

UPDATE ON COORDINATION ISSUES: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper presents an overview of UNHCR's key strategic partnerships, in respect of efforts to respond to today's humanitarian challenges. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of all areas where partnership features in UNHCR's work, for this would include almost every aspect at every level. What distinguishes strategic partnerships is that these concern issues that are fundamental, are not limited in time, and that cut across different operations and geographical areas. Issues discussed include:

- where UNHCR currently stands in relation to United Nations reform measures;
- how UNHCR is collaborating with partners in respect of threats to humanitarian space and to staff safety and security; and
- what UNHCR is doing in coordination with others to build capacity and systems to assess the needs of persons of concern more thoroughly and systematically.

It complements the information provided on coordination issues to the June 2009 Standing Committee, and to the Humanitarian Affairs and General Segments of the July 2009 Substantive Session of the Economic and Social Council.

2. To respond to today's humanitarian challenges, partnership is vital. This is the rationale and the driving force behind all United Nations reform initiatives, and is reflected in efforts such as the inter-agency cluster approach for situations of internal displacement in which UNHCR is deeply involved. Traditionally the Office has worked hand-in-hand, through bilateral agreements and partnerships, with the three pillars of the humanitarian world namely, sister agencies of the UN family and other international organizations – in particular the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (ICRC and IFRC) - and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It also remains the case that the High Commissioner's mandated protection responsibilities for refugees sometimes require UNHCR to operate independently – indeed, this may be desirable in certain country situations. However, the organization is becoming more and more closely involved in many of the collaborative initiatives and reform processes now taking form.

3. Today these collaborative relationships are evolving, and UNHCR recognizes the imperatives of joining forces, consolidating resources and combining experience. The Office is well aware of the potential "strength in numbers" and the need to find strong multilateral

responses to the global challenges of climate change, rising food and fuel prices, extreme disparity between rich and poor, and the financial crisis - all of which pose enormous humanitarian challenges and are potential drivers or multipliers of displacement.

4. Other challenges fall specifically within the domain of members of the UN family and call for closer partnerships to preserve humanitarian space, ensure staff and beneficiary safety and security, contribute to peacebuilding strategies and measures, and ensure that humanitarian agencies retain a sufficiently clear identity, in order to be - and be seen to be - neutral and impartial.

5. In terms of general administrative and financial matters, there are many areas where UN reform is opening the way for the United Nations to “deliver as one” in practical terms, through the harmonization of rules, standards and other *modus operandi* across the different programmes and funds. Examples of how UNHCR is aligning its way of working in this respect, such as the establishment of an Ethics Office and the introduction of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS), are referred to below.

6. UNHCR has articulated its commitment to developing dynamic partnerships in its Global Strategic Objectives (GSO) for 2008-2009, under GSO 6,¹ through:

- Strengthening partnership arrangements on internal displacement, mixed migratory flows, statelessness, peacebuilding and the transition from relief to development;
- Intensifying UNHCR’s engagement in and commitment to the effectiveness of UN Country Teams;
- Implementing participatory planning and needs assessment for refugees, returnees and IDPs; and
- Increasing implementation through partnerships.

II. UNITED NATIONS REFORM

7. As part of the overall United Nations reform strategy and implementation, UNHCR is already in the process of adapting its way of functioning in a number of areas, and will continue to align itself with common system requirements and developments as they evolve.

A. Strengthening humanitarian action

Effective response to emergencies

8. UNHCR is totally committed to engaging in initiatives aimed at securing greater coherence and predictability among humanitarian actors in the delivery of effective responses to emergencies. The inter-agency cluster approach for IDP operations has brought new opportunities to work together, notably through the Office’s engagement as cluster lead at global level in the Protection Cluster, the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM Cluster), co-led by IOM, and the Emergency Shelter Cluster (ESC), co-led by IFRC. This has resulted in jointly developed approaches and tools which, while supporting field operations, have also consolidated partnership and cooperation among cluster members.

