

Oral update on UNHCR operational regionalisation plan
74th Standing Committee meeting
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
Room XVII, Palais des Nations
5-7 March 2019

Mister Chairperson,

Distinguished Delegates

As mentioned in my opening remarks, UNHCR is in the midst of what we hope will be a far-reaching transformation. As we turn to the next aspect of our change process—regionalization and decentralization—we do so with the full knowledge that this is perhaps the most visible, and consequential, element of our ongoing process of renewal and reform. We are confident it will result in a more agile, efficient and innovative organization. Most importantly, it will leave us in a better position to respond to new crises, save lives, and address the future aspirations of forcibly displaced communities everywhere.

Many have rightly asked, 'why now?' For us, the urgency is clear. The humanitarian landscape is rapidly evolving. The Global Compact on Refugees, rightly hailed as a 'game changer,' has the potential to transform the way we respond to refugee movements. We all have a stake in getting this right. The Compact is built upon a strong foundation of law and policy. It sets out a framework for greater responsibility sharing with those countries who host—often for prolonged periods—the world's largest populations of refugees. Meaningful solutions for millions of refugees will require greater collaboration, imagination and political will. This, in turn, has prompted us to rethink the required skills, capacities and ways of working we need at country and regional level, and to adapt accordingly.

The UN system as a whole is also adapting to new challenges and possibilities, and moving rapidly in the direction of devolution of authority to regional centers. Many of UNHCR's sister agencies and key partners are already there. It is critical that protection concerns and perspectives—borne of a deep, first-hand knowledge of forcibly displaced communities—are included in the policy discourse at regional level. UNHCR's voice is essential.

The majority of solutions to forced displacement will continue to be local, driven by regional and local politics and possibilities. Our goal, therefore, is a decentralization that empowers the field to make the right decisions without unnecessary delays; enables Bureau Directors and Country Representatives to seize new opportunities; ensures that funds are prioritized in optimal ways; and promotes partnership and collaboration with a wide range of partners, including member states.

There are undoubtedly risks involved with this transformation. UNHCR is known and respected as a leader in the larger humanitarian community. Its protection expertise and advice is valued by states and civil societies in every corner of the world. Our way of working that has served refugees well for over half a century. But the world is changing rapidly. The numbers of forcibly displaced increases with each passing year. And the complexity of population movements and resulting protection challenges continue to intensify. The High Commissioner has therefore assessed the risks of complacency, of refusing to adapt to a changing multilateral system in an evolving world, as significant threats to our role and future relevance. This appetite for change is palpable among many UNHCR colleagues in Geneva and in the field.

During the course of 2018, the Change Team, with the support of outside consultants, consulted with a broad range of colleagues within the organisation and reviewed UNHCR's existing regional offices and Service Centres to ascertain what worked, what practices could be replicated, and what functions should be phased out at regional level. The review was also informed both by our own past attempts to regionalize, as well as the experience of sister agencies.

To better align with the geographical coverage of UN sister agencies and the UN Development System as a whole, the number of Regional Bureaux was increased from five to seven, with Bureaux to be located in Bangkok, Amman, Nairobi, Pretoria, Dakar, Geneva, and Panama City. While we made minor alterations in regional coverage based on operational considerations, we have largely adhered to established UN regional centres in our selection of sites for the future Bureaux.

A key design consideration underpinning our regionalization is a clear, robust application of the 'Three Lines of Defence' conceptual framework, which was adopted by the UN system in 2014. The ability to better identify, address and manage emerging risks informed the design of new Bureau structures. The new architecture will help ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities, decision-making authority, and most importantly, accountability for actions taken. Creating a renewed culture of accountability is an underlying cross-cutting theme of the larger change process.

A core principle of our regionalization and decentralization process is that those closest to populations of concern and points of delivery are best placed to make critical operational decisions. As part of the process, we will reinforce fundamental principles of good management and oversight. Located in closer proximity to countries under their purview, Regional Bureaux will be better positioned to regularly support country operations and assure quality protection and assistance in accordance with established norms and standards. At Headquarters, we will maintain a strong, independent 'third line' of defence oversight capacity through External Audit, Evaluation, and a robust Office of the Inspector General.

It is clear that the regionalization must be accompanied by an increased devolution of authority to the field. In recognition of this, we will revise our resource allocation framework before Directors move to the field. The revised RAF will include a number of new measures aimed at simplifying systems and processes and increasing the flexibility of managers in the field to make decisions, course-correct, and prioritize resources in ways that best suit their operational contexts and address the needs of refugees, IDPs, and stateless populations. The High Commissioner has endorsed in principle a number of policy proposals aimed at simplifying procedures and increasing the authority of Country Representatives and Bureau Directors. A task team has been formed at HQs to assess risks and formulate new policies in key areas of procurement, local fundraising, human resource management, and financial management.

Each of the seven new geographic regions are characterized by different political dynamics, protection challenges and possibilities for inclusion and solutions. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to bureau construction, but the common thread remains an enhanced ability to deliver on the High Commissioner's Strategic Directions, in particular our capacity to protect, to respond, and to solve. Our new Regional Bureaux will be structured around a core structure of four pillars. These include Protection, Strategy and Partnerships, Operations Management, and External Engagement. Technical expertise and any context-specific adaptations within the new Bureau structures will be determined through our forthcoming annual planning cycle. We have asked the Bureau Directors and their teams to consider the needs of country operations—and to place technical expertise at country level as a first priority.

We have set an ambitious timeframe for the transition. Directors of the new Regional Bureaux and their core teams will begin moving to the field in the fourth quarter of 2019. We anticipate that Bureaux will be fully staffed and operational by January 2020. A transition of this scale will invariably encounter obstacles and challenges. We will therefore maintain strong field support capacities within the HQ Divisions in this transition period to manage risks and ensure consistent delivery of protection and assistance as the new Bureaux gradually assume accountability for quality assurance and support to country operations.

The welfare of our personnel will continue to inform every decision as we move to relocate the Bureaux to the field and restructure headquarters. We have coordinated closely with the Staff Council to ensure fairness, transparency, and solutions for impacted staff members. We will extend maximum flexibility to colleagues during the transition, including accelerated, simplified assignment processes for the new Bureau positions in the field and as much flexibility as possible to relocate in the second half of the year. A number of staff transition support measures are being implemented, including support for possible placement with other UN agencies for those who do not wish to rotate, and the possibility to apply for a voluntary separation programme. We know that this transition will affect staff members and their families in different ways and we will continue to take all possible measure to minimize any adverse impacts.

At its core, our regionalization and decentralization process is designed to better protect and assist refugees and others of concern—and to promote access to viable durable solutions. It is a critical investment in our future, driven by the need to be a more efficient, nimble, and impactful organization. The primary objective, therefore, was not simply to reduce costs. We anticipate that the costs associated with the creation of core bureau structures in the field and associated transition costs can be covered from within our existing budget. This will require a collective effort to tighten our belts and rethink non-essential activities.

The strengthening of country operations will have a modest impact on our overall operational expenditure. However, we consider this an essential investment in our capacity to work differently and engage more effectively with development actors and complex national-level planning processes. In the medium to long term, we anticipate that the initial costs of this process will be offset by efficiency gains, improved value for money, and an enhanced ability to forge new partnerships on behalf of refugee protection, inclusion and solutions. Refugees and others of concern deserve, and expect, nothing less.