

Standing Committee Remarks  
Community-based Protection and AGD

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

The conflict and displacement that tear communities apart has a devastating impact on the lives of the girls, boys, women and men who flee to unfamiliar, often inhospitable places. Not only must they cope with the trauma created by the violence that they witnessed or suffered personally, they must also bear the immense grief of losing family members or being separated from them. With social ties cut, traditional safety networks unravel. On top of this, the loss of material possessions and resources increases economic vulnerability, takes a toll on psycho-social wellbeing, and also leads to physical protection risks.

The consequences of displacement affect different people differently, depending on their age, gender and diversity characteristics. Some, may lose their status and influence as a result of the displacement and become marginalized and at particular risk. Others, who may have been marginalized even before displacement, find they are even less protected and at greater risk when forced to move. Adolescents and youth are often forced to adopt negative coping strategies to ensure their own and their family's survival. With the transition to adulthood delayed or completely halted by their experiences, they see no future for themselves and become increasingly more exposed to protection risks.

Yet we know that people have extraordinary coping abilities when confronted with such extreme circumstances. They know the threats that they face and they find ways to protect and care for themselves and their family members as best they can. As they come together and find some stability, community structures begin to re-emerge and contribute to the community's wellbeing.

A group of Syrian refugee women in Cairo who came together to help the most vulnerable refugee families among them exemplify this re-emergence of community. They started small aiming to inform the families about services available to them and the documentation they needed to access the support. As the group grew in confidence and capacity, they wanted to expand their reach and do more to support their community. They formed an association and approached UNHCR for support. Today, with minimal UNHCR funds and their sustainability plans underway, they run two community centres, which provide vocational training and child care for working women, among other things.

This illustrates just how critical it is that outside support builds on the knowledge and capacities of displaced communities and plays an enabling role that supports their own initiatives to improve their situation thereby allowing them to be productive and valued members of the communities that are hosting them. We seek to partner with persons of

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concern, learn from them, and empower them to play a leading role in their own protection and eventually solutions. This is the goal of UNHCR's community-based protection approach.

The Conference Room Paper before you provides an overview of our progress towards this goal and outlines some of the main areas we plan to build on further.

In today's displacement contexts, community-based protection responses are critical because displaced communities are often more fractured, less secure and increasingly dispersed across cities and vast regions, and frequently on the move. While this poses obvious challenges to employing community-based approaches, through meaningful engagement with communities early on in a crisis and consistently from then on, we can capitalize on their own communication networks and rebuild community structures that support stability and cohesion.

With our partners UNHCR has adopted this approach in emergency responses ranging from Cameroon and Ethiopia to Ukraine for specific groups and on some sensitive issues. In Cameroon, a culturally relevant and non-stigmatising mental health and psycho social support program developed in consultation with refugees allowing them to define mental health problems in their own terms is in high demand from different age groups and being replicated. In Ukraine, it has taken the form of community dialogue tables after IDP communities asked for formal and regular opportunities for structured dialogues with humanitarian actors.

We also recognize that communities are not always able to act as protection agents. Segments of the population may be marginalized and exploited particularly in situations of forced displacement. So it is important that we listen and respond to all voices from communities, not only the strong ones.

It is through this continually evolving understanding of the complex social dynamics in forcibly displaced communities that we've sharpened our focus on the work we need to do to achieve the meaningful inclusion of specific groups in protection and solutions programmes.

UNHCR is also advancing in its efforts to promote an empowerment approach to working with youth, which sees them not as idle, helpless and troublesome, but rather as instrumental to fostering community engagement for the longer term and for developing resilient and progressive communities. When we create platforms from which youth can develop their capacities and take charge of their own lives, we consistently see them blossom into confident agents of change, improving their lives and those of others. It is with

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this in mind that we invite the Executive Committee to consider adopting a conclusion on protection and empowerment of youth.

Peaceful coexistence within refugee communities and between them and host communities is also vital to protection. In this regard, UNHCR's emphasis on refugees accessing national systems and services benefits displaced and host communities alike, by promoting coexistence and avoiding inefficient and unsustainable parallel systems.

Cash-based interventions are another way we can achieve these goals by growing local economies when cash-based assistance for refugees and IDPs is spent in local shops and on local services. Cash helps rebuild autonomy and dignity, and helps displaced people feel that they have a stake in the host community's success, that they have retained their independence in displacement and are well prepared to take up durable solutions.

The operationalisation of UNHCR's community-based protection approach through the age, gender and diversity policy in combination make up the key components of UNHCR's commitment to ensuring that we are accountable to persons of concern. We have longstanding policies, systems and tools in place to ensure that persons of concern have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect them and that their views help to improve the appropriateness, sustainability and quality of our programmes. We are currently consolidating these into an accountability framework that will not only show how far we have come, but will also outline specific areas for learning and improvements.

I would like to end by emphasizing that delivering on our accountability promises to all age, gender and diversity groups, and partnering with them for protection, takes time and requires direct contact. The work we have done since we last reported to this committee on building a community-based protection workforce is already having an impact. In fact, in recent years, we have seen an increase in field operations seeking staff members with community-based protection profiles. And we have stepped up our training efforts and our technical assistance to the field. But replicating or scaling up successful community-based protection approaches, like those I referenced earlier, requires sustained, multi-year support. UNHCR and our partners need to be embedded in communities, build their trust and develop dependable relationships with them.

Thank you.