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Age, gender and diversity mainstreaming

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I. Objectives and focus

1. UNHCR's mission to safeguard the rights and well-being of all persons of concern can only be achieved if women, men, girls and boys of all ages and backgrounds are able to benefit equitably from UNHCR's interventions. All groups must have equal access to UNHCR's protection, services and resources, and be able to participate equally in the making of decisions that affect them. UNHCR is committed to addressing discrimination and inequality not only to ensure equitable outcomes for all persons of concern, but also to safeguard against inadvertently contributing to further discrimination and injustice through the use of procedures and practices that neglect age, gender and diversity considerations.

2. To achieve this objective, UNHCR has adopted an age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) approach and targeted actions to address protection gaps. UNHCR's AGDM strategy supports the meaningful participation of women, girls, men, and boys of all ages and backgrounds, using a participatory, rights and community-based approach, in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of UNHCR's policies, programmes, and activities.

3. This paper provides an update on the implementation of the AGDM strategy, as well as an assessment of both the achievements to date and the continuing challenges identified by the recent AGDM evaluation. It also describes the impact of AGDM on the protection of persons of concern to the Office. Drawing from the evaluation, the paper then identifies the key components needed in the next phase of AGDM to ensure that existing challenges to the goal of an organization-wide integration of age, gender and diversity considerations are identified and overcome.

II. Mainstreaming: achievements to date

4. UNHCR's AGDM strategy was developed in 2004 with the overall goal of ensuring gender equality and the enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern while, at the same time, leveraging the rich range of capacities that exist within communities to bring about positive change. In order to attain this goal, UNHCR introduced various measures, including i) conducting regular participatory assessments with persons of concern to analyse their protection risks, concerns, priorities, capacities and proposed solutions and to jointly evaluate the outcomes; ii) undertaking an analysis to identify where targeted actions are required to address inequalities and to support the empowerment and protection of discriminated groups; iii) mainstreaming age, gender and diversity analysis into all activities, including policy development, manuals and guidelines, capacity building and training, as well as in the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of all UNHCR programmes; and iv) holding senior managers accountable for mainstreaming and targeted action through an AGDM Accountability Framework.

5. In 2009, UNHCR undertook an evaluation of the AGDM strategy. As highlighted in the evaluation report, the strategy introduced fundamental changes to the way UNHCR operates at both the conceptual and practical level. First, AGDM introduced the interrelated and mutually reinforcing notions of "rights-based", "community-based" and a "participatory approach", all of which are aimed at moving from a needs-based strategy to one that is focused on rights, community involvement, and empowerment, where persons of concern are placed at the centre of decision-making. Second, AGDM introduced a conceptual shift from pre-identified groups of "vulnerable" or "extremely vulnerable persons," typically used for categorization in UNHCR operations, to the broader concepts of age, gender and diversity. These less-restrictive concepts encouraged staff and partners not to simply label individuals as "vulnerable" but to analyse the protection context of persons of concern and identify the different vulnerabilities and capacities of all age and gender groups. Third, AGDM brought about an evolved understanding of the material,

social, economic, political and legal dimensions of protecting specific groups. Lastly, the AGDM strategy established a direct link with the development of UNHCR's operational budgets. Concerning this last change, priority protection concerns that are identified in participatory assessment processes should now be reflected in the annual budgeted activities through targeted actions, and spelled out in the country operations plans and in *Focus*.

6. At the operational level, the evaluation found that UNHCR's progress in the area of AGDM had yielded *impact* in the areas indicated below:

- There is a strong commitment to, and implementation of, participatory approaches within the planning process.
- Participatory assessments have improved programme and protection responses and have led to specific targeted actions and improvements in the protection situation.
- Multi-functional teamwork has improved the quality of operational responses.
- AGDM messages are well incorporated into protection policies, guidelines, handbooks and training materials.
- Participatory assessments have increased interaction with persons of concern and have changed staff attitudes and assumptions about working with persons of concern.
- The AGDM Accountability Framework, introduced in 2006 and globally launched in 2007, is considered a groundbreaking tool within the UN family.

III. Challenges of mainstreaming

7. The evaluation also highlighted a number of persistent gaps in the integration of age, gender and diversity analysis into UNHCR's protection and programme delivery and in its delivery of targeted actions. The gaps are indicated below:

(a) UNHCR lacks an official policy on AGDM that clearly defines the concept, preventing any misinterpretation.

(b) UNHCR has paid insufficient attention to building the staffing profile, training, orientation, and performance appraisal systems to ensure that gains made to date are not lost over time.

(c) While participatory assessments are being carried out in many operations, the results are highly variable. In particular, there is limited follow-up with persons of concern, including feedback to the community on what UNHCR has done with the information supplied in the participatory assessments. As a result, negative attitudes arise among persons of concern as the expectations of the participatory assessments are not satisfied.

(d) Multifunctional teams are formed to carry out participatory assessments in the beginning of the programming cycle only and are often not operational for the rest of the year. Frequently, only junior staff is involved, or such assessments are considered the work of community services staff, lacking involvement from protection or programme staff, and senior management.

(e) There is still an insufficient link between the results of the participatory assessment and the country operations plans.

(f) A lack of staff and funding for AGDM has hindered greater progress at the field level.

(g) There has been insufficient work in promoting UNHCR's participatory assessments as part of the common needs assessment framework in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

(h) There is a lack of systematic baseline data collection, disaggregating sex and age, built into *Focus*, against which progress can be measured and analysed.

(i) Despite the Accountability Framework, the commitment of senior management to AGDM has been variable and largely dependent on the personal convictions of individual country representatives, rather than on a systematic agency-wide approach to mainstreaming.

IV. Targeted actions: impact on populations of concern

8. Targeted actions to address protection risks and gaps identified for specific groups through comprehensive situation analyses, including participatory assessments, are at the core of the AGDM strategy. The evaluation found that the AGDM strategy had led, in many operations, to specific targeted actions that addressed the heightened protection risks of specific groups.

9. As the AGDM evaluation report rightly notes however, UNHCR does not yet have a comprehensive means to track the extent to which protection gaps identified at the field level are effectively translated into targeted actions. Nevertheless, over the past three years the global analysis of the AGDM Accountability Framework has provided a useful basis to follow trends in each specific area of targeted action, namely with regard to the protection of women and girls, the protection of children and the protection of victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The results of the trends analysis are outlined below:

(a) A significant improvement in the area of SGBV response and prevention has been noted, with a number of positive field practices reported in response to participatory assessments.

(b) By contrast, however, compliance in terms of AGDM accountability actions related to the protection of children has seen a decline in recent years. The areas that scored low include:

- ensuring 100 per cent birth registration and documentation;[1]
- targeting action to ensure that the specific needs of adolescent girls and boys are addressed; and implementing the UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child.

(c) With regard to the protection and empowerment of women and girls, the statistical trends show varying degrees of achievement, as outlined below:

- Movement toward the equal and meaningful participation of women in advancing their civil and political empowerment has been variable, indicating that this area remains a challenge, often due to cultural prejudices.
- Refugee men and women have been issued with individual registration documentation, with near gender parity, showing a positive trend.
- Only one-third of refugee camps met the standard on documentation, often due to a lack of government prioritization and a lack of government recognition of refugee status.

[1] Only 46 per cent of newborn babies in camps are issued with birth certificates, Global Strategic Priorities (2010-2011).

- A number of field practices have reported positively on the economic empowerment and livelihoods of women, including vocational training and start-up business activities. However, the degree and scale of the involvement of women is often limited and the broader impact thus negligible.

