



Concept Note | Regional NGO consultations for Europe

18 April 2023

BACKGROUND

UNHCR has a long-standing commitment and partnership to work with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), and other civil society organizations. This is in recognition of their critical role in providing protection, assistance and finding solutions for refugees, other forcibly displaced and stateless persons, including by promoting inclusion into national systems.

The 2023 consultations with NGOs, RLOs, and other civil society actors will be regional and organized by each of UNHCR's Regional Bureaus. The Consultations for Europe are organized jointly by UNHCR and the International Council of Voluntary Associations (ICVA) and will take place in-person on 19-20 September 2023 at the International Conference Center in Geneva.

The outcomes of the consultations will inform regional strategic priority-setting and organizational strategies of UNHCR, NGOs, RLOs, and other civil society actors in the Europe region including in the final preparations for the second Global Refugee Forum to be held in December 2023. The findings of the consultations will also be presented at the annual meeting of the UNHCR's Executive Committee in October 2023 and inform and support the global NGO consultations to be held in Geneva in June 2024.

TOPICS

Inclusion in National Systems

Socio-economic inclusion is a fundamental enabler for any durable solution, be it repatriation, local integration, or resettlement¹. Indeed, the inclusion of forcibly displaced populations in national systems, programmes, and services is a key strategy to address their needs in a more predictable manner, promoting their self-reliance and resilience, while avoiding creating parallel systems. It also strengthens social cohesion. To this end, UNHCR works

¹ The term inclusion refers to the practice of ensuring that forcibly displaced people and stateless persons have access to and are included in host government systems on par with nationals and have equal access to the services and protection that these systems afford to citizens in accordance with international norms and standards. This encompasses access to land, freedom of movement, documentation, decent work, access to education, health, social protection and social care services, housing, finance, entrepreneurship, upskilling and skills recognition, and wider economic opportunities. The inclusion of refugees in national systems yields a number of benefits—to refugees and their host communities. Improved protection and access to basic rights allows refugees to become net contributors as consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, and taxpayers.

with governments, civil society, development actors, and other stakeholders, such as the business community, to foster opportunities to include displaced populations in national systems and services and – particularly in middle- and low-income countries – to strengthen national systems for the benefit of refugees and affected host communities.

The inclusion of forcibly displaced people and stateless persons will remain a core political, economic and social challenge in Europe for years to come. The Ukraine situation has raised awareness among great parts of the society on the need to strengthen effective inclusion of refugees, as evidenced by the relatively low enrollment rates of children in schools, difficulties in accessing skilled employment, limited access to social services, including childcare, and language barriers. Other refugee populations face similar – if not greater – challenges, given sometimes lengthy asylum procedures, discrimination and limited or not recognized documentation required to access services and skilled employment.

While support for refugee inclusion and responsibility-sharing among States has been steadily growing over the past years, more needs to be done to overcome legal, administrative, and practical impediments to inclusion. Key guiding questions under this topic include, inter alia:

- What are some of the barriers to social, economic and financial inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless people and how can these be addressed?
- What are examples of emerging good practices with regard to the effective inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless people in national systems and services in Europe?
- How can UNHCR work better with forcibly displaced and stateless people themselves, civil society and other stakeholders to advance effective inclusion and promote social cohesion?
- What national, regional or global resources are needed in order to facilitate better inclusion? What is needed to help States to integrate forcibly displaced and stateless people into national systems and ensure social cohesion?
- How can RLOs help remove some of the barriers to inclusion?

Role of organizations led by refugees, other forcibly displaced and stateless people

Refugee-led Organizations are defined by UNHCR as “an organization or group in which persons with direct lived experience of forced displacement play a primary leadership role and whose stated objectives and activities are focused on responding to the needs of refugees and/or related communities”.²

While the critical role played by RLOs in refugee protection and assistance has most recently been evidenced in the context of the Ukraine situation, they have long been the first point of contact for asylum-seekers arriving in Europe, providing critical and lifesaving information about available services and rights, and acting as guides and translators in their new countries of asylum. They provide frontline and grassroots level support to affected communities and help the most vulnerable access assistance, counselling, education and livelihoods. Many

² <https://www.refworld.org/docid/63e658fc4.html>

refugee-led organizations also offer support to the host community and engage in activities to promote social cohesion and integration, and to combat hate speech and xenophobia.

Similar organisations and initiatives exist by and for other displaced or stateless populations. Engaging refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), stateless and war-affected communities in the response promotes decision-making, makes programmes more responsive to needs identified by communities themselves and also helps to achieve durable solutions. Inside Ukraine, for instance, IDP and community-led groups play a key role in engaging communities meaningfully and substantively in all aspects of protection programming.

In the five years since the Grand Bargain was launched, UNHCR has increased funding and support for national and local responders and simplified reporting requirements. In the Europe region, in 2022, UNHCR budgeted approximately USD 115M to local and national responders, of which 107M went to national NGOs. In terms of number of partners, local and national comprised 205 of UNHCR's partners in the region. Last year, UNHCR also supported 48 refugee-led organizations in the region through grant agreements targeting non-profit grass-root organizations established and led by refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, returnees, stateless people or any other person that UNHCR serves.

