

79th meeting of the Standing Committee
16-17 September 2020
Agenda item 2.b

Oral update on integrity in UNHCR, including efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

Mister Chairperson,
Excellencies,

As noted in my opening statement, we have previously discussed at some degree of length our efforts to prevent, mitigate, respond to, and learn lessons from all forms of misconduct, fraud, corruption, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and sexual harassment (SH).

The document entitled “Oral update on integrity in UNHCR, including efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment” provides a brief outline of these efforts, and the mutually reinforcing objectives we have pursued, together with snapshots of our activities and key areas of focus in the following four areas: prevention and response to sexual abuse and exploitation, and sexual harassment; the Ethics Office; the Ombudsman; and Risk Management.

And while I will not go into detail on the accomplishments of each of these functions, I do want to highlight our recently issued strategy and action plan to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment for 2020 to 2022. You will find a link to this strategy in the document presented for this session, and I encourage you to review this in detail if not already done.

These functions obviously do not cover the full gamut of the functions in UNHCR’s family of integrity-related functions. Instead, the intent with this session is to complement other integrity and oversight related sessions on the Standing Committee agenda by combining topics we have discussed in greater depth in recent years, and including with greater focus the work of the Ethics and Ombudsman’s Offices, both longstanding institutions within UNHCR but whose evolution in the context of our broader efforts on integrity have not been as fully captured.

This is also an opportunity for us to highlight the linkages and complementarity among functions. Our investments to date have had a measure of success in preventing and responding to various forms of misconduct. These successes notwithstanding, the most obvious need at this point is to improve how our work to set and frame values, and ensure that conflict within our workforce is proactively managed, and connects with the response-driven side of our integrity-related functions.

As mentioned earlier, this is reflective of a shift in culture within UNHCR, one that sees us refocussing efforts on a positive and proactive message modelling good workforce behaviour. Such an approach is a prerequisite to an organisation in which the relationship between management and its workforce is no longer defined by the need to comply – with rules, procedures, and policies – but rather by all acting with integrity because they *know* it is the right thing to do, all as part of a broader effort to best achieve our common goal: providing protection and solutions for the world’s forcibly displaced persons.

Cultural shifts take time. But they can and should be bolstered by the collective action of those entities which will continue to perform a central function in regards to integrity, supported by enhanced approaches that speak to the issues faced by the members of our workforce. For UNHCR, that requires greater complementarity and synergies among those entities, buttressed by active coordination and communication, which may seem obvious but

79th meeting of the Standing Committee
16-17 September 2020
Agenda item 2.b

Oral update on integrity in UNHCR, including efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

has to be carefully considered and cultivated in functions where trust and confidentiality are fundamental.

Our efforts so far have centred around our annual planning exercises, allowing the multiple entities which form part of the integrity family of functions to work together in considering and formulating plans for the year to come. This was followed up by work, led by the Ethics Office, to review and improve the work and articulation of a number of entities operating in the integrity functions to better serve the workforce and the organization at large.

Together with advice from the new Inspector General to rationalize further and enhance the operation of the organizational framework against the three lines of defence model, this is feeding efforts to improve individual functions and their coordination in the coming months, while also advancing our near-term imperative to improve our ability to identify and resolve conflict within our workforce to obviate the need for formal interventions.

Distinguished delegates,

This remains work in progress, and will be the focus of our organisation in the near term.

As demonstrated in the summary of our past and ongoing initiatives provided in the lead up to this session, we are committed at the highest levels to effecting the changes necessary to reinforce the integrity of our organisation and operations. This commitment goes well beyond identifying, investigating and sanctioning misconduct when it happens. Rather, it extends to a deeper re-shaping of the culture of UNHCR, modelling UN values and ensuring these are at the core of the organisation's relationship with its personnel, and permeates the relationship between manager and employee. It will strengthen the organisation as one that is inclusive and diverse where all are safe and respected. This in turn will make us an even stronger protection agency at the service of millions.