

2020 UNHCR-NGO Virtual Annual Consultations
Theme: Responding to Pandemics
29-30 September 2020

PREAMBLE

In 2020, COVID-19 has emerged as a major, worldwide disruptor to the provision of protection and assistance of UNHCR and partners to refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons. At the same time, it has impacted all socio-professional activities, particularly limiting international travel, imposing new work arrangements, and requiring social distancing. As a consequence, the traditional in-person Global UNHCR Consultations with NGOs could not take place in June this year. As an immediate adaptation measure, in mid-March, the UNHCR Partnership and Coordination Service (PCS) launched weekly online meetings on the COVID-19 response with the objective of creating a space for UNHCR and NGOs to discuss issues, challenges and potential responses to COVID-19. Recently, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) joined forces with PCS in the organization of these weekly NGO consultations. In addition, NGO meetings on COVID-19 response have also been organized by UNHCR at the regional level.

Building on these regular exchanges and with the aim of contributing to the preparations and outcome of the 2020 UNHCR's High Commissioner Dialogue on Protection focusing on "[Protection Challenges during Pandemics](#)", UNHCR PCS and ICVA will organize a dedicated 1.5 days UNHCR-NGO Virtual Annual Consultations on 29-30 September 2020.

BACKGROUND

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a worldwide pandemic. Since then, the COVID-19 outbreak has had an unprecedented impact on refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, host communities and our response to their needs, including in the humanitarian and development sector.

Refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons are often particularly at risk of being impacted due to their pre-existing living conditions, lack of resources and limited access to basic services. Those risks have been compounded by the socio-economic impact that lockdown measures are having on jobs, reliable household incomes and access to services for persons of concern. The worst may be yet to come, especially in the developing world hosting the largest majority of refugees and IDPs in congested setting. Long-term effects represent significant concerns. The pandemic is not only challenging global health systems, but also testing our common humanity. It is of paramount importance to ensure past investments in asylum systems and protection mechanisms are not lost or reversed.

UNHCR and NGOs have gradually adapted their response modalities and service delivery to the pandemic context, particularly to ensure the continuity of essential services, launch new and innovative programs or ways of working, and by suspending some non-critical activities. This included demonstrating flexibility and putting in place exceptional measures in the management of Partnership Agreements, 'boosting' the localization agenda, and further supporting refugee participation and leadership.

All those aspects and much more have been discussed at the weekly NGO meetings since March 2020 and will also feature among the topics to be addressed during the High Commissioner's Protection Dialogue. Hence, this year, the Annual Consultations between UNHCR and NGOs will focus on the theme Responding to Pandemics with the emphasis on engaging in preliminary learning from the COVID-19 response so far, especially when it comes to the identification of good practices and innovative approaches. Grounded in the [Principles of Partnership](#), UNHCR and NGOs discussions will be based on shared experience, perspectives and common commitments and focus on concrete outcomes in form of recommendations for the way forward in the response to COVID-19 and future pandemics and beyond, other protection and solution challenges.

OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

Based on the above background, the Annual Consultations will pursue the following interrelated objectives:

1. Analyze our collective response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic geared towards offering concrete suggestions to prepare for and respond to future pandemics and if applicable, other emergencies. The outcome of previous virtual UNHCR-NGO weekly meetings on COVID-19 regarding the identification and sharing of lessons learned and good practices will be considered in this analysis.
2. Develop recommendations to inform future collaboration between UNHCR and NGOs to prepare and respond to future pandemics and if applicable, other protection and solutions challenges.
3. Feed into the process of the 2020 High Commissioner Dialogue on Protection Challenges taking place through a series of virtual sessions and one hybrid in-person/virtual session between October and November 2020, focusing on Protection considerations; Resilience and Inclusion; and Climate Action.

The outcome of the consultations will include compilations of good practices as well as recommendations to feed into the specific themes of the High-Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. The consultations will benefit from robust engagement and contributions of International and National NGOs, Faith-Based-Organizations (FBOs) as well as Refugee-Led-Organizations (RLOs) to respective sessions. The outcomes, along with an overview of the debates, will be presented at

the annual meeting of the UNHCR's Executive Committee (5-10 October 2020), and feed into the High-Commissioner's Dialogue process through a dedicated paper with key messages and recommendations.

