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Technical integrity of UNHCR's programmes

Contents

I. Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to brief the Standing Committee on a review of technical support functions and processes in UNHCR, with an emphasis on the delivery of technical quality. This review was initiated in the second half of 2010 by the Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM), with input from the Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) and in cooperation with the Division of International Protection (DIP) with regard to refugee education programmes.

2. A major accountability for DPSM is to provide field operations with timely and consistent support in order to improve the quality of programmes, maximize their impact and align them with global priorities; DIP is similarly accountable, in technical domains that fall within its competence.

3. Seven technical sectors were selected for this review, namely: health; nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene promotion (WASH); education; shelter and physical planning; environmental protection; and livelihoods support. These sectors have in common the fact that the relevant professional standards, against which technical integrity is to be measured, are neither exclusively nor principally set by UNHCR itself. Instead, these standards are determined, and regularly reviewed, by the professional community which includes other agencies of the United Nations system as well as governmental and non-governmental actors. In the humanitarian arena, the Sphere project (www.sphereproject.org) has played an important catalytic role in setting standards, and UNHCR experts have contributed to this process. It is important to note, however, that interventions by UNHCR and its partners in non-emergency situations, including protracted refugee situations, cannot rely exclusively on standards such as Sphere that are internationally recognized as appropriate in the acute emergency phase of a humanitarian crisis.

4. Technical support is provided to UNHCR field operations through a broad range of activities, including standard-setting and policy definition, operational guidance, and hands-on intervention. It also relies on a complex network of professionals, who provide support from Headquarters, regional platforms or hubs, or within individual operations, on either a full-time or ad hoc basis. The question which the ongoing review is setting out to address is: to what extent are technical support activities, processes and mechanisms adequate to ensure that UNHCR programmes meet quality standards in the above-mentioned sectors of intervention? This question has to be considered in the context of the increasing complexity of humanitarian action; the rapid pace of technological development, and the need to use limited resources in the most cost-effective way.

5. Technical interventions influence UNHCR's programmes at all stages of the programming cycle: assessment and design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. With this in mind, preliminary review findings and recommendations are presented in this paper under the following headings: quality assurance in assessment and design; monitoring and evaluation; and technological innovation, as a part of the "quality" dimension of UNHCR's programmes.

II. Quality assurance in assessment and design

6. A number of inputs and processes, under the broad heading "technical support", are designed to maximize the probability that minimum standards of quality are being met through interventions by UNHCR and its partners. These are reviewed in the paragraphs below.

7. Quality assurance starts with the process of situation and needs assessment, for which a set of technical tools is indispensable at the earliest stage of a displacement situation. Rapid assessment tools, such as the Local Estimate of Needs for Shelter and Settlement (LENSS) in the shelter/ infrastructure sector, have been developed by most

Global Clusters in which UNHCR is a lead, co-lead, or member. Global Clusters and related Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) mechanisms have, over the past five years, boosted the capacity and creativity of the humanitarian community in relation to quality assurance tools in general. UNHCR has both contributed to, and benefited from, this momentum. At the same time, the nature of UNHCR's responsibilities compels it to develop standards, indicators and operational guidance that are applicable, not only in emergencies, but also in stable and protracted displacement situations, and with a view to achieving durable and sustainable solutions. One of the greatest challenges identified by UNHCR technical experts in the course of the review was the management of technical standards over time.

8. Situation and needs assessments feed into the design of programmes, in which assessed baselines serve to identify sector-specific targets towards agreed standards. Technical integrity must therefore be factored into both impact and performance indicators. While an effort has been made in a recent revision of the UNHCR Results Framework, to introduce more quality indicators, this must continue and be extended to cover all relevant sectors.