(d) There have been some instances, as outlined below, in which participatory assessments have resulted in "change movement" within communities:

- In Nepal, following a series of participatory assessment exercises, UNHCR identified substance abuse as a recurrent problem, causing increased domestic violence, neglect of children, school drop-out and a generally unsafe environment. A wide recognition of this problem led the community to form a task force to develop concrete measures in an effort to tackle this issue.
- In Chad, participatory assessments identified high bride price as a major factor contributing to the high rate of youth suicide. Community elders subsequently agreed to reduce the bride price, which led to a dramatic drop in the youth suicide rate as well as a decrease in the incidence of SGBV.
- The involvement of men and boys in combating violence against women and girls, initiated in South Africa using social change strategies, is now being replicated in a number of other African countries as an integral component of SGBV prevention strategies.

10. Lastly, the AGDM evaluation highlighted that UNHCR has not fully explored and developed the concept of gender as a variable that can render both women and men vulnerable to protection risks, requiring different solutions. This calls for increased attention to "positive discrimination" and protection measures targeted to specific groups such as male youth in the context of secondary movements, social groups targeted with allegations of witchcraft, or other groups including persons with disabilities and ethnic or sexual minorities.

V. The way forward

11. Creating an organization-wide culture in which an age, gender and diversity perspective is firmly embedded within all planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation has the potential to yield enhanced protection dividends and to facilitate positive, self-driven, social change within the communities within which UNHCR works. As such, the Office remains deeply committed to AGDM and is in the process of developing the final phase of its strategy to enhance the success of this multi-year initiative. To provide substance and direction to this stage, in late April 2010, the High Commissioner called upon all Directors to identify a set of concrete actions that together will constitute a time-bound, corporate plan of action to bring to full fruition age, gender and diversity mainstreaming. The plan, which will be finalized over the next couple of months, will address a range of gaps identified within key thematic areas, as outlined below.

(a) UNHCR needs to strengthen accountability for AGDM by ensuring that its key accountability tools (e.g. the competency framework) are further aligned with AGDM.

(b) Implementing AGDM is the responsibility of all staff members. UNHCR must expand the capacity of staff and partners in order to enhance the impact of AGDM. Learning opportunities need to be developed to increase the understanding of a much broader range of staff to fully integrate the age, gender and diversity principles (e.g. the continuous involvement of persons of concern; age, gender and diversity analysis; multi-functional teams; accountability at all levels, etc.) into their work.

(c). UNHCR must strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of AGDM and its impact, ensuring that key operational tools are fully aligned with, and supportive of, such an approach.

(d) UNHCR needs to prioritize AGDM in resource allocation. Resource allocation processes should reinforce the full integration of the age, gender and diversity approach into all phases of the operations management cycle. The specific needs identified need to be prioritized in the planning stage, and considerations need to be taken into account when designing office/staffing structures. Enhanced support to the Field in improving age, gender and diversity-driven assessments, analysis, project planning, monitoring and reporting is essential in ensuring the quality of these elements.

(e) UNHCR should enhance and develop policies and guidelines, for example in better defining "diversity" and in relation to working in urban contexts. In addition, fresh, creative ways need to be identified to ensure that existing age, gender and diversity-related guidelines are properly understood and implemented in the Field.

(f) The Office must aim to renew energy, commitment and leadership at every level of management in order to ensure the success of AGDM.

(g) UNHCR must enhance and expand partnerships to strengthen AGDM and increase the impact of the approach. The Office needs to actively promote a common understanding and application of the principles within inter-agency fora, both at Headquarters, and with government, NGO and other partners in the Field. In addition, partnerships with academia and other institutions need to be further explored and expanded.

12. Continued efforts are needed to explore further the potential of UNHCR to act as a catalyst of social change through its programmes and broader protection objectives. In order to do so, it is important to build on staff "buy-in" and maintain the strong commitment highlighted in the recent AGDM review. As always, realizing the full potential of the approach must remain a team effort aimed at generating protection through the prism of age, gender and diversity analysis and comprehension.