Importance of civil registration and vital statistics and identity management for durable solutions for refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees

Conference Theme: Innovative Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System: Foundation for Legal Identity Management

I. Introduction

1.   Globally, more than 1 billion people lack identity papers. In our modern world this excludes them from services and socioeconomic participation, and limits their access, for example, to work, housing, mobile phones and bank accounts. In fact, for vulnerable and already marginalized people a lack of documented identity means a constant risk of transgressing the lines between what is legal and illegal. Most people affected by a lack of legal identity live in their own countries and may have chances of obtaining identity documents, if specific measures are put in place in their favour.

2.   But what if a person is not in his or her home area but abroad, or if he or she is a foreigner, migrant, asylum seeker or refugee? In this situation, protection risks are high while the chances of obtaining a legal and recognized identity and inclusion are low.

II. Steps towards registration

- International protection for asylum seekers and refugees begins with admission to a country of asylum and registration and documentation by national authorities or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

- Registration and identification of refugees facilitate access to basic assistance and protection. As such, they are key for the people concerned and for States in order to know who has arrived.

- The process of registration enables the early identification of individuals with specific needs within a population and their referral to an available protection response. The very fact of being registered can protect against refoulement (forced return), arbitrary arrest and detention. It helps to keep families together and assists actors in reuniting separated children with their families.

- The individual data collected during registration provides the comprehensive population data needed for programme planning, including for shelter, food, water, health and sanitation facilities, cash-based interventions and other forms of targeted assistance. Registration data is also an important tool in ensuring the integrity of refugee protection systems and preventing and combating fraud, corruption and crime, including trafficking in persons.

- Increasingly, identity documentation is issued by government authorities, even where registration is still carried out by UNHCR. Government-recognized identity documentation can constitute proof of legal identity, which is key to the legal, socioeconomic and digital inclusion of the persons of concern within their host communities. For example, a proof of identity credential, such as an identity card, can facilitate greater freedom of movement in the host country, empower refugees to open bank accounts, register for a subscriber identification module (SIM) card and access online services and opportunities available to citizens everywhere.

- Advances in digital technology and the introduction of identity systems by Governments around the world are resulting in new approaches to providing identities to forcibly displaced persons. In past situations of mass influxes,

receiving Governments would often request UNHCR to undertake refugee registration and documentation on their behalf. But host countries are now taking an increased role even during the first phases of a crisis, often in partnership with UNHCR, using shared identity management tools and registration processes. In some countries, refugees are now being included in the host country's national population registry or identity system, which means they are issued a unique identity number and their life events are being recorded in the civil registry – something that used to be accessible only to citizens.

III.   The main purpose of registration for the displaced population

3.   Registration is the recording, verifying and updating of information on persons of concern to UNHCR with the aim of providing protection and assistance while documenting and implementing durable solutions. Registration is also undertaken to establish and preserve unique identities for refugees over time through the use of processes, systems and tools. Registration is also an essential tool for protection, data collection, the management of operations and the achievement of durable solutions. It is a fundamental component of international protection and it is the right of persons who may be of concern to UNHCR to be registered.

4.   Registration is a very important component of the mandate of UNHCR as it further provides data about persons of concern for the provision of protection, programme activities, service delivery and durable solutions. Registration data also provide valuable information about the overall demographic and other characteristics of population figures such as rates, averages and patterns. As such, registration data are key for designing, planning, targeting, delivering, tracking, monitoring and interventions across multisectoral activities. UNHCR data are updated through verification or continuous registration. Updates include new births, deaths, locations, protection cases and specific needs. The UNHCR registration system includes mechanisms to make data more reliable and effective. UNHCR data are supported by standard operating procedures, training and monitoring. They are representational as well as secure and protected. The personal data of persons of concern are protected, confidential and private, with access restricted.

5.   UNHCR core methodology for refugee registration is applicable to asylum seekers, refugees, stateless persons and other persons of concern. Registration activities are to be adapted for each operation and specific operational context. UNHCR registration activities are conducted in the diverse environments in which UNHCR operates, such as emergencies and mass movements; refugee status determination operations in 'prima facie' operations; urban settings in camps for new populations; stable camp situations; and mobile registration where the persons of concern are geographically dispersed or have logistical or other difficulties in approaching UNHCR.

