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**Leveraging community-based protection in evolving
operational environments***Summary*

This paper reaffirms the long-standing commitment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to working with communities and to the centrality of community-based protection in its work. It highlights the role of community-based protection in fostering active participation, leveraging local knowledge and empowering affected communities to address their own protection needs, while complementing formal protection systems. It provides examples of how, in today's complex operational context – including protracted displacement, onward and mixed movements, conflict situations and other areas with restricted access, and climate shocks affecting vulnerable communities – community-based protection and the concept of “people protecting people” should be encouraged and strengthened. The paper showcases that empowering and meaningfully engaging affected communities are essential foundations for creating effective, sustainable and cost-effective responses to forced displacement.

I. Introduction

1. UNHCR has a long-standing commitment to working with communities, with community-based approaches being central to delivering on its mandate. This commitment is reflected in the engagement of UNHCR in the Grand Bargain, which promotes localization and the empowerment of local protection actors. It is further reinforced by the Global Compact on Refugees and the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, which underscore the importance of strong partnerships and the meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless persons, as well as host communities. Additionally, empowering communities by drawing from their resilience, knowledge and capacity is one of the five strategic directions for UNHCR for the period 2022 to 2026.

2. Engaging with and empowering affected communities¹ are essential foundations to build sustainable and long-lasting responses to forced displacement and statelessness. While applying community-based approaches in all aspects of its work, UNHCR places a special emphasis on community-based protection, leveraging the agency and capacities of affected communities to achieve protection and solutions outcomes.

3. Community-based protection has been integral to the organization's work on protection. A conference room paper on community-based protection was presented at the fifty-seventh meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in June 2013², which marked a shift from community services to community-based protection acknowledging affected communities as active agents of their own protection. In today's complex operational environment, there is a renewed need to strengthen and better integrate this role within broader protection and solution strategies.

II. Community-based protection in evolving operational environments

4. Community-based protection is a continuous process that promotes the right of affected communities, including host communities, to actively participate in their own protection. In humanitarian emergencies and displacement situations, community-based protection engages affected communities working alongside authorities and humanitarian actors in analysing protection risks. Community-based protection leverages the agency and capacities of communities to prevent, mitigate and respond to those risks, and to identify solutions.

5. The following sections highlight strategic considerations and progress made in leveraging community-based protection in recent years, contributing to the organization's global priorities in evolving operational environments.

A. Community action for protection

6. UNHCR has a long-standing commitment to involving the whole community in protecting those at heightened risk, such as women and girls, children, persons with disabilities, minorities and other groups at-risk. The community-based protection approach is central to identify and address barriers and protection risks. This approach also empowers marginalized groups to participate in setting priorities and in shaping effective and sustainable responses – ensuring that no one is left behind.

7. By way of example, in Malawi, the refugee-led organization Umoja Persons with Disabilities Group mobilizes refugees with disabilities to advocate for their rights and strengthen their protection. Their work ensures access to services and meaningful

¹ In this paper, “affected communities” refers to all communities impacted by forced displacement and statelessness that UNHCR works with, including forcibly displaced and stateless persons, as well as host communities.

² Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/media/community-based-protection>.

participation in community structures in Dzaleka refugee camp helping them to address stigma, physical inaccessibility and exclusion from decision-making. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the women-led organization, Femmes Main dans la Main pour le Développement Intégral spearheads efforts to empower women as well as to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. They provide comprehensive support, including psychosocial, socioeconomic, legal and judicial assistance to internally displaced and returnee survivors. In Nepal, the Citizenship Affected People's Network mobilizes stateless communities, particularly women and children, to advocate for legal identity and nationality rights. By raising awareness, engaging local leaders, and influencing policy reforms, this local organization has been instrumental in securing citizenship rights for marginalized populations, ensuring they can enjoy their rights with dignity as well as access essential services.

8. UNHCR has adopted a route-based approach to more effectively address the protection risks associated with onward and mixed movements. This approach recognizes that while refugees and migrants have differing reasons for flight, they often travel the same routes and face similar protection risks and rights abuses. Community-based protection is key to this approach, as it strengthens engagement with communities, community-based organizations and diasporas to understand the risks along the routes. It also supports the mapping of local protection life-saving services and assistance, as well as referral pathways to respond to the diverse needs of vulnerable groups – including women, unaccompanied minors and persons with disabilities – while also helping to mobilize community protection mechanisms to address those risks. In addition, community-based outreach also plays an important role in preventing trafficking and exploitation. For example, through the Telling the Real Story project in Ethiopia, Somalia and eastern Sudan, UNHCR worked with community volunteers and youth-led organizations to provide refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants with critical and accurate information on the dangers of irregular onward movements, available protection services and alternative legal pathways.

B. Sustainable responses

9. Sustainable responses aim to enhance the resilience and self-reliance of forcibly displaced and stateless people and contribute to creating conditions in which they can realize their rights and progress towards durable solutions. Anchored in a “whole-of-society” approach, sustainable responses strengthen partnerships with communities, States, civil society, humanitarian and development actors, and the private sector. Sustainable responses prioritize area-based approaches, meaningful community participation, localization and inclusion in national systems wherever possible, while reinforcing and supporting national services where needed.

10. Community-based protection is central to sustainable responses by tailoring protection interventions to local realities and by leveraging the agency, resilience and capacity of all members in a community. Community-based protection enables continuous community engagement for a more accurate analysis of protection risks, community priorities and capacities, and the barriers people face in accessing their rights. This helps shape participatory and evidence-based solutions. Moreover, community-based protection fosters dialogue and trust among affected communities themselves as well as with national institutions and local authorities. In doing so, it promotes peaceful coexistence and inclusion in government-led policy initiatives and national systems. Where feasible, it can also promote successful local integration.

