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**Human resources, including staff welfare, and
safety and security**

Summary

This paper highlights developments in the area of human resources, staff welfare, and safety and security since the last update provided to the Standing Committee in September 2019 (EC/70/SC/CRP.21). It reports on the human resources transformation process, including support to the broader UNHCR reforms, and outlines measures put in place to prepare and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The paper also provides an overview of measures implemented towards a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction.....	1-3	3
II. Update on the human resources transformation	4-12	3
III. COVID-19 preparedness and response.....	13-18	4
IV. Security	19-22	5
V. Inclusion and diversity	23-26	6
VI. Conclusion	27	7

I. Introduction

1. Faced with increasing displacement and complex operational challenges, UNHCR's workforce is its strongest asset. To ensure that colleagues are best equipped to deliver, UNHCR embarked on a multi-year human resources (HR) transformation in 2019. This initiative, which was carried out in alignment with the broader organizational change process, aimed to transform human resources into a more modern and people-centric function and reinforce the importance of good people management.
2. The past year, with its many challenges, offered an opportunity for UNHCR to begin to apply the behaviours, practices and tools being developed through the HR transformation. In particular, it shaped UNHCR's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and allowed the organization to meet the needs of its field operations.
3. By the end of June 2020, UNHCR's total workforce amounted to over 17,300 people, including 13,000 staff and 4,300 affiliate personnel working in 130 countries. The largest presence was in sub-Saharan Africa at 38 per cent (22 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 at 20 per cent, Europe at 20 per cent, Asia and the Pacific at 12 per cent and the Americas at 10 per cent. Of UNHCR's workforce, 91 per cent was based outside of the three Headquarters locations (Geneva, Budapest and Copenhagen) and 37 per cent worked in hardship duty stations, often away from family, facing security threats and living in challenging environments.

II. Update on the human resources transformation

4. The multi-faceted HR transformation was founded on strong partnerships with operations, managers and teams around the world. The Division of Human Resources (DHR) continued to support the decentralization process, including setting up the new regional bureaux and accompanying the induction of the regional HR teams. By June 2020, 91 per cent of the colleagues assigned to a bureau had taken up their position, and more than 20 learning activities on new procedures and functional topics were offered to these colleagues.
5. In keeping with best practices, a dual approach was taken to HR management: authorities and processes were decentralized where this offered better service to clients and centralized where efficiencies could be gained in terms of simplification, consistency, oversight and budgeting. Regional HR teams supported regional directors in the management of the newly delegated HR authorities, including assignments up to the P4-level, the extension of standard assignment lengths and the extension of temporary appointments. At the same time, medical and psychosocial risk assessments were increasingly carried out by the relevant support teams in the regional bureaux.
6. To facilitate a positive employee experience across UNHCR and to ensure that the partnership approach to HR management was sustained, regular HR dialogues on strategic people management matters and quarterly messages from the Director of DHR were provided to the global HR community.
7. Capacity for strategic workforce planning for the regions and operations was strengthened through workshops for regional and field-based HR colleagues. Their access to data and analytic tools was also improved with the development of user-friendly workforce dashboards, a key factor for anticipating and addressing staffing needs and to ensure the exchange and rotation of talent across regions. UNHCR's efforts to swiftly assign personnel led to 1,320 positions being filled between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020. Fast track vacancies were also advertised to respond to emergency situations in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala and the Sudan.

8. In partnership with managers, renewed focus was placed on people management through dialogue, learning and communication on managing teams. A “strategic people dialogue with Representatives” was launched at the end of 2019, starting with the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region and the southern Africa region. The initiative aims to enable Representatives to be champions of good people management practices through open dialogue with relevant HR focal points. In addition, over 500 executive coaching sessions were held for the P5-level and above, and 75 senior managers benefited from the mentorship programme for first-time Representatives.

9. A cornerstone of the HR transformation is UNHCR’s ability to fully embrace a digital employee experience, and significant progress was made to identify a technical solution to facilitate this. This project, expected to last several years, will involve a substantial upgrade of the current systems. A mobile-enabled digital HR solution will be implemented using cloud technologies to support UNHCR’s people management initiatives and renew work practices for core HR services. In line with UNHCR’s broader digital strategy, DHR is closely collaborating with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications and the Division of Financial and Administrative Management.

10. UNHCR continued to simplify key processes to reduce transactional work, thereby enabling colleagues to focus more time on pressing operational matters and allowing HR teams to apply individual attention and human interaction where needed. UNHCR continues to use artificial intelligence (AI) to pre-screen talent pool applications, with the aim of improving efficiency in the recruitment of candidates. In 2020, automation was extended to routine tasks, which also helped ensure coherency of information across HR systems. At the same time, processes related to the digitalization of personnel data, “fit to work” assessments, the central administration of direct bank transfers for local payroll, and the medical insurance plan continued to progress. By introducing AI and robotic process automation tools, UNHCR is building the digital HR knowledge and skills required to streamline HR operations, reduce risk, enhance internal controls and ease the transactional workload at the field level.

