

**Ms. Ann Encontre - UNHCR**

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**Globally, it seems that our societies are still far from being inclusive and far from being peaceful.**

**Human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, are inextricably linked.**

**For States to realise SDG 16, respecting and ensuring international human rights principles, such as participation, accountability, transparency, and non-discrimination, are essential.**

**Taking a human rights-based approach involves the recognition that everyone is a rights-holder, it involves empowering rights-holders, and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes that concern them, and moreover, it means incorporating accountability and transparency mechanisms that rights-holders can have access to.**

**SDG 16 aims to achieve inclusive and just societies, where everyone is protected, everyone is respected, and free to speak their mind without having to fear for their safety - irrespective of their socioeconomic situation, ethnic origins, religion, age, gender, sexual orientations, etc. To achieve fair and inclusive societies as envisioned by SDG 16, people need equal access to justice and remedies. Where people have a problem, or where they have faced a violation of their right, they need to have equal access to be able to claim this right, and to seek a remedy. Here, I want to suggest that "People-centered" justice is paramount. A people-centered approach means that the starting point to transforming a system is to understand what people's problems are, what solutions they need, and from whom they expect some support to resolve their problems.**

**Imagine Aimee, a Burundian - she ended up finding herself as refugee in eastern DRC (she loves to cook but she was not a sit-at-home type). She got two others to join forces with her - they were all three widows with several mouths to feed at home. Women - self driven - young women, single headed household, who saw that they had no other choice to meet the economic needs of their families, driven by ambition - they started a business, making and selling mandazis, their main customers were the workers who went to clean the streets, who came for a mid-morning snack - coffee/tea.**

- The business was going well but after some time, they felt they were being shunned after mass on Sunday, they noted some resentment from the Burundian male refugees. Sometimes, they found rubbish thrown around their tea stall. One day they came in the morning & the place was completely ransacked. That day - that was it - They had had enough of the harassment, looting and trouble.
- With the growing animosity, that Aimee and her copines were feeling from the local community because of resentment of their progress.
- They complained to their community elders, who called everyone together, under their community tree (l'arbo a palabre) - they had a noisy pow-wow.
- The elders knew who the perpetrators of the violence against the thriving businesses.
- The local men felt that Aimee & the other women were out of the market as potential partners for them. The women had become more financially independent & did not need the men.
- The Elders in response put a local moratorium on the alcohol which was not to be sold after a certain hour. This applied to the whole community. Refugees and locals were affected.
- Village elders negotiated with the men, to ensure safety, understanding, and peaceful coexistence with the local community.

Witnessing these strong women's resolve and their ability to find a solution, stands as a reminder for me of the importance of a people-centered approach. Not only can we strengthen justice systems and accountability mechanisms by putting people and the outcomes they need first. This approach can also lead to sustainable solutions and bring impressive social and economic benefits.

To do this, the importance of realising people's right to freedom of expression and information cannot be overstated. **Sadly, even today where the digital age has made access to information so much easier at a global level, we are seeing many governments clamping down on these fundamental rights. They can continue to rule without question, without accountability to their own people.** If the media are not free to report, if citizens are not free to criticise and call out their leaders for their actions, then governments and leaders can rule without the checks

and balances that are essential for a functioning democratic system. They can rule without accountability and transparency, to the very people they are meant to serve. Without even mentioning names of countries, I am sure each of you can quickly list several countries where this core human right is not a given and is even being curtailed at unprecedented levels.

The digital divide still exists. So many of us take internet access for granted, and yet it is still unattainable for many low- and middle-income countries. Many populations live far away from capitals and do not even have access to electricity - let alone technology. Or in other cases, Governments restrict access to internet.

**Even in countries with excellent IT infrastructure such as in Turkey, the inter-agency protection needs assessment conducted in Feb 2022,** found that of the 1100 refugees surveyed, approximately half were unable to access remote and digital services due to lack of IT equipment. This finding strengthens advocacy within the protection / humanitarian sector to shift towards blended service delivery (particularly for those who can access remote services through availability of digital tools), and increasingly provide in-person services to those that do not have necessary digital tools to access remote services, and to those who face difficulties in navigating digital platforms.