11. Community-based protection also advances the localization agenda by empowering refugee-led organizations and community-based organizations, including those led by women and youth, to guide protection responses. For instance, in El Salvador, a network of youth-led urban centres (Centros Urbano de Bienestar y Oportunidades) fosters peaceful coexistence and social cohesion, contributing to the national strategy for the prevention of violence and forced displacement. In the Syrian Arab Republic, a well-established network of outreach volunteers played a critical role during the recent surge in returns of refugees and internally displaced persons by identifying and referring vulnerable individuals, assessing risks and needs, and providing first responses. In Peru, refugee-led organizations and

community-based organizations offer legal orientation to Venezuelan refugees, while in eastern Chad, similar organizations offer mental health and psychosocial support to Sudanese survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. In many parts of Chad, local refugee-led organizations and community-based organizations are often the only ones able to safely reach survivors due to religious, cultural and social norms. In Ukraine, UNHCR supports councils of internally displaced persons, established under local administrations, ensuring the engagement of displaced communities in municipal development plans and local policy-making, thereby upholding their right to participate in public affairs. Across these diverse contexts, strategic collaboration with local institutions and authorities is key to anchoring community-based protection in national systems and ensuring sustainability.

C. Conflict settings and access-constrained areas

12. UNHCR regularly operates in conflict settings and other areas with restricted access, where insecurity presents complex challenges to reach and assist those in need. In such environments, widespread violence weakens community structures, diminishing their ability to mobilize for collective action. To respond effectively, humanitarian efforts require community-based protection strategies tailored to those constrained environments, leveraging partnerships with local actors and using context-specific approaches to safely access and preserve humanitarian space. For example, in Honduras, UNHCR collaborated with key community leaders, women- and youth-led organizations to establish a direct operational presence in high-risk urban areas controlled by gangs. This, in turn, allowed the recovery and strengthening of physical and civic safe spaces, and facilitated community-led initiatives such as sports, arts and cultural programmes. Such interventions enhance prevention and protection mechanisms, particularly for children, youth and women, who are disproportionately affected by violence, restrictions to freedom of movement and forced recruitment into gangs.

13. In insecure environments, community-based protection can strengthen communities' self-protection mechanisms. It encourages community-led strategies and action plans to mitigate protection risks for the most affected groups and enhance the protection environment. These strategies may include local advocacy or community-led negotiations with parties to the conflict, or other forms of community mobilization such as women's groups, community protection networks and self-managed community centres. Safeguarding and expanding physical and civic safe spaces are critical to enabling community mobilization and participation, even in conflict settings. This includes creating opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in collective protection risk analysis; contributing to response planning; and organizing and advocating their protection needs. Emergency responses must prioritize identifying and supporting these opportunities to mobilize and strengthen protection efforts. Early community engagement through preparedness and contingency planning can enhance the timeliness and effectiveness of emergency responses. In the Sudan, to support the response to the ongoing emergency, UNHCR leverages existing multipurpose community centres run by community-based organizations in locations with constrained access in Darfur. These centres serve as safe spaces and hubs for community-led assistance and the delivery of protection services.

14. Climate shocks can be drivers of conflict and forced displacement, intensifying protection risks, especially in climate-vulnerable countries. They also complicate safe and lasting solutions by raising the risk of prolonged and repeated displacement. Community-based protection can help manage climate-related risks by using local and indigenous knowledge, improving early warning systems, and ensuring the engagement of all community members in preparedness and response. In countries like Bangladesh and Mozambique, such initiatives have strengthened protection-sensitive disaster planning. UNHCR advocates meaningful community participation in national policy-making processes on climate action to ensure that planning and responses take into consideration the needs of all groups and address pre-existing protection concerns.

D. Challenges

15. Community-based protection is a continuous process that requires sustained engagement to build trust with affected communities. However, in many operational settings, the urgency to deliver immediate results often leads to de-prioritizing the groundwork essential for community participation and ownership. This risks superficial engagement and limits the long-term impact of protection efforts in favour of immediate results. Moreover, some protection challenges – such as discrimination or human trafficking – are complex and cannot be fully addressed through community-based interventions alone. In conflict-affected areas, security risks can further hinder the implementation and sustainability of community-based protection efforts.

16. In many contexts, limited resources, poor infrastructure, and barriers to formal registration can also weaken the capacity of community-based organizations, refugee-led organizations and other local actors to engage meaningfully in protection activities and to access funding. Additionally, donor funding cycles, which often favour short-term outcomes, hinder efforts to secure reliable, long-term financial support for community-based protection initiatives. These challenges are further compounded by the current funding crisis, which poses unprecedented threats to community-based programming, despite its critical nature. Thorough situational analyses, more predictable and flexible funding mechanisms and multi-year strategies are essential for effective community-based protection work.

III. Conclusion

17. The centrality of community-based protection in the work of UNHCR and delivery of its mandate is more critical than ever. This approach centres on the leadership and active participation of affected communities in addressing their own protection needs, while complementing formal protection systems. In situations of protracted displacement, onward and mixed movements, limited access to areas affected by conflict, and climate shocks affecting vulnerable populations, community-based protection fosters locally-driven, adaptive protection and solutions strategies. Rooted in local knowledge, trust and collaboration, and informed by the lived experience of affected communities, this approach promotes the concept of people protecting people. It recognizes that community members are often best placed to identify and address protection risks, support and safeguard each other, and create safety nets that are responsive, resilient and take into consideration the needs of all groups in the community. In the context of diminishing resources, community-based protection interventions tend to be more cost-effective and sustainable – making them a strategic investment in long-term protection and solutions programming. Sustained commitment to community-based protection work is essential to upholding the principle of meaningful participation, ensuring the sustainability of the organization's interventions and strengthening local ownership of protection and solutions strategies.
