

Explainer: UNHCR's Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme and its Standing Committee

UNHCR Executive Committee

Overview & Purpose

The **Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom)** is the main governing body of the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**. It is responsible for **advising and guiding** UNHCR on international refugee protection, policy, and budgetary matters. ExCom was first established by **the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** and supports the High Commissioner, whose annual report is submitted to the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

1. Membership & Structure

ExCom is composed exclusively of UN Member States, elected by ECOSOC, based on broad geographic representation and a demonstrated commitment to and interest in refugee solutions.

As of 2024, ExCom has 110 Member States, making it one of the largest subsidiary bodies of the UN General Assembly.

Non-member states, international organizations, and NGOs with ECOSOC consultative status, or members of the **International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)**, may participate as observers but do not have voting rights.

2. Functions & Responsibilities

ExCom plays a **vital role in guiding UNHCR's mandate and ensuring effective refugee protection worldwide**. Its key responsibilities include:

- Advising the High Commissioner in the exercise of their functions;
- Examining UNHCR's financial requirements for the coming year and approving the annual programme budget target;
- Reviewing the work of the Standing Committee from the preceding year and establishing its programme of work for the next 12 months;
- Authorising the High Commissioner to make appeals for funds; and,
- Reviewing the outcomes of the global and regional consultations with NGOs.

3. Annual Meeting & Resolutions:

ExCom **holds an annual plenary session** (usually for a week in October) **in Geneva**. ExCom plenary sessions are usually live streamed via UN Web TV. [See here the recording for sessions in 2024.](#)

Following interventions by ExCom Member States, **observers** may be usually given the opportunity to speak at the discretion of the ExCom Chairperson, subject to time availability.

ICVA coordinates an NGO representative to draft and deliver the NGO collective statements in consultation with a wide range of NGOs, usually under the agenda items of the General Debate and International Protection. In 2024, R-SEAT became the first refugee-led organization (RLO) to lead the drafting and deliver an NGO statement at ExCom.

ExCom adopts Conclusions and decisions on international protection and humanitarian responses. Read [previous ExCom Conclusions](#) here, including the 2024 [Conclusion on Durable Solutions and Complementary Pathways](#) adopted during the 75th session of ExCom.

Although non-binding, ExCom Conclusions express an important international consensus on refugee protection issues, and have helped clarify and develop principles in areas not fully addressed by the 1951 Convention or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

The [Executive Committee Bureau](#) (the Bureau) comprises four Member State office holders: the Chairperson, two Vice-Chairpersons, and the Rapporteur, representing the four United Nations regional groups. The Bureau is elected at the end of the annual plenary session in October.

The Bureau organizes meetings of the ExCom and its subsidiary bodies to ensure the link between ExCom members and the Office of the High Commissioner, and promotes dialogue in decision-making and the formulation of conclusions.

Benefits of Engaging in UNHCR's ExCom for Civil Society, including RLOs:

1. Influence Policy Through Official NGO Statements

Benefit: Contribute to shaping the discourse at ExCom by serving as a lead drafter or providing input on official NGO statements delivered during the plenary.

How to Engage: Join ICVA's mailing list to receive calls for lead drafters and opportunities to contribute to statement drafting. Please email your interest to: secretariat@icvanetwork.org, cc: issie.basile@icvanetwork.org, with the email subject: "Request to join SCOM mailing list".

2. Stay Informed on Key Developments

Benefit: Stay updated on global debates concerning forced displacement and gain valuable insights from official Member State statements, UNHCR's governance practices, and budgetary decisions.

How to Engage: Organizations with ECOSOC consultative status or ICVA membership can attend ExCom in person in Geneva. Others can follow the sessions via [UN Web TV](#) live stream.

3. Strategic Advocacy and Networking Platform

Benefit: Leverage ExCom as a unique space for advocacy, dialogue, and partnership building on the margins. Member States present their priorities and challenges, and high-level officials from capitals often participate.

How to Engage: Organise bilateral meetings—virtually or in person—with key stakeholders, including government representatives and UN officials.

Additionally, NGOs can host side events at ExCom, coordinated through ICVA. These events are subject to space and UNHCR approval and provide a platform to highlight thematic issues, share field experiences, and promote collaborative solutions.

The UNHCR Standing Committee

Overview & Purpose

The **Standing Committee** is a sub-body of ExCom, established to manage ongoing UNHCR matters between the annual ExCom plenary sessions. It ensures continuity in oversight, budgetary review, and policy guidance.

1. Membership & Structure

The Standing Committee consists of **a subset of ExCom members (states)**. Although all ExCom members are entitled to participate, active participation is voluntary and varies among Member States.

Unlike ExCom, the Standing Committee meets **three times a year in Geneva**, typically in March, June or July, and September.

Observers, such as non-member states and NGOs, can also participate. Similar to ExCom, NGOs can participate if they have ECOSOC consultative status, or are members of ICVA. For RLOs, without ECOSOC or ICVA membership, ICVA can coordinate attendance to the meetings.

2. Functions & Responsibilities

- **International Protection and Legal Frameworks**
 - Reviewing global refugee protection issues and legal developments.
 - Providing guidance on strengthening protection mechanisms.
- **Programme and Budget Oversight**
 - Examining UNHCR's programme and support budgets, funding needs, and financial management.
 - Reviewing financial reports and providing advice on resource use.
 - Recommending budget adjustments and supplementary appropriations where necessary.
- **Operational and Humanitarian Response**
 - Assessing UNHCR's global and regional operations.
 - Addressing emerging refugee and displacement crises.
- **Policy and Strategy Development**
 - Shaping policies on key issues like durable solutions, resettlement, and integration.
 - Strengthening UNHCR's partnerships with governments, NGOs, and other agencies.
 - Promoting innovative approaches to refugee assistance and protection.
- **Governance and Reporting**
 - Acting as a bridge between UNHCR and ExCom.
 - Providing regular updates on progress, challenges, and recommendations.
 - Ensuring transparency and accountability in UNHCR's work.

3. Meetings

All three annual Standing Committee meetings review UNHCR's budget and funding situation, including supplementary budgets established in response to new emergencies. However, each session tends to have a thematic focus:

- **March session:** Focus on global and regional updates, including West and Central Africa, East and Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa.
- **June or July session:** Greater focus on international protection. This includes the Note on International Protection prepared by the High Commissioner, which is later presented formally at the ExCom meeting in October. See the [Assistant High Commissioner for Protection's](#) presentation and the [Note on International Protection](#) from the 75th ExCom in 2024.
- **September session:** Focus on management, financial control, administrative oversight, and human resources.

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Conclusion

The **Executive Committee and Standing Committee** work together to provide strategic oversight, financial advice, and policy direction for UNHCR.

ExCom sets the broad policy orientations and endorses annual budget targets, while the Standing Committee ensures continuity, provides detailed programmatic review, and supports effective implementation throughout the year.

This governance structure helps UNHCR to coordinate international responses to refugee crises and ensure that refugee protection principles are upheld worldwide.