



Intervention by Belgium
At the 71th meeting of the Executive Committee
of the High Commissioner for Refugees

Geneva, 5 October 2020

(check against delivery)

I am honored to participate in this year's general debate of the Executive Committee. It's important that such a high level event can take place, notwithstanding travel restrictions and other COVID-19 measures.

2020 has been a challenging year for your organization and for the humanitarian community as a whole. I salute your staff and all humanitarian staff for their commitment and perseverance in providing services for People of Concern during this global crisis.

At 197 million Euro, the Belgian humanitarian budget has never been so high, partly due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Belgium has also supported the UN MEDEVAC operation, by offering Intensive Care services in our University hospitals for Covid19 patients among UN staff, whereas the airport of Liège has been one of the international hubs for the logistical services of WFP. I can also announce that we are able to re-start our resettlement programme, after an interruption due to lockdown measures.

Now we have to start preparing 2021. It will not and should not be business as usual. Allow me some considerations.

The world is anxiously waiting for a vaccine. Once it will be available, we will all face difficult choices. Governments and international organisations will have to decide how to distribute and allocate the first load of doses. Who will be prioritized? Who are the most vulnerable groups? How will refugees and IDPs be covered? We expect them to be included in national vaccination programmes of the host countries, but what would be the fiscal impact of including refugees and persons of concern in national programmes? How will international organisations contribute to share the burden?

But there are also other concerns. How will humanitarian organisations communicate on the vaccination programs, how will misinformation or anti-vaccination campaigns be countered? Will all parties in a conflict allow humanitarian organisations sufficient access? I would be interested in hearing the High commissioner on these concerns.

We may hope to gradually overcome the health impact of the Covid19 pandemic next year, on the other hand the economic and social consequences will not disappear as quickly. We are all aware about the risks of increasing poverty, and of increasing food insecurity. The opportunities of refugees and IDPs to participate in economic activities, either as workers, or as entrepreneurs, have dwindled and these challenges will have to be tackled with the help of the IFIs and the IMF.

Belgium is particularly concerned by the rise of protection cases. The side-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are especially detrimental to women and girls. Numerous reports give an alarming picture of the negative gender impact of the current crisis, such as loss of labour opportunities for women working in the informal sector, an increase in GBV in camp settlements, a growth in negative coping mechanisms like early marriage or prostitution, or the risk that school closures may result in poor girls dropping out of school indefinitely. The current crisis may thus turn out to become a major setback in women and girls' empowerment. To turn around this worrying trend, a sustained effort is therefore required of governments, donors, civil society and humanitarian actors. I encourage UNHCR to listen to women's voices when programming its interventions, while continuing to enforce its zero-tolerance policy against SEA/SH (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse/ sexual Harassment). In its new results based framework UNHCR should

also use gender differentiated indicators as the international community needs to see evidence of continued progress in women's empowerment.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, we have become accustomed to the digitalization of our work. Even this meeting of the Executive Committee is an example of the new way of working. In the past, reporting on digital tools was covered in the chapter on innovations, not to be taken too seriously, but now it has become mainstream.

Digitalization has enabled humanitarian organizations to continue providing their services to people of concerns, in the midst of restrictions. However, when the pandemic is over, we should not just revert to the old ways of working. There are many efficiency gains through digitalization. Using social media in communication, digital feedback mechanisms, online training, virtual meetings, allow economies of scale and cost savings.

Of course we should not forget the digital divide. Poor communities still have less access to smartphones, or to internet. Humanitarian organizations should always verify whether the target group of their programs has digital access. We should start considering digital access as one of the basic needs in humanitarian settings, next to access to food, shelter, health or education.

We welcome the progress UNHCR has accomplished in its Grand Bargain commitments, and particularly the increase in Cash Based interventions and in localization. Of course, the Grand Bargain is not a beauty contest. It's about increasing efficiency and effectiveness. And in many cases, both CBI and localization will lead to more efficient and effective programs. As a donor representative, we are often worried that such interventions may be more prone to fraud and corruption. During the standing committee meetings, UNHCR has reported on measures taken, together with other partners, to minimize the risks. We welcome these measures, but we also encourage UNHCR to be transparent about the problems encountered as transparency is the basis for building trust in an organization.

Finally, over the past year Belgium, like other partners, increased its funding of humanitarian programmes in the Sahel region. The number of people of concern, both refugees and internally displaced, has grown exponentially. A mix of violent conflicts, extremist armed groups, weak government capacity, climate change, is driving the downward trend. I encourage UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations to increase their portfolio in the region.

Thank you for your attention.