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**Human resources, including staff wellbeing**

*Summary*

This paper highlights developments in the area of human resources and staff welfare, since the last update provided to the Standing Committee in September 2021 (EC/72/SC/CRP.23). It outlines developments towards a more modern, effective and people-centric human resources function at UNHCR, and reports on the support provided to the workforce to continuously improve the UNHCR employee experience amid complex global humanitarian challenges.

## **I. Introduction**

1. The complex and unpredictable environment in which UNHCR operates, characterized by the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and a dramatic rise in conflict and displacement, continued to impact its work and workforce. Despite these challenging circumstances, the people function in UNHCR has transformed to become more modern and people-centric, focused on partnership and the premise that a well-supported workforce is better able to care for others. The war in Ukraine, which prompted one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises in the world, coupled with protracted conflict and emergency operations elsewhere, underscored that the work of UNHCR would not be possible without the adaptability and dedication of its diverse and talented workforce. With this in mind, the Division of Human Resources is optimizing technology to simplify daily human resources matters and has placed further emphasis on the health and well-being of the workforce. This report provides an update on the multi-year human resources transformation in UNHCR and on the impact of various initiatives and developments on the way that the organization delivers for its people.

## **II. The people working for UNHCR**

2. By June 2022, the total workforce of UNHCR amounted to over 20,000 people, including more than 15,000 staff members and nearly 5,000 affiliate personnel working in 130 countries. The largest presence was in sub-Saharan Africa with 36 per cent (21 per cent in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, 10 per cent in the West and Central Africa region and 5 per cent in Southern Africa), followed by 20 per cent in Europe, 18 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa, 13 per cent in the Asia and the Pacific region and 13 per cent in the Americas. Some 91 per cent of the workforce was based outside of the UNHCR headquarters locations (Budapest, Copenhagen and Geneva) and 35.5 per cent worked in hardship duty stations, often away from family and often facing security threats and other challenging living conditions.

3. Currently, 45 per cent of the total workforce is female, of which women in the international category represent 49 per cent. Thirty-three per cent of the workforce is from Africa, 20 per cent from Europe, 17 per cent from the Middle East and North Africa region, 14 per cent from Asia and the Pacific region, and 14 per cent from the Americas. Seventy-two per cent of the workforce is locally recruited. The number of women in leadership roles further increased over the past year, as a direct consequence of the decision that two thirds of every shortlist to fill a position should be women.

4. Through concrete actions, UNHCR strives for inclusion and diversity, with equitable consideration for gender parity, racial equality, disability and age, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity. During the reporting period, such actions included the completion of a UNHCR independent review on race equality and equity which resulted in the creation in February 2022 of a multi-year action plan on race equality. In addition, the gender parity action plan was updated to increase talent from under-represented groups. Launched in 2021, the disability inclusion framework brought additional changes to the organization, including an administrative instruction on workplace accommodation, guides and learning on disability inclusion for managers, human resources colleagues and the workforce at large.

5. While the work of UNHCR remained impacted by the pandemic, the implications for the workforce were remarkably different from last year. Despite new COVID-19 variants and spikes in infection rates, there were fewer hospitalizations and no fatalities among the workforce due to the disease during the reporting period. This stands in contrast to 2020 and the first half of 2021, when UNHCR lost 18 colleagues. The proactive leadership in facilitating access to vaccination for colleagues and partners in the field through the United Nations system-wide COVID 19 vaccination programme, as well as strengthened medical evacuation resources contributed to this improvement. A new administrative instruction on COVID-19 vaccination and related safety measures was issued in February 2022, making vaccination mandatory for groups with heightened risk of contracting the virus. As of June 2022, 78 per cent of the UNHCR workforce was vaccinated. To ensure access to critical care for colleagues, UNHCR invested in strengthening medical facilities in particularly vulnerable emergency operations, notably in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique and the Sudan.

6. Given the impact of the pandemic on mental health globally<sup>1</sup>, UNHCR reinforced its psychosocial support to the workforce. In line with our field focus, The Division of Human Resources supported operations in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Pakistan, South Sudan, the Sudan and Ukraine by scaling up services from staff counsellors and medical personnel. In addition, the UNHCR well-being platform is increasingly being used as a resource and reference point by colleagues to advance self-help and access the psychosocial support provided by the Staff Health and Wellbeing Service.

7. The pandemic also acted as a catalyst for the organization's approach to occupational health and safety, including the launch of a new policy in December 2021. In addition to setting the policy framework, the approach works on multiple levels to ensure the organization's duty of care by implementing critical controls to manage and minimize risks, facilitating the development and monitoring of occupational health and safety standards, though safety and health training and by implementing incident reporting system.

### **III. Transformation through technology and partnership**

8. A key element in the modernization of the human resources function in UNHCR is the introduction of Workday@UNHCR, a new cloud-based digital human resources system which replaces the current tool (commonly known as MSRP). The transformation brought by Workday aims to significantly simplify and streamline policy and processes, increase transparency and offer better internal controls as part of the UNHCR business transformation programme. The system underwent 18 months of design exercises and extensive testing to ensure it is fit for purpose for all practical applications and business processes that it will support. The launch is planned for October 2022. Managers are provided with real-time people analytics and tools to support strategic objectives to ensure diversity and inclusion,

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2021 United Nations system-wide staff health and wellbeing survey, 49 per cent of staff reported deteriorating mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and 23 per cent self-identified as having a mental health condition. Stress mainly originated from long working hours and increasing demands (42 per cent), lack of time for family and friends (36 per cent) and geographical separation (34 per cent).

and the system will allow UNHCR to adopt best practices in human resources on a global scale.