More broadly, efforts are underway within the international humanitarian community – by UN agencies, donors, larger international non-governmental organizations – to strengthen the meaningful engagement and inclusion of organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people. For instance, the number of local NGOs appealing in the [2023 Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation](#) increased significantly from the previous year – from 59 to 154, including six refugee-led organizations.

While significant progress has been made, more needs to be done. As outlined in the [statement](#) issued by the Global Refugee-led Network on the occasion of UNHCR's Executive Committee's 73rd Plenary Session in October 2022, "refugees must be meaningfully included in all levels of decision-making about refugees". This means that "(i) refugees are represented in decision-making forums at local, regional, and international levels; (ii) all refugees and affected communities are able to meaningfully participate in all stages of the refugee response; (iii) RLOs are sustainably funded with quality funding for institutional strengthening". In the context of these consultations, the central role played by RLOs and the importance of their representation and participation was affirmed by the UNHCR Regional Director for Europe at of the UNHCR's 86th Standing Committee.

These consultations aim to make these commitments a reality by moving beyond the discussion of how UNHCR may support and partner with RLOs to address all three aspects of the above statement. Concrete support will be provided to ensure RLOs are aptly represented during the consultations and invited to engage in its substantive policy agenda under the other topics.

Taking into account the range of experience shared by participants, this session seeks to identify regional and context-specific avenues to improve collaboration with organizations led by refugees, other forcibly displaced, and stateless persons. Key guiding questions under this topic include:

- How can collaboration with RLOs be improved across coordination structures, response plans and implementation, and planning cycles?

- What are some key recommendations addressed to Government donors to increase direct and flexible funding through partnership agreements with reasonable administrative requirements to RLOs?
- What support do RLOs require in order to make their voices heard and fully participate in assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and adapting inclusion policies, strategies and initiatives and the regional, national and local level?
- How can innovation and accountability to affected populations be better harnessed to enhance the inclusion of RLOs?

GENDER EQUALITY

UNHCR's commitment to gender equality is articulated in the UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity (2018) through five obligatory core actions. The [UNHCR Strategic Directions 2022-26](#) identify accountability to women and children and gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response as priority areas for additional, accelerated, and targeted action. UNHCR strives to ensure that women and girls participate equally and meaningfully in all decision-making, community management and leadership structures; are provided with individual registration and documentation; have equal access to and control over management and provision of food, core relief items, cash-based interventions; have equal access to economic, educational and health opportunities and have access to comprehensive GBV prevention and response services.

UNHCR continues to strengthen engagement with displaced women-led organizations and strongly advocates for funding opportunities for these organizations through various mechanisms such as the [Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#). Notably, UNHCR worked with the [New Women Connectors](#), an organization led by migrant and refugee women, to organize five workshops that brought together migrants and refugees from 35 countries in Europe to enhance capacity building on leadership and advocacy.

Over the years, UNHCR and partners have worked to prevent and respond to gender-related protection risks and needs for women, men, girls, and boys, while increasing the efforts to ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons are equally included in all steps of programming. New and ongoing conflicts, the pushback on women's rights, the climate and environmental crisis, and the economic and social fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated gender inequalities in some contexts. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, the gender and age dimensions of displacement have been recognized from the start, with a clear majority of refugees comprising women and children. Protection monitoring and assessments, including safety assessments, have highlighted a range of risks associated with private accommodation, collective accommodation, and livelihoods and economic inclusion opportunities, many of which have a link to the age and gender profile of the refugee populations. In the context of solutions and inclusion, increasing risks of labour exploitation and trafficking have been noted as displacement becomes more protracted, particularly for women seeking employment who may face a variety of challenges, including language barriers, skills mismatch, and lack of childcare options.

In addition to dedicated sessions on the topic of gender equality, the consultations will aim to ensure that the theme is fully considered in all sessions, with specific recommendations aimed at strengthening meaningful participation, gender transformative approaches, addressing the gender data gap in humanitarian response and strengthening evidence-based programming.

Indeed, participation of forcibly displaced and stateless women in community leadership and management structures, including through networks of women- and girl-led organizations, is critical to achieve the objectives outlined above. The meaningful engagement of refugee women and girls is important in all phases and processes of humanitarian action, including but not limited to assessments, planning, coordination, fundraising, implementation and monitoring.

Key guiding questions under this topic include:

- Are European States doing enough to empower and encourage women participation in decision-making bodies, regardless of their nationality or status?
- What specific challenges do women and girls face in displacement, including challenges to effective inclusion? How can governments, humanitarian actors, and the private sector work together to better include women who are refugees, IDPs, or stateless in the labour market?
- What specific support do women- and girl-led organizations need to make their voices heard and fully participate in assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and adapting inclusion policies, strategies and initiatives and the regional, national and local level?
- What are key recommendations, good practices or existing mechanisms to improve accountability to affected communities, especially women and girls?

Side events

Information sessions or side events for NGO partners on UNHCR's programme reform and on the Global Refugee Forum 2023 will also be organized, either on the margins of or in the lead-up to the Regional NGO Consultations.