly associated with large organisations run by international civil servants.

These are more than buzzwords because we have grown much over the years, more than doubling our budget and workforce in the last decade to meet the challenges brought about by dramatically increasing forced displacement.

So we're not exactly aligned for these new realities, which is why we have decentralized and moved structures, authorities and decision-making closer to the point of delivery, allowing for greater interaction with the people we serve and improving delivery of protection and aid to them. Pushing decision making down to the regional, country and field office level was a first step, and we remain engaged with colleagues across the organisation to build on and reinforce this foundation, refining and redefining ways of working, and adjusting responsibilities and accountabilities where and when needed.

We're also working through the Business Transformation Programme to modernise proactively processes and tools which were designed and built well over a decade ago. This is a crucial step in meeting the demands of a growing organisation, changed ways of working, and increasingly complex operating environments. To put it simply, this programme aims to deliver systems and processes which will make it possible for personnel to work better, faster and smarter, and maximise the time and resources they dedicate to the people we serve.

To this end, the successful launch of COMPASS in January is a major milestone for UNHCR. This furthers our shift towards multi-year planning and allows operations to develop longer-term protection and solutions strategies as well as aligning with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). And this is where efforts to improve *the way* we do business reinforce efforts to change *how* we do business.

The process of changing how we do business is embodied in the Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework which forms a key part of the compact. It would be easy to forget this today, nearly three years after the Compact's affirmation and five years since the adoption of the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, but these documents formalised changes to the way we protect and pursue solutions for the world's displaced.

To be sure, these changes - greater linkages between humanitarian and development responses, a renewed focus on supporting host communities and the more integrated approach to supporting essential services such as health and education – began years ago. These were designed to ensure that humanitarian action, and refugee protection, are better integrated in broad national and international efforts.

Our efforts to ensure we work in a more integrated and joined up manner go beyond the compact, and have informed our approach towards partners. Within the United Nations, UNHCR has been actively engaged in driving elements of the UN reform agenda, including the reinvigorated Resident Coordinator system, the UN's new regional platforms, the Management Accountability Framework, and the development of new guidance on the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Through our engagement with these reforms, UNHCR is better able to ensure that the needs of persons of concern are taken into account in development planning, align our policies and procedures with key partner agencies within the UN system, translate global priorities into effective regional and country-specific strategies, and put an emphasis on programmatic integrity, accountability and efficiency.

Beyond the United Nations system, we've critically reviewed the way in which we partner with others. Some of the over 1,100 entities with which we partner globally (over 900 are national partners) had made no secret

of their sense that we didn't always act as a perfect partner. So we've worked, and continue to work, to be a better partner ourselves, through efforts as diverse as engaging in more open dialogue, simplifying our procedures (a process which COVID 19 helped us accelerate), and harmonizing procedures with other United Nations agencies.

It bears mentioning that we also introduced (in 2019) a policy of contributions towards partner integrity capacity and support costs. This policy, comprising a contribution of four per cent for national partner programme support costs, is one of the many expressions of our commitment to the Grand Bargain, and a recognition that our partnership with these organisations is one in which we share risks, and must work together to manage these.

Mr. Vice-Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,

Being an agile, flexible and adaptable organisation does not mean operating with a sense of *laissez faire*. Quite the contrary, effective risk management and robust controls are a precondition to this.

This is why we have worked, building on the findings of an external consultant's 2016 review, to consolidate the structure of UNHCR's oversight functions. This effort culminated in the promulgation and publication of UNHCR's first Policy on Independent Oversight.

We also launched the risk management 2.0 initiative in late 2017, a targeted three-year approach to strengthen the organization's risk management culture in all operational and management areas. This initiative has been successful in strengthening our risk management culture, and we are now building on this, through our Risk Management 2025 Strategy, to further enhance our risk maturity level.

We have doubled down on our fight against sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH), with a vision, strategy and action plan developed and taken forward by a Senior Coordinator in close collaboration with a technical level working group and a Director level Task Force. We thank member states for their strong support on this, including the newly formed Geneva Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment which will be important for all of us in the humanitarian and development community.

Finally, and as discussed at the September Standing Committee, we have worked to ensure colleagues benefit from an environment that normalises speaking up, and engaging in constructive dialogue on both positive and negative issues. This while working to ensure colleagues' needs are a central and guiding principle of the organisation's efforts to prevent and respond to the more serious forms of workplace issues.

These are but some of the elements of the work we have done to reinforce the integrity of our organisation, and operations, in the last few years. We are not perfect, and continue to face enormous challenges, but we believe we are on the right track.

Mr. Vice-Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,

Just as age is often said to be a mindset, so is an institution's agility, flexibility, and adaptability. This is why, at the young age of 70, we remain focussed on how we can improve, be more efficient, and identify previously untapped opportunities.

This mindset is driving our proposal to establish financial regulations for UNHCR, and efforts to bring greater efficiencies to the way in which our organisation is managed and works to deliver results. It is also driving efforts to diversify our sources of funding through aggressive fundraising from the private sector, and by tapping into innovative sources of financing by establishing a Green Financing Facility as mentioned by the High Commissioner at the opening of our meeting, and outlined at yesterday's side event.

This is also driving our efforts to increase inclusion, diversity and gender equity across the organisation, to engage, equip and empower all of our workforce to take action consciously to harness the benefits of the multiple perspectives, wealth of experience and creativity that comes with diversity.

Seldom has our agility, flexibility and adaptability been as tested as in the last couple of years. And seldom has our approach so clearly paid off.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the many disruptions this caused, our teams remained steadfast, serving the needs of people of concern with courage and tenacity. They reviewed programmes, identifying alternate ways to deliver protection and aid when needed. They met additional needs which the pandemic generated for forcibly displaced and stateless populations. They adapted their ways of working, to ensure continuity for our operations. And they worked to adapt enabling systems to ensure these continued to support changing operations and working modalities.

We are confident our teams will continue to deliver, and, with increasing vaccination rates and a lightening of restrictions, that their safe and gradual return to office premises will provide an opportunity to capitalise on new ways of working to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

These challenges, and the needs they generate, are numerous and outlined in the proposed budget for 2022 which you will consider under item 6 of our agenda. This is the first budget which we are preparing since the roll out of our new planning tool COMPASS, and the amended budget structure following your decision to that effect last year. This is also the first budget to have been elaborated as a regionalised and decentralised organisation, and has benefited greatly from the oversight and approval by the Regional Bureaux.

We are reassured by the support and feedback received from you all, and the strong engagement you have shown throughout the budget formulation process.

We reiterate our thanks to you all for your trust and support, and everything you do to protect and aid forcibly displaced and stateless populations. We count on you to help us respond to challenges and seize opportunities in the year ahead.

Thank you.