



Use of the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organizations'

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We are broadly supportive of efforts to include affected communities more meaningfully in policy responses. As the Global Compact on Refugees stated, 'responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist'.¹ However, when developing inclusive practices, we believe that the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organizations' is not an appropriate label and should not be used by UNHCR and other stakeholders. This is based on the following reasons:

1. The term reinforces a subordinate status for organizations and initiatives led by affected communities by inherently defining them in relation to their eligibility for protection by UNHCR

A major problem with the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organization' is that it centres discussions of partnerships within UNHCR's institutional parameters and bureaucracy. By putting UNHCR at the centre, rather than utilizing a term or terms that is/are independent of UNHCR's mandate, there is the risk that organizations led by affected communities will be seen as subordinate and interconnected to UNHCR, even when this is not the case. This perception could also undermine the potential for genuine partnerships on equal terms.

2. The term disregards alternatives which refugees and other forcibly displaced persons have themselves utilised

Refugees and other displaced persons do not identify as 'persons-of-concern'. At the inaugural Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, UNHCR and states heard from 70 different speakers with lived experience of displacement. Among these speakers, not one referred to themselves as a 'person of concern.' Likewise, at the institutional level, not one organization or initiative led by refugees or others has embraced the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organization' to our knowledge. Instead, it is far more common to see terms such as 'refugee-led organization', 'refugee-led initiative' and 'stateless-led organization', among others.

By adopting the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organizations', UNHCR and other stakeholders will disregard alternatives which refugees and other forcibly displaced persons have themselves utilised. Further, this approach will also undermine the autonomy of refugees and others to self-identify and choose their own terminology. Refugees and other displaced persons have highlighted the importance of having some control over how they are labelled. They have also critiqued state-centric categorisations which disempower communities and exclude particular groups from accessing services and seeking protection.² Unfortunately, the term 'Persons-of-Concern-led Organizations' is likely to contribute to these problems, rather than ameliorate them.

3. The term ‘persons of concern’ can be a problematic term for refugees and other displaced persons

We recognise that UNHCR has adopted the term ‘persons of concern’ to encompass all populations that it serves, not just refugees. However, UNHCR needs to consider how other stakeholders may interpret this term and recognise the risks that different interpretations present. The Oxford Dictionary notes that while the word ‘concern’ can be understood as meaning ‘a desire to protect and help somebody or something’ or ‘something that is important to a person, an organization, etc’, it can equally be used to indicate ‘a feeling of worry, especially one that is shared by many people’.³ In a global context where refugees and other displaced persons often experience xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice, it is problematic for UNHCR and other stakeholders to refer to refugees and other forcibly displaced persons as ‘persons of concern’. This term can implicitly reinforce feelings of worry and inadvertently contribute to perceptions of refugees and other displaced persons as security threats.

In situations where UNHCR does need to refer to all persons who fall under its protection mandate, it would be preferable for UNHCR to use terminology that more explicitly highlights UNHCR’s accountability to displaced persons. This approach would be consistent with UNHCR’s commitments to affected populations under the Grand Bargain initiative,⁴ as well as several of its institutional policies.⁵ While further consultation and deliberation is necessary, such terminology could take the form of ‘persons to whom UNHCR is accountable under its expanded mandate’ or ‘persons whom UNHCR serves’.

What should be done in the alternative?

We recognise that it is important for UNHCR to develop terminology to refer to organizations and initiatives led by affected communities. Without any consistent method to categorise these organizations and initiatives, it is challenging for UNHCR and other stakeholders to monitor and evaluate progress in participation and levels of support. A lack of terminology can also undermine funding initiatives and contribute to the ongoing invisibility of these organizations and initiatives. Nevertheless, when developing terminology, it is important to act collaboratively and cautiously to avoid unintentional harm. To address these issues, we propose that UNHCR and other stakeholders use either **‘Affected Community-Based Organizations (ACBOs)’**, **‘Affected Community-led Organizations (ACLOs)’** or **‘organizations and initiatives led by affected communities’** as alternative terminology in the draft recommendations prepared for the Annual NGO consultations, and as an interim measure. We believe these terms avoid many of the problems associated with the term ‘Persons-of-Concern-led Organizations’.

Beyond this, we recommend that UNHCR:

- (1) commissions or prepares a research paper that is publicly available and considers the merits of different terminology, as well as the potential risks of various terms; and
- (2) facilitates an open dialogue, informed by the research paper, to consider and select the most appropriate term/s for this purpose. This dialogue should occur virtually and should also permit written submissions. These approaches should be taken to overcome some of the barriers refugees and other stakeholders face to meaningful participation.

* This submission has been drafted by Tristan Harley, with input from Mustafa Alio, Brian Barbour, James Milner and Najeeba Wazefadost.

¹ *Global Compact on Refugees*, UN Doc A/73/12 (Part II) (2 August 2018) [34].

² See Global Summit of Refugees, *Policy Discussion and Outcomes Paper* (August 2018)

<http://www.networkforrefugeevoices.org/uploads/1/0/9/9/109923753/gsor_outcomes_and_policy_paper_final.pdf> 2.

³ Oxford Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/concern_2>

⁴ *The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need* (Istanbul, 23 May 2016)

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf>.

⁵ See, for example, UNHCR's 2006 Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations, which stresses the importance of 'being accountable to the populations that UNHCR serves' as one of the overarching goals of the tool: UNHCR, *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations* (UNHCR, 2006)

<<https://www.refworld.org/docid/462df4232.html>>.