The UNHCR-NGO consultations will also help identify NGO contributions to the Dialogue, e.g. in the form of panelists and/or themes to be addressed. In some instances, the consultations synergy with the Dialogue will translate into complementarity, for example by creating space to address topics too broad to be fully considered during the High-Commissioner's Dialogue.

All background material developed for the consultations, as well as short summary notes of each session, will be made available online and thus contribute to the larger public's preparation for the High-Commissioner's Dialogue.

PRELIMINARY AGENDA

Monday 28 September

- 14:00 - 16:00 Side event on Partnership Agreements in Pandemics

Tuesday 29 September

- 11:00 - 12:30 Opening conversation with the High Commissioner on our collective response to COVID-19
- 13:00 - 14:30 Resilience and Inclusion
- 15:00 - 16:30 Protection Considerations

Wednesday 30 September

- 11:00 - 12:30 Climate Action
- 13:00 - 14:00 Closing session with the Deputy High Commissioner

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

Consistent with its objectives as outlined above and the interlinkage with the High Commissioner's Dialogue, the 2020 Annual consultations between UNHCR and NGOs will cover three main themes: Protection considerations, Resilience and Inclusion, and Climate Action. A side event will be organized on Partnership Agreements in Pandemics.

Participants will analyze the breadth of information exchanged over the months between UNHCR and NGOs, including through – but not limited to – the weekly online NGO meetings to analyze challenges and good practices of our pandemic response so far on:

- the evolutions in partnership dynamics and collective responses;
- the innovations developed in terms of programming for continued service delivery;
- positioning and collective actions for advocacy and resource mobilization.

Those reflections will be mainstreamed and developed throughout the sessions, as well as being examined during the opening and closing sessions.

1. Protection considerations

The movement and other restrictions imposed across the globe to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced humanitarian actors, including those whose work focuses on protection, to adjust approaches with unprecedented speed. The situation has also placed a bright spotlight on the critical role that communities of concern play in crafting and implementing actions to enhance their own protection. ***Communities are often best placed to identify existing as well as emerging protection needs***, in particular among at-risk and marginalized groups, and how these can be effectively addressed.

Unsurprisingly, there is a growing body of evidence supporting the proposition that operations in which NGOs, UN agencies and other humanitarian actors had invested time and resources pre-pandemic in forging strong protection partnerships with communities were able to adapt to new realities faster and experienced less interruption in access to and delivery of protection and other key services. Conversely, those who had not were left scrambling to develop such partnerships in a far more challenging context. The lesson to be drawn is an obvious one: For humanitarian actors, governments and donors, ***prioritizing investment from the onset of an emergency in community-based approaches to protection places humanitarian operations on a more sound and durable foundation***.

The session will feature three practitioner/panellists who will each share their perspectives and first-hand experiences of community-***based protection*** in action during the ongoing pandemic in order to kick off a broader discussion and sharing of experiences among participants. During the session the group will endorse a set of key recommendations focused on **community**-based protection.

2. Resilience and inclusion

While the virus is blind to borders or socio-economic status, race or national origin, it has had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable people in the world. Among them are forcibly displaced who typically find work in the informal economy and are invariably the first to lose their livelihood when the economy declines. Restrictions of

movements, lockdowns and loss of income, evictions, school closures, denial of access to health and other basic social services as well as rising xenophobia have a ***profound and probably long-term negative socio-economic impacts on vulnerable groups, especially those of concern to UNHCR***. The session will unpack this statement in three sections:

First, informed with data collected worldwide, panelists will ***discuss the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on refugees, other displaced populations and the stateless***, looking at the importance of supporting the ***resilience*** in the short-medium and longer-term. Second, panelists will ***discuss opportunities and challenges of inclusion of especially refugees, but also other displaced populations***, looking at for example, links to economic stimulus measures, social protection and healthcare responses. Third, good ***practices and lessons learned so far in the pandemic response will be showcased***, contributing to recommendations on how to prepare for and respond to this and future pandemics.

The session will aim to underline the importance of inclusion of refugees in responses, the critical role NGOs and partnerships play, while highlighting relevant good practices. It will feed into the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection session relating to Inclusion and Resilience.

