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**OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting:  
Upholding the Principles of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination including in the  
Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief**

**Session III: The Role of Educational Programs and Civil Society Initiatives as a  
means to Address Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization and Promote  
Mutual Respect and Understanding: State Responses, Coalition Building,  
Community Resilience**

**Statement by Sophie Hofbauer  
UNHCR Liaison Office to the OSCE and Vienna-based UN Agencies  
Vienna, 2 April 2019**

Distinguished Chairperson,  
Dear Participants,

Marginalized and vulnerable groups such as refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced people, and stateless persons are susceptible to stigmatization and stereotyping. According to UNHCR, in 2018, there were more than 68 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. 25 million of them are refugees and half of them are under 18 years of age.

Mandated with the protection of forcibly displaced persons, UNHCR is deeply concerned about false portrayal in print and social media as well as other internet-based fora. UNHCR's people of concern are increasingly the target of negative stereotyping, stigmatization, as well as hate crimes and incidents. Against the backdrop of rising hate speech and nationalist sentiment against refugees, migrants, ethnic and religious minorities as well as members of the LGBTI community, educational programs and civil society initiatives to promote mutual respect and understanding in our civil societies are needed more than ever. Experience shows that people-to-people contacts are the best way to learn about the "Other" and to reduce fears. We strongly believe that dialogue at the international, national and local levels is indispensable to creating awareness among citizens on biased media reporting and challenging premanufactured views.

With the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, States fortified their political will to take concerted action for refugees, share responsibilities, and promote multi-stakeholder approaches to international cooperation. On that note, we remind States that meaningful participation of marginalized populations in educational programs and civil society initiatives is key to deconstruct negative images and promote social cohesion within and across state borders.

UNHCR has a strong track record in promoting positive images of displaced persons, showing them as equal members of society, as "normal people like you and me". UNHCR strongly believes that educational programs and civil society

initiatives are crucial to bringing positive change to the current negative and discriminatory attitudes by some towards refugees, stateless persons and other marginalized people.

Let me conclude by underlining that refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, IDPs, and stateless persons should be and are in fact part of our societies. The international community cannot afford to turn a blind eye on them. Proactive coalition building is needed against negative stereotyping and stigmatization and will help to make our societies more resilient against attempts to stigmatization and stereotypes in the future.

Thank you for your attention!