

Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
85th Standing Committee meeting

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**Agenda Item: 4 (b) Human resources, including staff welfare
(EC/73/SC/CRP.22) 20 September 2022**

Madam Chair, Excellencies,

In 2022, the number of displaced persons hit an unfathomable threshold: 100 million people were forced to flee their homes to seek shelter elsewhere. This number bears witness to the rapidly growing and unpredictable global situation our organization responds to every day.

UNHCR being present – to respond to these complex emergencies and the growing humanitarian need – is only possible because of **our people**. Our incredible workforce who – no matter where they work or what they do – show up every day to make a difference for the people we serve.

They do so despite being faced with frequent security threats, logistical challenges and while working amidst a still-ongoing global pandemic. In the past year, I had the pleasure of meeting many of them, and experience their daily life myself, as I traveled to Sudan, Bangladesh, Ukraine and Afghanistan.

During these missions, I am always inspired by the incredible resilience and perseverance that our colleagues bring every day, despite often being directly impacted by conflict themselves, like our national staff in Ukraine – or experiencing vicarious trauma, like our colleagues caring for displaced in the DRC.

No matter where they are, their passion and conviction are a testimony to their humanitarian spirit – and seeing them go above and beyond for the most vulnerable is a daily inspiration.

This humanitarian spirit is what binds our workforce of nearly 20,000 colleagues – hugely diverse in nationality, origin, language, expertise, and experience – together around one common purpose. Our colleagues join UNHCR for more than just a job: it is a vocation and a calling, built on the desire to make a difference for the people we serve. **I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to our fantastic workforce and say "thank you", for all they do every day.**

As I am approaching my 4-year anniversary with UNHCR, I am struck by how much has happened during this time. How much the world has changed, how much UNHCR has changed and, above all, how much the Division of Human Resources has changed.

As you may recall, it was some 4 years ago that we, the Division of Human Resources, embarked on our journey of transformation – on which I have had the pleasure to update the Committee regularly. Our multi-year agenda to modernize human resources centers around a strong partnership with our operations, strengthening people management, simplified and streamlined

HR processes, and increased efficiencies through technology to enable better HR services for all colleagues.

These priorities – **People, Partnerships and Technology** – remain in clear focus, and they have evolved, so please allow me to highlight some of the ways UNHCR's people function has continued our transformation: Adapting to the evolving needs of our workforce, with some significant initiatives and developments marking the past year.

Building on the premise that life is complicated enough, so your HR shouldn't be, our transformation efforts have centered around the simplification of daily HR matters. Over the years, we have made strides to become more field-driven and client-oriented, and placed greater emphasis on the health and wellbeing dimensions of the employee experience.

One of the most impactful parts of our transformation was the decision to move from our current HR tool – which is no longer serving us well – to **partner with Workday, the leading provider of HR digital solutions**, to introduce a new cloud based, user-friendly system for all things HR: from payroll, recruitment and strategic workforce planning to personnel administration, to learning and performance management.

In doing so, we made a very conscious choice to use the implementation of Workday@UNHCR as an opportunity to review, simplify and streamline every single HR policy and process for the past 18 months. This change process has not been easy, given the complexity of the UN Common System– as well as a level of comfort that comes with doing things a certain way for a long time. **It has, however, been worthwhile.** Not only has it resulted in a dynamic and people-centric digital platform – something easy to use for both colleagues in the field and headquarters – but we have simplified and streamlined over 200 HR processes and revised 8 major HR policies, as well as created a new approach to performance management.

For the first time, Workday will allow UNHCR to disaggregate its workforce data, leveraging global best practices in HR and achieving our strategic goals, including those around diversity and inclusion.

Perhaps the biggest change, however, has been in the mindset of HR colleagues in the division; to boldly embark on such a change during a pandemic, to stay the course and to embrace new ways of working – all to ensure UNHCR can offer everyone a better day-to-day experience – shows a mindset shift that is inspiring.

As we approach our go-live moment in early October, **I am incredibly proud of the global HR community: how they have been an integral part of building Workday, training their colleagues and now owning the rollout to the entire UNHCR family.**

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are fundamental pillars of our transformation towards becoming a more inclusive organization where individuals from all backgrounds thrive, and where our internal value system mirrors our external mandate.

With no less than 160 nationalities among our colleagues, UNHCR is, by its very nature, geographically diverse. But nationality alone doesn't tell the whole story. Our workforce also represents different genders and ages; religious, and cultural differences; family compositions, educational backgrounds; and work and life experiences. This extremely diverse group of people, with their own unique perspectives, is what makes our organization so powerful – **people are UNHCR, and diversity is our strength.**

UNHCR is committed to achieving gender parity at all levels, and since 2018 we have increased overall representation of women in our organization from 43% to 45% (including Affiliate Workforce colleagues). Over the past 5 years, we redoubled our efforts to achieve gender parity by hiring equal numbers of men and women in the international professional category and by placing a stronger focus on women in the conversion from national staff to international careers. Notably, the number of women in leadership roles further increased over the past year, as a direct consequence of UNHCR's decision that two-thirds of every shortlist should be occupied by women.

