PROCEDURAL STANDARDS
for Refugee Status Determination
under UNHCR's Mandate

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Unit 2.2

REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION (RSD) FILE MANAGEMENT AND RECORDKEEPING PROCEDURES

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2.2 Refugee Status Determination (RSD) File Management and Recordkeeping Procedures

2.2.1 General

Each UNHCR Office should **implement detailed file management procedures** for all aspects of the processing, organization and handling of RSD files, whether in paper and/or electronic format, in accordance with UNHCR's policies on the management of UNHCR records and archives. RSD file management and recordkeeping procedures in UNHCR Offices will vary depending on the scope of RSD operations and the technical systems and resources that are available in each Office. However, in every UNHCR Office file management procedures should **achieve the following objectives**:

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

OBJECTIVES OF RSD FILE MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES:

- Rational internal organization of individual RSD files;
- Efficient filing and retrieval of individual RSD files and information therein;
- Regulated and restricted access to RSD files and respect for confidentiality of information;
- Secure physical storage of RSD files to prevent loss, damage or unauthorized access;
- Efficiency and integrity in UNHCR RSD procedures.

All UNHCR staff who handle RSD files should ensure that the **information contained in the file is complete and organized** so that other UNHCR staff who are required to take action on the file can quickly and accurately understand the history and status of the file.

All documents should be filed in **chronological order**, based on the date on which they were generated or received in the UNHCR Office.[1] For paper files, the pages should be numbered as they are added to the file. Documents in electronic format should also be saved and organized in the same manner as paper files.

File management procedures should clearly define **individual responsibilities** relating to management of paper and electronic RSD files including specific requirements for oversight and accountability (see § 2.2.7 – *Supervision and Oversight of RSD File Management*).

2.2.2 Procedures for Opening RSD Files

An **individual RSD file** should be opened for each refugee status Applicant as early as possible in the RSD process, to ensure that all documents and developments relating to his/her claim are duly recorded and retained on the individual RSD file. Where more than one member of the same family or household apply for refugee status in their own right, a separate linked RSD file should be opened for each of them.

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[1] Depending on the size of the file, documents may also be organized thematically and in chronological order.

It is recommended that separate linked RSD files also be opened for individuals who are applying for derivative refugee status as **family members/dependants** (see § 5.1 – *Derivative Refugee Status*). This would promote the integrity and confidentiality of the procedures, as well as other protection standards in processing the claims of Applicants for derivative refugee status.

Unless there are specific operational reasons not to do so, **RSD files** should be maintained in both paper and electronic format and identified according to established nomenclature.[2] RSD files should contain a copy of all records received or produced by UNHCR regarding Applicants, including Applicants for derivative refugee status. As a best practice, documents received in paper format should be digitalized and kept on the electronic RSD file. Audio/video files should also be saved as part of the electronic file. Electronic RSD files should be maintained on UNHCR's recordkeeping system, with back-ups for audio/video records stored locally in a secure location in accordance with established procedures for file management and recordkeeping.

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

THE RSD FILE SHOULD CONTAIN:

- The RSD Application Form and other relevant information gathered at registration;
- A list of all accompanying family members/dependants applying for derivative status and their individual RSD files numbers;
- A list of all linked RSD cases, including all family members/dependants with individual refugee status claims;
- Photographs of the Applicant and other biometrics;
- Copies of all identity documents and other supporting documents;
- All notes by UNHCR staff members regarding the Applicant, including records of interviews or conversations with the Applicant(s) or third parties. These include audio or video records of interviews, where available;
- All correspondence relating to the Applicant;
- All formal decisions taken in the processing of the claim;
- Copies of documents issued by UNHCR to the Applicant;
- Contact information for the Applicant;
- All other relevant information regarding the Applicant or his/her claim.

Eligibility Officers should record on the Applicant's file and in the UNHCR's case management database a brief description of any activity relating to the processing, the date of the action and the staff member involved.

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[2] Offices which, for operational reasons, only maintain electronic files should ensure that back-ups for all records are stored locally in a secure location in accordance with established procedures for file management and recordkeeping.

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS SHOULD BE RECORDED ON THE APPLICANT'S FILE AND UNHCR'S CASE MANAGEMENT DATABASE:

- Interviews and appointments with, or relating to, the Applicant;
- The date of filing of the RSD application, as well as the date of all applications/submissions by the Applicant in other UNHCR RSD procedures (appeal, cancellation/revocation, cessation, file re-opening, etc.);
- All decisions taken by UNHCR regarding the status of the Applicant;
- Documents issued by UNHCR to the Applicant, including the date and manner of issuance (e.g. in person, by post, through legal representative, etc).

2.2.3 RSD File Management and Organization

Each UNHCR Office should establish a system for assigning RSD file numbers and file organization.

