

## **Preliminary Concept Paper**

*"We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before."*

António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>1</sup>

### **I. Introduction**

1. The eighth annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges will be held in Geneva on 16 and 17 December 2015 on the theme: *Understanding and addressing root causes of displacement*. This preliminary Concept Paper outlines the reasons for focusing on this theme and the objectives of the Dialogue, and provides some initial information on organizational matters. As in past years, the concept will be refined and sharpened as preparations for the Dialogue progress.

### **II. Why focus on root causes?**

2. The number of people displaced by conflict has reached levels unseen since the end of the Second World War. Close to 60 million people are forcibly displaced today. Civilians from Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, to the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Ukraine and many other countries, are affected by armed conflict, leading both to internal displacement and refugee flows in the absence of effective national protection. Stateless people are also in need of protection because they are those who no country considers to be a citizen. UNHCR's interest in root causes derives from the notions of prevention of displacement on the one hand and of re-acquisition and enjoyment of national protection on the other, in the context of durable solutions.

3. Since its establishment 65 years ago, five years after the drawing up of the United Nations Charter, UNHCR has never had to address so much human displacement. Increasing numbers of people are displaced, and increasing numbers of displaced people are caught in 'semi-permanent' crises or protracted internal displacement and refugee situations. As each year goes by, fewer and fewer appear likely to find a solution to their plight. The Syrian refugee situation is poised to become not only the largest refugee crisis, but also the largest protracted refugee situation of the decade.

4. Against this backdrop, a more nuanced understanding is needed of what root causes actually are, how they can be attenuated or eliminated, and by whom. How are root causes understood in the context of humanitarian work? What role does UNHCR, along with other humanitarian actors, play in addressing them?

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<sup>1</sup> World at War, UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014, available at: [www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html](http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html)

### III. Objectives of the Dialogue

5. The broad objectives of the Dialogue are to:
  - Contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of ‘root causes’ of displacement, and their relevance to both ‘prevention’ and ‘solutions’;
  - Catalogue practices that have proved effective in addressing root causes, including within the work of UNHCR and other humanitarian actors;
  - Better frame the institutional contributions humanitarian actors can make to address root causes;
  - Identify particular actions that can contribute to addressing distinct root causes; and
  - Generate ideas on how to address root causes in more targeted, strategic and collaborative ways, and identify opportunities to do so, especially through partnerships.

### IV. Potential themes for breakout sessions

6. A number of potential themes could usefully be explored by participants in breakout sessions. A more detailed Background Paper setting out themes and some guiding questions for the sessions will be shared in due course.

#### A. ‘Prevention’

7. When we look at the populations UNHCR serves today, the overwhelming majority are survivors of human rights abuses, violence and conflict. Many also share two characteristics: *deprivation* and *discrimination*. The latter is most often based on race or ethnicity; nationality or gender; beliefs, including religious beliefs; and caste or class. Root causes to displacement are myriad and include poor governance, unequal access to the benefits of ‘development’, regional dynamics and conflicts, urbanization, and extremism of all sorts.

8. The 1990s saw high interest in the notion of ‘prevention’, principally of the conflicts giving rise to refugee flows and displacement. A focus on ‘preventive action’ was considered the best way to avert such flows. At the same time, there was felt to be an almost causal link between ‘addressing root causes’ and ‘attaining durable solutions’. In the ensuing two decades, the discourse surrounding prevention and root causes has evolved, with the importance of addressing root causes recognized in a range of areas, including preventing and resolving statelessness, protecting minorities, countering transnational organized crime and, most recently, ensuring protection at sea.

9. By ‘prevention’ UNHCR does not mean preventing refugee movements or displacement, but rather addressing the factors that trigger displacement, so people are not obliged to move. A key goal of prevention in this context is the availability of effective national protection systems.

10. There are obvious limitations to what humanitarian actors can do in efforts to address underlying causes of displacement, but they can and do bring value to such efforts, often because of their strong country presence, long-standing engagement in many settings, community-based approach, well-established partnership approach, and emphasis on capacity-building with local and national actors. Indeed, UNHCR and partners are making important contributions already, but do not necessarily frame such work as ‘prevention’ or

'addressing root causes'. Falling within this work are, for example: UNHCR's multi-year campaign for the prevention and resolution of statelessness and related advocacy on birth registration; protection activities for internally displaced persons or other affected populations; work in the area of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls; and community-based protection and community empowerment.

11. In the collective effort to deepen understanding of conflict and displacement phenomena, including for preventive as well as humanitarian reasons, it is timely to consider deeper and inter-linked causes of conflict and displacement. One such example is the impact of the lucrative extractive industries linked to diamond mining, logging and, increasingly, minerals and metals that are vital for the digital revolution and the global economy. These industries often operate in locations which, while resource rich, have weak government presence, policing and justice, and little respect for the rule of law, with significant potential for serious human rights violations and displacement. Another example is the brisk traffic in small arms that contributes to the ready availability of arms and munitions and their consequent use in atrocities, conflict and crimes of all sorts. The weapons culture is a reality, for example, in the northern triangle of Central America and a key feature of the operations of transnational organized criminal gangs. These and other factors have been recognized as significant contributors to displacement.

12. Against this backdrop of newly emerging consequences of globalization, human development and technology as well as persistent traditional causes of conflict and displacement, the Dialogue will analyse the relationship between the underlying causes of violence and conflict and the resulting refugee flows and displacement, and generate ideas for how best to prevent, to the extent possible, the need for people to flee.