9. The close partnership between the Division of Human Resources and operations grew stronger during the reporting period and manifested itself in multiple ways, most notably through the senior human resources partners and their teams in the regional bureaux. Working closely with the Division of Human Resources' leadership and acting as a strategic partner to their respective regions, the responsive growth of these operations indicated a very positive impact on the delivery of human resources in the field. To further strengthen regional capacity to identify and develop talent and increase diversity, the division is introducing regional talent advisors to join human resources teams in the regional bureaux in mid-2022.

10. To ensure availability of talent, 1,317 international positions were filled between July 2021 and June 2022, of which 403 were fast track positions. This is an increase of 157 international positions compared to the same period last year. The time to fill a vacancy in the international category dropped from 119 working days in 2020 to 107 working days in 2021. Fast track positions were filled to respond to emergency situations in Afghanistan, Chad, Ukraine, Ethiopia and Mozambique. Some 12,000 applications were received through 27 talent pools, and thousands of first-time applicants participated in outreach events and virtual career fairs.

11. The scope and speed of the Ukraine emergency was used as an opportunity to review and simplify the fast track recruitment and assignments process using a risk-based approach. Thanks to strong partnership between the division, the regional Bureau for Europe and the respective operations this resulted in a significantly reduced timeline for deployment. Despite this being the biggest fast track recruitment in the organization's recent history, 183 out of 249 job openings were filled within three months.

12. The Junior Professional Officer programme was made possible by generous support from Member States to offer young talent opportunities to gain experience and work for UNHCR. By June 2022, 64 junior professional officers were working for UNHCR with a retention rate of over 75 per cent. UNHCR also greatly benefits from United Nations Volunteer Programme (UNV) modalities and in May 2022 hosted 808 United Nations volunteers. Having successfully piloted in several countries, in June 2022, 23 refugee United Nations volunteers worked for UNHCR in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa region, and the Americas. The UNV refugee programme enables refugees to become agents of change in their communities, strengthen their economic position and reduce their dependence on humanitarian assistance.

13. As part of simplification, UNHCR reviewed the management of workforce travel and expanded the use of lump sum payments to all types of statutory travel. The new approach to travel includes measures to save considerable time to manage statutory travel requests, grant more flexibility to travellers, and give emphasis to sustainable modes of transport by favouring trains on short-distance journeys. UNHCR is moving to a digital online management of travel requests, which will improve monitoring and tracking.

#### **IV. Good people management**

14. To increase dialogue with the workforce, UNHCR launched the first organization-wide global PeoplePulse online survey in October 2021. This series of

short, targeted surveys to the workforce replaced the more traditional global workforce survey which used to collect feedback on a biannual basis. A key feature of PeoplePulse is that it allows for rapid check-in surveys on particular matters of concern to the workforce. Using data to empower managers to engage with their teams and hear their feedback in real time, PeoplePulse surveys aims to strengthen engagement and accountability.

15. Opportunities for growth and development are key for engagement and a positive employee experience. During the reporting period, UNHCR expanded its learning curriculum, made programmes available in more languages, and extended the online environment to enable learning regardless of location. In 2021, nearly 14,000 members of the workforce and some 2,500 external users participated in at least one learning activity.

16. Strengthening good people management practices across UNHCR is a key feature in the organization's transformation. Over the past year, UNHCR developed a new performance management model (Evolve) to frame the relationship between manager, employees and their teams. Evolve will be introduced with Workday@UNHCR and has a greater focus on team achievements and results-based impact. It is based on five pillars: simplified process, continuous learning and coaching, frequent check-ins, trust and collaboration.

17. In addition to extensive multilingual career webinars, the division hosted two major virtual career events, Learn@Work week in November 2021 and Careers@UNHCR in May 2022, offering more than 100 different activities in four languages on career and functional development. The three-day events were attended by 12,000 individuals and featured keynotes from senior leaders, external speakers and colleagues sharing their expertise, career stories and experiences.

18. The strategic people dialogue with representatives, a forum for representatives and the division's leadership to discuss human resources and people management issues per region, continued virtually during the reporting period. The division also expanded its coaching, team coaching or mentoring offering to investing over 1,500 participants.

19. In July 2021, UNHCR introduced a strategic workforce planning approach, providing a solid foundation for mainstreaming strategic human resources planning across the organization. In alignment with the move to multi-year planning strategies across all operations, regional bureaux and divisions, this will help ensure the availability of talent, forecast talent gaps and build strategies to fill these gaps efficiently.

20. UNHCR continued to lead at the inter-agency level, co-convening the Task Force of the High-Level Committee on Management on the future of the United Nations system workforce, and as co-chair of the Chief Executives Board Human Resources Network. These engagements resulted in several key deliverables on senior leadership behaviors, a model policy on flexible work, guidance reinforcing work-life integration and new ways of working that will enable the United Nations system to offer an improved employee experience for the global workforce.

## **V. Conclusion**

21. Throughout a turbulent year and despite the many challenges, the dedicated workforce of UNHCR stayed and delivered to assist those they serve. The Division of Human Resources and the human resources colleagues around the world

collaborated with managers on multiple levels to respond to urgent and rising needs of the workforce. At the same time, the division is preparing for the future by modernizing and transforming the human resources function, as well as by introducing more efficient and agile systems, processes and partnerships to offer a positive employee experience. By capitalizing on the lessons learned from COVID-19, UNHCR was able to maintain support for operations while simultaneously planning for the long term to continue making a positive difference for its workforce, operations and, ultimately, those forced to flee.

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