



International Refugee Rights Conference

7-9 June 2018, Toronto Canada

Networking, advocating, strengthening NGOs

Conference report

1. Overview of the Conference

The Canadian Council for Refugees' International Refugee Rights Conference was held from 7 to 9 June 2018 at York University, Toronto. Approximately 650 participants from 36 countries in all five continents met to learn from each other and work across borders to meet the evolving needs of refugees and other vulnerable migrants.

With the theme “*Networking, advocating, strengthening NGOs*”, the goal of the conference was to enhance the effectiveness of NGOs in promoting the human rights of refugees. The objectives of the conference were:

- To promote ongoing cross-border networking, knowledge-exchange, strategizing and collaboration among NGOs committed to the rights of refugees and vulnerable migrants, and between NGOs and academics.
- To enhance NGO advocacy for better global protection for refugees and vulnerable migrants, including by giving input into the Global Compacts on refugees and migrants.
- To enhance efforts to educate and engage the public, in order to energize support for policies respecting the rights of refugees and vulnerable migrants.
- To increase knowledge of the inter-connections between policies and practices affecting refugees and migrants in different regions of the world.
- To support the development of NGOs in the Global South committed to the rights of refugees and vulnerable migrants.
- To support the inclusion of the voices of refugees and vulnerable migrants in discussions concerning them.

2. Conference Sessions

The conference opened with a plenary to reflect on the global context, with a focus on the Global Compact on Refugees and on youth, and closed with a presentation of perspectives on Canada's approach to protecting and welcoming refugees, with the participation of Mr. Arif Virani, MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage.



In between, there were 24 workshops where international and Canadian speakers were invited to share their experiences and perspectives. In addition to the workshops and plenaries, the program included six NGO networking sessions, eight caucus sessions, a networking lunch, two evening social events and CCR working group meetings.

Conference sessions were carefully planned and designed with a view to achieving the objectives of promoting ongoing cross-border networking, knowledge-exchange, strategizing and collaboration among NGOs, and between NGOs and academics.

The overall structure of the conference was also designed with these objectives in mind, providing early opportunities for NGOs to connect with each other in the preliminary sessions at the beginning of the conference, and ending the conference with networking sessions where participants could identify opportunities and priorities for future collaboration.

In order to facilitate the networking and to provide bi- and multilingual spaces, the conference program and participant kits were available in English, French and Spanish. All plenary sessions and some workshops had simultaneous interpretation between English, French and/or Spanish.

In total, there were 47 sessions.

Plenaries:

- Opening plenary with international perspectives
- Plenary on world regional perspectives
- Closing plenary on Canadian perspectives

Preliminary sessions:

- Enforcement
- Global Protection
- Welcome and integration
- Protection
- Rights and Status
- Durable solutions

Workshops:

- Global Compact on Refugees
- Detention
- Settlement
- Mental health

- Security vetting
- Youth
- Public opinion
- Effective protection
- Durable solutions
- Economic and social rights
- Interdiction
- Faith
- Sexual orientation and Gender identity and expression (SOGIE)
- Children's rights
- Post-deportation
- Statelessness
- UNHCR Role
- Trafficking
- Citizenship
- Family Reunification
- Welcoming communities
- Private sponsorship
- Gender and displacement
- Refugee determination

Caucus sessions:

- Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB)
- Refugee Women
- Rohingya
- Mental health and detention
- Technology
- Complementary pathways
- African Refugee Network
- Refugees in Israel

Networking sessions:

- Mexico-US-Canada
- LGBT
- Resettlement
- Communications
- Trafficking
- Youth

Working Group Meetings:

- Inland Protection
- Overseas Protection and Resettlement

3. Outcomes from Workshops

Workshop moderators were asked to ensure that each session identified outcomes, such as recommendations for resources and actions, identification of issues for advocacy and opportunities for cross-border collaboration.

a. Recommendations for resources

Addressing Gender-based Violence: the role of local women's leadership

- In advance of the workshop, organizers prepared a draft toolkit with some recommendations on how to support local women's leadership. The organizers will circulate an updated version with the recommendations generated during the workshop.

Refugees and Migrants as Resilient Champions

- Develop an orientation manual for resettled refugees, and consult previously resettled refugees during its creation.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression

- Develop resources that assist settlement workers in helping refugee claimants navigate the refugee claim process in a SOGIE context.
- Capitalizing on existing international resources for training and advocacy so as to avoid others having to 'reinvent the wheel' and so we do not 'work in silos'.

b. Issues identified for advocacy

Sharing refugee sponsorship experiences

- Canadian and other advocates to influence Australia so that civil society's effort to fundraise benefits refugees directly rather than going to the government.

Addressing Gender-based Violence: the role of local women's leadership

- Advocate to ensure women with precarious status are included in the federal government's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-based Violence
- Advocate to prioritize women in resettlement programs, e.g. the program to resettle 1000 vulnerable refugee women and girls in Canada.
- Highlight women's voices and leadership in refugee settings to ensure more access to funding; insist on equal participation of women's rights organizations and beneficiaries.