6.   UNHCR defines three broad levels of registration, corresponding to different stages of the operation, and requiring different levels of resource investment. The levels are distinguishable by the amount of data collected, the degree to which the generic process is followed and the frequency of updating the information. Information compiled through a registration process is required to support a wide range of activities. The same set of core information is collected and used for different purposes, although most also require specific additional information depending on the reason the information is collected. The registration data collected are used for issuing identity and entitlement documentation, refugee status

determination, protection and community services interventions, and registration of refugees and asylum seekers.

IV. What are UNHCR objectives for achieving the digital inclusion and digital identity of refugees, stateless persons and other forcibly displaced persons?

1. Empowering refugees, stateless and forcibly displaced persons

7.   Refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and other forcibly displaced persons should have both a legally recognized identity and a digital identity. Individuals will be able to request UNHCR to certify their identity. Such a certified individual identity will be valid across borders and can be used and shared in a self-determined way by each user.

8.   A legal identity for every individual is of utmost importance. However, a digital identity that give access to the Internet, mobile phones and related services is becoming equally important. Empowerment from digital inclusion will allow access to jobs, income and remittances, online learning and web-based economic activities. It will therefore make a difference in people's lives.

2. Strengthening State capacity

9.   Integrated national identity systems providing a foundational identity to everyone, including refugees and asylum seekers, stateless persons and other forcibly displaced persons, will receive full support from UNHCR, which will focus on refugee registration as a functional subset of a multisector and multipurpose identity infrastructure and will assist States in registering and documenting all individuals living on the State's territory, including those under the mandate of UNHCR. State capacity should be strengthened to ensure that nobody is deprived of the opportunities of the digital age. UNHCR will assist States in meeting international data security and privacy standards.

3. Improve service delivery

10.   UNHCR and other aid agencies need to improve their service delivery by using the Internet and mobile services more extensively. Refugees and other forcibly displaced persons will, for example, have relief accounts that show entitlements in a transparent manner and track cash and relief items that have been or will be made available to them. Legal and protection services, in particular for asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons, will be provided online in a speedy and secure manner. The use of e-Government will enhance service delivery, facilitate access and allow opinions and complaints to be more easily obtained. Efficiency gains will lead to more client satisfaction.

4. UNHCR registration tools

11.   For several years now, UNHCR has used proGres, also known as the Profile Global Registration System, as a tool for the registration of persons of concern. Since its introduction in 2003, proGres has provided a source of information and has also acted as a repository for storing data in the majority of UNHCR field operations.

12.   The implementation of proGres allowed UNHCR to introduce standards into registration and case management practices and to transform a range of local databases, excel sheets and other ad hoc tools into one coherent application. It has become a key instrument for the delivery and tracking of protection and assistance to persons of concern around the world.

13.   ProGres further assists UNHCR in the provision of documentation for protection and durable solutions. Vital documents are provided by host Governments with the assistance of UNHCR and this information is updated on proGres. Recently, UNHCR has developed additional registration tools to complement proGres such as the Population Registration and Identity Management Ecosystem (PRIMES).

14.   PRIMES consist of a centralized repository of all relevant identity data that are visible and editable by UNHCR staff and UNHCR partners with appropriate access rights from anywhere. PRIMES is designed to work offline, online and in Global System for Mobile Communications environments. It will be interoperable with the information technology systems used by government and partner organizations, such as the SCOPE, used by the World Food Programme, and PRIMERO, used by the United Nations Children's Fund.

15.   In the future, an integrated PRIMES trust and service platform will be the single entry point for all digital interaction between UNHCR and registered individuals.

PRIMES is an enabler for:

•   Registration (biographic and biometric) and certification.

•   Case management (including principal protection aspects such as refugee status determination, resettlement and repatriation, legal and physical protection, and child protection).

•   Assistance (cash and in-kind).

•   Data management, including reporting and sharing.

16.   By the end of 2017, proGres in Partnership (proGres version 4), which is now a component of PRIMES, was deployed to 37 UNHCR operations covering 10 per cent of refugee data. Following the roll-out of PRIMES in January 2018, proGres has been accelerated. Hence, planning for 2018 prioritizes 80 per cent of the refugee population for which UNHCR holds data. This includes the roll-out of a single, centralized data base with case management modules (proGres v4), the UNHCR cutting-edge Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS) and a newly developed Rapid Application (RApp) that allows for offline registration of both refugees and other displaced populations, such as internally displaced persons.

