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Community-based protection and age, gender and diversity

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of recent progress made to improve UNHCR's community-based protection work and implementation of the "Age, gender and diversity policy." It highlights areas of progress, main challenges, as well as considerations for the way forward.

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I. Introduction

1. UNHCR's community-based protection approach is rooted in the "Age, gender and diversity (AGD) policy,"¹ which aims to ensure equal enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern through consultation and partnership with them throughout the programming cycle. UNHCR strives to include persons of concern in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of protection, assistance and solutions programmes in order to understand their concerns and jointly devise responses that meet their needs and build on their capacities. This approach is a key component of the Office's commitment to ensuring accountability towards persons of concern.

2. Displaced and stateless communities know best the threats that they face and the tools needed to address them. UNHCR therefore endeavours to harness the knowledge and resources of these communities to strengthen their own capacities. If they are empowered, refugees, stateless persons, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other populations of concern can better protect and support their families, contribute to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence with host communities, support the aspirations of their youth, and help each other restore their lives.

3. Conflict and displacement destabilize communities, undermine their resilience, and weaken their protective and supportive capacities. This can lead to harmful practices such as child marriage and child labour. Yet crises that take such a toll on community structures can also eventually lead to the rebuilding of more inclusive, cohesive and tolerant communities. A change in the roles of women and girls, while they are displaced, can empower and help them combat harmful practices. A critical element of community-based protection, therefore, is to be able to identify and support the positive roles that communities, including traditional and religious leaders, can and should play, but also to be able to understand communities sufficiently to be able to address negative attitudes and practices.

4. A critical element of UNHCR's community-based approach is the promotion of peaceful coexistence between displaced communities and host communities. In many operations, coexistence has been encouraged through community centres, where refugees or IDPs may design and implement activities for themselves and host communities, such as social events, recreational activities, public information and education. UNHCR's cash-based interventions can also contribute to peaceful coexistence by strengthening the local economy, especially when cash directed towards refugees and IDPs is spent in local shops and on local services. This can reinforce community relations and improve quality of life during displacement.

II. Areas of progress

A. AGD Accountability Framework

5. In 2013, the "UNHCR accountability framework for age, gender and diversity mainstreaming"² was transformed into an AGD accountability report and integrated into UNHCR's planning and reporting system, Focus. Using this new tool, UNHCR is able to better capture the outcomes of participatory assessments with persons of concern and assess the extent to which they are translated into action. As part of year-end reporting for 2014, AGD accountability reports were submitted by all operations and headquarters divisions. Drawing from these reports, an analysis of progress and challenges in specific areas of work will soon be published as the "AGD accountability report for 2014." The analysis indicates that implementation of the AGD policy has taken root at all levels, with

¹ Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/4e7757449.html>.

² Available from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47a707950.html>.

positive results in areas such as gender empowerment, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and response, and the inclusion of marginalized groups in protection and assistance programming. As identified below, areas for improvement also have been identified, and UNHCR will seek to address these through two drivers of change: i) leadership; and ii) programming tools and systems for enhanced accountability to persons of concern.

B. AGD e-learning

6. UNHCR has strengthened understanding of the AGD policy among staff and bolstered its implementation across all functional areas. In 2013, UNHCR introduced a mandatory e-learning induction course that includes an AGD component for all newly-recruited staff. This component also has been integrated into other learning initiatives, such as the Protection Learning Programme and the Operationalizing Protection for Multi-Functional Teams Programme. To date, the AGD component, as part of mandatory or optional courses, has been completed by more than 2,300 UNHCR staff, 700 United Nations Volunteers and 200 partner staff.

C. Community-based protection workforce

7. As reported in the June 2013 conference room paper on “Community-based protection” (EC/64/SC/CRP.14), UNHCR’s internal review of the field-based protection and community services posts revealed an ambiguity in the division of responsibilities between functions. It also found that while the community services function was a key driver of community-based protection work, it did not tend to hold the same level of influence in operational decision-making processes as the protection function. Moreover, neither function was able to dedicate enough time to direct contact with communities. To address this, UNHCR has created a new function, Protection Officer (Community-based), which merges the functions of Community Services Officer and Protection Officer. Job descriptions have been created for these posts, and recruitment profiles were adjusted accordingly. The revised job descriptions are more directive about the positioning of these posts in office structures and establish accountabilities for both the staff member and manager on direct community contacts. In the first phase of this process, five P-3 and P-4 posts were created. Now in the second phase, over 370 former community services positions are being progressively converted to the new function. In the third phase, UNHCR will identify strategic protection posts for conversion. Once completed, this process will institutionalize community-based protection as a core protection function.

