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Human resources, including staff welfare

Summary

This paper highlights major developments in the area of human resources management since the last update provided to the Standing Committee on “Human resources issues, including staff security” in September 2014 (EC/65/SC/CRP.20). It also provides an overview of key priorities as set out in UNHCR’s forthcoming “2016-2021 People Strategy”, which will outline UNHCR’s strategy for recruiting, placing, supporting and developing the organization’s workforce in order to ensure that UNHCR continues to fulfil its mandate. An update on “Staff security” is being presented concurrently to the Standing Committee (EC/66/SC/CRP.24).

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I. Introduction

1. By year-end 2014, the population of concern to UNHCR was an unprecedented 54.9 million persons, compared to 42.9 million persons in 2013. UNHCR's ability to provide protection and assistance to this ever-increasing number is dependent on its dedicated staff, who are willing to work in some of the most difficult and dangerous locations in the world, often separated from their families for extended periods of time. The commitment, adaptability and professionalism of UNHCR staff make them the greatest resource of the Office.

2. In 2014, UNHCR was present in 125 countries and 454 locations worldwide. Over the past five years, a substantial increase in simultaneous large-scale humanitarian emergencies has seen a 39 per cent increase in staff numbers. As at 31 July 2015, the organization had 9,727 staff, 73 per cent of whom were nationally recruited. Since 2009, the number of staff working in the field has increased by 41 per cent, bringing the number to more than 8,000. More than half of UNHCR staff work in category D and E duty stations. Given the need for flexibility in the organization's workforce in order to respond to changes in its operating environment, the Office also has flexible operating arrangements with a range of partners such as United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). In total, more than 12,000 persons worked for UNHCR by mid-2015.

3. In this challenging global context, UNHCR remains committed to strengthening mechanisms to recruit, care for, support and manage its human talent. In addition to implementing a series of human resources reforms to reinforce organizational effectiveness and efficiency, the Division of Human Resources Management (DHRM) is also finalizing a new "People Strategy" for 2016-2021.

4. As part of these reforms, UNHCR is pursuing four major goals:

- Preparedness and diversity – improving UNHCR's ability to better anticipate future workforce requirements; manage an appropriately skilled and diverse staffing pool; and hire the best talent.
- Performance and competence – investing in career development, management and learning; effective performance management systems; leadership development; and succession planning.
- Flexibility and timeliness – enhancing UNHCR's ability to respond quickly to operational demands through a sound mobility framework and a range of flexible workforce arrangements, while maintaining a balance between the needs and aspirations of staff and the operational requirements of the organization.
- Care and support – providing a working environment that fosters resilience, supports staff health, engenders a culture of trust and values, and reinforces professional human resources capacities and systems.

5. UNHCR made significant progress with these four goals during the reporting period, as outlined below.

II. Preparedness and diversity

6. To mitigate the risk of workforce misalignment, UNHCR is enhancing its ability to anticipate global operational demands for staff in terms of numbers, location, experience and skills, as well as the capacity of the organization to attract, hire and retain talented people. To achieve this goal, DHRM has undergone substantial structural changes.

7. A Strategic and Transformative Human Resources Service was established in 2015 under the Deputy Director of DHRM. Its objective is to address evolving organizational human resources challenges through implementation of the forthcoming “People Strategy”, enhanced partnerships with divisions and bureaux, leadership and talent management, and the coordination of human resources aspects of emergency preparedness and response.

8. Additionally, the Talent Outreach and Acquisition Section (TOAS), created in 2014, is tasked with recruitment to meet the organization’s need for specialists and new skills. TOAS is responsible for four external recruitment programmes: the Entry-Level Humanitarian Professional Programme (EHP) launched in 2013; the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) launched in 2014; Profile-Based Recruitment, to be fully implemented in 2015; and ad-hoc recruitment to attract high-level leadership and specialized talent in specific functional areas.

