

## **Note from UNHCR Dialogue with Regional NGOs on COVID-19 Response**

**Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 10:30-12:00**

**UNHCR** Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (**RBAP**) in collaboration with Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (**APRRN**) and International Council of Voluntary Agencies (**ICVA**) organized the “**UNHCR Dialogue with Regional NGOs on COVID-19 Response**”. Participation was considerable and diverse, including 60 NGOs (89 individuals) representing rights and advocacy, refugee communities themselves, humanitarian responders, UNHCR, and others. Below is the detailed note on the meeting:

**Moderator:** Jeremy Wellard, Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific, ICVA

**The objective of the meeting:** To update partners on UNHCR’s position, response and business continuity during COVID-19; To hear from NGOs on challenges on opportunities for their work in the region; To reinforce trust-centred partnership and develop joint action.

**Summary of the discussion:**

### **COVID-19 Response (General overview and impact)**

**Indrika Ratwatte, UNHCR Director of Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific**

- The Director started by thanking NGOs for being at the frontlines serving the populations of concern in extraordinary circumstances.
- At this moment, we need to leverage our respective strengths and come together in solidarity to respond as a unified community to one of the biggest challenges we have ever faced.
- UNHCR continues to work closely with governments, WHO and UNCTs, NGOs to secure the inclusion of persons of concern into national system response.
- UNHCR is part of the GHRP, and our appeal is \$ 250 M of which more than 60% funded so far, which will enable us to respond to the immediate needs. The GHRP was compiled in a rush way among the UN agencies, but we are sure that there will be iteration very soon and NGOs will participate in the appeal.
- UNHCR has commenced discussions with partners at the global level to ensure rapid response to concerns and challenges faced in responding to COVID-19. Consultations with NGO at the Geneva level has taken place every week for the past month to keep you up to date on developments and to hear from you how we can work better together.
- To enable implementing partners to scale up the response to meet needs, the HC declared an internal L2 Emergency – allowing the easing to some of the bureaucratic hurdles to accelerate the response.
- The HC sent a letter on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April to inform our partners of special measures taken by UNHCR to support our partners.
- Despite the social distancing and the tighten measures applied by various countries, UNHCR and humanitarian NGOs adopted the stay and deliver approach.
- Touch base on the immediate challenges:

- We see the 3 phases of the humanitarian response happening simultaneously. Highlight the socio-economic impact on the refugees and other people who live on the edge of poverty. The biggest challenge is the refugees, and other displaced populations are not included in the economic measures applied by countries which will just contribute to worsening their situation.
- The asylum and protection space are shrinking;
- Poverty will have a significant impact; and
- Stigma is another challenge, and we noticed it is getting worse in some countries in our region but even worse in some of the developed countries.
- We should utilize the 2030 UNSDG agenda and try to operationalize it by engaging the development actors.

### **Overview of NGOs Response and advocacy support efforts**

#### ***Themba Lewis, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)***

- Thanking UNHCR and participants for their hard work and engagement, noting that this is the first regional meeting around COVID of its kind, engaging RB and numerous NGOs around coordinated regional response and information exchange.
- Express solidarity with all NGOs and APRRN members for their hard work, noting unprecedented level of communication and coordination among regional actors.
- Outlining challenges, in addition to what the UNHCR director mentioned, i.e. funding, roll back in protection and concerns about humanitarian access.
- Seen a shift in APRRN activity towards consolidating and disseminating information from local actors to regional and international level, centralizing resources and media monitoring as well as releasing statements and working to document developments
- Members expressing concern regarding access to asylum, potential pushbacks and repatriation, normalization of restrictive border measures, potential risks in high-density and restricted movement areas such as camps and detention
- Need to start shifting from situation reporting to strategic longer term response: increased levels of destitution, poverty, and xenophobia will be coming very soon
- Need to ensure support for refugee-led initiatives as refugees are first responders and last actors standing on many situations

#### ***Ipshita Sengupta, Bangladesh Rohingya Response NGO Platform***

- The situation is quickly changing in Cox Bazar. Testing capacity is increasing in comparison with last week.
- Government is vigilant. Widespread transmission is not declared yet. So far, no confirmed cases in camps.

