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High Commissioner's Programme**

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Human resources, including staff welfare*Summary*

This paper outlines developments in human resources in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since the last update to the Standing Committee in September 2025 (EC/76/SC/CRP.23). The reporting period was marked by one of the most significant workforce adjustments in recent history, as UNHCR undertook a large-scale downsizing to realign with reduced financial resources. The paper highlights measures taken to support the organization and its personnel through this period of transition, alongside key initiatives to stabilize the workforce and lay the foundations for a forward-looking, agile, skills-based and sustainable workforce model.

I. Introduction

1. The past year has been one of the most consequential in the Office's recent history. Acute financial constraints necessitated a significant restructuring and workforce downsizing exercise, with over 7,000 colleagues leaving the organization since January 2025. As a result, UNHCR has become significantly leaner, even as humanitarian needs continue to grow.
2. In 2025, the Division of People Management, formerly the Division of Human Resources, prioritized managing the workforce reduction. Efforts centered on support to the organization and all colleagues navigating this challenging period, while quickly adjusting human resources frameworks and policy instruments that had not been designed for downsizing on this scale.
3. In 2026, while transition support has remained central, the focus has progressively shifted towards advancing a strategic reset of the organization's people architecture, to lay the foundations for a strategic, skills-based and technology-enabled workforce model that strengthens the organization's ability to anticipate, adapt and deliver in a context of continued volatility.

II. People working for UNHCR

4. In January 2026, UNHCR launched the Global Workforce Dashboard, a dynamic online tool which makes live workforce data available to Member States, further supporting the Office's transparency and efficiency efforts.
5. As at 30 June 2026, the total workforce of UNHCR stood at approximately 12,600 people, including some 9,500 staff members and 3,000 affiliate workforce colleagues. Despite this contraction, UNHCR maintained a strong operational footprint, with 90 per cent serving outside of headquarters, in field operations and often in hardship duty stations. The vast majority, over 70 per cent, of the organization's workforce are locally recruited colleagues serving in country offices and emergency response operations worldwide.
6. Despite the reductions, UNHCR retained gender parity across all international professional grades, including senior management grades (P5 and above), following sustained efforts in recent years to achieve this. At the national and general service levels, parity was maintained across most grades, with National Professional Officer level A approaching parity.
7. The UNHCR workforce continues to reflect broad geographical diversity spanning 153 nationalities, and 79 per cent of colleagues originating from the Global South, as defined and outlined in the Global Workforce Dashboard.

III. Workforce changes in 2025–2026

8. Building on the measures outlined in the previous update to the Standing Committee, UNHCR focused on the immediate organizational adjustments in response to the funding shortfall in the first half of 2025. These included structural reviews of headquarters and regional bureaux, policy adjustments to support workforce mobility and cost containment, and the introduction of special measures to prioritize redeployment and provide enhanced career and psychosocial support to personnel during a period of significant uncertainty.
9. As workforce reductions and placement efforts continued during the second half of 2025, support to personnel remained a central focus. The freeze on external hiring and special measures prioritizing the placement of unassigned colleagues resulted in over half of regular positions in the reporting period being filled by staff in between assignments, with the remaining half filled by other internal candidates. To further support those considering departure from the organization, an early separation programme was launched in October 2025 and accepted by approximately 300 colleagues, more than 75 per cent of whom were in between assignments.

10. Despite these efforts, UNHCR continued to face a structural imbalance between international staff and available positions. By May 2026, approximately 1,800 international positions remained for close to 3,000 international staff, leaving around 950 colleagues in between assignments. This situation was neither financially nor operationally sustainable, prolonging uncertainty for affected personnel, placing additional strain on workforce planning, and generating significant costs.

11. In this context, the High Commissioner decided in May 2026 to activate the Staff Placement and Reduction in Force Policy, developed in 2025 as a contingency mechanism, for international staff. The process targets international staff in between assignments and offers the possibility for their participation in a targeted placement exercise for all currently vacant positions or an agreed termination option for those who opt to separate voluntarily from the outset. Where placement is not possible, separation measures are applied in accordance with the Staff Regulations and Rules. It is expected that the unsustainable gap between international staff and positions available will be addressed upon completion of the process at the end of September 2026. The policy had been activated once previously for General Service staff at Geneva Headquarters in July 2025.