¹ See UNHCR’s Global Strategic Objectives for 2008-2009, *UNHCR Global Report 2008* (pages 10-13)

9. Much has been achieved, but much remains to improve on the part of all involved. For example, in some operations the cluster approach can become heavily bureaucratic, generating numerous meetings and additional reporting, especially at the field level. In emergency situations, time is of the essence, and these procedural delays sometimes distract staff, affecting efficient delivery to the beneficiaries. UNHCR is committed to contributing to inter-agency efforts to streamline the process to ensure greater flexibility and effectiveness.

Pooled funding

10. UNHCR participates in the international community's efforts to reform and strengthen humanitarian financing, in particular the pooled funding mechanism to improve the quality of response. The Office welcomes the progress made with regard to the functioning of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). However, other aspects of country-level pooled funds, such as the process of transfer of Common Humanitarian Funds and the Emergency Response Funds, need to be adjusted in order to avoid large transactional costs in terms of staff time to service the process. Experience to date with these new funding mechanisms shows the necessity of strong partnerships and improved coordination among agencies and the Humanitarian Country Team.

Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator system

11. UNHCR has been engaged in the consultative IASC process, led by OCHA, to strengthen the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) system, both in the design of the system and by submitting candidates for the Pool which aims to provide appropriately qualified staff for this key function. The Office has also been working within the UN Development Group (UNDG), on strengthening the Resident Coordinator (RC) system and common programming processes.

12. The next challenge will be to streamline and harmonize the functioning of the respective HC and the RC pools of candidates to ensure effective and efficient humanitarian coordination at field level. Currently, the combination of the RC and HC functions has become the norm; however, this does not take into account situations where both the RC and HC functions would be better served by separating them. In some operational situations, the Resident Coordinator may not always be fully inclined to raise refugee issues with the host Government and will welcome the independent role of the High Commissioner's Office to broker an agreement on refugee-specific issues. In each situation, the system should consider all possible models for coordination and avoid a "one-size-fits-all" default model, retaining flexibility which is a key component of emergency response. UNHCR therefore sees its engagement in this respect as "strategic, as opposed to selective."²

Delivering as One in the Field

13. The Delivering as One (DaO) initiative is now recognized as a unique platform to achieve solutions for persons of concern to UNHCR in bridging the gap between relief and development. A number of previous reports to the Standing Committee at formal and informal meetings have provided updates on UNHCR's engagement in five DaO initiative

² Comment by Special Adviser to the High Commissioner at an informal briefing to ExCom members and Standing Committee observers, June 2008

pilot countries: Albania, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Initial perceptions of the DaO initiative were that it focused primarily on fostering more effective development in relation to accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. However, thanks to participation in common programmes and extra resources from common funding mechanisms, UNHCR has started to see some instances of expansion of projects benefitting people of concern and inclusion of refugee and asylum matters in country-led UN development plans. Developments such as these will be pursued as DaO and other One UN initiatives progress.

14. An active member of a number of UN Country Teams where it has operations on the ground, UNHCR appreciates the role of the Common Country Assessment/UN Development Assistance Framework (CCA/UNDAF) process in facilitating the targeting of the development needs of refugee-hosting and return areas.

15. While progress remains limited with regard to the inclusion of refugee and IDP concerns in national development plans, UNHCR is nevertheless participating in initiatives such as the Management and Accountability System of the UN Development and Resident Coordinator system.

B. Reforming management and operations practices

a) Improving accountability and oversight

16. As has been recommended by the Secretary-General, UNHCR is seeking to strengthen its accountability through an overarching accountability framework that focuses on the achievement of results and the management of risks. In the process, care has been taken to ensure that reform initiatives³ recommended for UNHCR in this domain fit within the overall UN system reform context.

17. In order to adopt the “Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers” (HACT) and to manage funds administered under “pass through arrangements”, UNHCR has been working with other UN partners to align its practices in this respect. As UN agencies are in the process of upgrading their accounting processes by adopting the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS)⁴ UNHCR actively participates in United Nations working groups that produce policy and guidance papers for use by all agencies and share experiences to ensure consistent application. To explore the potential for achieving efficiencies and economies of scale in treasury management, UNHCR’s Treasury Section is contributing to the UN Working Group for Common Treasury Services.