- Communication is a significant challenge in the camps. Advocacy to lift the restriction of the communication network is on-going at all levels with the GoB.
- More need to be done on the health and Hygiene situation in Cox Bazar.
- NGOs have limited resources to support their staff. UN system is required to step in to provide medevac if needed.
- There has been a reduction in the operation of protection actors, and reduced protection monitoring and presence is a concern. It is indispensable to maintain protection monitoring in Camps.
- Advocacy with the government to ensure NGO staff exempted from the lockdown measure to provide essential services in camps.
- Flexibility and availability of funding were also a key concern for NGOs in the response.

***Najeeba Wazefadost, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR)***

- APNOR has noted an increase in the number of domestic violence due to the lockdown, which requires attention.
- In countries like Iran, where more assistance is needed, lack of funding is a major challenge due to political reasons, i.e. the sanctions imposed on Iran.
- APNOR has developed country check-in calls with country focal points to ensure that timely follow up on refugees.
- Refugee-led learning programs are not getting funded nor is any support being provided in many cases, especially education.
- APNOR is also having an Asia Pacific Regional Conference with refugees on COVID-19 and NGOs can join as observers.
- APNOR presented an overview of their response activities; please see their presentation.

**Regional Protection environment (Key Messages /Rights/Advocacy/Urban settings/Sustainability)**

***Aurvasi Patel, Head of Protection Service***

- Protection (PRT) related Guidance Notes developed by IASC, Division of International Protection sent immediately to the field operations. the PRT service amended general guidance for region-specific challenges. Bureau operationalized some of the guidance to be practical tools for the operations .
- PRT service participates in coordination meetings with UN/NGOs as much as they can and issues raised in these meetings are fed back to the operations for follow up.
- Bureau protection staff hold regular meetings with protection teams in the operations to better understand the protection impact of COVID 19, identify areas for support, and share best/innovative practices between the operations

- Bureau protection staff also hold thematic meetings such as on Refugee Status Determination, all of those working in camps or camp-like environments, all Resettlement staff, etc. through a fraud and integrity lens. RST suspended in agreement with IOM.
- PRT service develop advocacy points on specific issues as they arise together with the communications team in the Bureau
- DIP issues a Global PRT Dashboard at the request of the HC supported by the respective bureau Data Information Management Analysis units in the Bureaus
- The main protection issues coming from POC in the region remain:
  - loss of livelihoods and concerns regarding the ability to pay for rent and food as a result; an analysis is being done in the Bureau on the impact of COVID on urban refugees and asylum seekers in terms of considering a cash grant spanning a few months but ensuring that in the analysis we consider the impact of COVID on host population so not to do harm and maintain peaceful co-existent; modalities being considered.
  - heightened stress within the home and the resulting SGBV/CP implications (coupled with a lack of shelter options and limitations in GBV/CP response capacity in the COVID environment) limited access to online/continued learning for refugee students (lack of laptops/ipads/and internet connectivity as schools move to this modality throughout the region); In this context the NGO's to advice HCR of their efforts.
  - issues accessing UNHCR documentation (for those not yet registered or with expiring documentation) to prevent detention/deportation.
- A number of good and innovative practices are being developed by the operations to enable continued access to services (particularly through the utilization of Community Based PRT networks within the refugee community), to ensure protection sensitive information/documentation is shared safely and securely in a remote context, to ensure a variety of communication channels are available for POC, to engage non-traditional stakeholders capable of providing support, to develop modalities for the filling of medical prescriptions for POC on lockdown, to engage a wide array of actors in joint and targeted advocacy, etc.

### **Special Measures for Partnership Agreements related to COVID-19**

#### ***Christine Matthews, Head of Strategic Planning and Management Service.***

- Thanking NGOs for their hard work and commitment to respond to the displaced population.
- UNHCR RBAP has 177 partners in the region of which 48 are internationals and 129 national partners with an overall budget of USD 100mil in the region.
- NGO Partners are the core of our partnerships and UNHCR wants to extend its appreciation to our NGO partners who work with us shoulder to shoulder in operations, making sure refugees and other Persons of Concern are extended the protection and assistance.
- On 3rd April 2020 High Commissioner sent a letter partners with a clear messaging: Reprogramming will take place and will have implications for existing partnerships, but we will work with existing partnerships in good faith and in a spirit of true partnership.
- The following raft of flexibility measures were announced:

- Grant Partners greater flexibility to make discretionary budget re-allocations (Partners currently have authority to make discretionary budget line transfers “within an Output” provided that the change will not exceed 20% in value. This threshold has been increased to 30% for the entire year which reduces the need for formal amendments of agreements).
- Grant flexibility on the release of the next instalments. UNHCR has authorized our Country Representatives to exercise judgement in absence of a verified financial/ performance reports for the prior period;
- Overtime for partner personnel can be charged to the project, even if that means exceeding normal contribution limits;
- Allowing partners to charge incurred expenditure for planned activities that did not materialize or were incomplete due to imposed movement restriction or social distancing measures;
- Requests to our operations to reduce reporting requirements and demands to a minimum, to accept documents in electronic form (rather than hard copies) and to carry out desk reviews and remote monitoring and verifications.

### **Question and Answer session**

Following the presentations, participants were invited to engage UNHCR RBAP, APRRN, and ICVA through a moderated question and answer session, utilising a web-based platform that allowed for voting questions up or down depending on participant interest. The top six voted questions from participants were as follows:

- In Bangladesh, what is UNHCR doing to ensure equal access to COVID-19 testing/treatment for Rohingya refugees? What about restoring telecommunications?
- Is UNHCR seeing any positive practices by governments in the region to include refugees in COVID-19 response?
- Simplification of partnership is a great step by UNHCR. How can refugee schools can get on board? 10 community schools in Indonesia and willing to partner.
- Boats have arrived in Malaysia with more anticipated. How is UNHCR responding? Can you share anything about contingency planning for boat arrivals in the region?
- Speakers have highlighted the increasing risks of SGBV. This is a life saving issue - are refugee women's groups being prioritised for support and resources?
- What is being/can be done to respond to increased protection concerns for children and other vulnerable populations (including SGBV) during social isolation measures?

**Questions submitted were responded to by various presenters.**

On positive practices by government, it was highlighted that a number of countries (notably Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan) had shown willingness and recognition of the issues facing refugees and were entering into dialogue with UNHCR. Other countries would require funding from donors to strengthen their engagement on these issues.

Community engagement was highlighted as a key factor, and innovation was needed to enable effective communication with the COVID-19 restrictions in place.

Best practices in resilience at needed to be identified and scaled up.

In regard to engaging women's groups and women-led initiatives, UNHCR agreed this was a priority concern. UNHCR confirmed their focus on prevention of SGBV and on child protection throughout their programming. Papers on these issues are being prepared.

On partnership procedures, new simplified arrangements apply to existing NGO partners. NGOs wishing to enter into new partnership arrangements with UNHCR should contact the relevant country office.

UNHCR recognizes the need for collective advocacy on key thematic issues including protection challenges, social protection, responsibility sharing and inclusion, simultaneously while looking at the health issues related to the response.

Best practices should be identified and shared, both with general public and as advocacy with donors. This includes on refugee-led advocacy.

The session ended with closing remarks by Jeremy Welland (ICVA) and Themba Lewis (APRRN).

#### **Additional resources shared by participants during the meeting:**

A letter Hong Kong based NGOs sent to the Hong Kong Government with policy recommendations on supporting the refugee community in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic [https://docs.google.com/document/d/169\\_zAGkuEp9mN\\_b3\\_vXNsUYPFouL88eG/edit#](https://docs.google.com/document/d/169_zAGkuEp9mN_b3_vXNsUYPFouL88eG/edit#)  
IFRC Guidance Note for Asia Pacific Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies on including migrants and displacement people in COVID-19 preparedness and response activities is available [online](#)

For more information on APNOR (Asia Pacific Network of Refugees)

[www.apnor.org](http://www.apnor.org)

APNOR #refugeesrise Emergency Appeal : <https://www.gofundme.com/f/refugeesrise-emergency-appeal-to-coronavirus>

info@apnor.org

#### **An overview of the advocacy landscape in Australia**

There is a very coordinated advocacy across the civil society with federal government, state governments and with the broader social services and health sector. For the top priorities we have highlighted and continue to advocate on, see here: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/priorities-covid-19/>