12. UNHCR fully recognizes the impact of these measures on colleagues and their families and has placed strong emphasis on providing clear guidance, timely information and career transition support, while ensuring that the process is implemented with consistency and fairness. Throughout, the Global Staff Council has been closely engaged as a key partner.

13. To support colleagues through this period of significant organizational change, UNHCR delivered a broad programme of engagement, learning, wellbeing and workforce transition support initiatives designed to reach staff across functions, locations and contract types. Given the uncertainty and emotional toll of recent times, an in-house mental health literacy resource was offered, drawing over 1,000 learners, and a Wellbeing@UNHCR 2026 event engaged around 850 participants. Despite reduced resources, learning and development opportunities were sustained and expanded through partnerships and pro bono arrangements, with over 3,300 colleagues engaging in digital learning. Leadership and development programmes reached nearly 1,000 colleagues, reflecting the importance of effective people management in strengthening delivery, as well as supporting morale, trust and wellbeing.

IV. Building a sustainable workforce model for the future

14. With the workforce stabilization measures described above now advancing, UNHCR is focusing on strengthening its people management architecture to support a leaner, agile and sustainable organization. In line with the ongoing management review and the High Commissioner's vision of reducing by half the number of refugees living in protracted displacement and reliant on humanitarian assistance by 2035 (50 by 35), efforts during the have centered on three complementary priorities: reorganizing the people management function, modernizing service delivery, and advancing a workforce model better equipped to meet evolving operational demands.

A. Reorganizing the people management function

15. Following structural changes at Headquarters in 2025, the Division of Human Resources underwent significant restructuring and was reconstituted as the Division of People Management in October 2025. The division was reduced by more than 60 per cent in budget and positions, requiring a fundamental redesign of its operating model and difficult choices regarding priorities and service delivery. Within a substantially reduced resource envelope, the division sought to preserve core strategic capabilities, while accelerating the centralization of transactional services through a new global shared services approach.

16. To make better use of reduced resources, the division consolidated related functions into an integrated talent management approach, bringing together recruitment, assignments, skills, leadership development and performance management. Managing talent across the employment lifecycle is intended to strengthen internal mobility and improve workforce planning.

17. In parallel, partnerships and service delivery arrangements have been further consolidated to support a leaner organization. A key feature has been the accelerated transition of transactional human resources services to Global Shared Services. This approach reflected the need to make the most effective use of significantly reduced people management resources, preserving critical strategic functions within the division, while expanding Global Shared Services responsibility for transactional service delivery.

18. Payroll and personnel administration for international staff were transferred to Global Shared Services, alongside the progressive centralization of personnel administration for locally recruited staff from operations. UNHCR identified the location-independent human resources-related transactions and ensured a smooth transition to the centralized model. Reflecting industry best practices and building on the organization's ongoing centralization efforts, the new operating model is helping improve efficiency by consolidating location-independent transactions into a standardized service. This ensures consistency across operations, enhances service quality and compliance, and reduces duplication, allowing streamlined local teams to focus on their strategic, context-specific and advisory roles.

19. The centralized approach has also been extended to the administration of the Medical Insurance Plan for locally recruited personnel. Currently, 72 per cent of operations have transitioned to the new model, with completion expected by the end of 2026. Average claims processing times have decreased from four to six weeks previously, to five to seven working days, supported by a dedicated team of trained claim specialists, medical adviser oversight, multilingual capacity and a more consistent application of policy. The model has also strengthened confidentiality, data protection and compliance, including by reducing access to the health insurance platform from approximately 850 users in 2024 to a maximum of 35 users. Centralized processing is further enabling more standardized controls, proactive fraud prevention, improved quality assurance, and a more service-oriented experience for insured members, while freeing up capacity in field offices.

20. While the transition has strengthened some elements of the people management model, it has also required significant trade-offs. The scale of the restructuring reduced the responsible division's capacity at precisely a time when demand for workforce planning, career support, change management and personnel advisory services increased substantially. As a result, progress on some strategic initiatives has slowed, and there has been a reduction in the level of individualized support that can be provided during the period of exceptional organizational change.