11. Following the restructuring of the Global Learning and Development Centre in January 2019, work advanced towards an integrated talent management framework for UNHCR. By aligning strategic workforce planning, talent identification, recruitment and assignments, as well as development and performance management, the components of talent management are brought together in a cohesive model across service lines within DHR.

12. UNHCR also continued to explore longer-term change and mechanisms to feed into the system-wide “future of work” initiative. In this regard, UNHCR is co-leading the workstream on “new ways of working” in the Taskforce on the Future of the United Nations System Workforce set up by the High-Level Committee for Management (HLCM). The expected outcome is to advance the United Nations system towards a strategic HR framework that would take into account the rapidly changing global context and labour market. Since February 2020, UNHCR has co-chaired the HLCM HR Network, contributing its strong field perspective and supporting a forward-leaning approach for broader transformation in the United Nations system.

III. COVID-19 preparedness and response

13. With its far-reaching global implications, the COVID-19 pandemic has also greatly influenced ways of working at UNHCR. Teams around the world faced a sudden shift to remote working and continued to “stay and deliver” in often difficult circumstances and while facing personal, family and health-related challenges. To reduce the risk of infection and reinforce public health considerations, UNHCR encouraged its workforce to curb travel and to telework, where advised by host governments and as recommended by the World Health Organization. UNHCR’s business continuity plans mitigated any disruption of HR matters, which were managed remotely.

14. DHR played an important role in the early preparedness and response efforts, participating in the dedicated Senior Multifunctional Response Team and the COVID-19 Crisis Management Team. The close partnership with operations was put into practice as DHR worked with regional HR teams to ensure that local concerns underpinned their preparedness and response plans. In addition, UNHCR ensured inter-agency alignment on the management of people matters through its role as co-chair of the HLCM HR Network, allowing the organization to convey the needs and concerns arising from operations in the field. Efforts included contributing to the revised rest and recuperation (R&R) framework as well as to the guidelines for the administration of travel, leave and quarantine. UNHCR also worked to ensure a coordinated approach to medical evacuation in response to the pandemic and contributed to the United Nations system-wide Task Force on Medical Evacuations and to inter-agency efforts to strengthen the medical first line of defence.

15. Various health support measures were introduced to ensure that UNHCR's ability to stay and deliver was balanced with health and safety considerations. Pre-emptive action was taken to protect colleagues with underlying medical conditions, and close to 600 individuals were recommended to telework on the basis of health concerns. In addition, around-the-clock online medical advice in several languages was introduced globally to support personnel and their family members. The Staff Health and Wellbeing Service accompanied operations in their assessment of local health care capacity and assisted with filling gaps where possible, strengthening access to care for personnel. To further protect colleagues working in camps and communities and carrying out essential protection and assistance functions, UNHCR made available personal protective equipment and issued guidance for its use and procurement.

16. In order to support colleagues coping with challenges arising from COVID-19, including isolation, family separation, multiple roles at home and difficulty to travel on R&R, psychosocial support capacity was strengthened through peer advisers and regional staff counsellors. Additional external mental health support was also provided where needed.

17. As part of its people-centric approach, UNHCR emphasized well-being as a key theme in its outreach and communications to personnel, reminding managers and teams of self-care principles in these challenging times. Teams around the world contributed to these self-care efforts during teleworking, including by facilitating virtual social gatherings, exercise classes and blog posts. Managers benefited from targeted support to strengthen their ability to work and engage remotely with their teams. The webinar series "Tales from the home office" involved external experts and people management champions within UNHCR sharing positive experiences and lessons learned, and also offered a space for the exchange of experience in remote management.

18. DHR co-led the "back to office" process in close collaboration with the Division of Financial and Administrative Management, issuing guidelines which reinforced occupational health and safety obligations. In addition, an online health self-assessment tool was launched to enable informed decision-making for colleagues returning to the office. Looking ahead, UNHCR will continue to learn from recent experiences of teleworking and feeding into the broader future of work implications.

