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BACKGROUND PAPER

Session title: The Role of youth empowerment in building resilience in Asia and the Pacific

Date: Wednesday 15 June 2016

Time/Room: 5, 1630 – 1830

i. Background

As of February 2016, the Asia and Pacific region hosted over 8.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including some 3.9 million refugees, 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and an estimated 1.5 million stateless individuals. The countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific continued to uphold their longstanding tradition of hospitality to displaced people and are making significant progress in resolving statelessness.

Young people constitute the highest proportion of the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR globally and, in particular, the region. Youth are the driving force behind any community and are the key agents of social change, economic development and innovation. In the Asia Pacific region, where more than two thirds of the population of concern to UNHCR are living in urban and semi-urban areas, youth have much to offer and the failure to involve them in the community is a lost opportunity. They bring to the table fresh perspectives and rich experiences which could help fuel innovative approaches towards addressing issues impacting them, the youth population as a whole and the wider community. Their involvement also helps foster stronger ties with local youth, promoting greater tolerance and trust, thereby strengthening resilience of the community.

But while the local youth have easier access to education, skills development and other tools necessary to become change makers in their communities, young persons of concern to UNHCR are most of the time not afforded the same opportunities. They often do not have access to quality education, and lack secondary and higher education opportunities, creating social barriers to strengthening their resilience. More importantly, these young people are the future of their respective countries of origin. They should be instilled with the education and like skills they need, to not only contribute in the situation they are in, but also rebuild their communities and home.

Furthermore, many young persons of concern to UNHCR have experienced exclusion, hardship at an early age, forced to assume social and economic responsibilities, often discarding their own aspirations, to help their families survive. Restrictions in employment and income generation in host countries perpetuate this poverty and further heighten protection risks among them.

Therefore, it is crucial to keep alive a sense of hope among young persons of concern to UNHCR by empowering them through the education and skills to be more resilient and build a life for themselves and their families. This also ensures that they are protected from risks of further abuse and exploitation.

UNHCR's offices in Asia and the Pacific have continuously tried to find ways to engage more with young people in order to understand their needs, consult with them and draw of their experiences when developing projects and strategies, including on longer term solutions through participatory assessments and focus group discussions.

UNHCR works with States and partners to strengthen social and economic standing of persons of concern by means of education, vocational training, livelihoods' promotion and self-reliance activities, including advocacy to include them in the national education systems and livelihood opportunities, building the capacity of the related line ministries and infrastructure support.

More concerted efforts and innovative thinking are needed in ensuring that youth are benefitting from greater support. Hence, the regional session with the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific will focus on how to enhance access to **education and safe and dignified livelihoods**. In this regional session, opportunities for stronger collaboration between UNHCR and the NGO communities can be explored further. Good examples and lessons learned in the respective countries will be provided by the speakers.

Some of the following questions could guide the discussion:

- What are the opportunities for civil society and UNHCR to work together on youth empowerment in refugee hosting countries and amongst communities affected by statelessness?
- How can civil society support advocacy with States to include persons of concern, including refugees and stateless persons in national **education** systems?
- What measures can be taken to strengthen partnerships with civil society, and development actors, to ensure that youth can better access livelihood opportunities in a safe and dignified way? What good practices exist in the region?
- What skills trainings, recreational or cultural activities or other projects should/can be undertaken to ensure that youth participate in their communities and decisions affecting them, enhance peaceful co-existence, contribute to peacebuilding and raise awareness about important matters such as health, education and rights?

Moderator: Ms. Fatemeh ASHRAFI, Chief Executive Officer of the Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children in Iran (HAMI)

Speakers:

- Ms. Zakia ANWER, Youth Representative from Pakistan
- Mr. Arslan MALIK, Program Coordinator of the American Refugee Committee (ARC) in Pakistan
- Mr. Subin Lal MULMI, Programme Coordinator Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Nepal

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