

Ninetieth meeting of the Standing Committee
1-3 July 2024
Agenda item 4 (b)

Oral update on mental health and psychosocial support

In 2022, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme adopted a conclusion on international protection on the theme of mental health and psychosocial support. Member States welcomed the engagement of UNHCR in this area, which was defined as any type of local or outside support that aimed to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and prevent or treat mental health conditions. The conclusion encouraged States and UNHCR to continue integrating mental health and psychosocial support in their respective protection and solutions programming as well as in their emergency preparedness and response strategies, in line with humanitarian principles and without discrimination. Encouraged by the Executive Committee, UNHCR accelerated its efforts to incorporate mental health and psychosocial support in all aspects of its work.¹

Growing mental health and psychosocial support needs in displacement situations: The prevalence of mental health conditions in populations affected by conflict and forced displacement is significantly higher than the levels observed in other populations. Displacement creates considerable psychological and social stress for individuals, families and communities. Many people experience atrocities and adversities prior to and during their flight. Living conditions in displacement settings often impose further stress and hardship, in addition to worries about those left behind and concerns about the future. The mental health needs are of particular concern in acute humanitarian emergencies. For example, the situation in the Sudan has led to alarming mental health issues among forcibly displaced persons within the country as well as among Sudanese refugees in the neighbouring host countries of Chad, Egypt and Ethiopia. The Sudan regional refugee response plan for 2024 includes multisectoral actions to address mental health and psychosocial well-being. However, the shortfall in funding has severely hampered the ability of UNHCR and partners to meet these needs. The demand for mental health support also remains high in protracted situations, such as among Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Malaysia. Decreasing resources and limited options for durable solutions fuel despair and hopelessness among refugees, exacerbating mental health problems and negatively affecting self-reliance.

Approach: Mental health and psychosocial support is a multisectoral issue that requires dedicated interventions in the sectors of health, protection and education, both from the onset of emergencies and in situations of long-term displacement. The Public Health Section in the Division of Resilience and Solutions at UNHCR is a resource hub for mental health and psychosocial support within the organization and provides technical and operational support to divisions and regional bureaux as well as to country operations.

Guidance: The work of UNHCR is guided by the operational guidance on mental health and psychosocial support for refugee operations. An updated version of the operational guidance is being developed at present. Similarly, guidance on mental health and psychosocial support for child protection will be made available in the second half of 2024. Relevant guidance has also been incorporated in various UNHCR strategies, policies and handbooks, such as the:

- Global public health strategy (2021-2025);
- Policy on the prevention of risk mitigation, and response to gender-based violence (2020);
- Education 2030: A strategy for refugee education;
- UNHCR emergency handbook;
- Integration handbook for resettled refugees.

¹ The 2023 annual report on strengthening mental health and psychosocial support in UNHCR is available on the UNHCR global website.

UNHCR, together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a minimum service package for mental health and psychosocial support in 2022, which was endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The package contains priority activities to address the mental health and psychosocial support needs of affected populations in humanitarian settings. It was jointly introduced by UNHCR, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO in Belarus, Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mozambique, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

Outcomes: The UNHCR multisectoral monitoring system contains a global indicator that provides information on the number of people who have received mental health and psychosocial support services by UNHCR and partners, especially in the sectors of health and protection. In 2023, some 1.3 million refugees received such services, compared to 1.1 million refugees in 2022. UNHCR was able to maintain its level of service despite considerable budget reductions that affected country operations in 2023.

Broadening partnerships: At the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, significant number of pledges around mental health and psychosocial support were announced by governments, private sector partners and non-governmental organizations, under the umbrella of a multi-stakeholder pledge to foster sustainable and equitable access to mental health and psychosocial support and related services at affordable costs for all refugees and host communities. A total of 113 announced pledges were related to this multistakeholder pledge. Notably, a joint global policy and technical support pledge was led by the European Commission, Germany, and the Netherlands (Kingdom of), joined by other countries, United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations and academia. Within the Global Refugee Forum education alliance, a thematic task team on mental health and psychosocial support and social and emotional learning in education was established to increase awareness and support for students and teachers in refugee contexts. In addition to the Global Refugee Forum pledges, UNHCR is prioritizing the integration of mental health and psychosocial support through a multi-annual humanitarian-development partnership (PROSPECTS), which is supported by the Netherlands (Kingdom of). This partnership aims to transform how host governments and other stakeholders respond to situations of forced displacement as well as to strengthen the economic and social inclusion of forcibly displaced persons through their integration in national protection systems, the delivery of services and social protection.

Going forward: The Executive Committee conclusion on mental health and psychosocial support successfully galvanized attention around this critical issue. Results from 2023 indicate that the conclusion has helped stimulate progress in this key area. Nevertheless, mental health and psychosocial support needs sustained attention, especially at a time when limited funding requires the organization to prioritize and make tough choices. Mental health and psychosocial well-being is of critical importance to UNHCR. Going forward, UNHCR will continue to anchor mental health and psychosocial programming within its interventions in the health, protection, education and other relevant sectors, and encourages donors to support such initiatives.

Geneva, 10 June 2024