

Short NGO Statement: informal briefing to Member States and other stakeholders on UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and operational priorities

Wednesday 22 April, 9:00-11:00

- Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak on behalf of a wide range of NGOs.
- We want to start by thanking UNHCR for its constant dialogue with NGOs over the past few weeks, basically since the pandemic started.
- UNHCR has been transparent, communicative and collaborative, which demonstrates a renewed impetus for the Principles of Partnership. NGOs particularly appreciate UNHCR efforts to be a more flexible donor and adapt the collaboration framework in those unprecedented times.
- We hope that the UNHCR example will be heeded by others, including within the UN system, as we need flexible, good and responsive donors, which also implies multi-year commitments.
- We also recall that NGOs expect that flexibility and guidance to partners will be implemented consistently across the globe, with limited case-by-case discretion.
- NGOs have been at the forefront of the prevention and response to the COVID-19 pandemic and would like to reiterate five key messages:
 1. On Protection: We are extremely concerned by the impact of border closures, the risk of *refoulements*, suspended asylum procedures, restrictions of movements, and social isolation. All of this has direct and potentially longer-term effects on the lives of refugees and other persons of concern. We fully agree with UNHCR: States have a responsibility to protect public health but should ensure measures taken are non-discriminatory, necessary, proportionate and reasonable in all circumstances and that they do not contravene international legal obligations.¹
 2. To address those protection concerns, ensure continuity of service while respecting do-no-harm, and contribute to the COVID-19 response, NGOs call for humanitarian staff to be recognized as essential staff and protection work as essential activities. In particular, child protection and access to education should be prioritized. AGD considerations should be at the core of COVID-19 response, especially a focus on prevention and response to gender-based violence.
 3. Along with Protection we call on reasserting the importance of work on durable solutions. We are concerned by the current suspension of resettlement travel for refugees. While movements are constrained, it remains important to continue planning and looking for solutions. It is fundamental to maintain our engagement on the broader durable solutions agenda to maintain momentum and stakeholder engagement. When movements are possible, such as in the recent relocation of unaccompanied children from Greece, opportunities should be actively sought.
 4. NGOs highlight financing priorities: As front line actors in this global emergency, NGOs urgently need to receive additional funding. NGOs are responding right now, also helping in prevention and preparedness measures when still feasible. Funding needs to go through our NGOs and local staff to make sure it goes to serving people in need. While the Global HRP remains underfunded, we are hopeful that the revised Appeal will properly involve NGOs, including local organizations. We are also calling on donors to keep funding existing humanitarian plans.
 5. NGOs believe that the GRF momentum should not be lost and that the GCR arrangements can actually be mobilized to ensure increased solidarity and responsibility-sharing in the COVID-19 response. For example, regional arrangements such as the Support Platforms and global mechanisms such as the Asylum Capacity Support Group could play a positive role. An analysis of pledges made under relevant thematic areas, such as Jobs and Livelihoods, could also help address the socio-economic impacts of the current crisis.
- Thank you.

¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), The COVID-19 Crisis: Key Protection Messages, 31 March 2020, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e84b9f64.html> [accessed 21 April 2020]