

High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges “Preparing for protection and solutions in the future”

Swiss Statement

2020 has been a challenging year with a global health crisis, conflicts and climate change increasing. This led to a sharp increase in forcibly displaced people. More than 50% of forcibly displaced persons are children below the age of 18 years.

While it is true that COVID-19 has impacted all people and all aspects of society, the pandemic has made starkly apparent and exacerbated pre-existing structural inequities that particularly harm migrants, refugees, and other forcibly displaced populations, including IDPs. Furthermore, people on the move are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to their often precarious living and hygiene situations, be it in camps, overcrowded housing situations and inadequately protected work places.

Lockdown and confinement measures hit vulnerable people the hardest and implied an economic shock and loss of livelihood. Vulnerable people, including many refugees and migrants, who are often working in the informal sector and with no social protection and security were mostly affected by the lockdown measures taken by the government and thus, coupled with increasing food prices are affected most by the increasing food insecurity. Millions of labor migrants returned home due to the pandemic and families ended up in poverty, as remittance flows decreased significantly. The alarming estimates by the World Bank back in April about the expected drop in remittances of 20% or around 110 billion USD prompted Switzerland and the UK to raise awareness about the potentially devastating effect of this decline for millions of people around the world relying on these money transfers. Together with partners from the UN system and the World Bank, Switzerland and the UK launched the Call to Action “Remittances in Crisis: How to Keep them Flowing”, which identifies and promotes key measures that should be taken by policymakers, regulators and remittance service providers to ensure access for migrants and wider diaspora communities to remittance services and sustain this vital lifeline during the crisis. The latest estimates released by the World Bank in October come timely in clarifying remittances trends. While the drop in remittances will not be as sharp as expected, there will a more gradual fall extending into 2021 by about 14% compared to the pre-COVID-19 levels of 2019. In light of this, the Call to Action will continue to provide a platform for governments and other constituencies in sharing experiences, exploring solutions and taking concerted action.

The pandemic has created tensions and fears which led to stigmatization of the most vulnerable groups of spreading the virus. Such fear and

misinformation led to tensions and violence against marginalized groups, such as migrants, refugees and IDPs.

As reported by the UN Secretary General, 90% of COVID-19 cases occur in cities. Acknowledging also that urban centers/cities are hosting the majority of refugees (60%) and IDPs (80%) worldwide, Switzerland pays a particular attention to cities in their efforts to ensure protection and inclusive approaches in response to the multiple challenges arising from the pandemics. Mayors and local governments around the world have responded pragmatically, urgently, and ethically. From providing free access to testing or treatment and direct cash assistance regardless of migration status, to ensuring public outreach materials are multilingual, to actively fostering messages of community solidarity, mayors are taking decisive action.

The Mayors Migration Council (MMC) — which Switzerland supports as a founding institutional donor — has stepped up and affirmed that the only way to recover and build back stronger from this crisis is to create inclusive response and recovery policies ensuring that no one is left behind. The MMC Mayors of Zurich, Freetown, Kampala, Amman and others, launched together a Global Mayors Solidarity Campaign for Inclusive Response and Recovery. They called on national governments and the international community to join them in three tasks:

- a) Ensuring safe, equitable access to services regardless of migration status, including healthcare and economic relief.
- b) Empowering migrants and refugees to be part of the solution to COVID-19, including through the regularization of essential workers.
- c) And combating misinformation, racism, and xenophobia to strengthen community solidarity in all COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

For this to happen, cities – in particular secondary cities - need capacity building support and investment in their core infrastructure from national and international partners so they can continue to deliver the critical non-discriminatory services migrants, refugees and IDPs rely on. Switzerland is pleased to see that local governments are represented – through the Geneva Cities Hub – in the dialogue on protection today. We believe that cities should be given more space in the future in the partnership, acknowledging the key role they play in shaping durable solutions, fulfilling international commitments on migration, protection and the SDGs more broadly.

The lockdown and confinement measures also had a heavy impact on children. The closure of schools has prevented up to 1.3 billion children and young people in 190 countries from going to school and the situation in many developing and emerging countries remains critical. During the GRF a year ago, Switzerland had pledged to set-up a Hub for Education in Emergency in Geneva. With the Covid-19 health pandemic, this pledge became even more relevant and Switzerland is delighted to announce that the hub will be launched officially in January 2021 and we are looking forward to work together with our partners in this regard.

At the height of the pandemic in spring, there was still little concrete and reliable data and information on the overall impact of Covid-19 on the situation of refugees and migrants, in particular migrants outside refugee camps. Switzerland attaches great importance to interventions that are based on sound evidence in order to protect the most vulnerable which is a priority for protection work in the future. In this context, we have worked with partners to support data collection on the impact of COVID-19 in order to put in place targeted measures to protect and support refugees and migrants. Data has demonstrated, for example, that the Covid-19 has created an increased dependence of refugees and migrants on smugglers and that this increased dependence increases their vulnerability to protection incidents.

Switzerland would like to thank UNHCR once again for its excellent work and commends all staff for their strong commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic.