

88th Meeting of the Standing Committee

13-14 September 2023

Agenda item 2(c)

Oral update on integrity in UNHCR

Since 2017, UNHCR has undergone a far-reaching and extensive process of transformation, including decentralization and modernization, touching every facet of the organization. It has sought to strengthen its organizational culture, creating a working environment free from abuse, discrimination, harassment and exploitation. The organization is also fully dedicated to strengthening integrity and accountability systems across all levels, to building capacity to recognize risks and take actions to mitigate them, and to ensuring that conflict resolution and accountability mechanisms, both formal and informal, are effective. These efforts are undertaken in recognition of the fact that UNHCR works in challenging operational environments, where inequalities and where security and operational dynamics create heightened risks for fraud and other types of misconduct.

This oral update provides an overview of the collective progress made towards delivering on UNHCR's ambitious integrity agenda. This includes actions undertaken by the Ethics Office, the Enterprise Risk Management Service, the Office of the Senior Coordinator for the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, and the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator.

Building capacity and confidence

To support colleagues to make informed decisions that balance values and risks, while also constructively addressing workplace disagreements, a series of initiatives were advanced to provide an avenue for learning.

The Ethics Office institutionalized a shift from one mandatory code of conduct session a year to ongoing dialogue throughout the year, promoting values in action and trust and collaboration. The dialogue sessions serve as a vehicle for change, providing space for collaborative learning and highlighting diversity and inclusion as foundational. During the dialogue sessions, which provide an opportunity for participants to confront and discuss real ethical challenges, UNHCR personnel connect and learn from each other. They also collectively reconnect to the nine principles that form UNHCR's code of conduct, which provides foundational guidance for ethical decision-making in the workplace. Following the sessions, colleagues are encouraged to "stop, pause and reflect" on their own roles, as they contribute to upholding the values of UNHCR and ethical decision-making. In 2022, over 130 operations and entities at Headquarters reported having had code of conduct dialogue sessions, collectively involving nearly 7,500 members of the workforce. The sessions were predominantly facilitated by the Ethics Office, with the help of 65 code of conduct dialogue focal points and 400 facilitators. Globally, operations highlighted their appreciation of the new format and themes.

The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator supported colleagues to become competent in preventing and de-escalating conflicts and facilitating conflict resolution in the workplace. In order to provide closer support to colleagues working in operations in Africa, UNHCR established a presence in Nairobi covering the three regional bureaux and their operations. This has resulted in a 40 per cent increase in colleagues in those regions reaching out to the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator for support, while globally there was an 11 per cent increase in requests for assistance. It is estimated that the Office of the Ombudsman helped de-escalate over 130 situations of conflict in the workplace. In addition, through both virtual and in-person outreach, one out of five UNHCR personnel, including managers, received training in how to resolve differences through constructive dialogue.

Providing UNHCR personnel, leaders and risk focal points, as well as partners, with the necessary tools and knowledge to proactively address risk is a key objective of the organization's Risk Management Strategy 2025. The risk network has made substantial progress, engaging with over 6,800 UNHCR and partner personnel through remote support and virtual trainings in 2022, a 26 per cent increase compared to the previous year. Senior Risk Advisers have facilitated dialogue in operations, addressing topics such as conflict of interest in Ethiopia and fraud risk management in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya. In addition, targeted training sessions have been held with nearly 190 senior leaders and risk

experts on reputational risk management and crisis communications since 2020, equipping them to set the tone and lead by example in UNHCR's operations.

In parallel, to bolster the ability of UNHCR operations to understand and address risks of fraud across various activities, a new fraud risk management tool was launched. The organization of a Fraud Awareness Week also provided an important opportunity to bring fraud prevention to the fore. During the week, an event involving a panel conversation led by the Controller with the participation of the Chief Risk Officer and the Inspector General was attended by over 500 colleagues.

Strengthening the “speak-up” culture

UNHCR remains fully committed to fostering a culture of openness, transparency and accountability, where all personnel are encouraged to speak up and report misconduct, and where colleagues are empowered to share concerns, report problems and offer suggestions without fear of retaliation or negative consequences.

The Support Desk for Workplace Concerns, launched in May 2022, has provided a channel through which the workforce can flag issues for the attention of the integrity entities, including formal Administration of Justice focal points. The Support Desk provides an integrated service, which allows colleagues to better understand where to turn to in order to address their workplace issues and grievances. This collaborative approach also ensures that concerns are assessed by all relevant entities and channelled to the appropriate mechanisms, including formal ones where necessary. Since its launch, the Support Desk has received 119 requests for support, with the number of cases gradually increasing each month.

Complementing this initiative, the revised Administrative Instruction on Protection Against Retaliation came into force in August 2022. The Ethics Office has observed a steady increase in cases and colleagues coming forward to report possible misconduct, which in turn enables UNHCR to take early action. This demonstrates confidence in the internal justice system and is a positive sign in terms of the speak-up culture.