17.   However, the ultimate objective of PRIMES is to empower refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. A recognized identity and close interoperability with State population registries and civil registration and vital statistics systems will go a long way towards ensuring inclusion in socioeconomic life. With PRIMES, UNHCR and partners are contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, including Goal 16 which contains a target on providing legal identity for all, including birth registration.

5. Evaluate existing registration processes and standards

18.   Given that registration is the first – and in some cases the only – point of contact with UNHCR for all refugees, it is critical that the registration process is equipped and supported to collect accurate and representative data on the population of concern. Only through registration processes can UNHCR and its partners obtain a reliable, accurate and up-to-date account of the population: who they are, where they are and what their needs are.

19.   Refugees and asylum seekers must be at the centre of decision-making that affects their lives, their protection and their well-being. In order to understand the challenges they face in their daily lives, and to avoid actions that could inadvertently leave them worse off, it is essential to consult people directly: listen to them, identify their priorities, draw on their knowledge and provide them with feedback.

20.   In order to ensure an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach and consult a cross-section of the refugee community, it is recommended not only to engage refugee leaders, but also a range of community representatives, community leaders and other individuals who play a role in the community.

21.   *Who to consult*: refugee leaders, other leaders and thematic committees through individual consultations as part of an AGD approach.

22.   *What to consult about*: the overarching goal for consulting persons of concern in the context of registration planning is to achieve equality of access and full participation in the activity, as enshrined in the UNHCR policy on age, gender and diversity.

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24.   *Consult government and other partners*: in certain operational contexts, government authorities – local, district, provincial, national – are active stakeholders in registration; in others, they may not be. Where appropriate, engage government counterparts in a gap analysis on issues of concern to them, and identify together possible solutions or improvements.

25.   *Consult the host community*: it is preferable, and in some contexts necessary, to consult the host community. There may be a need to actively gain the acceptance and cooperation of local communities and their leaders, particularly where the provision of assistance and protection by UNHCR may be seen as discriminatory or a threat to the local economy, including some contexts characterized by significant mixed migration flows or highly restrictive operational contexts.

6. Barriers to travel

26.   The following actions are recommended to address the barriers associated with travel to registration sites:

- Extend registration activities to relevant provincial centres.

- Provide transportation services or pay costs associated with traveling to the registration site for certain individuals.

- Conduct mobile registration to bring registration to the homes, neighbourhoods and community centres of refugees facing physical or other constraints, including older refugees, persons with disabilities, injured persons, pregnant or lactating women, or persons living too far from designated registration sites or dispersed across a large region.

7. Durable solutions and identification management

27. Durable solution assistance includes voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration. For any durable solution to be successfully implemented, the backing data must be accurate and the target group must have proper document, such as birth certificates, divorce certificates and marriage certificates. Information about all such documentation is contained in the UNHCR database.

28. Identity management describes the suite of identity related to processes UNHCR undertakes in the performance of its mandate. Among the components of identity management is registration, which as mentioned above and provides for the recording and updating of identity data in UNHCR systems. Governments or any service provider involved with any durable solution can verify and authenticate these documents from the UNHCR database before proceeding with the durable solution. It should be further noted that UNHCR does not produce any vital documents that fall under government jurisdiction. As such, UNHCR must work closely with government partners for the provision of these document.

29. UNHCR encourages Governments to undertake the task of registration, as it is Governments that are responsible for issuing birth certificates, death certificates, divorce certificates, identification cards and travel documents, in cases where refugees have to travel. For local integration, the caseload to be locally integrated must be adequately identified from the information contained in the UNHCR database so that refugees are given the proper services and protection that they need. For repatriation, those to be repatriated must be properly identified before they travel to enable them to receive the assistance and services due them at the point of return.

30. At resettlement, these documents are even more critical, as relationships must be established through either birth, marriage or even divorce certificates. Travel documents and travel authorization to the resettling country can only be issued once all the documents are in order. Over the years, UNHCR has continued to develop extremely credible and reliable data that need very little or no authentication as the data continue to be updated and verified.

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