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Human resources, including staff welfare*Summary*

This paper highlights developments in the area of human resources and staff welfare in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since the last update presented at the Standing Committee in September 2024 (EC/75/SC/CRP.20). It outlines the response of UNHCR to one of the largest workforce downsizing exercises in its history, shaped by severe financial constraints and structural reforms. The Division of Human Resources prioritized workforce support by enhancing career development, strengthening staff health and well-being initiatives, and advancing human resources systems with expanded digital functionalities.

I. Introduction

1. The past year has been marked by significant change across the organization. Despite widening humanitarian needs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had to undertake one of the most substantial downsizing exercises in its history due to deteriorating funding. The scale and urgency of the changes required a rapid and coordinated organizational response, impacting colleagues and teams at all levels and covered by various contractual modalities globally.

2. The Division of Human Resources played a central role in supporting the workforce and the organization during these changes, prioritizing workforce support measures including psychosocial and well-being support, communications, managing internal mobility and the continued transformation of human resources systems and policies in alignment with broader United Nations reform efforts. The rollout of the digital human resources platform Workday, sustained focus on people management and broader human resources reforms since 2019 enabled UNHCR to navigate the unprecedented workforce changes of 2025 with greater agility and data-driven decisions. This allowed the workforce to remain resilient and continue delivering on its mandate.

II. People working for UNHCR

3. As of 30 June 2025, the total workforce of UNHCR amounted to almost 17,400 people, including 13,800 UNHCR staff members and 3,600 affiliate staff. This reflects a significant decrease over the last few years, underscoring the impact of financial pressures and structural reform. While the full impact of the 2025 downsizing on the workforce composition will take time due to factors such as internal reassignments, and contract type and duration, UNHCR will be a leaner organization going forward.

4. Despite these reductions, UNHCR maintains a strong operational footprint, with almost 90 per cent of the workforce deployed outside headquarters and 37 per cent serving in hardship duty stations. The UNHCR operational presence in sub-Saharan Africa was 34 per cent (19 per cent in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, 10 per cent in West and Central Africa, and 5 per cent in southern Africa), followed by 18 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa, 12 per cent in the Americas, 13 per cent in the Asia and the Pacific region and 12 per cent in Europe. UNHCR operates on a lean management structure, with 3.5 per cent of the workforce on grades P5 and above.

5. UNHCR has made significant progress toward achieving gender parity across all levels of the organization and continues to prioritize equal opportunities for women in leadership and the development of a supportive workplace culture. Since the end of 2024, gender parity has been reached across all international professional grades (including senior management grades P5 and above). At the national and general service levels, parity has been achieved in several grades (NOC, NOB, G7, G6, and G5), with women often exceeding 50 per cent representation.

6. The largest proportion of the workforce in UNHCR, 33 per cent, comes from sub-Saharan Africa followed by Europe (21 per cent), the Middle East and North Africa region (17 per cent), the Americas (14 per cent) and the Asia and the Pacific region (15 per cent). UNHCR's workforce spans 163 nationalities and approximately 71 per cent of the workforce is locally recruited.

III. The 2025 review process

7. During the reporting period, UNHCR undertook extensive organizational adjustments in response to a severe funding shortfall, including a structural review of headquarters and regional bureaux, and a global downsizing. The Division of Human Resources closely supported the Design and Development Service and the Division of Strategic Planning and Results in the review by providing key data on the legal staffing framework and workforce trends.

A. Policy changes and special measures

8. To support these structural changes, the High Commissioner introduced a series of policy adjustments to provide greater flexibility and operational agility during this critical period. Key policy revisions included the change in the period of Special Leave with Full Pay for international staff in-between assignments (from nine to six months); review of the eligibility for five-year contract extensions; and temporary adjustments to the Resource Allocation Framework regarding position management. These adjustments were aimed at ensuring the organization's ability to deliver on its mandate while ensuring a careful transition for the workforce in an exceptionally challenging operating environment.

9. Careful sequencing of vacancy advertisements for remaining positions was also put in place to give priority consideration to colleagues affected by the discontinuation of positions, ensuring maximum opportunities for redeployment. These adjustments were complemented by time-bound measures such as a temporary freeze on external recruitment and the prioritization of staff in-between assignments and of those impacted by post discontinuations for vacant roles. Comparative review processes remained applicable for locally recruited staff in headquarters and in operations, ensuring priority consideration for affected staff and the retention of qualified staff members.

10. In addition, several special measures were introduced to provide flexibility and support to those affected by post discontinuations. To strengthen talent management and ensure that the organization can efficiently re-engage experienced personnel as needs arise in the future, UNHCR established a roster for separated staff members and affiliates. This roster captures the profiles, skills and experience of former colleagues, enabling hiring managers to consider them for future roles while recognizing institutional knowledge.

B. Support to the workforce during structural changes

11. Recognizing the profound impact of downsizing on individuals and teams, UNHCR prioritized transparency, fairness and care within workable parameters to support the workforce throughout the process. Colleagues were supported through a range of measures tailored to international and locally recruited staff and affiliates. Engagement with the workforce was fostered through information sessions, town hall meetings and targeted briefings organized by contract type and location, supported by a dedicated intranet page with key documents, frequently asked questions and practical resources, aimed at minimizing uncertainty. Active collaboration with the Global Staff Council and operations helped ensure that support measures reflected workforce realities.

12. Human resources teams around the world enhanced support to individuals and teams with guidance and referral to specialized services, as well as managing a significant increase in work on internal mobility, offboarding and comparative reviews. Managers were provided with updated human resources guidance, coaching and leadership support, strengthening their capacity to navigate the transition and support their teams effectively.