In May 2023, UNHCR launched “NotOnlyMe”, an innovative tool to support victims of sexual harassment. This tool allows victims to submit a confidential record of their experience to a secure and encrypted online matching escrow system that anonymously alerts them if someone else has recorded an incident involving the same harasser. Experience has shown that victims of sexual harassment are more likely to choose to come forward for support and to formally report an incident if they know that the person who has harassed them has also harassed others. The tool also allows the user to anonymously chat with UNHCR's Victim Care Officer and clinical psychologists.

Identifying and tackling integrity risks

Recognizing the heightened risks inherent to working in challenging operational contexts, where power and gender differentials can give rise to sexual misconduct, UNHCR's updated 2023-2025 Strategy and Action for Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment places emphasis on strengthening capacity at the operational level, in close partnership with internal and external stakeholders. The strategy outlines the organization's comprehensive approach to coordinating and implementing risk mitigation, prevention and response efforts, while ensuring that global policy development speaks to UNHCR's operational realities.

Supporting UNHCR's operations, the regional bureaux and headquarters entities to proactively tackle a range of integrity risks is critical to the organization's risk management efforts. UNHCR's risk management process provides a strong platform for colleagues to discuss and address risks of sexual exploitation and abuse; fraud and unethical conduct by personnel, partners and suppliers; and fraud linked to individual case processing. The identification and management of integrity risks is supported by a network of dedicated Senior Risk Advisers and risk focal points. Fraud and integrity risks feature prominently in risk registers across the organization, signaling that these are well identified, understood and addressed through a wide range of mitigating measures.

A recent survey conducted in June 2023 targeting the dedicated risk focal points and risk owners,¹ shows some encouraging insights in terms of the progress made in managing integrity-related risks in UNHCR.

¹ The risks owners are composed of the High Commissioner's Representatives in UNHCR's country operations and Directors of divisions.

Among the respondents, 65 per cent affirmed that risk management has significantly contributed to enhancing integrity and ethical conduct within the organization. Furthermore, when it came to the effective management of risks related to fraud, 73 per cent reported that UNHCR had successfully identified and managed these challenges and 69 per cent expressed confidence in the organization's ability to address and manage risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse. Results showed significant progress made since 2019, when the respective numbers were 56 per cent and 58 per cent.

Engaging with partners, including in the United Nations system

UNHCR continues to invest significant efforts in its role in leading and supporting inter-agency initiatives. This includes, most recently, its co-leadership in developing the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Definition and Principles of a Victim/Survivor-Centered Approach, published in June 2023, which drew from UNHCR's own Policy on a Victim-Centred Approach in Addressing Sexual Misconduct. UNHCR, through its leadership of the Chief Executives Board Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment, has been at the forefront of system-wide initiatives to prevent and respond to sexual harassment. UNHCR also contributes to the work of the Office of the Victims Rights Advocate and the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society is also a key priority. In partnership with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, UNHCR launched the fourth round of applications for the joint UNHCR-International Council of Voluntary Agencies Community Outreach and Communication Fund for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. This fund supports local organizations working on awareness-raising and aims to promote a localized approach to prevention and response. Working in collaboration with partners to strengthen their capacity in this area has also been a priority. As of the end of 2022, over 80 per cent of eligible NGO partners had been assessed on their capacity to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. This has helped target support for partners where gaps were identified. Through joint efforts with other United Nations partners, the process of partner assessment and monitoring is now conducted online, using a new module on the United Nations Partner Portal.

Other integrity entities in UNHCR have been equally active in inter-agency fora. The Ethics Office continues to participate in the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, contributing to the ongoing development of a unified set of ethics standards and policies for the system. The Ethics Panel consults on important and complex cases and issues having system-wide implications. In addition, the Ethics Office is an engaged member of the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations.

The office of the Ombudsperson and Mediator has also strengthened its relationship with other Ombudsman and Mediation offices in the United Nations system, including with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In November 2022, it convened a seminar on transformative mediation.

Under the umbrella of the United Nations High-Level Committee on Management, UNHCR is co-chairing in 2023 a risk management forum, where integrity risks are part of the agenda. Recognizing the importance of building the risk management capabilities of UNHCR's partners, substantive efforts have gone into developing a robust learning curriculum. A new eLearning module on managing risks and opportunities, developed by UNHCR, is now available on the United Nations Partner Portal. In 2023, other innovative learning materials have been launched, enabling UNHCR risk focal points and Risk Advisers to facilitate effective training. Through interactive sessions, real-life examples and brainstorming activities, partners are empowered to make informed decisions and take risk-conscious actions in their work. Dedicated webinars have also been employed to foster collaborative discussions on risk-sharing. A successful pilot training was conducted in June 2023 in Kampala, Uganda, with the participation of 40 colleagues from both UNHCR and partner organizations. A facilitator guide has now been rolled out globally to engage partners across operations to jointly manage shared risks.

Given the dynamic and demanding operational landscape in which UNHCR works, addressing integrity risks will continue to be a priority for the organization. Acknowledging that sustained effort is needed, UNHCR remains resolutely committed to creating a workplace culture that promotes safety, transparency and accountability, as the organization aspires to foster an environment where refugees and personnel alike can thrive, free from any form of harm.