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

THE FILE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION SHOULD ACHIEVE THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

- Reflect the composition of the family unit / household and permit easy identification and cross-referencing of linked files;
- Permit designation and processing of more than one refugee status Applicant in a family unit;
- Reflect changes in the status of individuals who are in the family, including changes in an individual's status as a refugee status Applicant or Applicant for derivative refugee status;
- Reflect changes in the composition of the family unit/household, including marriages, births, deaths, or other developments affecting the refugee status Applicants and Applicants for derivative refugee status;
- Ensure separate filing of the information provided by each member of the family unit / household so that the source of specific information is clear and the principle of confidentiality is not undermined.

Every UNHCR Office should have a **file registry**. An electronic version of the file registry should be maintained on UNHCR's recordkeeping system. The file registry should include the RSD file number, the name of the Applicant, the UNHCR registration number where different from the RSD file number, the date the file is opened, the name of the UNHCR staff member who opened the file, the date the file is closed and the physical location of the file. Each RSD file should be registered in the file registry as soon as possible after opening.

2.2.4 Access to RSD Files

All information regarding Applicants, whether stored in physical or electronic form, should be subject to **restricted access by authorized UNHCR staff** and should be kept in a **secure location**. Electronic files should be saved on UNHCR's electronic recordkeeping system.

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

FILE MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES IN EACH UNHCR OFFICE SHOULD ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING ISSUES REGARDING ACCESS TO RSD FILES:

- Designation of UNHCR staff members who should have access to RSD files and the level of access authorized. For RSD files in electronic form, restrictions on what fields of information may be changed by authorized staff members should also be defined;
- Procedures for storage and surveillance of physical RSD files in central storage areas;
- Procedures for storage of electronic RSD files on UNHCR's electronic recordkeeping system, including appropriate safeguards to preserve the confidentiality and integrity of the information contained therein;
- Directions for secure storage of RSD files that are not in the central file storage area or on UNHCR's recordkeeping system, including security of files in archive storage areas, the offices of individual staff members, in any area to which persons who are not UNHCR staff members may have access, as well as on personal computers or other electronic devises, and on personal/locally shared drives;
- Procedures for removing RSD files, including information relating to Applicants recorded on computers and portable electronic storage systems from UNHCR premises and other storage areas;
- Access by implementing partners or any other third party to RSD files, including the precise scope and conditions of access and the procedures that should be followed.

2.2.5 Movement of Physical RSD Files

UNHCR Offices should establish clear procedures to regulate and track the movement of RSD files within the Office. At a minimum, there should be a **central record**, in which the name of every staff member who requests a file must be recorded, with the date that the file is removed and returned. Transfers of files between staff members should also be noted in the central file record.

To avoid loss or misfiling of documents UNHCR staff should, as a general rule, not remove documents or sections of documents from individual RSD files.

2.2.6 Storing and Archiving Closed RSD Files

Closure of RSD files should be subject to established criteria and administrative procedures. The criteria for closure of RSD Files are set out in § 9.1 – *Closing RSD Cases*.

Individual RSD files, whether in paper or electronic form, must be retained by UNHCR as Permanent Records. The staff member who is responsible for supervising file management in the UNHCR Office should ensure that procedures for maintaining closed RSD files and for transferring individual RSD files to UNHCR Headquarters are developed and implemented in accordance with directives and guidance produced by the Records and Archives Section in UNHCR Headquarters and in line with the Policy on the Protection of Personal Data of Persons of Concern to UNHCR.

2.2.7 Supervision and Oversight of RSD File Management

In each UNHCR Office, **a designated staff member** should oversee the implementation of file management procedures.

STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

OVERSIGHT RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RSD FILE MANAGEMENT:

- Providing training and support to UNHCR staff on implementing file management procedures;
- Supervising UNHCR Office practice with respect to access to physical and electronic RSD files, as well as the movement and storage of individual RSD files, to ensure the security of RSD files and the integrity and confidentiality of information relating to Applicants;
- Conducting **random monitoring** of physical and electronic RSD files to ensure that staff members are complying with established procedures for maintaining and updating RSD files and entering relevant data into central systems.

The staff member who is responsible to oversee RSD file management **should report to the RSD Supervisor**. Problems with management of RSD files that may affect the fairness or efficiency of RSD procedures must be reported to the RSD Supervisor, who should be responsible to direct and monitor the effectiveness of measures to address the problem. Wherever necessary, the designated staff member or the RSD Supervisor may consult with the Records and Archives Section at Headquarters and relevant functional sections in DIP for guidance and training support.

Annex: List of Additional Resources

UNHCR, *Policy on the Management of UNHCR Records and Archives*, UNHCRIHCP/2017/4, 21 December 2017, https://bit.ly/2uJ6lVX

UNHCR, Records and Archives, Guidance and Training, available at https://intranet.unhcr.org/en/support-services/RAS/Guidance.html

UNHCR, *Policy on the Protection of Personal Data of Persons of Concern to UNHCR*, May 2015, http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/55643c1d4.pdf

UNHCR, *Guidance on the Protection of Personal Data of Persons of Concern to UNHCR*, 2018, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b360f4d4.html

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