9. The EHP and the CBI have successfully reduced institutional gaps in terms of skills, languages and diversity at junior and mid-levels. Following the deployment of the first EHP cohort of 44 candidates in March 2014, 5,365 persons applied for the second round of the EHP programme in 2015. A rigorous selection process is underway and expected to be concluded during the last quarter of 2015. Under the CBI, a cohort of 27 applicants were deployed between March and July 2015, mainly to fill skills gaps in the areas of protection, programme, refugee status determination and cluster coordination. The second phase of the CBI saw a total of 3,444 applicants for 35 positions. In addition, 15 functional profiles were published on UNHCR’s website and have continued to attract a large number of applications from qualified candidates covering a range of core functions. This will provide the Office with a pool of available talent for deployment to emergencies and in areas where there is insufficient internal capacity.

10. Review of the career management function has been ongoing, with the creation in 2015 of a new Assignments and Career Management Service (ACMS) and the decision to relocate the Career Management Support Section (CMSS) to Budapest. This will facilitate interaction between CMSS and other units in charge of talent outreach, staff services, and learning and development, which are based in Budapest. A Workforce Analysis and Business Intelligence Unit was also created in 2014 to enhance UNHCR’s workforce planning and management reporting capacity. Systems to enhance data analysis are being developed and will be used to inform decision-making concerning the global workforce. Closer cooperation among DHRM, regional bureaux and divisions will support a shared understanding of evolving staffing needs in terms of volume and functional areas and/or expertise.

11. One of UNHCR’s greatest assets is the diversity of its workforce: staff come from 154 countries and speak more than 454 languages. UNHCR remains committed to ensuring that diversity is valued and nurtured, and that the workforce composition continues to reflect diversity in terms of gender, nationality, language and cultural background. A review of UNHCR’s gender equity policy is underway, with a view to developing a strategy that embraces all different forms of diversity, including but not limited to gender. In line with the “People Strategy”, which has a strong diversity component, the review is exploring the barriers and opportunities for a diverse workforce in terms of careers in the organization. Preliminary findings demonstrate opportunities for proactive engagement, including: fostering a “culture of inclusion” and a shift in attitude and practice by managers towards a more inclusive and respectful working environment; a stronger focus on accountability in terms of meeting diversity targets; sustained efforts to attract, develop and retain diverse talent; and flexible work modalities for all employees.

III. Competence and performance

12. UNHCR depends on a competent, high-performing workforce to meet its complex operational needs. In this regard, it is important to balance current and future staffing needs with the experience, competencies, and career and life priorities of national and international staff. The new ACMS will strengthen UNHCR's capacity to successfully navigate these various and sometimes competing factors. In particular, career counselling for staff will be informed by closer cooperation with functional units on organizational staffing needs, both immediate and projected.

13. With some 162,000 course completions since 2010, the Global Learning Centre (GLC) has greatly expanded opportunities for staff to acquire knowledge and better manage their career paths, offering access to a wide array of learning programmes aligned with UNHCR's strategic and operational priorities. In 2014, some 28,000 learning activities were completed, with the majority of learners in the G staff category (67 per cent). In addition, 8,000 learning activities were completed by members of the flexible workforce and 2,000 by UNHCR partners (non-governmental organizations and government partners).

14. In close collaboration with the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS), the GLC supports emergency preparedness and response, including through the Workshop on Emergency Management (WEM). In 2015, a WEM was conducted for the first time in French in Senegal, with the support of the Senegalese Army and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). A WEM-like training was also delivered in Dubai for civil protection and Red Crescent agencies from the region, with the support of the Dubai International Humanitarian City.

15. Substantive competency-based learning initiatives and certification programmes have been developed in key functional areas, such as management and finance, and supply chain, to ensure greater accountability and to support career development. Two pilot initiatives were launched in 2015: a certification programme for representatives, deputy representatives and heads of sub-office at the P-5 to D-1 levels, and a certification programme for human resources staff, with a focus on field-based staff.

16. Leadership is another area of focus, with UNHCR's managers playing a critical role as coaches, mentors and role models in creating an enabling environment for their staff. Because many staff members were recruited during the crises of the 1990s, a significant number of senior managers (40 per cent of staff at the P-5 level and above) are expected to retire by 2020. While this will result in an inevitable loss of experience and knowledge, it also represents an opportunity to attract talented colleagues from younger generations. During the reporting period, succession planning was furthered, including through the establishment of a new Strategic Human Resources Unit focusing on leadership development.