Effective Protection: State responses in the Americas

- Mexico: access to legal information (particularly about the asylum process); access to timely refugee status determination, alternatives to detention.
- Colombia: access to registration and protection, regardless of method of entry

Faith Communities across Borders

- Sanctuary movement, and need for spaces for refugees to receive sanctuary. Churches, mosques, synagogues etc. have collaborated across borders to provide places of refuge.
- Faith groups should advocate for refugees as an outpouring of their religious commitments to both care for those who are marginalized as well as change systems that create or contribute to their marginalization

Family reunification

- Participants agreed that advocacy for excluded family members must be prioritized.

Global Compact on Refugees

- Enhanced accountability and reporting mechanisms that take the needs of civil society and NGOs into account
- Get root causes included in the Global Compact (they are currently not acknowledged or addressed)

Trauma and Rehabilitation of Displaced People

- Advocate for support from funders to include mental health and wellness as part of displaced person settlement.

Post-deportation Monitoring

- Call on Government of Canada to take into consideration the risks for returnees in countries of origin.

Statelessness

- Advocate for solutions to statelessness:
 - Ratification of conventions
 - Focus on importance of birth registration and identity documents to prevent statelessness
 - Make use of UNHCR's "I belong" campaign resources
 - Focus on the 17 sustainable development goals, a number of which speak to the issue of statelessness; even governments that have not ratified treaties have signed on to these.
 - Campaign for local legal frameworks
 - Create more forums where activists and advocates can learn from people who have experience statelessness.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression

- Community organizations must continue to advocate to government to prioritize the resettlement of LGBTQIA+ refugee claimants
- Continue investment in alternative pathways (e.g. private sponsorship circles), and more education for others interested in joining and supporting those pathways.

c. Issues for cross-border collaboration

Access to secure citizenship for refugees

- Keep dialogue and discussion going on sharing best practices and learning more about the impact of lack of citizenship on refugees.

Durable solutions

- International advocacy for alternative pathways to resettle refugees, and to increase awareness-raising and debunk myths about refugees, at the same time acknowledging that refugees are economic assets.

Challenging refugee interdiction and containment policies

- Significant and sustained public pressure is required on this issue. Legal challenges are an important tool in challenging restrictions on the right to asylum since those rights are entrenched in law.

Addressing Gender-based Violence: the role of local women's leadership

- Raising awareness of the issues confronting women on the ground, as well as their unique needs and efforts to address these issues.
- Bridging the divide between development aid and humanitarian aid.
- Connecting local women's groups directly with resources in other countries.

Effective Protection: State responses in the Americas

- Strategic litigation, public legal information and accompaniment

Faith Communities across Borders

- Faith-based groups should work together to mitigate religious persecution, especially as it contributes to the creation of refugees.
- Faith groups should unite to demonstrate a commitment to “welcoming the stranger”, countering xenophobic and discriminatory efforts to keep people out.

Global Compact on Refugees

- Explore opportunities for learning the language of networks, of capacity building, fostering a network, and then networking that knowledge in a transnational way.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression

- The ongoing stereotyping and marginalizing of LGBTQIA+ identities within various regional contexts (i.e. Canada, Austria, and South Korea) continue to be a barrier to SOGIE supports.

Recommendations for CCR and other organizations

Public Positive Opinion

- Several participants wanted a workshop on how to work with the media.

Creating an Ideal Global Refugee Status Determination System

- Panelists drafted an ideal framework for a refugee status determination system that was presented at the workshop. There was support from participants for the draft to be further developed, for use as a positive prototype in international dialogue.

Displacement, Youth and Identities

- Continue discussions to advance the bridging of refugees and Indigenous youth.

Security Inadmissibility

- Focus on due process in admissibility screening of refugee claimants, rather than on international and human rights law.
- Work with non-legal community to inform them on importance of security/admissibility procedures and create a network for front-line workers who meet refugee claimants with potential inadmissibility issues.

Creating Welcoming Communities

- Engage immigrants and refugees to share their own stories and identities and become community leaders.

Addressing Gender-based Violence: the role of local women's leadership

- CCR should play a role in facilitating information and resource exchange.
- Other organizations should highlight the role of local women's organizations and leaders in refugee settings, see women's rights organizations as real partners and co-create with them, and elevate their voices. Internally, organizations need to make sure our cultures support gender equality and related discussions. They should also invest in job training and social and psychological services for women.

Faith Communities across Borders

- Religious groups in the refugee sector can increase their individual impacts by building bridges across faith communities and borders.

Trauma and Rehabilitation of Displaced People

- Organizations to develop and adopt psychosocial intervention strategies essential for supporting successful integration of displaced person. This may include:
 - Proactive informal gatherings and interventions such as support groups, picnics, and information sessions, to help with isolation, coping and empowerment.
 - More focus on social determinants of health and mental health when addressing mental health of displaced persons

- Holding mental health, self-care workshops
- Having a social worker, youth and family support workers on-site.
- Find ways to expand specialized, trauma-informed services to other parts of Canada. Small communities are seeing survivors of torture but have no resources to support them.

