

Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
79th Standing Committee meeting

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**Agenda Item: 2 (C) Human resources, including staff welfare, and safety and security
(EC/71/SC/CRP.18)
16 September 2020**

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

Just over a year ago, UNHCR was at the height of its transformation exercise: moving strategic resources from Geneva to regions and operations, and delegating authorities for a more agile mode of delivery.

This was in perfect alignment with the transformation of human resources, launched earlier and on which I had the pleasure to update the Committee last year. It is a multi-year agenda to modernize human resources and be closer to the field, simplify processes, increase efficiencies, and deliver HR services in partnership with employees and managers with our people in focus.

While unexpected at the time, so much of this groundwork and careful planning proved essential in 2020. It reaffirmed the direction of our transformation in support of UNHCR's readiness for the constant disruption of the future. As such, I take the opportunity to showcase the impact of our ongoing transformation through the lens of UNHCR's response to COVID-19 in those first critical months.

Along with the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic placed UNHCR in a truly unprecedented situation. It required for us to stay put even if we are used to a dynamic way of working -- in and out of the office, in camps, away on rest and recuperation, mission travel, etc. This situation impacted nearly all of our operations, and required our colleagues to manage personal, family and health-related challenges while the demands of their jobs and the people they served increased overnight. It required a renegotiation of our employee value proposition, which is built on UNHCR taking care of and supporting our workforce in the most difficult locations and in return asking colleagues to serve in hardship locations and emergency operations in support of the mandate and the people we work with.

Yet, our people remained on the ground, working with the most vulnerable, showing that we continue to deliver even in the most challenging circumstances. Amid crisis is where our people really thrive, and where we as a humanitarian organization can make a difference in today's world.

In this context, I am incredibly proud of what we, in the Division of Human Resources, have done to support our people, putting in practice the new behaviours and tools of our transformation. I hope to highlight this support today along five main themes: partnership; robust HR foundations and workforce management; enabling environment; people management; and belonging and inclusion.

First and foremost, we have been working in partnership with operations putting our people at the centre. As you may recall, last year we launched our regional HR teams, led by Senior HR

Partners, embedded in the seven regional Bureaux are a key feature of our partnership model. Little did we know how critical they would be in 2020.

The regional structure ensured that our guidance responded to needs and challenges in the field, with HR partners bridging the two-way communication between field and HQ. HR was present in the regular calls between country operations and the High Commissioner, paving the way for globally crafted and locally adapted guidance. As a co-chair of the HR Network, I was able to bring the field voice to the inter-agency response and push for consistent practices among different agencies on the ground.

Second, the new streamlined HR structure at HQ, in place since January 2019, shifted into higher gear. Services working in alignment allowed HR to continue delivering without disruption even after moving to remote working almost overnight. Thus, ensuring that our colleagues did not need to worry about salaries, job applications, or contract extensions on top of all the other challenges they were facing. We also made sure to look at the specific needs of our locally recruited workforce and colleagues in the affiliate categories.

Over 1,300 positions were filled in the period July 2019 to July 2020, higher than the previous reporting period, attesting to an agile and efficient assignment process even while working remotely. Most of these colleagues have already started in their new roles, some able to travel to the duty station some remotely, but in all cases through an HR partnership with teams and managers to find appropriate solutions in each context. In addition, we were already in the process of transitioning to a new approach towards learning, but the pandemic offered an opportunity to accelerate the shift to online modalities, allowing for on-demand learning, more responsive to real needs. For several months, we did all of this from home, noting that in March close to 88% of UNHCR's workforce was teleworking.

Third, the pandemic put a sharp focus on UNHCR's occupation health and safety framework, a key feature in the transformation roadmap, safeguarding the health and safety of our colleagues through a risk-based approach and considering local health advisories and UN WHO guidelines. This was made possible through the tight UNHCR health and wellbeing network, working seamlessly between HQ, regions and operations.

As you may have seen in the report, early on we introduced preventive care measures such as app-based telemedicine support and requiring vulnerable colleagues to telework and we substantially increased access to psychosocial support for all.

In addition, we pooled resources and efforts with other field-based agencies on medical evacuation and the ramp up of the medical first line of defense. However, this remains a major challenge; overcoming border restrictions, identifying emergency support and hospital beds, and coordination are only a few examples of the extensive work that goes into every single medical evacuation. For every lost life we have experienced, I need not expand on the enormous grief and frustration shared by all colleagues who work on these evacuations.

I take the opportunity in your presence, Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, to commend our medical and psychosocial teams and the HR community around the world for their dedication during the pandemic. As I speak, they continue to stand by our workforce with their expertise, compassion, commitment and care.

Fourth, this pandemic has brought home the most important relationship of all, namely that of manager and employee. We saw that the ability to stay and deliver during COVID-19 was

heavily influenced by this relationship. Recognizing HR's role as a partner to this manager-employee relationship, we increased support on remote management and emphasized empathy, wellbeing and flexibility as key pillars for managing teams. This was done through webinar series, resources on the intranet, and communities of practice to share experiences. Thereby, reinforcing people management a corporate priority and critical feature of our transformation.

People, their experiences and wellbeing are central to everything we do in human resources. At UNHCR, we know that a sense of belonging is an important part of the way our people view their employment experience. This too was redefined in the past few months as our experiences as a team were not limited to sharing an office in a physical building. Our workforce was also called to reflect on belonging and what that truly means in a humanitarian and highly diverse organization like ours, in the context of the black lives matter movement following the death of George Floyd.

Each individual in UNHCR brings with them a diverse set of perspectives, work and life experiences, as well as national, religious and cultural differences that make them who they are and why they want to work for the people we serve. The true power of diversity can only be unleashed, and its benefits reaped when we have a truly inclusive environment.

Efforts towards increasing diversity and inclusion in the workforce, therefore, continue to be a priority for the organization. In addition to the High Commissioner's efforts to increase dialogue, review our practices to address systemic weaknesses, we will continue to support our managers and employees on how to engage in more dialogue to strengthen our awareness and reduce unconscious bias.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

One year ago, nobody could have predicted exactly how much our transformation would be put to the test in 2020.

And in truth, we are not at the end of this formidable trial just yet. The world of work continues to evolve, whether propelled forward by new technology, this pandemic, or changes in global culture and politics. Transformation and a long-term vision will therefore continue to be a fundamental part of a people-centric HR function.

This means taking a critical look at what our organization is capable of doing in the current volatile and uncertain environment; and asking what we need to do differently in order to maximize the impact of the one major asset we have -- our people. This includes thinking differently about flexible work, duty stations, skills of the future, leadership, collaboration, etc.

I would like to end by saying how incredibly proud I am of every single UNHCR colleague, continuing their work, and supporting our persons of concern in incredibly difficult circumstances this year. We have showcased that the HR function has grown and evolved into an agile, dependable and stable support structure for our people. Needless to say, there's still more to do – for there always is.