

Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
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**Agenda Item: 2 (C) Human resources, including staff welfare
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Madam Chair, Excellencies,

The world is changing at an incredible and unpredictable pace, as evidenced most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic and the many humanitarian crises around the world.

Our workforce is also directly impacted by these changes: colleagues have had to shift their ways of working almost overnight; security challenges are becoming more complex; the pandemic led to prolonged separation from family and friends; and the stressors impacting the physical and mental health of our colleagues continue to increase.

Yet, UNHCR's workforce continues to impress with their incredible resilience, adaptability, and creativity in support of those we serve. I am inspired on a daily basis, hearing from our colleagues how they go above and beyond to deliver on our mandate, no matter the circumstances. Allow me to start off by paying tribute to our 18,000 colleagues working around the world. Thank you.

As the people function at UNHCR, we owe it to their dedication to provide them with the support, development and opportunities that would allow them to bring their best self to work in service of the most vulnerable. With so much of our work people-dependent, it makes sense that when we take care of our people, they in turn take care of people in their care.

This people-centric approach is the main driver of the Human Resources transformation at UNHCR, in which we have been engaged, the past couple of years. With focus on partnership with employees, managers, and the organization as a whole, we strive to modernize and professionalize our human resources function to better support operational excellence.

A couple of years in, we can already see the impact of these changes on our ability to anticipate and respond to the unexpected. Today, I would like to share with you some examples of the ways we are managing human resources differently at UNHCR.

By understanding what actually drives our employees and keeps them awake at night, we can focus on creating a better employee experience for each colleague, allowing them to focus on what matters most. In the past year, this meant first and foremost how to continue delivering in COVID-19 times despite all the challenges.

With more than 2,000 cases of confirmed infections since February 2020, and 18 colleagues lost to COVID-19, safeguarding the health and wellbeing of our people against the pandemic remained very much of a priority. This would not have been possible without our regional HR presence, including Medical and Psychosocial teams, to ensure measures and policies responded to realities on the ground.

Through a risk-based approach, we worked with our colleagues and operations for comprehensive assessments including individual circumstances, nature and criticality of function, availability of health facilities and protection measures, to ensure a balance between the duty of care to our workforce and our business continuity.

In Costa Rica, for instance, the operation pivoted to online registration of persons of concern and virtual coordination of case management, which allowed us to continue to deliver, while minimizing exposure to the virus and protecting colleagues with underlying medical conditions.

Today, a lot of our preventative efforts are focusing on making sure COVID-19 vaccination is accessible to our personnel worldwide. I take this opportunity to convey our huge appreciation to member states for including UN personnel in national vaccination programmes. This makes a huge difference.

And where this was not possible, we continue to work inter-agency to provide access to vaccination to allow us to deliver essential work.

COVID-19 has become a new critical lens through which we look at safe and effective delivery in field regions and HQ. As part of our engagement on the Future of Work, we want to ensure that we leverage the learning to account for the changes in our work and the way our people are managed.

The pandemic has shown that good people management practices can play a differentiating factor in the wellbeing of the workforce. Furthermore, research and experience show that the way people are managed has a big impact on how they perform at work, and ultimately the quality of care they deliver. This is why good people management continues to be a priority for us at UNHCR.

In that context, the High Commissioner has launched in October 2020 an organization-wide review of the current performance management model. Managing performance is a common challenge in the world of work and one that we will not be able to solve quickly. At the same time, we are excited to try out a new approach and to start piloting a development-based model.

What we are setting up is a more user-friendly process with frequent and informal feedback, which puts the relationship between employee and manager at the centre and allows all of our employees to see how they and their team contribute to the bigger picture. We will keep you informed on the launch and impact of this new approach in the coming years.

Similarly, we know that belonging has a strong correlation to motivation at the workplace. UNHCR is committed to building an anti-racist and inclusive organization, where diversity is valued and fostered, and all colleagues have a sense of belonging. For us diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being invited to dance, and belonging is dancing like no one is watching. We will not rest until everyone feels like they belong at UNHCR.

Building on our work over the years to increase inclusion and to hear about the different experiences and work together towards a more inclusive organization, we have commissioned an independent race equality and equity review. Meanwhile, we have already put in place an interim action plan and intensified the dialogue with colleagues.

An increased dialogue on inclusion and diversity in the humanitarian space is very important to UNHCR, as evidenced in the engagement of our workforce, and we look forward to continuing the exchanges on these important issues within the UN and with member states.

Ultimately, as part of the HR transformation, we hope to make the daily HR experience of our workforce simpler so they can focus on what matters, namely, to support the people we serve and to spend their after-work time with their family and loved ones.

A missing puzzle piece in that aspect was a digital experience as seamless as the one our employees have outside of the office: mobile, based on self-service, and allowing them to connect with others. In that respect, I am delighted to announce that UNHCR has partnered with Workday, a leading provider in HR supporting technology, for our new HR digital solution.

We are currently in the configure and prototype phase, in a view of a launch in 2022. Our HR community from all regions, is dedicating considerable time and energy to ensure we end up with a user-friendly, field-tested, inclusive HR digital solution.

This will help UNHCR adjust to global best practices in human resources and is already driving the simplification of many of our HR policies and processes. As a cloud solution, Workday will innovate and improve with time and through users' feedback, somewhat like smartphones where people receive regular software updates. This means the tool evolves with us, and we with it; it is dynamic and continues to be fit to purpose as we and the world change at a fast pace.

We are also sharing our experiences at the inter-agency level to ensure we leverage the common UN digital agenda in partnership with Workday to create solutions that work for the humanitarian sector.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, while we were focusing on the immediate challenges in front of us, including country emergencies and the pandemic, we have also continued to be engaged on our HR transformation, contributing to UNHCR's ability to better deliver and respond.

This would not have been possible without the dedication and tireless engagement of the HR community at UNHCR, working simultaneously to respond to urgent needs and focusing on a longer-term vision for a modern HR function. I take the opportunity, in your presence, to commend them for their passion and dedication to our work; for without the team, we are nothing and together we go far. Thank you.

It is true that change is rarely comfortable and requires discipline and commitment to stay the course, but as its impact becomes more visible and we see the fruit of our efforts, we remain steadfast in our conviction that it is a worthwhile journey.

As the world of work evolves, with new technologies, new behaviours, and different expectations, we continue to leverage this change while keeping people at the centre of how we work, and plan for what comes next.