Drawing upon the synergies between our ambition to achieve gender parity and improve geographic diversity, particularly for under-represented groups, **we see the parallel goals of gender parity and diversity as complementary rather than competing.** This will require initiatives that simultaneously contribute to these two goals, such as leadership accountability, targeted recruitment and outreach efforts, and fostering an inclusive and enabling environment for all colleagues. **It is not simply about achieving quantitative goals, but about changing the institutional culture, so UNHCR can fully deliver on its promises in an inclusive way.**

One such step took place at the beginning of this year, when we finalized our Action Plan on Race Equality and Equity, which outlined key actions to eliminate racial discrimination and racism in our organization. We also shone a spotlight on disability inclusion, and our on-line systems are being optimized to be better accessible for colleagues with disabilities.

As internal assignments continue to make up a large part of the movement within our workforce and attrition is low, we are particularly looking at strengthening the development of our national staff and affiliate workforce members to promote representation and growth at all levels.

We therefore keep investing in our workplace culture and belonging, and we will not rest before every UNHCR colleague feels like they are part of an environment that nurtures belonging and trust.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, our employees demonstrate every day that they are driven, talented and dedicated to assist those in need. Allowing them to take ownership of their growth and development by promoting good people management and offering holistic development opportunities is key to a positive employee experience and a critical feature of our transformation.

This is why we are launching **Evolve, a new performance management approach** designed to support the relationship between manager and employee with greater emphasis on development and continuous feedback, to achieve both collective and individual goals. This allows us to

strengthen the talent we already have at all levels, and support colleagues with development opportunities that are as dynamic as our work is.

Moving the conversation forward in this targeted, continuous way is also a key component of the way we are engaging the workforce at a global level. Through the rollout of short, focused surveys, we have been able to receive relevant feedback from our operations, around what works well and where the organization can do better. By making this data available to managers in real time, they can make targeted interventions and address motivational gaps and concerns in their teams in a dynamic and more immediate way.

In some places, the COVID-19 pandemic has relinquished its place in the spotlight for other emergencies, but I would be remiss if I did not highlight the incredible work that our medical and psycho social professionals have done to protect our workforce against the virus, through our new COVID-19 vaccination policy and other on-the-ground support during the height of the COVID emergency. In protecting our workforce, we were able to stay and deliver to the people forced to flee, and while the pandemic might present us with further peaks in the future, we now have the knowledge, skills and policies in place to largely protect our colleagues.

Overall, the lessons we learned during the peak of this global pandemic have helped build a much stronger occupational health and safety framework for UNHCR. It has also made us acutely aware of the vital role of mental health and psychosocial services for our workforce.

After all, **selfcare is not selfish, it is sacred**, especially in the work we do.

As I have emphasized many times before, UNHCR's greatest asset is our people.

This is why, throughout the many challenges that needed our immediate attention in the past year, – including the short-term deployment of hundreds of colleagues to support emergencies in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Ukraine – we continued our quest to transform HR into a more modern and responsive function.

In fact, we have used the opportunity to reconcile the need for immediate, bold action with a push for a more efficient and expeditious ways of getting the right people in the right place. The rapidly unfolding situation in Ukraine urged us to revisit our fast-track deployment processes in real-time. Never before had we deployed such a large number of colleagues to an emergency situation this fast, and the lessons learned during this process are feeding back into our new policies and procedures to benefit UNHCR in future situations like these.

Our efforts in modernizing all components of HR – from talent management and learning to inclusion and emotional health – and bringing these elements closer to operations, maximizes the potential of our workforce and the ability of UNHCR to make a difference in the lives of the people we serve. **None of this would be possible without the dedication and commitment of the fantastic UNHCR HR community, and your generous support as member states.** Please allow me to express my genuine appreciation for the ongoing collaboration with all of you. We were delighted to see so many of you at our recent Member States briefing in June and look forward to seeing you again at a similar event early next year.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, the reason we do what we do is simple, **People are UNHCR**, whether they work in Burkina Faso, Colombia or Geneva. Whether they are our general service or professional staff, our affiliate workforce, regardless of their roles and backgrounds. **Each and every one of them brings something unique to our organization and to the people we serve.**

As the world continues to present challenges to our organization, we continue to approach these new realities with creativity, innovation, and determination. One thing that doesn't change, however, is the fact that we keep our people and what drives them, at the center of everything we do.

Thank you.