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Human resources, including staff welfare

Summary

This paper highlights developments in the area of human resources and staff welfare since the last update provided to the Standing Committee in September 2020 (EC/70/SC/CRP.21). It outlines achievements made in relation to the transformation of human resources at UNHCR and reports on the support provided to the workforce to build a better employee experience, despite the challenges of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

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I. Introduction

1 UNHCR embarked on a multi-year transformation of its human resources (HR) function in 2019, building on the foundation that taking care of its workforce will result in a better response to the people of concern to the organization. The aim of the transformation is also to ensure that colleagues and operations are ready to adapt and deliver regardless of the challenges of the future. Against this background, this report provides an update on the HR transformation and illustrates the initiatives and impact of the work undertaken by UNHCR in the area of HR, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. Putting people at the centre

2. By end of June 2021, UNHCR's total workforce amounted to over 18,000 individuals, including 13,500 staff and 4,600 affiliate personnel, working in 130 countries. The largest presence was in sub-Saharan Africa, with 37 per cent (21 per cent in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes; 11 per cent in West Africa; and 5 per cent in Southern Africa), followed by the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with 19 per cent; Europe with 19 per cent; Asia and the Pacific with 12 per cent; and the Americas with 12 per cent. Of UNHCR's workforce, 90.5 per cent was based outside the three headquarters locations (Geneva, Budapest and Copenhagen) and 37.5 per cent worked in hardship duty stations, often away from family, facing security threats and living in challenging environments.

3. UNHCR's ability to "stay and deliver" was made possible by the commitment of its dedicated workforce. In line with the people-centric principle of the HR transformation, HR support aimed at facilitating the conditions and environment that would allow the workforce to continue delivering despite the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as isolation and digital fatigue due to prolonged teleworking. To safeguard the health and wellbeing of the workforce, occupational health and safety protocols were reinforced. Health support measures introduced in response to the pandemic in 2020 remained in place, including preventative action to protect colleagues with underlying medical conditions with the possibility to telework or relocate to where the required medical services were available. Furthermore, personal protective equipment was made available to protect colleagues working in camps and communities, and operations' capacities to strengthen the local healthcare system if needed and for emergency medical evacuations were increased. In a survey of colleagues who had taken the offer to be shielded for medical reasons, over 75 per cent said they felt well supported by UNHCR. Telemedicine support offering online medical advice in several languages remained available and supplementary psychosocial support was provided in recognition of the additional strains on mental health.

4. By the end of 2020, UNHCR joined the broader United Nations system efforts to provide COVID-19 vaccinations to ensure operational continuity for frontline workers in duty stations where vaccines were not provided or available. These measures were accompanied by regular information-sharing and individualized advice to best support the workforce.

5. In addition to the COVID-19 response, UNHCR continued its efforts to improve living and working conditions in remote duty stations, to enable the workforce to stay and deliver even in the most challenging locations. In 2020, 90 per cent of guesthouses completed the quality checklist in line with the United Nations minimum standards and management procedures for guesthouses, a significant improvement from previous years, leading to structured efforts to ensure that UNHCR accommodations in the field were well-managed, safe and comfortable. In November 2020, UNHCR also launched the Wellbeing Platform, a comprehensive online self-service tool developed in partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP), to help colleagues manage the psychosocial risks and pressures of humanitarian work.

6. Having opportunities for growth and development is the foundation for a positive employee experience and vital for continued professional engagement. To adapt to the COVID-19 situation, UNHCR rapidly pivoted its entire learning curriculum to virtual delivery to ensure the workforce continued to upskill and develop. The shift to an online environment enabled more learning opportunities, regardless of location, and programmes were made available in more languages for wider access. In 2020, around 15,000 colleagues participated in at least one learning activity.

7. To ensure consistency, fairness and transparency in the management of and support for its affiliate workforce, UNHCR issued a new administrative instruction in December 2020. The affiliate workforce is an essential part of UNHCR's ability to scale up and reduce activities as needed and to meet evolving operational requirements. The new framework is a significant step in UNHCR's aim to offer a unified and positive employee experience regardless of contractual status.

8. Currently, 44 per cent of UNHCR's total workforce is female, while in the international category, women represent 49 per cent. Thirty-four per cent of the workforce is from Africa, 20 per cent from Europe, 17 per cent from the MENA region, 14 per cent from Asia and the Pacific, and 13 per cent from the Americas. Of UNHCR's workforce, 71 per cent is locally recruited. The ability of UNHCR's workforce to deliver to its full potential is also impacted by the sense of belonging, and efforts towards increasing diversity and inclusion have continued. Initiatives in the past year included more dialogue on race equality, which resulted in the development of an interim action plan and the commissioning of an independent race equality and equity review. Other efforts in this regard led to the development of the disability inclusion framework; the broadening of rules surrounding family installation (taking into account the situation of same-sex couples); and sustained outreach to attract diverse profiles and talents. To ensure better integration across the agency, the Inclusion and Diversity Unit became fully embedded in the Division of Human Resources (DHR) and worked in close collaboration with the Senior Executive Team, as well as operations and different entities at headquarters.

III. Reinforcing good people management

9. The manager-employee relationship, supported by HR, has a significant impact on the ability to deliver results, as well as people's daily life. Good relationships have the potential to build accountability and foster strong performance, engagement, and resilience, and can help prevent stress, conflicts, failure to deliver, as well as potential misconduct. With this in mind, UNHCR continued its focus on good people management and the strengthening of managerial skills.

