

**UNHCR input to the 2021 HLPF under the theme “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”**

March 2021

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereinafter referred to as UNHCR) makes reference to the letter dated 18 November 2020 by which UNHCR was invited to provide substantive inputs to the 2021 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on its review of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the 2021 theme.

### **The 2030 Agenda and the Global Compact on Refugees**

The 2030 Agenda makes explicit reference to refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants as people who are vulnerable and must be empowered. The overarching aim of the 2030 Agenda “to reach the furthest behind first” and “leave no one behind” clearly applies to those who experience the consequences of war, persecution, displacement and not being citizens of any country (stateless). The 2030 Agenda pledge of Leaving No One Behind and addressing exclusion and marginalization of populations provides a unique entry point to strengthen protection and solutions for UNHCR persons of concern.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is an essential tool for international solidarity in ensuring that refugees and the countries and communities that host large numbers of them are not left behind. The GCR was developed through an inclusive multilateral and multi-stakeholder process and affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018. It explicitly links forced displacement with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and provides support for efforts to ensure refugees are included in work towards achieving the SDGs.

These [complementary frameworks](#) can together ensure that displaced and stateless persons are not left behind in development processes and that displacement is addressed through inclusive and comprehensive approaches.

### **General considerations on COVID-19 and international protection**

The measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic have [significant consequences](#) for the protection, health, socio-economic welfare, and resilience of forcibly displaced and stateless people and their host communities. They have also affected opportunities to identify solutions in some instances and delayed solutions in others. The actions that States and other actors take in the next months could shape what international protection will look like in future pandemics. Efforts need to include a focus on strengthening protection foundations and building resilience, drawing upon the international refugee protection regime, including the 1951 Refugee Convention; the principles of protection, responsibility-sharing and inclusion in the GCR; and relevant pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019.

The global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic has posed challenges for the institution of asylum. In some cases, it triggered regressive measures, and borders were closed on public health grounds. In other instances, innovative approaches enabled the continued functioning of asylum systems, through, for example, the automatic or remote renewal of documentation for asylum-seekers, remote registration and interviewing, accelerated processing of asylum cases, and health screenings and quarantines upon arrival. Such arrangements enable States to continue admitting those in need of international protection, while protecting the health of their nationals. The Asylum Capacity Support Group set out in the GCR could help to identify and support such adaptations.

The COVID-19 outbreak has also heightened the vulnerabilities of individuals with specific protection needs, such as individuals at increased risk of sexual- and gender-based violence

(SGBV), women and girls as well as men and boys in vulnerable situations, and people who are elderly, have disabilities, or are in detention. In the context of COVID-19, the United Nations Secretary-General affirmed that people and their rights need to be at the front and centre of the response, a principle that is central to the GCR. This requires assessing needs and developing responses through an age, gender, and diversity lens to ensure that no one is left behind. In recognition of this, some actors have taken measures such as releasing individuals from immigration detention and providing mobile access to support survivors of SGBV. Newly collected microdata in four countries – Kenya, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Lebanon – provides insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting what are already highly vulnerable forcibly displaced populations in each of these contexts. More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence shows pre-existing inequalities are deepening, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems for women and girls globally.

For example, in Kenya, employment outcomes for refugees are also worse for women. Even though the majority of working-age refugees are women and more households are headed by women, employment rates were lower for women than men before COVID (19% versus 21% in Kakuma, 36% versus 43% in Kalobeyei). Even among those women who are employed, they tend to occupy lower paid jobs—including in volunteer positions, agriculture and informal activities—than their male counterparts who are more likely to be in paid employment work. Based on estimates collected by UNHCR and the World Bank in collaboration with the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics using the [World Bank High Frequency Phone Survey \(HFPS\)](#), the pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the employment situation for most refugees, with women disproportionately impacted. Only 6% of camp-based refugee women were employed in Oct-Nov 2020 compared to 28% of refugee men, aggravating existing inequity in poverty and food insecurity for women and women-headed households (Kakuma SES 2019; Kalobeyei SES 2018).

The pandemic is testing the resilience of refugees and their host communities and has far-reaching consequences. Access to health services and education are constrained. Many people are losing their livelihoods, resulting in increased poverty and leading some forcibly displaced people who were self-reliant to become dependent on aid. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on work and income of displaced people and their dependents. Hardest hit is the informal or grey market economy where much of this income was derived prior to its onset. In line with the GCR principle of inclusion, many States and other actors have attempted to address the impact through inclusive approaches to building resilience, both in the emergency response and for the medium and longer term.

Some major refugee-hosting countries are including forcibly displaced people in national emergency responses to build their resilience, contain the spread of infection, respond to health crises, and mitigate the socio-economic impact on the wider community. Other countries and donors have supported these efforts with financial, material, and technical contributions in demonstration of solidarity and burden-sharing.

In keeping with the multi-stakeholder and partnership approach set out in the GCR, key actors in the frontline response, such as cities, refugee-led organizations, faith actors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are taking innovative steps to enhance the capacity of communities to cope. For example, many are engaging refugees who are health professionals to support national healthcare systems and to create networks to assist the most vulnerable members of the community. With a view to mitigating some of the longer-term socio-economic effects on resilience, development actors, the private sector, donors, and international organizations are working with host countries to determine how best to ensure that national systems can cope and prepare for the future. Some are considering immediate measures to address the impact on forcibly displaced and stateless people and their host communities, and others are considering how to support building inclusive national health, education, and social protection systems in preparation for future emergencies. Within the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic development response to COVID-19, UNHCR has also worked to advocate for meaningful inclusion of persons of concern in UN Socio-Economic Response Plans (“SERPs”) at country level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped people fleeing war and persecution. Ensuring protection by safeguarding access to asylum and strengthening and adapting asylum systems remains a critical and life-saving international responsibility, together with addressing specific protection needs and building resilience in the face of the pandemic. New and innovative approaches developed in the face of the current pandemic can inform thinking in terms of how to respond to, mitigate, and prepare for protection and solutions challenges both now and in the future.