3. Climate Action

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique risks to displaced people and increases vulnerability for populations living in regions especially impacted by the adverse effects of climate change. The coronavirus outbreak has shown that in order to avert the worst impacts of a global climate crisis, the international community needs to come together quickly to adjust, prevent and respond to climate change. The current crisis is ***offering learning points so as to address the climate emergency, echoing UNHCR's call to action***.

Building on the efforts of UNHCR's Special Advisor on Climate Action and his team, this session will aim to ***analyze responses and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic that are useful for the preparation and response to Climate Change*** focusing on protection, mitigation, and adaptation. The session will particularly consider the use of ***legal and normative frameworks in the context of Climate Change; operational responses to ensure Climate Action; and the greening of our operations***, collectively and individually. Moreover, the session will emphasize the need for ***community involvement at grassroots level*** in the response, adaptation and resilience towards climate change and aim to discuss with NGOs how to support local communities in this regard. The expected outcomes of this session will include building the basis for transformative partnerships with NGOs; identify entry points for community engagement and provide recommendations for the way forward.

4. Partnership Agreements in Pandemics (special advanced session/side event with Implementing Partners)

There have been many new developments in partnerships over the past year, building on an **ongoing dialogue between UNHCR and NGOs**, and as part of the ongoing overall transformation within UNHCR, on planning, implementation, and resource-based management. This session will look at the current reform on implementing partnerships, including respective frameworks and policy procedures, implementation at regional and field level and the continued need to ensure **reforms are impactful** and support the move from a compliance, risk-averse paradigm to a **results driven, risk aware paradigm**. The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered the development and application of special measures to increase **flexibility and simplification of processes to ensure adaptation and continuity of service** in unprecedented situations. NGOs also engage with UNHCR on respective issues in relation to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan to respond to COVID-18 as well as the adaptation of various Humanitarian and Refugee Response Plans.

The objective of this session will be to have a **forward looking exchange** based on an analysis of challenges and good practices applied during the pandemic so far that would generate clues about local/ international approaches to programming and implementation, in particular with regard **to remote access and management**, implications in terms of **Accountability to Affected Populations**, and **meeting the needs of vulnerable and displaced communities**. Participants will also exchange on **what comes next** in terms of flexibility in programming and as we move beyond the GHRP and back into regular appeal and planning cycles (e.g., which changes will endure, and which will not?). In terms of participants, this session will take the form of a side event reserved for UNHCR's Implementing Partners.

PARTICIPATION AND MODALITIES

To ensure effective exchanges and concrete outcomes through the online interface, the consultations will adhere to the following parameters and criteria:

- **Overall limit of participants** joining the sessions: **200**, mainly from International and National NGOs, FBOs, RLOs and UNHCR. In light of the virtual nature of the NGO consultations, opportunity and encouragements will be provided for **local NGOs and RLOs to register**, in consultation with Regional Bureaus, to further support the localization agenda.
- **The number of delegates** attending the Consultations should not exceed 2 participants per NGO, FBO and RLO.
- Participation from UNHCR staff will be encouraged to ensure a two-way dialogue. Other UN Agencies may request to register one staff per organization, as speaker or as 'observer'.

- **Priority will be given to organisations that work on forced displacement and have been involved in the pandemic response since March 2020, particularly those that:**
 - **have engaged in the weekly UNHCR-NGO meetings on COVID-19 and refugee response.**
 - **demonstrate expertise and experience in the three main topic of discussion for this consultation (Protection considerations; Socioeconomic response; and Climate action).**
- **Priority will be given to NGOs that are ICVA members and/or implementing and/or operational partners of UNHCR in 2019 and 2020.**

Each session will seek to be as interactive and concrete as possible, leaving room for exchanges to take place. In this perspective, session leaders will put together a panel of speakers, drawing mainly from UNHCR and NGO/FBO/RLO staff, while also considering other expert contributions e.g. from other UN agencies and academia.

The first part of each session will consist in introducing concepts, information and objectives through either traditional but short presentations or through interview style dialogue between the moderator and panelists. A structured exchange with the audience will then take place. The moderator will wrap up the session by summarizing the main follow-up and action points coming up from the session. The moderator may be a UNHCR or NGO staff.

ICVA/UNHCR PCS
14.09.2020