9. Standard-setting and the dissemination of technical standards through guidance remain essential components of quality assurance. While, as a rule, technical standards are developed in an inter-agency, multi-stakeholder environment, the particular characteristics of refugee situations often call for specific or more detailed definitions. A current case in point is the implementation of the UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas: following circulation of a booklet on *Designing appropriate interventions in urban settings* (December 2009), UNHCR will shortly disseminate operational guidance on education, health and livelihoods for refugees in urban settings. In other sectors, such as shelter, technical standards tend to be context-specific, influenced not only by the type of settlement (urban, semi-rural or rural), but also by climate, terrain, social and cultural factors, etc. UNHCR has therefore embarked on a project to catalogue shelter solutions for refugees and other displaced populations beyond the emergency phase, with a view to updating guidance in this area.

10. Over the past 24 months, guidance tools have been developed or updated on a range of technical matters, and made available to staff on the UNHCR Intranet. These include: guidelines on supplementary feeding; referral health care; HIV testing and counselling; microfinance for refugees; gender equality in and through education; supporting learners with disabilities; and household energy assessment. Protocols and standard operating procedures are most effective for mainstreaming technical standards into the practices of field actors. In the health sector, for example, protocols are in place in most refugee operations for the procurement and onward management of medicines, and for responses to disease outbreaks.

11. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ensure the technical integrity of interventions unless relevant expertise that can genuinely influence the management of operations is built into the human resources of the organization. The few technical experts at Headquarters have to work through networks of sector specialists in the Field. However, a survey of internal UNHCR technical networks has revealed serious discrepancies among the different sectors, calling for a more consistent approach to network development and management. Regional technical support hubs in Nairobi and in Bangkok are useful links in those "support chains", however their capacities are also stretched to the limit. Furthermore, in some sectors – education in particular - even the larger operations are not equipped with specialist staff, and unrealistic demands are placed upon protection, community services or programme staff in respect of technical programming and monitoring. In several operations, managers have pointed to over-reliance on affiliate workforce arrangements for the coverage of technical sectors, while stressing that they can hardly afford to establish or maintain regular staff positions.

12. This is where partnership comes in. UNHCR relies heavily on non-governmental as well as governmental partners for the implementation of its programmes; it has entered into

standby agreements with some of these partners for the deployment or secondment of technical experts, both in emergencies and in more stable environments. UNHCR wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the indispensable support it receives from States which provide deployable expertise or funding for many of these standby agreements. At the same time, these partners are calling for more systematic mainstreaming of technical expertise into UNHCR's own staff cadre. External rosters need to be updated and staff trained and administered. Meanwhile, UNHCR has initiated a dialogue with its main standby partners with a view to enhancing the predictability and quality of deployments, including through regular review and capacity building of roster members.

13. Quality assurance in critical sectors of assistance is provided to a large extent by UNHCR's implementing partners, many of whom have acquired a solid international or national reputation for professionalism in their respective fields of competence. Those partners themselves, however, face difficulty retaining technical expertise, or readily admit that the technical knowledge and skills of their staff need upgrading. Technical training and capacity building is, therefore, a recurrent activity in refugee settings, taking a significant share of the time and energy of the limited central, regional and national resources of UNHCR. To try to remedy this, as well as to highlight the complementarity of technical interventions, UNHCR and its partners increasingly use multisectoral training, for example, for the three clusters which UNHCR leads or co-leads (protection, shelter and camp coordination and camp management), or through programmes which bring water, sanitation and shelter staff together.

III. Monitoring and evaluation

14. Surveillance systems are generally more developed in some sectors than in others. The public health area stands out as being particularly well regulated. In the refugee domain, this advantage has led to the development of the Health Information System (HIS), now web-based, which has been deployed to 41 operations, covering 169 sites, including urban settings. Health facility and laboratory scorecards are being piloted as add-ons to the system. By the end of 2011, WASH measurements will be integrated into the HIS and, over time, other sectors will be incorporated, notably education. What makes HIS – soon to be renamed "Field Information System" – a potentially powerful mechanism of quality control is the accountability chain along which it operates, with clearly assigned responsibilities for data entry, validation, analysis, and feedback.

15. Other monitoring systems have been tested successfully over a period of time. Thus, the environment-related Framework for Assessing Monitoring and Evaluating (FRAME) toolkit, last updated in 2009, contains a number of checklists with a wide range of indicators. Environmental audits are rare in refugee or displacement-affected areas, though a few Governments have made them mandatory on a regular basis. Such audits could play an important role in controlling the integrity of ongoing programmes, through the lens of environmental protection, which is by nature cross-cutting. Thus, no technical intervention would be considered to be of sufficient quality unless it contributed to the protection of natural resources and ecosystems.

16. Joint Assessment Missions (JAMs) have been organized since 1994 and are carried out in most refugee situations every two years. This is a testimony to the strong partnership between the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR, as well as with other operational and implementing partners in refugee operations, and to the compelling message of food security as a most basic right for mobilizing all sectors of protection and assistance. In a typical JAM nowadays, refugee food security and coping strategies are assessed in a comprehensive manner, enabling a thorough review of interventions in health, nutrition, education, environment, shelter, energy, WASH, agriculture, and livestock keeping - not only in their own right, but also in their mutual complementarity. JAM recommendations are a significant source of validation and/or re-direction or re-prioritization for the activities of WFP, UNHCR and their partners in the Field.

17. Based on this model, UNHCR intends to initiate a discussion with its main operational and implementing partners, as well as with interested donors, about the feasibility of periodic multisectoral technical evaluations of large or growing operation sites. One area of quality control requiring particular attention is feedback from beneficiaries. Participatory assessments tend to focus on needs and protection or welfare gaps, and seldom discuss the quality of the services received from UNHCR and its partners.

IV. Technological innovation

18. According to the terms of reference of the review, appropriateness to context, cost-quality ratio and innovation are all important dimensions of technical quality or integrity. Technology is moving fast in areas relevant to humanitarian work, including mobile communication technology, transitional shelter, water, and solid waste management. UNHCR is working to embrace innovation in all aspects of its work, and is open to cooperation with a broad range of partners. The recently completed design of a new family tent, in cooperation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and involving constant dialogue with field users on the one hand and manufacturers on the other, is a model to be followed.

19. Within the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply, the Supply Management Service has made strides in emphasising quality assurance and quality control in UNHCR's relations with its suppliers, including for core relief items. The research and development capacities of the corporate sector can be leveraged in order to combine innovation and cost-cutting measures. The "Lights Years Ahead" project, launched in 2010, appeals to private sector donors because the products UNHCR is deploying under the project (including energy-saving wood stoves, family solar lamps and solar street lights) are technologically sound and cost-effective.

20. Experience with innovation in the humanitarian and other fields has demonstrated that collaboration between end users, the industry, and academia can deliver a constructive mix of competencies. UNHCR is therefore exploring new modalities of collaboration and "triangular" partnerships that would address two gaps in the innovative capacity of the Office and its partners: (i) given the limited human resources dedicated to fast-evolving sectors, it is not easy for UNHCR to keep abreast of technical developments outside the humanitarian arena that could offer novel applications; and (ii) while ingenuity and creativity are not in short supply in the humanitarian community, it takes time and resources to "package" technical challenges and local solutions in a way that stimulates interest and mobilizes support from business and academia. These shortcomings contribute to the perception that humanitarian action – especially in protracted situations – is technically conservative.

21. While this paper does not directly address information and communication technologies (ICT), it is clear that ICT innovation pervades almost every sector of UNHCR's work. Whereas systematic programme monitoring contributes to quality assurance, recent experience shows that well developed ICT tools can facilitate and considerably speed up monitoring. Thus, mobile phones are being used for data collection in several operations, within the context of bed-net retention and other surveys, and for tracking and evaluating project outputs. Likewise, web-based surveillance systems such as the HIS allow real-time validation of data and rapid feedback, as well as control of compliance with procedures and timely corrective action.

22. UNHCR will continue to exploit the potential of innovative technological applications as new developments occur.