18. In line with the overhaul of UN procurement practices, in late 2008, the High Commissioner requested a review of UNHCR’s supply chain performance with a view to further strengthening its capacity for effective delivery of goods and services to beneficiaries, as reported to the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee⁵ in March 2009.

³ See *Oral update on UNHCR’s Structural and Management Change Process*.

⁴ See *Update on the introduction of International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS)* (EC/60/SC/CRP.15)

⁵ See *Supply Chain Management* (EC/60/SC/CRP.5)

b) Setting the highest ethical standards

19. In line with overall UN reform requirements, the UNHCR Ethics Office⁶ was established in September 2008 and has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote collaboration with both internal and external partners, as an active member of the United Nations Ethics Committee. Advisory services of the Ethics Office have also been sought by partner agencies thereby strengthening a common understanding and implementation of the values and principles espoused by UNHCR and the United Nations generally.

c) Establishing a mobile, multi-skilled and motivated staff with access to internal justice

20. As a direct consequence of the adoption of the Secretary-General proposals to Member States to streamline contractual arrangements for staff working for the United Nations Secretariat at Headquarters and in the field, the Office also has adopted the UN-wide changes to contractual arrangements as of 1 July 2009.

21. With the introduction of the new Administration of Justice System in the United Nations in 2008, the UNHCR Mediator's Office changed its title to the Office of the UNHCR Ombudsman. This change was made to more accurately reflect what the Office of the Mediator and its team members have been doing over the years, i.e. the work of an organizational ombudsman's office, and to harmonize the UNHCR title with accepted practice in the United Nations. Collaboration with the *United Nations Ombudsman* has been enhanced, in line with the General Assembly Resolution 62/228 that called for an "integrated, decentralised United Nations Ombudsman Office." The UNHCR Ombudsman's Office invested significant time and energy in working with the UN Ombudsman and staff of the New York-based Ombudsman Offices to develop standardized practices, tools and methodologies and contribute to plans for the expansion of the informal justice system in the United Nations. This engagement has been valuable in identifying ways to enhance the professionalism of the work of the UNHCR Ombudsman.

III. HUMANITARIAN SPACE

22. Humanitarian organizations operate in an increasingly complex and often insecure environment. More than ever before, the reaffirmation of humanitarian principles and a dialogue among all those expected to abide by them are required, and for this, strategic partnership is essential. Challenges to principled action are many and include (1) security measures limiting access to or by needy populations; (2) perceptions that humanitarian workers promote specific political interests or show inappropriate behaviour; (3) blurred distinction between the role of the military (including UN Peacekeepers) and that of humanitarian workers; (4) impact of the role of International Criminal Courts on humanitarian assistance; and (5) banditry targeting humanitarian workers as a result of a breakdown in law and order.

23. A number of these challenges must be addressed by governments which have the key responsibility for ensuring the security of relief workers and their access to populations in need. UNHCR's mandate requires its staff and partners to deliver protection and assistance

⁶ See *Report on the Ethics Office* (EC/60/SC/CRP.21)

even in areas where access to persons of concern is difficult and dangerous. Therefore it is natural that the Office is called upon to play a leading role in efforts to preserve and expand humanitarian space in close collaboration with other humanitarian agencies.

24. UNHCR has worked on this issue with partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and co-chairs (with OCHA) the IASC Core Group on Humanitarian Space which has attracted a high level of participation from NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, other UN agencies and IOM. The core group has developed an action plan for a range of activities including: working with the military; integrated missions; and perceptions of humanitarian actors. As part of this process the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is planning to organize training for NGO staff on humanitarian principles. and the World Food Programme (WFP) organized an initial roundtable discussion on “Perceptions of Humanitarian Assistance” in Rome in June 2009. Two more roundtables, examining humanitarian space challenges in specific countries and involving all actors, are planned for the third quarter of 2009 , and will be led by UNHCR and UNICEF.