17. Efforts to improve the performance management system continued. In November 2014, UNHCR introduced a new "Policy on performance management", drawing on good practices from the United Nations common system and lessons learned from the previous policy. The new policy emphasizes performance management as a continuous dialogue among supervisee, supervisor and reviewing officer on past and expected performance in order to foster trust, transparency, honesty, collaboration and innovation. The policy also includes measures to enhance individual accountability, recognize exceptional performers, and manage underperforming staff. Efforts to simplify the performance management system also progressed.

IV. Flexibility and timeliness

18. The mandatory mobility policy for nearly all international professional staff is a resource- and time-intensive process to manage, and is contingent on a degree of burden sharing among staff; yet it remains essential to UNHCR's capacity to carry out its mandate. Each year, about one-third of international professional staff change duty stations. In 2014, DHRM advertised a total of 1,343 regular vacancies – a record, and close to twice the number advertised in 2009. In addition, 168 “fast track” vacancies were advertised for deployment to emergency situations, 16 times more than in 2009. DHRM supported 1,260 international relocations for reassigned or newly recruited staff members and their families, including the processing of medical clearances, international shipments and benefits.

19. Specific challenges arise in the context of emergency response, such as difficulties in quickly identifying and deploying staff with the right profiles, language skills and availability. UNHCR is working to improve deployment policies and procedures in order to enhance its capability to be flexible and responsive. Together with DESS, an emergency human resources capacity has been established in DHRM, consisting of 10 staff who will be trained in emergency human resources management and who will be on standby for emergency deployment.

20. In 2015, a “Revised policy and procedures on assignments” introduced a number of measures to enhance the assignments process, including the possibility for simultaneous internal/external advertisement of posts, access to profile-based pools of recruited staff, the possibility for standard assignment lengths (SALs) to be modified by the High Commissioner under exceptional circumstances, and simplification of the functional assessment process. UNHCR is committed to better managing the assignments process within timeframes that are sensitive to staff's personal needs and to the requirements of specific operations. Additionally, the Office is developing a new strategy for the engagement and management of personnel working through flexible arrangements.

V. Care and Support

21. While working for UNHCR is highly rewarding, as reflected in responses to the 2014 global staff survey, due to the nature of UNHCR's work and operational environment, staff may be exposed to human tragedy, primary and secondary trauma, security threats as well as health and other risks. The high level of commitment by many staff to the work of the organization, coupled with mandatory mobility, may impact personal life, including relationships and families. It is imperative that even in the most difficult working environments staff can depend upon excellent health and welfare support.

22. In 2014, UNHCR's Staff Welfare team included 10 counsellors based in Amman, Beirut, Dakar, Geneva, Islamabad, Juba, Kinshasa and Nairobi. The team provided psychosocial support through more than 4,500 individual contacts with staff based in 111 countries, serving in 278 locations. Counsellors also undertook field outreach, spending a total of 620 days on mission to 38 operations, and facilitated group activities for more than 8,700 staff.

23. A “First Time Managers” programme for junior managers leading teams in challenging field conditions was piloted in countries affected by the emergency in the Syrian Arab Republic (Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon), focusing on good management practices and staff support. Six trainings for Peer Support Personnel (PSP) were organized, targeting staff working in D and E duty stations, including in Myanmar and South Sudan, and two more sessions are planned before the end of 2015. PSPs are staff members who

volunteer to offer confidential support to colleagues facing work-related or personal difficulties and to act as “first responders” following a critical incident. Psychological preparation before, and debriefings at the end of, assignments are now being carried out for all postings in D and E duty stations. A framework for the provision of support to staff in high-risk environments was finalized in June 2015, which focuses on fostering individual resilience and supporting positive team dynamics, and includes Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to support staff following a critical incident. The SOPs set out different areas of responsibility (such as security, human resources, management and medical) following a critical incident.

