

**Remarks by the Director of the Division of Resilience and Solutions,  
Mr. Sajjad Malik**

**Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (80th  
meeting)**

*Geneva, 24 March 2021*

*Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.*

*Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Throughout 2020, the challenges faced by the 80 million forcibly displaced people across the world were further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The resilience of refugees, both urban and in camps, and their host communities is being tested to its limits. Health risks, including mental health risks, have increased exponentially; yet, health services are heavily strained and access to health care is more limited than ever. In camp and urban settings, refugees often live in densely populated areas with inadequate housing and lack of access to clean water, which makes them particularly vulnerable to the virus and increases the risk of infection. Access to education is also further constrained with 95 per cent of refugee children impacted by school closures.

Refugees have been severely impacted by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic through loss in income. In Ethiopia, 27% of refugees reported that household incomes were either reduced or totally disappeared.<sup>1</sup> In Uganda, 89% of households reported a decline or loss of income since March 2020.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, where refugees and migrant families rely heavily on the informal economy, up to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/161541608611808833/pdf/Monitoring-COVID-19-Impact-on-Refugees-in-Ethiopia-Results-from-a-High-Frequency-Phone-Survey-of-Refugees.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/682171613766616044/pdf/Monitoring-Social-and-Economic-Impacts-of-COVID-19-on-Refugees-in-Uganda-Results-from-the-High-Frequency-Phone-Survey-First-Round.pdf>

80% of UNHCR's persons of concern have gone from a situation of precarious self-reliance to destitution caused by the collapse of the informal economy across the region. This leaves displaced populations struggling to meet their basic needs, while increasing their dependency on humanitarian aid.

It is within this challenging context that UNHCR, together with its partners, delivered its global programmes in 2020 to meet the needs of its persons of concern. Given the wide range of areas covered by the global programmes<sup>3</sup>, from public health and WASH (*water, sanitation, and hygiene*) to education, livelihoods, and shelter, I will provide here some additional elements to complement our conference room paper.<sup>4</sup>

***Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

The COVID-19 outbreak has heightened the vulnerabilities of our persons of concern, particularly of individuals with specific protection needs, women, girls, elderly people, or people with disabilities. Gender inequalities are deepening, with many women and girls facing additional obstacles when seeking advice, protection and redress.

UNHCR deployed cash-based interventions (CBI) to mitigate some of these risks and to limit the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on displaced populations.

More than 65 UNHCR operations launched new cash initiatives or expanded existing cash assistance. Within this approach, UNHCR continued to work towards its commitment to increase the percentage of women as the primary recipients of assistance. Out of the 6.6 million recipients of cash assistance tracked in UNHCR's Cash Management System CashAssist, 48.5% are women.

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR's Global Programmes cover: (i) public health; (ii) human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and reproductive health; (iii) nutrition and food security; (iv) water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); (v) education, livelihoods and economic inclusion; (vi) shelter and settlements; (vii) energy and environment; and (viii) cash-based interventions. Furthermore, they comprise UNHCR's engagement as co-lead of the global shelter cluster and the global camp coordination and camp management cluster.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/standco/80/en/CRP-3-Global-programmes-English.pdf>

Learning on cash assistance and gender suggested that CBI support can render women and girls less vulnerable to sexual exploitation and negative coping strategies, thus having a positive impact on intra household relations.

UNHCR also stepped up its livelihood responses at the local, regional and global levels. Together with partners, we provided support to more than 1.3 million individuals that were most vulnerable to or affected by COVID-19 in 85 countries.

The pandemic has further reinforced the importance of refugee inclusion in national responses and local preparedness plans. For this global public health emergency, we are grateful and applaud the refugee-inclusive-plans adopted by the nations worldwide. Yet, with more than 85 per cent of the world's refugees hosted in low- and middle-income countries, and many hosted in isolated and remote parts of those countries, national health infrastructure is weak and heavily strained. They need sustained and longer-term support.

