



UNHCR High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges 2020

National Statement

High Commissioner, Chair, your excellencies, distinguished delegates.

We would like to thank UNHCR for convening this year's High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges under difficult circumstances. We know the pandemic has and will continue to have a disproportionate impact on the lives of forcibly displaced and stateless people, and their host communities. It is critical that we continue, together, to find solutions to protection challenges faced by the millions displaced globally.

High Commissioner, Australia is particularly concerned by the impact of the pandemic on refugee women and girls, and by increased instances of sexual and gender-based violence globally. Access to sexual and reproductive health services has been constrained, disruption to education has had a disproportionate impact on girls, and women and girls have and will continue to bear the brunt of household pressures, unhelpfully reinforcing gender roles.

It remains critical that UNHCR continues to prioritise the protection of women and girls across its operations. In this regard, working with partners and donors to maintain the delivery of sexual and reproductive health services is paramount.

We commend UNHCR for its efforts to embrace technology – such as mobile messaging services – to deliver assistance, including SGBV prevention and response. We encourage UNHCR to build on these technological advances, working with local

and national organisations – particularly refugee women-led organisations – to empower communities to deliver effective protection outcomes.

High Commissioner, COVID-19 has undoubtedly altered the protection landscape in refugee and host communities. It is therefore essential that UNHCR continues to improve data collection and analysis to ensure its protection interventions produce meaningful outcomes – including for persons with disabilities, who have unique and specific needs.

We can only ensure the needs of persons with disabilities are met if they have agency, through accessible and meaningful engagement. Australia’s multi-year humanitarian investments promote equitable access to assistance for people with disabilities. We ensure our partners make meaningful and reportable progress on improving disability inclusion in Australia’s humanitarian programming. We commend UNHCR for implementing the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, and urge UNHCR to align this with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

High Commissioner, COVID-19 has constrained traditional models of humanitarian assistance. While this has been incredibly challenging, there are lessons and opportunities too. We encourage UNHCR to continue efforts on localisation through greater engagement with and support for local humanitarian actors. Importantly, this includes passing on the benefits of flexible, multi-year funding, continuing to allocate a greater portion of indirect support costs, and investing in the institutional capacity building of local and national partners.

COVID-19 has highlighted the remarkable resilience of refugees, and the communities that generously host them. Refugees and host communities have worked tirelessly to implement successful COVID-19 preparedness and response activities, highlighting the importance of community-led, localised responses. The meaningful

participation of refugees, including women-led refugee organisations, in the design and implementation of protection programming remains essential.

High Commissioner, COVID-19 has put the international protection regime under immense pressure. Australia paused its humanitarian resettlement program following border closures. However, we have continued to permit entry for the highest priority humanitarian entrants, in line with our commitment to protecting those in situations of acute vulnerability, including women and girls.

Australia remains one of the most generous refugee resettlement countries globally, and we are particularly focused on resettling vulnerable women and children. In 2020-21, the Australian Government has allocated up to 12,000 places under our humanitarian resettlement program, which will resume at scale once it is safe to do so.

At home, Australia has continued to implement best-practice settlement support services for refugees. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government has worked closely with settlement service providers to ensure that vital support is provided to humanitarian entrants and other vulnerable migrants, and that settlement service providers maintain business continuity.

Service providers have been responsive and adaptable and have introduced innovative service delivery approaches, including the use of digital and virtual technologies. For example, the Adult Migrant English Program pivoted to an online delivery model to continue to provide services.

High Commissioner, the Australian Government remains committed to the successful settlement of humanitarian entrants and acknowledges their important contribution to Australian communities. We note in particular the valuable contribution refugees have made to our national COVID-19 response, including as frontline health workers.

High Commissioner, at the end of an incredibly challenging year, Australia acknowledges UNHCR's tremendous efforts throughout 2020 to stay and serve the

most vulnerable. We also commend the remarkable COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts by refugee and host communities globally.

We look forward to continuing to work with UNHCR to protect the most vulnerable, and to draw on the important lessons from this incredibly challenging time to better serve displaced people around the world into the future.

Thank you.