13. Career support services were significantly expanded for colleagues affected by the workforce downsizing exercise. These services included individual career counselling, skills development webinars and practical workshops on resume-building and professional networking. Over 3,800 colleagues participated in career support webinars and workshops during the reporting period, complemented by nearly 2,000 hours of individual and group coaching.

14. Psychosocial support was strengthened, enabling colleagues to access individual and group counselling, thematic webinars on resilience and coping with uncertainty, and peer-to-peer support through the global Peer Advisors Network. Additional resources – including self-help tools and well-being programmes such as Act to Heal and Cultivate Resilience – were made available to help colleagues manage stress and maintain mental well-being during this period of organizational transition.

15. These ongoing efforts were focused on ensuring that colleagues were well-informed about their entitlements and the provisions relevant to their individual circumstances,

offering them appropriate support and enabling them to make informed decisions about their next steps. Strategic partnerships were sustained with regions and operations to coordinate emergency staffing and workforce planning, complemented by initiatives such as the Junior Professional Officer programme and leadership development platforms, which contributed to strengthening workforce capacity.

IV. General update

16. Since 2019, human resources management at UNHCR has continued to transform and modernize. These change initiatives have strengthened the ability of the Division of Human Resources to effectively partner with both the organization and its workforce – particularly during the downsizing process. Despite financial constraints, continued efforts to drive efficiencies and enhance the employee experience have remained a critical priority within the core framework of people, partnerships and technology.

17. Efforts continued to strengthen occupational health and safety, including mental health, for all colleagues, especially those serving in the most challenging duty stations. The Psycho-social Risk Management System pilot framework concluded in April 2025, with support from the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology, delivering an advanced tool for identifying and mitigating organizational psychosocial risks and contributing to the mental health and well-being strategy of the United Nations system. In collaboration with the Global Infrastructure Section, physical offices globally were assessed for health and safety compliance, with 72 per cent of offices mapped. The launch of a new medical insurance scheme for directly hired consultants, contractors and fellows ensured robust insurance coverage for affiliate staff, eliminated the risks and liabilities of self-insurance and reaffirmed the organization's duty of care to all colleagues.

18. Despite capacity limitations, key advances were made in enhancing human resources systems and processes. The integration of Workday, the UNHCR digital human resources system, across personnel administration, payroll and case tracking strengthened operational agility and data-driven decision-making while improving efficiency and consistency. The offboarding process for staff members was launched in the system, providing resources and checklists as well as tailored exit surveys to guide colleagues leaving UNHCR, illustrating the responsiveness of teams in adapting to organizational needs. This was supported by a comprehensive overhaul of personnel administration towards greater efficiency and effectiveness in alignment with global models for human resources shared services.

19. Similarly, the transition of the Performance Improvement Plan – a key element in the performance management process – from a fully offline process to Workday has provided much-needed structure and visibility to this critical workflow. Strengthened analytics enabled data-informed tracking of workforce trends to guide decision-making. These digital initiatives were accompanied by efforts to strengthen data integrity, cybersecurity and privacy in line with the data protection framework of UNHCR.

20. In addition, UNHCR began laying the groundwork for a skills-based model of talent management, including enhanced talent profiling in Workday and initiatives such as Career Gigs and targeted learning pathways. During the reporting period, 2,654 colleagues accessed LinkedIn Learning, completing over 126,000 course modules, while Coursera recorded 5,484 hours of learning by 682 participants. These efforts aimed to improve the organization's ability to map, develop and deploy skills where they are most needed, aligning with the shift in the broader United Nations system towards skills-based workforce planning.

21. PeopleChat was launched in September 2024 as an internal tool to provide the workforce with instant access to human resources information and support through a chatbot driven by artificial intelligence. At the inter-agency level, UNHCR maintained its leadership role in advancing human resources reforms across the United Nations system. In October 2024, UnifyHR was launched as an inter-agency initiative to strengthen human resources policy benchmarking and analysis across 13 United Nations organizations using a chatbot driven by artificial intelligence modelled on PeopleChat, fostering greater collaboration and alignment. UNHCR also remained at the forefront of the United Nations' digital identification initiative, successfully leading on the pension data integration use case

enabling secure and automated transmission of staff data between United Nations organizations and the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, streamlining pension processing and reducing administrative delays. This marked significant progress for the initiative and laid the groundwork for future applications such as Single Sign-On user authentication and digital credentials.

22. As co-chair of the United Nations Chief Executives Board Human Resources Network, UNHCR has helped steer system-wide discussions on efficiency, partnership and human resources innovation. UNHCR actively contributed to the International Civil Service Commission's comprehensive review of the United Nations common system compensation package, aligning its revised Policy on Flexible Work with working group recommendations to harmonize entitlements for extended teleworking outside duty stations. It also supported system-wide efforts to improve the quality and details of staff expenditure data, aimed at strengthening financial modelling and cost projections.

V. Conclusion

23. As UNHCR continues to manage this difficult period of downsizing and extensive change, the organization remains committed to safeguarding the well-being of its personnel, in particular ensuring that those leaving the organization are treated with dignity and respect. UNHCR will also seek to maintain the capacity of global operations, supported by strong partnership of human resources teams with entities, operations, staff representatives and the broader workforce.

24. Looking ahead and as part of the broader review of headquarters, the Division of Human Resources will transition into the Division of People Management as of 1 October 2025. While the downsizing will require a review of strategic priorities and offerings, the focus will shift to embedding a skills-based workforce model that supports strategic agility, internal mobility and diversity across the organization. This approach will be underpinned by strengthened data systems and simplified, integrated human resources processes that allow the organization to respond flexibly to shifting needs and emerging crises.