### **Leaving No One Behind in Action: Including displaced persons and stateless in COVID-19 recovery plans and guaranteeing social protection**

The following are key considerations when ensuring a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and when building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

1. **Access to territory/protection by displaced persons:** States can and should ensure access to asylum, while protecting public health. This means that while States can legitimately impose limits on border crossings, it is essential to ensure those seeking international protection have access to territory – which can be subject to reasonable public health safeguards [including quarantine, testing, or other nondiscriminatory measures]. Many States have demonstrated that they can well manage arrivals consistent with public health imperatives.
2. **Adapted asylum and statelessness determination processes, including for documentation:** It is important to adapt asylum systems so that refugees and asylum seekers can continue to access international protection. This includes, for example, remote extension of documents, remote registration, adaptive measures in interviewing rooms, and remote interviewing. The continuation of processes to identify and provide stateless persons with a status is likewise important. Birth registration should also be considered an essential service and continue to operate to prevent more people from falling through the cracks and risking statelessness. The introduction of adaptive measures in asylum procedures does not necessarily require major financial or technological investments, especially if planned in advance. Unless asylum systems are properly adapted, there is a real risk of significant backlogs being created, which could significantly impact the protection of individuals and protection space, going forward.
3. **Inclusive access to services and national responses:** Refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons are at higher risks of exposure to protection concerns during the pandemic. Inclusive approaches that protect every individual's right to life and access to adequate health and other services are critical. Including refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons in national responses is critical not only for the current situation, but also for any plans to address the medium and longer-term socio-economic impacts of the crisis (e.g. as they might relate to loss of livelihoods and the current recession).
4. **Promote access to the labour market and livelihoods:** Support the self-reliance of refugees and their host communities, including through promoting their right to work and inclusion in the labour market.
5. **Restrictions on freedom of movement:** States can legitimately restrict freedom of movement during a pandemic, but detention and other restrictions of movement, where they need to be imposed, must not be arbitrary or discriminatory. Restrictions on the exercise of rights should be non-discriminatory, necessary, proportionate, and reasonable to address the aim of public health; they should also be maintained no longer than necessary.
6. **Community-based structures:** The pandemic has challenged one of the key strengths in delivering protection – its proximity to communities – and stimulated the international community's to explore alternative ways to engage with diverse groups across age, gender,

and diversity. It also has clearly demonstrated the comparative advantage of prior investment in community-based structures and the critical role played by displaced people in the COVID-19 response.

7. **Participation of women and girls:** Build resilience by ensuring the input of women and girls in national pandemic response plans for health, education, and economic recovery. Ensuring the full and meaningful participation of women and girls remains a strategic priority for UNHCR. During the pandemic, we have witnessed an increase in GBV (such as an increase in child marriages and intimate partner violence). UNHCR's recently issued GBV Policy aims at strengthening GBV standards including our commitment to strengthen collaboration with local and women-led organizations. Statistics serve as a reminder to the global community that targeting gender-based inequity and vulnerabilities should always be a programmatic priority. Especially for fragile or vulnerable groups such as refugees, the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate negative impacts on women and girls, serving to only greater compound existing inequity in labour market outcomes, welfare, and education among others.
8. **Under-recognized role of youth and adolescents:** Many adolescents and youth have mobilized to respond to the crisis. Young people can also help mitigate the impact and consequences of the crisis in the longer term, including by engaging around issues such as promoting social cohesion, countering hate speech and xenophobia, and building strong and inclusive initiatives.
9. **Exacerbated child protection risks:** Include refugee children in national systems policies, and plans to ensure they receive the health, education, protection, WASH and other services they need. The pandemic has led to the greatest disruption of education systems in history. UNHCR and partners are working hard to deliver protection and education to 31 million forcibly displaced children, with the key interagency guidance, the "Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action", providing the multisectoral framework and standards for all humanitarian actors to protect all children.
10. **Scale-up protection and COVID-19 impact monitoring and the inclusion of refugees in national COVID-19 socio-economic impact assessments:** This provides the evidence base to inform the response of government and international actors. These socio-economic data sets can be used to provide or update data baselines for the longer-term inclusion of refugees in government social protection programmes.
11. **Build on the good practice of including refugees to government COVID-19 health responses promoting national coverage, and ongoing government COVID-19 responses via social assistance and worker support programmes:** These successes and the pooling of international funding can support the inclusion of all living in refugee-hosting areas to government socio-economic COVID-19 responses.
12. **Channel COVID-19 social assistance support to refugees via existing government programmes that were already set up to include refugees before the onset of COVID-19, saving time and further contributing to build the long-term capacity of the programme:** Where possible, scale up access to civil documentation and digital identification, enroll refugees to government social registries and promote financial inclusion as part of receiving COVID-19 social protection benefits.
13. **Scale-up the assistance of international organizations:** To fill the gaps in government responses in refugee-hosting areas, fast-tracking support in areas with lower local government capacity, and ensuring this is aligned to government programmes wherever possible.
14. **Inclusion of refugees to COVID-19 social protection responses:** This can provide best practice that is used as the template in the future for long-term international investments for scaling up coverage of government social protection programmes for all in refugee-hosting areas.