IV. STAFF SAFETY AND SECURITY

25. While the primary responsibility for the safety and security of humanitarian staff rests with governments, the UN security system nevertheless plays a key role in ensuring that humanitarian action is enabled, rather than restricted, based on specific risk assessments. UNHCR is closely involved in the work of the High Level Committee on Management and the Steering Committee, contributing to UN efforts to establish a comprehensive plan for a system-wide security management system.

26. UNHCR welcomes the nomination of the Under-Secretary General (USG) of the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) as Chairperson of the Executive Group on Security (EGS). The EGS is meant to advise, reinforce and facilitate the rapid decision-making authority and accountability of the USG/DSS and resolve potential impasses at the country level or within a security management team, rather than act as an appellate body. UNHCR reaffirms its commitment to support the USG/DSS as, and whenever, required, but has shared its concerns about the creation of an additional level within the UN security management framework. Even with the establishment of the EGS, the new UN security risk management approach requires heads of agencies to exercise their responsibility for staff security and safety through their organization’s representative on a security management team.

27. The recent attacks on UNHCR staff and partners in Pakistan, Somalia and the Caucasus have caused deep anxiety within the organization and amongst partners throughout the humanitarian community. Beneficiary security, at the heart of UNHCR’s mandate, is also a serious concern. The High Commissioner is committed to pursuing every possible option to enhance the security of staff. UNHCR has conveyed to governments the urgent need for a comprehensive and effective set of measures to minimize the security risks faced by staff, as well as the need for a robust response to recent incidents, including through investigations into the attacks on UNHCR staff. The Office’s position is that there is no “one-size-fits-all” response and that solutions must be tailored to specific situations.

28. In addition to continuing to enhance its own security management capacities, as agreed with the USG/DSS, UNHCR is now re-evaluating and strengthening all mechanisms of cooperation on security with the UN system, and with the broader humanitarian community.

V. NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

29. The Global Needs Assessment initiative (GNA) has been designed to consolidate the findings of assessments and participatory planning in a way that allows UNHCR to comprehensively lay out the needs it must cover to comply with its responsibilities. As such, the GNA can and must also process inputs from other partners. This facilitates UNHCR's contribution to ongoing inter-agency initiatives to coordinate and align needs assessment activities.

30. Many different humanitarian needs assessment data systems exist, but few are computerized and most are incompatible with each other. To address this gap, UNHCR is working with the Needs Assessment Working Group (NAG) and the IASC Inter-Agency Information Management Task Force, both OCHA-led initiatives at the global level, to coordinate needs assessment activities among clusters.

31. These initiatives have not attempted to develop a single needs assessment system at the global level, but are focusing rather on facilitating multi-agency needs assessments to speed up data collection. Using appropriate data management methodology and increasing the data management skills of field personnel is paramount in order to consolidate the comparison and processing of data between organizations. UNHCR's Operational Data Management Learning Programme (ODMLP) addresses these issues comprehensively, and the Office is working together with OCHA, IFRC, UNDP and UNITAR to re-develop the ODMLP for inter-agency and inter-cluster usage.

32. To help coordinate needs assessments within individual clusters, UNHCR has also led cluster-specific activities at the global level, such as the CCCM Cluster Needs Assessment (in collaboration with IOM, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Lutheran World Federation and other partners) and the Protection Cluster Information Management Task Force (in collaboration with ICRC, OCHA, OHCHR, UNICEF and others).

VII. CONCLUSION

33. Challenges to humanitarian action in a globalized and complex world can only be met through cohesive coalitions and strong partnerships, giving individual humanitarian actors the necessary strength and leverage in order for their endeavours to bring meaningful results. Aware of this reality, UNHCR will continue to build long-term strategic partnerships in all of the critical areas of its activities and counts on the guidance and support of this Standing Committee in doing so.