Building on the right to freedom of speech, the right to association and assembly, not only ensures that people have their voices heard, but it also allows societies to come together to collectively voice shared interests. Most recently, we have witnessed the courage and collective action by people from all corners of the world, including some in Russia, as they protest, calling upon their governments to do more for the people of Ukraine & the 3<sup>rd</sup> country nationals (people from the Caribbean, like me). This embodies the very essence of their fundamental right: it is not just for individuals to claim their own rights, but to stand up for others, at times even in the face of repression, risks of arrests, detention, and physical violence.

**Accountability:** the cornerstone of a human rights-based approach. **Mechanisms must operate promptly, fairly, and transparently.** They must be able to **assess claims of violations, determine responsibility and**

**provide remedies to those who have suffered wrongful treatment.** Without such mechanisms, there are no means by which errors or acts of wrongdoing can be addressed to ensure that they will not recur. It is not only about sanctioning mistakes; **it is equally important that future violations are prevented by identifying remedies.**

To achieve fair and inclusive societies as foreseen by *SGD 16*, people need equal access to justice and remedies. Here, I want to re-iterate, as in the case of Aimee, that **"People-centered" justice** is paramount. It is the starting point for transforming a system based on what people's problems are, what solutions they need, and from whom they expect support to resolve their problems.

This may sound simple, but all too often, reforms and programs focus on other factors, such as their roles and organisations' mandates, their budgets and the economy, their constituents' interest, and political considerations.

When I lived & worked in Ethiopia, I regularly met urban refugees who just could not afford to go to formal courts, they used to tell me - when they have a problem, the first thing that they would do is to talk to a friend, or a trusted relative, or a leader in the community. **Many called me!!** Solutions for them did not come easily, and in some cases, they gave up before even coming close to a solution. **They saw justice as only reserved for the people who have the means.**

In 2020-21, UNHCR commissioned a Justice Needs and Perception Survey for Ethiopian Nationals & we found that:

- Many women in Ethiopia - 37% - or one out of three - in dealing with legal problems in the past 4 years - only half of their problems were resolved, while half were never resolved.
- Younger women encountered more problems, women from urban areas and with higher education faced more legal problems.
- More women had to deal with family problems, sexual violence and domestic violence compared with men.
- Women from rural areas, with no education and low income, very often took their problems to village elders. While local elders may have been most relied on to solve women's problems in these contexts, experts warned, however, that community justice

mechanisms, might not always uphold the values of equality and non-discrimination.

All the above, must also be underpinned by ethical values and accountability in humanitarian and development institutions. We, who are humanitarian actors in this room must be prepared to put the displaced populations and the societies where they live at the centre of the decisions made for them.

As humanitarians, I would like us to follow principles of accountability to affected populations. **These approaches require that people are not only at the centre of the response, but that they are given the space to take part in identifying, and ideally, taking ownership of the solutions** - just like Aimme and her friends.

Rights-based and community-based approaches, seek to facilitate the meaningful and systematic participation of people of concern in assessments, planning, implementation, and monitoring processes and, thereby, decisions that affect their lives and their communities.

The same logic applies to national and international institutions - all are accountable to the people we serve and the communities that host them.

I would like us to be breathing and living examples of 3 key ethical principles/values guiding us in our work: **integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity these are enforced by our Code of Conduct** that guides our UN staff across the globe. As you can imagine, without accountability, the work we do as humanitarian actors would not be possible. Therefore, we need to strengthen our resolve to be accountable as individuals and to encourage and demand a culture of professionalism and integrity from all our partners-national and international.

**To wrap up,**

At this moment in time, as fundamental principles of humanity are being challenged, it is more important than ever to promote and protect the values that underpin our international human rights regime.

Human rights, however, cannot be considered in a vacuum. The realisation of these rights also requires peace: the right to life, physical integrity, liberty, and security. Even in a world where the numbers of conflicts and humanitarian needs and human rights violations are escalating at an unprecedented rate, I call upon all of us - governments, humanitarians, and

development actors, alike - to adopt a "people-centered" and human rights-based approach.

In the next 8 years as we work towards achieving SDG 16, we all need space to speak up, to be listened to & to be heard, or there is a risk of being left behind. **This is particularly important to tackle the barriers of exclusion, a must, if we hope to realise an inclusive society.**

Achieving an inclusive and peaceful society, requires an environment where all human rights: the rights to equality and non-discrimination, to freedom of opinion and expression and to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, are fully respected and enjoyed by all individuals.