D. Youth empowerment

8. In 2013, UNHCR established the “Youth Initiative Fund” to support projects created, designed and led by youth to address protection challenges they identified within their communities. The Fund is unique in that it builds on the existing capacities of young people and their empowerment, rather than focusing on and reacting to their vulnerabilities. Thus far, the Fund has supported more than 35 projects in 24 countries, addressing issues such as SGBV, peaceful coexistence, and education and livelihoods. For example, a playground project in Morocco brings together host communities and youth associations from different backgrounds to play basketball. The project’s activities are not limited to sports: trained coaches engage young refugees and the local community through a series of free activities designed to enhance life skills and peaceful co-existence. Through all of the projects, the Fund provides the support needed to empower youth to become protection actors within their communities, build life skills and strengthen their resilience. UNHCR and partner staff working in the field have reported that implementing projects in partnership with youth has demonstrated their capabilities and helped dispel the notion of idle, helpless and troublesome youth. When provided with

the opportunity, refugee youth become confident agents of change, strengthening protection in their own communities.

E. Protection of persons belonging to diversity categories

9. Recognizing that the diversity element of the AGD policy is not easily defined, UNHCR has worked to improve staff and partner capacity for enhanced protection delivery for specific groups. Most recently, UNHCR has focused on building internal capacity to protect and assist two categories of people facing particular protection risks in operations around the world: i) persons with disabilities; and ii) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons.

10. From 2011 to 2013, UNHCR partnered with the Women's Refugee Commission to assess and improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in UNHCR's protection and assistance programming. Gaps identified during this work led to the development, in 2014, of a multi-year programme to intensify technical support to country operations and forge new partnerships with national disability actors. The initial focus will be on eight country operations, including Chad, Rwanda and Zimbabwe in 2015. Employing a community-based protection approach will ensure that persons with disabilities actively participate in assessments, capacity building and planning for the projects. It is hoped that these first eight projects will enable the development of sustainable and replicable disability-inclusive programming.

11. In order to strengthen the protection of LGBTI persons, in 2014 UNHCR began a global mapping exercise to identify organizational strengths and gaps. The findings are expected to be issued by the end of 2015. In parallel, UNHCR is developing a training programme on the protection of LGBTI persons, which has been piloted with staff in 32 different country operations. The training materials will be made available to all UNHCR staff and humanitarian partners later this year through the Global Learning Centre's Protection Digital Repository.³ UNHCR also is developing eligibility guidelines on the international protection needs of asylum-seekers who apply for refugee status on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression, or on the basis of being intersex. The guidelines will include country-of-origin information on the situation of individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

III. Main challenges

A. Insecurity, access and participation of persons of concern

12. Insecurity increasingly affects the ability of UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to ensure the meaningful participation of persons of concern. Security challenges can limit the capacity to work in partnership with persons of concern and their communities. This suggests a need to develop innovative strategies to augment, often remotely, the capacity of communities to effect positive change in their own environments. It also requires concerted efforts to develop outreach networks with communities of concern and local partners. Such an approach has yielded positive outcomes in the Syria situation, where refugee and IDP volunteers play a strong role in outreach and referral networks.

13. Where UNHCR has access to populations of concern, the Office has consistently sought to consult them during the assessment phase of the humanitarian programme cycle. Multi-functional teams (MFTs) composed of staff members and partners with different skill sets, experience and functional expertise work with communities of concern

³ Training materials will be made available on UNHCR's learning platform "Learn and Connect," <https://unhcr.csod.com/client/unhcr/default.aspx>.

to facilitate the adoption of an integrated approach. They outline a clear set of targets to support appropriate programming decisions at senior levels and reinforce UNHCR's ability to analyse the protection environment and respond holistically.

14. However, internal reviews have shown that gaps frequently exist after the assessment phase, and UNHCR needs to improve the level of inclusion of persons of concern in all phases of the programming cycle. Of particular importance is the need to ensure more structured and systematized reporting back to persons of concern during the implementation and monitoring and evaluation stages. The use of MFTs during these stages, though not uncommon, has yet to be systematized. Without MFTs working throughout the programming cycle, feedback from communities is not fully communicated to UNHCR and partner planners. UNHCR will address these problems through the new community-based protection workforce as well as a new pilot learning initiative.

C. Community-based protection outside of camps

15. A growing number of persons who are forcibly displaced find themselves in urban areas, where services and livelihood opportunities may be more accessible. However, urban areas can increase the risk of exposure to protection risks such as SGBV, detention, exploitation, xenophobia, discrimination and harassment. A fundamental challenge in urban settings is the identification, and thus protection, of refugees and IDPs. Ensuring adequate communication with displaced populations proves difficult, especially when they are dispersed across large cities and move frequently. In a number of operations, UNHCR relies on its partners, as well as refugees and IDPs themselves, for outreach to communities. Refugee and IDP volunteers provide communities with crucial referral services to national systems or humanitarian programmes while, at the same time, supporting UNHCR to identify and monitor protection trends. In Somalia, for example, UNHCR is leading an inter-agency mechanism that gives persons of concern a channel (through mobile SMS) to raise issues and provide feedback on the support offered by the Somalia Return Consortium.

