

25 January 2019

Dear colleagues,

We write on the heels of the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). They have given us the needed momentum to start 2019 with a new vision of close and effective collaboration between our two organizations. This vision is set out against the backdrop of what has equally been articulated in the GCM, and which we reiterate here, that “[R]efugees and migrants are entitled to the same universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, which must be respected, protected and fulfilled at all times. However, migrants and refugees are distinct groups governed by separate legal frameworks.” We wish to reiterate at the outset our appreciation of the distinct roles and responsibilities of IOM and UNHCR, which would in turn enable the right operational responses for positive engagement between the two organizations.

It is against this background that we are writing today to set out clearly our joint vision of engagement, to the benefit of refugees and migrants alike. IOM is committed to ensuring that international refugee law is respected, and will continue to appreciate and respect the distinct terminologies and categorizations of persons on the move. Refugees and those in need of international protection, as defined under international refugee law, fall under the mandate of UNHCR, and IOM will continue to support and partner up with UNHCR to support the UN refugee agency in effectively carrying out its mandate. This includes UNHCR’s supervisory responsibility in terms of defining who is a refugee under international law. In an ever-increasing political climate of restrictive approaches to refugee protection, UNHCR and IOM will stand together to ensure that UNHCR’s mandated responsibilities, notably its international protection function, are not jeopardized with alternative terminologies and definitions being pursued, with resulting limited rights whether on arrival or on return considerations. At the same time, both organizations recognize that growing numbers of migrants suffer from abuse and unnecessary hardship along their migratory journey, which in some circumstances may require the granting of alternative protection arrangements. We will seek to support jointly such comprehensive responses. UNHCR recognizes IOM’s lead in supporting migrants in vulnerable situations.

Proper and effective operational approaches, with respective coordination responsibilities, will need to flow from this distinct terminology. While refugees and migrants at times move along the same routes, not all movements are mixed. Where those are predominantly composed of refugees, the operational response must be one where UNHCR is able to carry out its mandated lead responsibility – including where others might not wish to have the individuals recognized as refugees or in need of international protection. We cannot allow ourselves to be perceived as divided on this core issue, at the expense of international refugee protection and effective protection of human rights. This will be particularly critical in voluntary repatriation operations, where limited protection space in certain states might lead to calls on early and premature returns without needed safeguards. IOM is committed to working under UNHCR’s leadership in any possible return operation engaging refugees. Where caseloads are predominantly composed of migrants, the operational response will be led by IOM, with the support of UNHCR and other partners as required. Both organizations will retain responsibilities for those identified to be of their concern. Where the movements are of a mixed nature,

IOM and UNHCR – drawing on a growing number of positive field examples – will work hand-in-hand in establishing and co-leading Refugees and Migrants Coordination Platforms for effective coordination. IOM and UNHCR will also discuss and engage on these mechanisms with other humanitarian partners to ensure broad support.

IOM and UNHCR are committed to continue to expand on their operational partnerships in situations of mixed movements, including in the critical area of data gathering and sharing. We will work together, including at the Headquarters level, to agree on the best approaches to advance this critical area where proper knowledge is crucially important. We have agreed to set up a technical working group to advance this work.

Per our joint letter of 6 July 2018 to all staff, together with the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the UNDP Administrator, we have also agreed to continue working together for the protection of and assistance to internally displaced persons, where we both play a critical role jointly with Member States and humanitarian partners. This commitment equally extends to our work in the area of climate change and disaster displacement, noting the tremendous challenges in this regard requiring collaborative approaches, bringing our respective expertise to the fore in continued active partnership with the Platform on Disaster Displacement. Both the GCM and the GCR address the complex challenges which arise from such situations, and will inevitably see our two organizations actively engaged as appropriate.

Finally, and also in line with the GCM and GCR, coordination of efforts to strengthen national systems to respond to the rights and needs of persons on the move, whether in the area of migration, asylum, or IDP situations, will be important going forward for better use of respective resources and expertise. Under the coordination role of IOM, UNHCR will fully engage in the UN Migration Network established to enable coordinated UN support to States in implementing the GCM objectives. UNHCR will be seconding a colleague to the Secretariat of the Network, which is housed in IOM and reporting to the Director-General. In line with the GCR and in particular the Asylum Capacity Support Group to be established, UNHCR will lead efforts to build national asylum capacities and in the area of resettlement and complementary pathways for refugees, including through the development of a three-year resettlement and complementary pathways strategy, in which IOM will play a key role, both in its development and implementation.

There are important challenges ahead, but we must – together – rise to them in a collaborative spirit and fully in line with the principles and approaches which we have set out above for our two organizations. We count on your cooperation, with us and with one-another, as there is no doubt in our minds that we are better united than divided in these challenging times. To help support this collaborative approach, we have appointed our respective Chiefs of Staff to liaise closely and actively if any issues of concern were to arise.

With all our good wishes for a happy and healthy 2019.

Yours sincerely,



António Vitorino
Director-General
International Organisation for Migration



Filippo Grandi
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees