

# We are only as strong as our most vulnerable

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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*As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.*

We chatted to Amina Rai, regional communication officer for the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) Private Sector Partnerships Africa, to get her take.



Amina Rai, regional communication officer for the UNHCR Private Sector Partnerships Africa

**■ What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

**Amina Rai:** UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, stands in solidarity with host countries and communities, and calls upon timely international funding and support to national systems and national response plans. Covid-19 does not discriminate. This outbreak can affect anyone — including refugees and displaced people. This should be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation, together with an inclusive and measured approach at the national level. UNHCR welcomes the fact that many governments are including or are willing to include refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern (PoCs) in their national plans and response.

Across Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the protection and poverty impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable people and those living in the economic margins of society has been devastating. Among them, refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs, stateless persons and many others are unable to make ends meet. For instance, the majority of refugees and IDPs live below the poverty line in the regions. Many of those who had previously coped without cash assistance are now increasingly desperate, entering further into debt and spiralling into poverty. They face difficult choices such as reducing meals, sharing overcrowded shelters and limited access to clean water, soap or face masks.

We recently released the findings of the UNHCR's [2020 Islamic Philanthropy Report](#), highlighting the impact of the Refugee Zakat Fund on vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the globe – we have helped over 1 million refugees to date. With Covid-19, many, many more will need help.



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■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.***

**Rai:** Covid-19 is a global public health crisis. However, the consequences of Covid-19 are creating a protection and poverty crisis for persons of concern to UNHCR.

Compounding an existing general economic downturn, the impact of government containment measures on movement is having an immediate socio-economic impact at the individual and household level. This is affecting all – from the wealthy, to small business owners, to middle-class families and the poor. While acknowledging how far-reaching the impacts are, and not discounting the challenges faced by all segments of society, the economic impact will be most desperate and immediate for those living on the economic margins of society, with little or no capital and depending on daily wage labour or support from others.

That said, it should also be noted that the 2020 Islamic Philanthropy Report also revealed that South Africa ranks sixth in terms of the biggest risers over the past 10 years in the CAF World Giving Index 2019. The country ranks 45th overall and has a core of 36%.

The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index provides insight into the scope and nature of giving around the world. The 2019 index is the 10th edition and includes the results of around 1.3 million individuals interviewed across the globe over the last 10 years. The report is primarily based on data from Gallup's World Poll, which is an ongoing research project that was carried out in 143 countries in 2018 that together represent around 95% of the world's population (around 5.2 billion people). The survey asks questions on many different aspects of life today, including giving behaviour.

■ ***How is your organisation responding to the crisis?***

**Rai:** UNHCR is accordingly expanding its programmes to support national health systems and deliver health, WASH and shelter assistance directly; cash programming to address poverty and resulting protection risks; and deliver protection to the most vulnerable, including through remote tools.

The response hence includes:

- Support to national response plans, by working with governments and local authorities, by advocating for the inclusion of PoCs in these plans, and by implementing programmes that complement national plans, including health, WASH and shelter interventions that respond to and reduce the risk of infection.
- Remote protection services and cash assistance to most vulnerable persons of concern, including in some cases host communities.
- We are also calling on all who can, to contribute to the [Zakat Fund](#) during the holy month of Ramadan.



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### Comment on the challenges and opportunities.

**Rai:** While Covid is a public health crisis, its impact is resulting in a protection and poverty crisis for persons of concern and nationals living in similar conditions.

While states can take vital and evidence-based public health measures to help control Covid-19, these should not discriminate against refugees. This crisis is a reminder that to effectively combat any public health emergency, everyone — including refugees, stateless and internally displaced people (IDPs) — should be able to access health facilities and services in a non-discriminatory manner. As the crisis has shown, we are only as safe as our most vulnerable communities.

The 2020 Islamic Philanthropy Report also revealed that seven of the ten countries where people are most likely to help a stranger are located in Africa. Across the region, Africans have always exhibited a strong sense of compassion and togetherness. This can be referenced in the African philosophy of *ubuntu* which exists in different languages across Africa and signifies a belief in recognised shared responsibility, and mutuality towards each other.

### How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?

**Rai:** Physical distancing and movement regulations have also had an impact on how UNHCR reaches out to refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, and vice versa. Two-way communication is crucial to address social isolation and distress, and to ensure programmes are responsive and tailored to the needs of diverse groups.

Refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs and others are able to reach UNHCR, ask questions, and convey their priorities. While face-to-face methods may be restricted, virtual and remote tools are being adapted and enhanced to allow UNHCR and partners to deliver protection services and information in multiple languages, and with them identify persons at risk, design services and engage the broader host community. These include infolines/hotlines, call centres, whatsapp and SMS broadcasts, use of social media platforms and dedicated websites.



We are because of others

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### How have you had to change the way you operate?

**Rai:** Covid-19 prevention and control measures have restricted the movements of both forcibly displaced and humanitarian workers, as well as communities at large. UNHCR has responded across the MENA and Africa region by building on and ramping up its established virtual systems, focusing on two main objectives:

- Support prevention and response to Covid-19 in coordination with the Protection, Health, MHPSS, Shelter, Education,

Wash and other sectors, through risk communication and community engagement (RCCE).

- Ensure continuation of protection and assistance services, adapting operating modalities and prioritising people who are most at risk.

Together with partners, UNHCR is reinforcing systems to communicate with refugees and deliver protection services such as registration and documentation, including innovative means by remote tools. Helplines and outreach programmes are being strengthened with the aim to ensure challenges faced by persons of concern are identified quickly and appropriate responses are put in place.

#### ▀ Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

**Rai:** Remote protection services are increasingly being applied. Operations are addressing ways to ensure assistance to the most vulnerable. Additionally, while we are witness to an economic downturn, we have also seen an increase in public generosity as we face these challenging times together, as a larger community. Refugees and those forcibly displaced have been facing movement restrictions, lack of livelihood and employment opportunities, and harsh uncertainties for years, and while we are experiencing a glimpse of these fears today, it has created a collective empathetic consciousness to the cause of refugees.



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#### ▀ Your key message to those in the sector?

**Rai:** This pandemic has clearly proven that we are only as strong as our most vulnerable, and that every person in society needs to be protected in order for us all to be safe. I urge the larger community to consider those on the margins of society and most vulnerable to this crisis in any response and efforts to combat these challenging times.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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