



## CCHN Monthly Forum

### Humanitarian Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- *Updates from Regional Working Groups*
- *Professional Exchange on the Needs of People on the Move*

*Online Event – 14 May 2020, 14-16h*

### REPORT

The second CCHN Monthly Forum gathered over 140 frontline humanitarian professionals and policymakers from around the world in a digital space, where experiences and perspectives on the humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic were exchanged. Ms. Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection with UNHCR shared her introductory remarks at the start of the forum. Regional working group discussions highlighted trends and evolution of the situation in specific humanitarian contexts. Professional exchange on the impact of the pandemic on the needs of people on the move provided field and policy perspectives to the participants.

#### ***Introductory Remarks***

The introductory remarks were presented by:

- **Claude Bruderlein**, CCHN Director
- **Gillian Triggs**, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, UNHCR

*and the discussion was moderated by Joëlle Germanier, CCHN Head of Operations.*

In his speech, **Mr. Claude Bruderlein** highlighted the objectives of the CCHN Monthly Forum and expressed the importance of opening informal avenues sharing of information and experience between field practitioners and policy/ donor experts. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic is expected to become increasingly complex involving multiple layers of inter-related issues and domains from public health, national security, nutrition, human rights poverty alleviation and economic development. Humanitarian agencies will be challenged by this complexity. With the remote nature of operational management, it is critical that we find spaces to share immediate information and perspectives and draw some lessons learned.

**Ms. Gillian Triggs** shared that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a refugee or migrant phenomenon, and while the virus has often been characterized as non-discriminatory, we see that there is a disproportionate impact on persons of concern due to their circumstances. She further pointed out that COVID-19 is a crisis that overlays many other pre-existing crises,

especially considering that approximately 80 million people are currently refugees or internally displaced as a consequence of conflict, natural disaster or food shortage. COVID-19 further reveals the inequalities, poverty, consequences of climate change and in particular the fragility of health systems. For Ms. Triggs there is a need to **innovate solutions** in order to continue addressing challenges related to provision of international protection to the people in need. She emphasized that **integration and inclusion of all persons, irrespective of their status, in provision of services** must be at the center of any solution.

### ***Regional Working Groups***

*Summary of discussions on current challenges of humanitarian negotiation in regions, moderated by CCHN Negotiation Support Specialists*

#### **Africa**

A broader discussion of the situation and challenges included noting difficulties to work remotely in areas with no mobile network and an examination of the role humanitarians can play to counter rumors and misinformation with effective and relevant programs and service provision. The importance of interaction and proximity to communities repeatedly emerged during the discussion as a key factor that could also impact issues of perception and acceptance of international agencies and staff seen as “outsiders” and “foreigners”.

Participants working in Somalia shared their challenges and expressed that COVID-19 is exacerbating the pre-existing gaps. As part of solutions, they referenced using new program modalities including remote support, cash transfers and food delivery services to support beneficiaries while respecting social distancing efforts. Engaging with the pre-existing “access infrastructure” which includes various working groups, UN management, and civil-military partnerships in Somalia was seen both as a challenge and an opportunity.

There was recurring skepticism in regard to calls for a global cessation of hostilities and cease-fire. Participants cited examples of worsening security situations across many contexts. They also spoke about the increased pressure and stress that the COVID-19 situation is posing not only on humanitarians in their professional and personal lives but on counterparts as well.

The session concluded with a brief exchange on the role of donors and the difficulties in adjusting programming and targeting proposals on the new dynamics of COVID-19. An assumption was raised that “typical” donor countries could reduce funding for international support while focusing on domestic challenges. A question of how donors and agencies can continue to focus on protection issues in addition to emergency response and public health needs could deserve more focus in the next forum.

#### **Asia**

The discussion focused on three humanitarian contexts: Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Participants shared context-specific trends and challenges. A number of common trends across contexts was observed throughout the discussion. A general observation shared by participants was that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the pre-existing operational and negotiation challenges, and in particular the vulnerabilities of the populations in need.

Furthermore, participants shared that movement restrictions are a common constraint hindering humanitarian operations. As a result, remote operations seem to present few opportunities, like the incorporation of protection or IHL elements. However, the majority of participants spoke about the shrinking negotiation space for protection activities with a prioritization of programs towards medical assistance from government and non-government actors alike. Participants pointed out that expectations from various actors have to be carefully managed with the right level of transparency to maintain trust.

The worsening security situation in all contexts presents a significant challenge to access negotiations, with the notion of duty of care being a core and important aspect for all. There is also a recurring tendency for government and non-government actors to politicize the issue of the pandemic, using it as a justification for tighter restrictions and further increasing political tensions among actors.

In the midst of shifting priorities and more restrictive environment, the discussion highlighted that humanitarians are adapting to the situation by implementing creative programming. Further exchanges will be needed to generate learning from those coping mechanisms and good practices and to share these among frontline humanitarians across regions.

### **The Middle East**

COVID-19 is impacting the countries in the Middle East in different ways. According to the participants, while some countries are slowly lifting the restrictions (ex. Jordan), others are only now starting to impose the lockdown measures (ex. Yemen). At the Monthly Forum of April, it was highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to de-escalation of violence and also to opportunities for humanitarian organizations to gain access in Syria and Yemen. However, the situation has reversed over the past weeks with renewed clashes in these contexts. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed by the authorities to contain the virus has led serious socio-economic concerns leading to tensions.

