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**Self-reliance and inclusion***Summary*

Substantial progress towards self-reliance and inclusion has been achieved in recent years. However, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is threatening to reverse these advances and is amplifying the need for greater solidarity and responsibility-sharing to deliver on the commitments outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees. This paper provides an update on recent advances and challenges to strengthening the self-reliance and inclusion of persons of concern in national services, including in the context of COVID-19. It also discusses the opportunities presented by the pledges made in support of self-reliance and inclusion at the first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019.

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## I. Introduction

1. Notwithstanding the significant increase in the number of forcibly displaced persons in recent years, substantial progress towards self-reliance and inclusion has been achieved. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to reverse these advances and is negatively impacting the ability of the displaced to earn a basic living and ensure food security. The health pandemic has also affected access to education and weakened the capacity of some stakeholders to support self-reliance and inclusion. Safeguarding the previous gains will require sustained momentum towards greater international solidarity and burden- and responsibility-sharing, as envisioned in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).

2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its promise to “leave no one behind”, and the GCR, including the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF), have demonstrated the will and determination of the international community to enhance the socioeconomic condition of refugees and host communities, and have given rise to optimism. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased support to refugees will be required in order to ensure that their health, protection and basic needs are met, while simultaneously leveraging the commitments toward their self-reliance and inclusion.

3. This paper provides an update on recent advances and challenges to strengthening the self-reliance and inclusion of persons of concern in national services, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also discusses the opportunities presented by the pledges made in support of self-reliance and inclusion at the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019.

## II. Background

4. The GCR calls for the international community to “ensure that refugees and their host communities are not left behind in a country’s progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals”, including by supporting inclusion in national development planning, educational systems, labour markets, health systems and social services, and child protection programmes. The GCR recognizes that the economic, social and cultural inclusion of refugees is of benefit to both refugees and host communities, and inclusion is a key element of the Compact’s self-reliance objective. Self-reliance refers to the ability of individuals, households and communities to meet their essential needs, enjoy their human rights and lead dignified lives.

5. Most of the world’s forcibly displaced persons have limited opportunities for self-reliance. Many refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless persons and asylum-seekers find themselves in situations where access to health care; water, sanitation and hygiene services; and education is limited, and social security systems are inaccessible.

6. As durable solutions are available to very few refugees and most remain in protracted displacement, UNHCR is partnering with development actors to support refugees and their host communities, and to foster inclusion, as called for in the GCR. However, experience from the CRRF roll-out, projects under the World Bank’s IDA-18 regional sub-window for refugees, and other initiatives, indicate that transitioning refugees from international humanitarian assistance to inclusion is a long-term process. To be successful, inclusion requires a policy environment where refugees are permitted to enjoy socio-economic rights, where governments have the capacity to absorb new populations, and where multilateral and development support is available.

7. In Ethiopia, for example, the implementation of the progressive 2019 Refugee Proclamation allows refugees to access work permits, primary education and driving licenses. This requires greater support from the international community, long-term and area-based programming and a greater role for sub-national authorities. In Rwanda, the Government-led multi-year strategic plan for refugee inclusion outlines the need for coherent humanitarian and development financing, effective costing, legal documentation and targeted communication for camp-based refugees, in order for them to transition from

reliance on humanitarian assistance to an inclusive model. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, sustained access to the national education system for Afghan refugees will necessitate greater support from development actors.

### **III. Recent advances, challenges and opportunities**

8. UNHCR has long advocated refugee inclusion in national health plans. In recent years, there have been encouraging examples of this. In Ghana and Turkey, refugees have been included in the national health care systems on par with nationals. In Rwanda, urban refugees in Kigali have recently been included in the national social health insurance scheme. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR is working with the World Health Organization on promoting the inclusion of refugees in national response plans.

9. Progress is also being made with respect to the inclusion of refugees in national education systems. At the GRF, the Central African Republic and Niger committed to include refugees in their education sector plans, highlighting the need for a methodology to determine the cost of including additional children in already stressed education systems. COVID-19 is also having a significant impact on national education systems, following the closure of schools, and on the way in which UNHCR supports this sector. UNHCR is working with governments and other partners on distance-learning and digital programmes, building on existing partnerships with the private sector. In Uganda, for example, the Office is expanding an existing programme funded by Google to support the Government in rapidly expanding content that is already accessible online. In the Dadaab camps in Kenya, community radio is being used to help ensure that children continue learning, despite school closures. In Jordan, UNHCR is working with the Ministry of Education to facilitate access to education for refugees and their host communities using online learning platforms.