24. The results of UNHCR’s “Staff health risk appraisal survey” were published in 2014, and the results of the “Staff wellbeing survey” are forthcoming. Preliminary results indicate that significant imbalances between invested efforts and potential rewards are a leading factor in the risk of emotional and other types of exhaustion, job dissatisfaction and eroded motivation. The “Staff health risk appraisal survey” provided a geographical map of health and psychosocial risk factors across the organization. The results of both surveys will inform efforts to improve the comprehensive staff health and welfare support system.

25. The regionalization of the Medical Section, initiated in 2014, was fully implemented by mid-2015, with regional medical doctors based in Bangkok, Dakar and Nairobi. Medical assessments and support missions were carried out in several countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, and an epidemiologic surveillance system was established in operations affected by the Ebola virus, along with a strategy for psychosocial support. Other achievements included a national staff vaccination campaign in Chad; the provision of basic first aid training in high-risk operations with low levels of available medical support (benefiting 408 staff); health promotion activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Thailand (benefiting 361 staff); and the establishment of a walk-in clinic at UNHCR headquarters.

26. Throughout the reporting period, DHRM undertook several missions to review living and working conditions. A number of recommendations are forthcoming to improve the personal lives of staff members working in remote, difficult settings, including access to new technologies. With the support of “Innovation Norway”, UNHCR is purchasing solar power water pumps, filters and lights, hybrid generators and innovative energy-free sewage technologies for staff accommodation and offices in deep field operations, as well as developing an “all-inclusive base camp” consisting of accommodation and office facilities for emergency operations. These tools should assist the organization to better protect the environment, reduce the cost of fuel and servicing of generators, provide a reliable and safe electrical supply, improve staff security by reducing fuel transport and storage, and provide safe potable water to staff members by introducing water filters to replace bottled water. In 2014, with the support of “Technology in Action”, two solar-powered water filters and pumps were successfully installed in Mauritania, and 12 more are being installed in Chad. An “all-inclusive base camp” for 32 to 40 staff members has been pre-positioned in Dubai and is available for deployment to emergency operations at short notice.

27. In 2014, DHRM issued a revised administrative instruction on UNHCR-provided accommodation, introducing enhanced standards as well as a consistent rental fee base calculation. In addition, an energy audit was carried out in Kenya, advice on accommodation-related matters was provided to 18 operations, field assessment missions were undertaken to four operations, and renovation works on UNHCR-provided accommodations were undertaken in five operations in Africa.

28. Professional human resources capacities and systems have also been reinforced. Globally, UNHCR seeks to ensure that human resources staff are provided with opportunities to develop within the human resources career stream, and that a range of sound policies, procedures and systems are in place to enable them to perform their

functions. DHRM has been modernizing existing tools and plans to transform the human resources administrative function into one of human resources management, which is more proactive and strategic. For example, UNHCR envisages the creation of comprehensive human resources job descriptions covering competencies such as recruitment, career management, performance management and staff welfare. Other steps include the launch of the human resources certification programme and the creation of human resources positions in the field. Projects aimed at improving human resources services and bringing these services as close as possible to the field included, throughout 2014 and 2015, the simplification of the Performance Management System, a procedure for e-separation (implemented in headquarters and in the field since 2014), a staff data digitalization process, and the upgrade of UNHCR's enterprise resource planning system, Managing Systems, People and Resources (MSRP).

VI. Working in partnership

29. While constantly improving its capacity to meet UNHCR's operational needs, DHRM also actively participates in inter-agency working groups that impact staff and affect all agencies in the United Nations Common System such as the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) human resources network, and the Pension Fund. DHRM has contributed to United Nations reforms on human resources management, including the Compensation Review Working Group, the Tripartite Working Group of Hardship Duty Stations according to conditions of life and work, and the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) strategic working group on duty of care issues for United Nations personnel operating in high risk environments. In addition, DHRM has co-led the United Nations Staff/Stress Counsellors Special Interest Group Coordinating Committee (UNSSCG) for the past seven years.

VII. Conclusion

30. In order to meet the needs of persons of concern, the Office continues to adapt and innovate in its approach to human resources management. The forthcoming "2016-2021 People Strategy" and its implementation plan will support UNHCR's efforts to recruit, place, support and develop the organization's workforce, ensuring that it will continue to fulfil its mandate in the face of increasingly challenging large-scale displacement situations worldwide.