Further, participants shared that movement and access restrictions, emerging new interlocutors, and the difficulty of finding a shared space between humanitarian principles and public health approaches as rising challenges. Some participants explained that stigmatization of migrants and refugees as vectors of transmission of the virus continues to be a concern.

Participants also shared examples of good practices in terms of humanitarian negotiation. A participant based in Iraq stressed that by identifying and uniting essential activities, humanitarian organizations could negotiate better access and more freedom of movement than if they would have to negotiate independently. Another participant working in Yemen explained that offering support to the authorities from early on was key in their negotiations at a later stage. He shared that by supporting the authorities in drafting protocols for quarantine centers they could ensure integration of basic humanitarian principles into the response measures. Other recommendations shared by the participants included expanding of the mapping of the network of influence, professional and technical negotiations informed by public health facts, and being more aware of the priorities of the counterpart.

## **Latin America**

Participants raised common concerns in the current context of the pandemic. Ongoing movement restrictions, shortage of supplies and inflation of prices of goods, and the perception of the humanitarians as the vectors of transmission of the virus by authorities and populations were some of the challenges commonly faced by the frontline humanitarians.

Furthermore, some participants shared concerns related to security and protection of staff of humanitarian organizations and implementing partners. A participant explained that new internal negotiations are taking place to develop more adapted modes of aid delivery that would entail safeguarding the health of staff and guaranteeing that responses to the needs of people are appropriate.

Participants also pointed out at the emerging difficulties related to remote negotiations with counterparts. Some participants requested the CCHN for remote negotiation tools and methods with focus on trust and relationship building, as these are different for remote or digital communication from the traditional face-to-face communication and negotiations.

## ***Professional Exchange***

*Summary of the discussion on impact of COVID-19 on the humanitarian response to the needs of people on the move*

Field and policy insights concerning the situation of people on the move were shared by:

- **Philippe Sacher**, Senior Inter-Agency Coordinator, Regional Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, UNHCR; member of CCHN Community of Practice
- **Susan Fratzke**, Policy Analyst, Migration Policy Institute

*and the discussion was moderated by Dariha Erketaeva, CCHN R&D Project Manager.*

Providing insights from the field, **Mr. Philippe Sacher** spoke about the situation of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the context of COVID-19. There are over 5 million Venezuelan persons displaced outside the country; and they are impacted by COVID-19 and related government measures. Most at risk of being left out are those in irregular situations; those who have lost their livelihoods; and those who may face risks associated with return movements to Venezuela, said Mr. Sacher. He further explained that 90% of Venezuelan refugees and migrants are engaged in the informal sector and loss of livelihoods are resulting in evictions, homelessness and enhanced xenophobia. He also shared concerns, needs and risks related to health, WASH, food, gender-based violence and education. Mr. Sacher elaborated on shifting power dynamics at local levels; and stated that inclusion of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in national protection and welfare programs is vital.

As a policy analyst, **Ms. Susan Fratzke** shared her perspective on the impact of the pandemic on migration policy. She offered that there have been two types of responses so far: 1) widespread border control - more than 200 countries have imposed some kind of entry restrictions and 2) tightening immigration policy: suspension of visa processing and renewing residence permits. These pose immediate challenges for migrants and refugees related to

access to legal status (and thus to social services); suspension of processing of asylum claims, and access to territory, she explained. Ms. Fratzke elaborated further on the medium-term possible scenarios, as well as on the normative implications of the pandemic. She suggested that there is a possibility for profound change in the global mobility system. Questions around privacy and consequences of lasting measures particularly on people fleeing violence and seeking asylum will be crucial to keep discussing and analyzing in the coming period.

Adding to the conversation, Professor Geoff Gilbert, Professor of Law at the University of Essex shared that most lawyers live in silos (human rights, refugees, law of armed conflict etc.), however when you are negotiating with governments, you need to know across the range of fields. He stressed that the law does not demand, rather it provides humanitarian professionals with frameworks that guide planning of negotiations.

Reem Mussa, Humanitarian Advisor on Migration with MSF contributed to the discussion and highlighted issues like instrumentalization of COVID-19 to normalize the restrictive environments in certain contexts, the importance of reflecting on lockdown measures: (what are other ways to mitigate impact on health?); and the need to be aware of increasing restrictions coming in order to plan in advance for ways to maintain the delivery of assistance.

The professional exchange marked the beginning of migration workstream for the CCHN. Further discussions and briefings focusing on the humanitarian response to the needs of people on the move will continue as one of the topics of interest for the CCHN Community of Practice.

### ***Upcoming CCHN Activities***

Joëlle Germanier, CCHN Head of Operations presented a set of upcoming activities including:

#### **For CCHN members:**

- **Regional peer circles** of frontline humanitarian negotiators
- **CCHN Negotiation Support Cell** connects frontline professionals with a support group structure and a community of care
- **Live Sessions on Facilitation Skills** for CCHN facilitators and community members aspiring to become facilitators

#### **For all participants:**

- [Online Peer Workshops](#) at global and regional levels on Humanitarian Negotiation
- **Third CCHN Monthly Forum** on 16 June 2020 at 14h00
- **Hybrid Briefing Session:** How Public Health Can Inform Humanitarian Negotiation in Times of a Pandemic on 18 June 2020.

\*\*\*\*\*