IV. Security

19. Approximately 20 per cent of UNHCR's workforce (over 2,800 people) continue to perform their duties in areas of high risk and insecurity due to armed conflict, the presence of extremist groups and other sources of instability. While more than half of the workforce (53 per cent) are working in areas deemed moderate risk or above, staying and delivering for people in need has become even more complex with the spread of COVID-19. In addition to health risks, the pandemic has heightened tensions in some parts of the world as a result of its economic and social impact, affecting both UNHCR personnel and persons of concern. Close monitoring and assessment continued to be required as host government security and health resources faced increased pressure, challenging their usual response capacity. Restrictions on travel severely reduced the ability of the United Nations to evacuate personnel

due to a health or security emergency, while the capacity for treating patients locally was also stretched. UNHCR and other United Nations partners reviewed their staffing numbers around the world to ensure the optimal balance of operational presence and risk.

20. In support of the organizational restructuring process initiated last year, UNHCR's Field Security Service (FSS) was reconfigured to deliver security advice in a regionalized context. Senior field security professionals are now situated within each regional bureau, providing direct support to the Regional Bureau Directors while working closely with country-based Field Security Advisers in their regions. Further collaboration with other members of the United Nations Security Management System and operational and implementing partners ensured a coordinated approach to security management.

21. A leaner FSS at Headquarters is focused on operational oversight and monitoring, global analysis and alerts, standard-setting, inter-agency policy development and processes, and other forms of support to the regions. Regular security steering committee meetings led by the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) continued to ensure the appropriate oversight of operations with substantial risks. These meetings were conducted together with the regional bureaux, field operations, FSS and relevant services within DHR to examine existing security measures, review the staffing footprint and determine if further support was required.

22. Other important developments included the preparation of an updated policy on security management, reflecting the revised accountability structures following decentralization. Global security training programmes were re-examined, along with other areas of staff development, to maximize the use of distance-learning technology and methodologies in light of restrictions in face-to-face delivery. UNHCR continued to cultivate a multi-talented and diverse security workforce, with particular efforts towards improving the gender balance. Three female security professionals were recruited this year, and FSS continued to work closely with DHR to explore innovative ways to reach qualified potential candidates. To further strengthen gender in security management, a dedicated workshop for locally recruited security personnel was rolled out in 2019, and additional guidance was disseminated to FSAs. Webinars were also conducted together with DHR and the Ethics Office to ensure appropriate incident support, given the global statistics and concern for increased domestic violence during the pandemic.

V. Inclusion and diversity

23. Every individual at UNHCR brings a diverse set of perspectives, work and life experiences, as well as national, religious and cultural differences, that motivate them to serve people in need. Efforts towards increasing diversity and inclusion in the workforce, therefore, continued to be a priority for the organization. Women represent 44 per cent of the total workforce and 48.5 per cent of the international workforce. Currently, 35 per cent of the workforce is from Africa, 21 per cent from Europe, 17 per cent from the Middle East and North Africa region, 14 per cent from Asia and the Pacific, and 12 per cent from the Americas.

24. Targeted outreach to attract talent from less represented countries was strengthened. Additional initiatives included the roll-out of the Refugee United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme to UNHCR operations following its successful pilot in 2019. The programme enables refugees to become UNVs in their host countries, thereby ensuring their representation and recognizing their talent within the organization. In 2019, the organization also began to explore avenues for collaboration with the Global Youth Advisory Council to foster a dynamic talent pipeline for global youth, exchange ideas and strengthen UNHCR's career outreach network. In parallel, the Junior Professional Officer (JPO) programme continued to offer talented young professionals from an array of countries an opportunity to gain work experience. By June 2020, 80 JPOs were working for UNHCR.

25. Promoting the full participation and leadership of people with disabilities in the workplace was an important area of focus. Efforts were made to further explore their access to workplace accommodation, assistive technologies and career counselling, in consultation with DHR. In addition, DHR and UN-GLOBE¹ representatives agreed to maintain a regular exchange on issues related to the needs and concerns of LGBTI colleagues. A safe platform for UNHCR's LGBTI community to network, share information and experiences, and raise concerns was also launched.

26. Diversity and inclusion are key to UNHCR's success in delivering on its mandate. To foster an enabling environment, extensive investments were made in learning programmes and interventions to encourage colleagues to interact with full respect for diversity and inclusion. Such initiatives included reflective leadership dialogues, attended by over 370 participants, which support managers in developing team cultures anchored in inclusive, collaborative, safe and accountable work environments. UNHCR also strengthened its commitment to creating a stigma-free workplace with regard to mental health, and in September 2019, a communications campaign was initiated to accompany the launch of the United Nations system Workplace Mental Health Strategy.

VI. Conclusion

27. UNHCR's continued transformation in the area of human resources will help it ensure readiness for the unpredictability of the future. Embracing new behaviours, attitudes and technology will allow the organization to work with managers and teams around the world to improve the employee experience and strengthen support for refugees and other persons of concern.

¹ UN-GLOBE advocates for the equality and non-discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) personnel in the United Nations system.