Post-deportation Monitoring

- CCR to take a leadership role in the creating of monitoring mechanisms for NGOs to assist refugees upon deportation.
- Call on UNHCR to ensure post-deportation monitoring mechanisms.

Review of the Role of UNHCR

- The importance of being aware of and engaged in the process that is underway around the New York Declaration and the evolving Global Compact on Refugees was highlighted.

Refugees and Migrants as Resilient Champions

- Organizations should create safe spaces for diverse communities to gather, rather than allowing communities to gather only according to cultural background, in an effort to encourage social exchange.
- Larger organizations should support smaller communities and organizations who sponsor refugees, as they do not necessarily understand all aspects of refugee migration, and require mentorship.
- Offer on-the-job mentorship programs to enhance foreign credential recognition (model from Europe) so credited individuals can upgrade their skills for a year.
- Introduce wraparound approach for youth that combines activities such as soccer with academics for formal development around issues requested by the youth themselves. Activities like soccer allow youth to learn skills such as coordination, collaboration, communication, and stress management, and also present an opportunity to connect newcomer and Indigenous youth.

4. Participants and Evaluation results

Promotion of the conference was so successful that registration numbers exceeded expectations and capacity several weeks before the conference, leading to registration being closed as of 18 May 2018. Some exceptions were made thereafter, but unfortunately the CCR was forced to turn away many people who would have liked to participate.

Of the 650 participants who attended the conference, 80 were from outside Canada. The CCR approved full or partial funding support for 25 non-Canadian participants. The selection process used by the CCR was successful in identifying strong refugee advocates representing all the regions of the world, with a priority for participants from the Global South. The vast majority of those funded were asked to be resource persons at one or more conference workshops and sessions.



In addition to participants from outside Canada, the CCR was able to financially support the travel costs of 19 participants who were refugees or former refugees. In addition, about 45 youth participated in the conference (many of them also former refugees).

The Conference benefitted from the participation not only of NGO representatives, but also others, including representatives of various levels of government, of the UNHCR and IOM, and academics.

Evaluation results - Of the 102 responses received:

- **89%** of participants agreed that the conference helped them to increase their understanding of refugee needs, trends, and barriers.
- **87%** of participants thought that the conference was successful overall and they would recommend others to participate in the future.
- **89%** of participants agreed that the conference helped them to acquire knowledge, understanding and contacts that will be useful in their work.
- **81%** of participants agreed that the conference provided good opportunities to participate and contribute to the dialogue.
- **75.5%** of participants agreed that the conference reached its goal of promoting NGO networking across borders for better global protection for refugees and vulnerable migrants.
- **85%** of participants agreed that there was a good range of world regions, sectors, perspectives etc. represented at the conference.
- **95%** of participants agreed that there were significant efforts to promote bilingualism (English-French)

Participants appreciated...

The following comments from conference participants describe what they liked best about the event:

- Opportunity for networking and knowledge sharing, as well as the knowledge level of the resource persons
- Inclusion that was accomplished in every aspect of the conference
- The opportunity to meet and learn about experiences and read situations of the refugee and immigrant in different countries and areas in the world
- The focus on youth, and having both a panel on youth, but also a large number of youth participating in the conference
- The diversity in the conference. The multiculturalism made the interactions joyful. Bi/trilingualism efforts promoted. Great job promoting accessibility, generally!
- Discussions and different views on the same area
- Connecting international & national issues
- Meeting amazing individuals who come from refugee backgrounds, who are contributing back to CCR and Canadian community
- Workshops that made us talk in small groups were good - helps support networking
- The positive, proactive attitude; well-prepared presenters
- Alternative pathways for resettlement

5. Next steps

Following the conference, the CCR compiled reports from the workshop moderators and solicited recommendations for priority follow up from funded participants. At the CCR meetings in September 2018, discussions were begun on how to identify realistic next steps that the CCR can take, and the CCR Executive established a process for deciding on priorities. This process will be pursued over the coming months, in line with the CCR's strategic objective of increasing international engagement.

6. Acknowledgements

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- COSTI - Opening plenary: Global perspectives
- Sojourn House - Workshop on Immigration Detention
- OCISO (Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization) – Workshop on Refugees and Migrants as Resilient Champions
- MANSO (Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations) – Workshop on Trauma and Rehabilitation Process of Displaced People
- Amnesty International – Workshop on Security Vetting/Inadmissibility: Getting it right
- Action Réfugiés Montréal – Workshop on Durable Solutions: Addressing the challenge of Low Global Resettlement Numbers
- Citizens for Public Justice – Workshop on the Indispensability of Binding Faith Communities across Borders
- The United Church of Canada – Workshop on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE)
- Diocese of Niagara Anglican Church of Canada – Workshop on Sharing Refugee Sponsorship Experiences
- Kinbrace – Refugee Housing & Support – Workshop on Creation an “Ideal Global Framework” for Refugees Status Determination

We wish to thank the Local Organizing Committee members, local volunteers, workshop organizers, panelists and moderators, on whom the consultation’s success depends.