One major area of focus was to limit the spread of the virus in camps and settlements, some densely populated. UNHCR's response included support to local governments where required, and introduced urgent measures, social distancing, and hygiene practices with increased WASH facilities. We also introduced capacity-building activities for government and partner staff on surveillance, contact tracing and case management. UNHCR also provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), medicines, oxygen concentrators, rapid testing kits and other supplies. From March to September 2020, 380 metric tonnes of PPE and medical equipment were delivered to UNHCR operations worldwide.

UNHCR continued advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern in national COVID-19 vaccination strategies and vaccine orders. We are engaging with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee partners, Gavi (the Vaccine Alliance) and the COVAX Facility. To-date, 157 countries have developed a national vaccination strategy. Of these, 20 countries have started vaccinating refugees.

Vaccine equity and access are crucial to achieving ‘herd immunity’ for refugees and their hosts. UNHCR is committed to the COVAX allocation principles and will continue to advocate globally, regionally and at country level to ensure people of concern are included in national vaccination deployment plans and roll outs on par with nationals.

While UNHCR will not be providing vaccines, we will work closely with COVAX, GAVI, WHO and UNICEF, to support these endeavours where necessary. UNHCR will also support, what we call the “last mile” – such as support to COVID vaccination in remote refugee camps/locations through provision of cold chain and medical supplies to cover gaps; provision of PPEs and hygiene supplies to health workers, community mobilizers and vaccinators; transportation and delivery of vaccines to remote refugee hosting locations; transportation of partners or Ministry of Health staff involved in vaccination activities; establishment of temporary vaccination sites in a refugee camp; and communicate with communities in line with government messages. UNHCR operations are now reviewing the needs, country by country. We will need donor support to support the last mile.

In 2020, UNHCR continued to grow its partnerships, encouraging development actors and multi-lateral development banks to include forcibly displaced populations in their responses. As such, the World Bank Group has committed to provide up to US\$ 1 billion<sup>5</sup> in 100% grant terms during the fiscal year 2021<sup>6</sup> for eligible countries under the IDA19 Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR). This is an exceptional measure to encourage eligible refugee-hosting countries to include host and refugee communities when planning their responses to address the impact of COVID-19.

Moreover, the decision by the World Bank’s Operations Environmental and Social Review Committee stipulates that refugees must be included in all World Bank projects supporting COVID vaccination campaigns.

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<sup>5</sup> Out of the US\$ 2.2 billion under the Window for Host Communities and Refugees.

<sup>6</sup> 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021.

In response to the pandemic, the World Bank has also decided on the early replenishment of IDA20, cutting the three-year IDA19 cycle by one year. Funds under IDA20 will be disbursed earlier by one year as of 1 July 2022. These funds are critical in making fresh concessional resources available as countries work to rebuild from the pandemic.

UNHCR's work with the World Bank, including through the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, and national governments to include forcibly displaced persons in phone surveys<sup>7</sup> has provided data and evidence to better inform programming, policy and advocacy for socio-economic inclusion.

*Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

As we also heard in the regional updates, in today's unprecedented challenging context, supporting displaced populations is more important than ever. This includes ensuring that refugees are not left behind in a country's progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Supporting inclusion in national development planning, educational systems, labour markets, health systems, and social services is also a key element of the Global Compact on Refugees.

Throughout 2020, UNHCR adapted its global programmes to address the heightened challenges presented by COVID-19, while also delivering on its overall goals (*such as meeting our Grand Bargain commitment to double the amount of funds programmed for cash-based interventions, delivering USD 700 million to 8.5 million people in 100 countries in 2020*). The pandemic has highlighted that there is no one size fits all solution to combating the virus. As such, UNHCR's approach to delivering its global programmes is context specific, based on shared responsibility and inclusion of both refugees and their hosts in national plans that are developed based on context specific priorities.

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<sup>7</sup> 13 countries have either completed or are currently collecting data, and 8 additional countries will begin data collection in 2021.

To conclude, I would like to express our appreciation for your continued support to UNHCR's work in these challenging times.

**Thank you.**