10. In recent years, significant progress has been achieved in the adoption of global policies that provide an enabling environment to advance self-reliance. Several countries, including Djibouti and Ethiopia, have adopted policies granting refugees the right to work. UNHCR is strengthening partnerships to support changes at the national level that will expand access to labour markets. In partnership with the International Labour Organization, over 15 joint market assessments have been conducted to identify gaps and economic opportunities for refugees. UNHCR has also collaborated with the World Bank and national statistics agencies to collect socio-economic data from refugee households in Chad, Kenya, Niger and Uganda, providing detailed information on income, consumption, skills, health and economic activity. The information will help identify gaps and opportunities, support evidence-based advocacy and inform programme design.

11. Facilitating access to financing and loans for the displaced and host community members is a critical enabler for enhancing self-reliance. Access to affordable financial services, such as bank accounts, mobile money, loans and credit, has broadened the use of local financial service providers (FSPs) in the delivery of cash-based assistance. Currently, UNHCR has over 45 contracts with FSPs offering payment services to refugees. Furthermore, 17 FSPs in 13 countries are now offering credit services to refugees, while 15 others are establishing local arrangements to begin providing this important service. To support the inclusion of the most vulnerable populations in livelihood activities and to improve their self-reliance, UNHCR, the World Bank's Partnership for Economic Inclusion and 13 non-governmental organizations are working to scale up the "graduation approach" through the Poverty Alleviation Coalition.

12. The socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 present substantial risks for refugee entrepreneurs. Across Africa, the Americas and the Middle East, hundreds of thousands of refugees are in need of urgent financial assistance to cover their daily subsistence since lockdowns and other public health measures came into force. In Lebanon, which was already facing an economic downturn before the pandemic, over half of the refugees surveyed by UNHCR in late April reported having lost livelihood mechanisms, such as daily labour opportunities. Among the refugees consulted, 70 per cent said that they had to skip meals. The impact of the pandemic on refugee women has been

particularly profound, with almost all who had been working indicating that their sources of income had been disrupted. Other issues reported included evictions, heightened tensions with host communities and an increase in negative coping mechanisms.

13. While many economic activities have been suspended since the pandemic was declared, the COVID-19 emergency has expedited the employment of refugees as health workers in several host countries. In addition, refugees have been employed in the production of essential safety items, such as personal protective equipment and soap, to support the response. Across the world, cash assistance to refugees has been scaled up as a quick and efficient means of providing assistance, enabling families to meet their basic needs and mitigating some of the negative socio-economic impacts of the crisis on communities. In Costa Rica, for example, persons of concern with work permits who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, have been eligible for monthly cash transfers. In Mauritania, UNHCR is working with the Government and other partners to ensure refugees have access to national social protection mechanisms in order to mitigate the negative socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

14. Despite the progress made in many countries, more needs to be done to ensure the inclusion of refugees in national social protection schemes, particularly when such programmes are already strained for nationals. UNHCR works with governments and partners in different contexts to ensure that refugees continue to receive social protection benefits during COVID, including in Brazil, Costa Rica and South Africa. Emerging extensions of national social protection programmes to include refugees in the Congo (Republic of) and Mauritania provide encouraging examples in more challenging contexts.

#### **IV. Leveraging pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum**

15. At the GRF, a number of States committed to developing more inclusive national policies to enable refugees to become active and contributing members of their host communities. Eight States pledged to include refugees in national, regional or local development plans and programming, while others pledged to support inclusion through bilateral development cooperation or other mechanisms. Several States pledged to support inclusive policies made by countries hosting large refugee populations in sectors such as education. In several countries, private sector entities pledged to employ or facilitate the employment of refugees. Despite the restrictions posed by COVID-19, momentum towards the implementation of GRF commitments has been sustained, with some pledges being adapted and accelerated to respond to the health pandemic, including addressing the socio-economic impact caused by COVID-19. Country and regional implementation plans are being developed, and opportunities to match them are being explored.

16. At the GRF, the World Bank announced an increase of \$2.2 billion in financing, as part of the IDA19 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities, which will build on investments made in several large refugee-hosting countries through its IDA18 projects. This financing for refugees and host communities is designed to complement other assistance efforts in support of self-reliance. A group of seven multilateral development banks jointly pledged to “provide rapid financing through dedicated financial instruments or sources that can help alleviate the strain on public services in host countries and support livelihoods, inclusiveness and resilience for all”.

#### **V. Conclusion**

17. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the challenges faced by refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. It has threatened the development gains made in the last few years and the progress towards refugee self-reliance and inclusion. UNHCR is working with governments and partners to maintain the momentum and is supporting efforts to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability. Now, more than ever, greater solidarity and responsibility-sharing are needed to deliver on the commitments outlined in the GCR.