B. Modernizing people management

21. Against a backdrop of reduced resources, UNHCR has continued to invest in data, digital tools and artificial intelligence to improve service delivery, strengthen workforce planning and support evidence-based decision-making.

22. Greater integration across systems, expanded self-service capabilities and advanced workforce analytics enhanced managers' access to timely workforce information, while simplifying routine processes for personnel. A data protection impact assessment of the human resources system was completed to reinforce safeguards for personal data and ensure compliance with applicable standards.

23. Artificial intelligence is increasingly supporting a range of people management activities, including providing rapid guidance on relevant policies through PeopleChat, identifying skills and learning opportunities through Workday Skills Cloud, and strengthening workforce planning through SHAPE, an artificial intelligence-enabled planning assistant. In parallel, UNHCR initiated the design of an artificial intelligence-supported recruitment decision-support tool to streamline candidate screening, while maintaining appropriate human oversight throughout recruitment processes.

C. Building the future workforce model

24. Alongside organizational restructuring, UNHCR has continued to advance reforms aimed at building a more resilient workforce capable of responding to increasingly volatile operational demands.

25. UNHCR is reviewing its mobility and contractual framework to reduce structural liabilities, while supporting greater operational agility. As an initial measure, the Recruitment and Assignments Policy was amended in May 2026 to align the grade of posts with the remuneration of incumbents, with additional reviews of recruitment, rotation and contractual arrangements under way, following consultations with personnel and staff representatives. UNHCR is laying the foundations for a revised skills-based workforce model, including by identifying and prioritizing critical organizational capabilities, assessing workforce skills and gaps, and improving alignment of learning and talent development investments with operational needs. Together, these measures are intended to support effective workforce planning, mobility, deployment, succession management and learning, while helping to build a resilient workforce for the future.

26. Embedding health and wellbeing in operational planning has remained an integral component of this transformation. A psychosocial risk management framework has now been expanded to 26 operations and incorporated in the annual risk review, strengthening the organization's ability to identify and mitigate workforce risks through evidence-based analysis. The organization has also continued to support operations facing significant healthcare access risks, reinforcing its duty of care responsibilities for personnel serving in challenging environments.

27. At the inter-agency level, UNHCR continued to play a leading role in shaping system-wide people management strategies, including exploring efficiency and collaboration opportunities aligned with UN80. As co-chair of the United Nations Chief Executives Board Human Resources Network, UNHCR has contributed to the International Civil Service Commission's review of the common system compensation package, which the General Assembly will consider for decision in December 2026.

28. UNHCR co-chairs a new inter-agency task force on workforce composition, established in the aftermath of system-wide contraction, with the aim of developing comparative analyses of workforce models to ensure consistency and efficiency in global workforce management. In addition, through the High-Level Committee on Management Far-Reaching Efficiency Initiative on Common Insurance Services, UNHCR, United Nations Volunteers and the International Organization for Migration began work to establish a shared approach to medical insurance for non-staff.

29. UNHCR has taken a leading role in advancing the inter-agency United Nations digital identification initiative (UN Digital ID). In June 2026, UNHCR became the first organization to launch the UN Digital ID mobile application and wallet, providing personnel and affiliated users with a secure and standardized digital identity and further simplifying administrative processes across agencies.

30. UNHCR continued to help strengthen inclusion and accountability across the United Nations system by contributing to the development of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy 2.0 and implementation of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

31. Responsibility for preventing and responding to sexual misconduct was transferred to the Division of People Management in October 2025. In the months since, the priorities have been to rebuild focal point capacity following workforce reductions, maintain timely support to victims, strengthen managerial guidance and build further awareness across the organization about prevention and response processes.

IV. Conclusion

32. UNHCR has undertaken one of the most significant workforce adjustments in its history, moving from large-scale downsizing towards the foundations of a revised and sustainable workforce model.

33. Despite the challenges that accompany such a significant shift, UNHCR is now putting in place its agile, skills-based and resilient people management and talent architecture, supported by strengthened data, simplified processes and enhanced partnerships, positioning the organization to continue to operate effectively and to deliver on its mandate under constraints.