16. UNHCR is analysing the impact of networks of refugee/IDP outreach volunteers in several operations, where they have been the backbone of a communication mechanism between displaced communities and UNHCR. Outreach volunteers not only disseminate information, provide psychosocial support, and refer people to services such as health clinics, registration centres and food distribution points. They also notify UNHCR of issues of concern to their communities. These models empower refugees and IDPs to take charge of their own lives and become agents of change within their communities, thus reducing dependency. UNHCR aims to replicate successful initiatives.

D. Empowerment and self-reliance

17. Promoting self-reliance through empowerment is a key component of UNHCR's approach. This approach supports refugees and IDPs to design and implement community projects that also can benefit host communities. As discussed in the paper on "Innovation: Cash-based interventions" (EC/66/SC/CRP.13), such interventions are an important means of supporting the safety and dignity of persons of concern and promoting autonomy, allowing refugees and IDPs to make their own decisions about goods and services and invest in livelihoods. Electronic cash delivery mechanisms such as bank cards or mobile phones are more discreet than in-kind assistance and offer greater choice in the timing, amount and frequency of disbursement. The flexible and personalized nature of cash-based assistance can also benefit marginalized groups and persons with specific needs.

18. UNHCR's protection and assistance programmes work in support of national governments, who retain the primary duty to protect forcibly displaced populations and ensure access to basic rights and services. UNHCR therefore prioritizes support to

national systems, including capacity building for duty bearers and service providers who in turn support displaced communities. This approach avoids, where possible, unsustainable -- and often inherently unequal -- parallel structures, and helps to promote peaceful coexistence between displaced populations and the larger community. Applied early and in strong partnership with local actors, this approach demonstrates international solidarity and responsibility sharing. Working with a broad range of national partners expands UNHCR's reach, increases the level of support provided to displaced communities and strengthens the resilience of the communities that host them.

IV. Taking community-based protection and AGD forward

A. Community-based protection and AGD as accountability tools

19. UNHCR's work on community-based protection and AGD builds on years of experience and continuous innovation and improvement. In July 2014, UNHCR assumed the role of co-chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Task Team on Accountability to Affected Populations/Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, sharing good practices on accountability and learning from other humanitarian actors. The Task Team's work plan is focused on the creation of a help desk and technical support missions to support inter-agency efforts in the field.

20. To meet its accountability to persons of concern, UNHCR is committed to continually reviewing and strengthening its working methods. Some of the challenges mentioned above illustrate the areas in which UNHCR is now directing its work to ensure protection in new, quickly evolving and complex situations with communities.

B. Institutional learning

21. UNHCR has begun to map and document effective community-based protection practices. The information gathered will form the basis of a good practices guide in order to implement community-based protection approaches globally. A capacity-building initiative that is planned to run through early 2016 will explore the challenges faced in the field and help identify ways to address them.

C. Solutions

22. UNHCR's over-arching goal is to ensure that persons of concern can avail themselves of durable solutions. The robust and consistent engagement of communities throughout the displacement cycle can have a profound impact on their journey towards achieving durable solutions. Refugee and IDP communities that lead fuller and more dignified lives in displacement are more likely to successfully achieve durable solutions than those who are treated as passive recipients of aid, upon which they often become dependent. It is therefore critical that humanitarian programmes help bring normalcy to the lives of refugees and IDPs, preparing them to seize opportunities for solutions, as discussed in the paper "Solution strategies" (EC/66/SC/CRP.15). It is to this end that UNHCR prioritizes support to national services and systems to which refugees and IDPs have access.

V. Conclusion

23. UNHCR is committed to ensuring that persons of concern of all age, gender and diversity backgrounds have equal enjoyment of rights and access to appropriate and effective protection programming that they themselves help to design. This paper has outlined progress towards this goal, including through strengthened organizational capacity and the development of community-based protection good practices to be

replicated. More needs to be done by all concerned actors. UNHCR is seeking to expand the Office's direct partnerships with refugee youth and provide means by which they can contribute to their own protection and that of their communities. In this regard, UNHCR invites the Executive Committee to consider adopting a conclusion on international protection on engagement and empowerment of youth. It is important that the Office more closely engage with local government and civil society actors, use resources to build on their strengths and provide them with the means to better support displaced populations living among them. UNHCR continuously seeks to expand and facilitate partnerships with all concerned actors, including with displaced communities, civil society, host communities, and host States, and to centre, within each stage of the planning cycle, the participation, insights, and experiences of persons of concern.