10. These efforts included investments to strengthen the coaching and mentoring culture at UNHCR; and by June 2021, around 1,400 colleagues had benefited from coaching or mentoring activities. Communication and collaboration between managers and DHR were also enhanced through frequent dialogues, as well as with the support of regional HR teams who acted as the link between operations and Headquarters. The Strategic People Dialogue with Representatives, a series of discussions between leadership teams at country-level and DHR to discuss workforce issues, continued virtually in 2021. In the context of COVID-19, managers benefited from targeted support through various guidance documents and webinars to strengthen their ability to work and engage remotely with their teams. UNHCR also offered various learning and development tools related to inclusion and created dialogue spaces and facilitated sessions for managers, in recognition of their role in creating and promoting safe, inclusive, and respectful work environments. In addition, a learning programme to increase managers' knowledge about mental health was piloted to allow them to recognize and respond to colleagues suffering from mental health challenges and ensure early support.

11. To build strong systemic foundations for good people management, in October 2020 UNHCR launched an organization-wide review of the current performance management model. The aim is to build a new approach that fosters shared responsibility between

manager and teams for defining expectations, reviewing progress, and giving and receiving performance feedback. The review has to date collected responses from employees, managers and HR, compiled best practices and innovations from outside of UNHCR and prototyped a model, which is to be piloted and launched in 2022.

12. Good people management also rests on strong insights and strategic workforce planning. The analysis of 100 country leadership positions (Representatives and Chiefs of mission) allowed the identification of key trends that will impact workforce plans in this critical role. A succession planning pilot for structured and strategic filling of leadership roles was also launched.

IV. Supporting UNHCR's transformation

13. Through the HR transformation, UNHCR continues to prepare for the future by building on efficient and agile systems, processes and partnerships. Despite the prolonged periods of teleworking due to the pandemic, with strong business continuity plans in place DHR was able to continue offering services and support, thereby ensuring UNHCR's workforce was able to stay and deliver.

14. Over the last year, significant headway was made in the set-up of the new digital HR solution, Workday@UNHCR, making UNHCR one of the first large United Nations organizations to configure an HR cloud-based technology. This project is a cornerstone of the HR transformation and part of UNHCR's broader work on modernizing its systems through a business transformation programme. In this context, DHR engaged with operations and employee resource groups, to ensure that Workday@UNHCR is fit-for-purpose and will drive simplified business processes and practices for HR from its launch in 2022. As a cloud solution, Workday@UNHCR will improve with time and through users' feedback, enabling UNHCR to adopt global best practices in HR.

15. Operations were supported through services and streamlined processes to ensure optimal delivery. In this respect, 1,160 international positions were filled from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021; fast track vacancies were advertised to respond to emergency situations in Armenia-Azerbaijan, Cameroon and Mozambique, the Sahel region and Sudan (Darfur and Ethiopia situations). Furthermore, 27 talent pools were continuously developed to respond to new or evolving needs. While measures to strengthen reference checks had already been embedded in policies for the international professional category, pre-vetting screenings for sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment and misconduct were included in the revised policy on locally recruited staff and in the policy for the management of the affiliate workforce.

16. In addition, the UNHCR handbook for designing field presences was launched in June 2021, providing guidance to operations regarding the structuring and staffing of UNHCR offices, including function-specific roles. Work continued to build cohesion and collaboration across the entire network of UNHCR's HR teams. To better support HR colleagues and enable self-service, the Common Reference System (CORES) was launched, designed specifically for all HR information needs. Guidance was also provided to operations regarding office presence during COVID-19, as a result of the various stages of risk around the world.

17. As part of equipping the organization for the future, HR partnerships were strengthened. The organization was highly engaged in the inter-agency efforts on HR and health and safety matters in the context of COVID-19. It was a leading contributor to the United Nations system-wide task force on medical evacuations, the inter-agency efforts to strengthen the medical first line of defence and the United Nations vaccination strategy. UNHCR co-led workstreams of the High-Level Committee on Management task force on the future of the United Nations system workforce, contributing to the development of several system-wide initiatives related to the future of leadership, ways of working and technology. For further system-wide streamlining, UNHCR developed an inter-agency repository of HR

policies and shared its experience with its in-house artificial intelligence solution for recruitment pre-screening, for possible implementation in other agencies.

18. The Junior Professional Officer (JPO) programme continued to offer talented young professionals an opportunity to gain experience and work for UNHCR. By June 2021, 67 JPOs were working for the organization. In an effort to further accommodate the particular needs of recruiting offices, new modalities in partnership with the United Nations Volunteers Programme were rolled out. These included the United Nations Community Volunteer and the United Nations Expert Volunteer modalities, which build on the success of the Refugee United Nations Volunteering (RUNV) scheme (10 RUNVs were on board by June 2021). UNHCR also greatly benefited from the collaboration with different stakeholders (governments, non-governmental organizations, universities and the private sector) to combine and leverage complementary resources and HR knowledge to the benefit of its workforce.

V. Conclusion

19. Despite the many challenges in the past year, UNHCR's workforce stayed and delivered with great commitment and dedication. The organization's HR community worked on multiple levels to respond to the urgent and rising needs, while continuing to ensure the modernization of the HR function at UNHCR. By being able to focus on the long-term vision while learning from the immediate COVID-19 response, UNHCR was able to continue making a positive difference to its workforce and to the people it serves.