## **B. New 'root causes': environmental degradation, natural hazards, and climate change**

13. The majority of the people who are of concern to UNHCR happen to be on the front lines of climate change. They are concentrated in least developed and developing countries that will suffer the disproportionate impacts of climate change, including increased food and water insecurity, loss of traditional livelihoods, and slow-onset events such as desertification. Experience has confirmed that these disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, who include those who have been already displaced for conflict-related reasons.

14. States and communities are increasingly pointing to new root causes of displacement: environmental degradation, natural hazards and climate change. It is widely believed that climate change-related stress may exacerbate pre-existing tensions and discontent within communities and States, in some cases contributing to conflict and rendering both the humanitarian needs and responses in such situations even more complex.

15. Most people displaced in the context of disasters and climate change remain within their own countries. For those forced to flee across international borders, there are gaps in the current legal, institutional, and operational frameworks for protecting them. The Nansen Initiative Global Meeting in October 2015 and the UNFCCC COP 21 meeting in Paris in December 2015 will be important milestones in clarifying the human mobility implications of climate change and the manner in which States can marshal international support for responses going beyond 'humanitarian approaches'.

16. Addressing displacement in the context of disasters and climate change will require a range of responses that go beyond traditional humanitarian approaches to encompass disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development. In addition to ensuring that those displaced internally or abroad by climate-related crises receive timely protection and assistance, it will be necessary to ensure that those affected are able to recover and restore their livelihoods and achieve solutions as early as possible. To prevent

displacement, greater focus is needed on addressing root causes by, for example, mitigating displacement risk and addressing underlying vulnerabilities through improved disaster risk management, climate change adaptation and resilience-building measures. Sustainable development planning will also be essential to avoid these phenomena becoming the ‘root causes’ of forced displacement. Solutions to address the needs of those who may be displaced within and across borders need to be given careful consideration. The Dialogue will explore the implications of the Nansen Initiative’s Protection Agenda for UNHCR’s work but also benefit from work undertaken in relation to planned relocation.

### **C. Reinvigorating the search for solutions in protracted situations<sup>2</sup>**

17. Solutions are integral to UNHCR’s Statute. The range of legal instruments UNHCR works with, as well as a number of Executive Committee Conclusions, confirm such a solutions orientation. Many solutions entail the acquisition or reacquisition of national protection. Beyond the broad function of ‘finding durable solutions’, UNHCR’s mandate includes the facilitation of voluntary repatriation of refugees or their assimilation within new national communities, which is undertaken in practice through resettlement to third countries or local integration in countries of asylum. UNHCR’s campaign to eradicate statelessness within a decade – the #IBelong Campaign and the 2014-2024 Global Action Plan to End Statelessness – identifies actions to eradicate the principal root causes of statelessness.

18. The principal reason behind protracted displacement is the multiplication and persistence of conflicts that appear to be intractable. Conflict resolution – and prevention – must therefore be given higher priority, in light of the very real threats conflicts pose to international peace and security. Examples of the spill-over effects of conflict abound. It is crucial to build collective capacity to find solutions to conflicts at an early stage, rather than struggling to cope with the consequences. How can the international community make inroads into resolving protracted situations?

19. While UNHCR has sharpened its focus on attaining durable solutions over the past few years and is increasingly cognizant of the link between its own work and root causes, it is painfully aware of the limits of its own actions. Acting upon the root causes of refugee flows, displacement and statelessness requires a range of actions in other areas, where UNHCR is not the sole or even a key player. The most important ingredient is political will. How to ensure that key actors in peace processes do not lose sight of the urgency of finding solutions to displacement, particularly from the outset of a crisis? In a number of peace processes, women have been not only agents of change but also agents of peace: how to better tap the potential of women, including displaced and refugee women, as peacemakers and agents of peace? How to ensure that peace agreements actually address the root causes of conflicts and take due account of the need to resolve the plight of refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons?

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five years or more in a given asylum country. This definition has some inherent limitations, but estimating the number of refugees living in long-term exile is crucial from a solutions, protection, and operational perspective. It is estimated that some 6.4 million refugees (45 per cent) were in a protracted situation by the end of 2014. The average duration of the 33 protracted refugee situations is estimated to be about 25 years.

## **V. Organizational arrangements**

20. As in past years, UNHCR will maintain a dedicated webpage where it will post the Background Paper and other relevant information, including logistical information, as and when it becomes available.

21. UNHCR will organize an Information Session on the Dialogue in Geneva, in November.

## **VI. Participation**

22. Invitations will be extended to UNHCR's Executive Committee Member States and Standing Committee Observers, other United Nations Member States with an interest in the topic, relevant sister agencies of the UN system, IGOs, NGOs, academics, experts, practitioners and advocates. Invitations to States are extended via their Permanent Missions in Geneva and addressed to their Ambassadors/Permanent Representatives. Other invitations will be extended by e-mail.

## **VII. Outcomes**

23. In keeping with long-standing practice, UNHCR will prepare a Background Paper to inform the deliberations and make available other relevant documents. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, will chair the Dialogue, with the assistance of Co-Chairs who will lead the discussions in breakout groups. To keep the deliberations as interactive and informal as possible, the Dialogue will consist of a mix of plenary and breakout sessions. None of the discussions will be attributed to individual participants or delegations, and the High Commissioner will not seek to secure a negotiated outcome from the Dialogue. He will round off the discussions with his own summary of the deliberations at the close of the Dialogue, with the assistance of the Co-Chairs. After the close of the Dialogue, UNHCR will make available an informal summary of the deliberations, including recommended follow-up actions, as appropriate.

*Geneva, 7 August 2015*