

Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) | June 2020

Refugee Statement

On behalf of the millions of refugees from around the world, a people in desperate need of international protection, we welcome this opportunity to deepen refugees' collaboration with the UNHCR, States, NGOs and ATCR co-chairs in this important dialogue on resettlement.

We would like to particularly thank Canada for their efforts as the co-chair of ATCR to support the meaningful participation of refugees and to champion the inclusion of refugees as a permanent part of ATCR activities and processes, for which all relevant stakeholders have responsibility.

The engagement of refugees at the Working Group meetings (WGR) in Ottawa provides a useful guide for other resettlement state members on how to implement meaningful refugee participation. A Concept Note on Refugee Meaningful Participation prepared by the Refugee Steering Group (RSG) will be presented at the ATCR 2020. We strongly commend this to you as we believe "nothing about us without us."

Key challenges

Refugees, who are already some of the world's most vulnerable, are suffering from the shocks related to the COVID-19 pandemic and face specific challenges. In addition to severe economic hardship, which can lead to negative coping mechanisms, and acute protection risks, refugees are often the most marginalized members of society, with over 80% being located in low and middle income countries.¹ As a result, the vulnerabilities and marginalization they faced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic have only become more pronounced; often further increasing their protection risks. In particular, those living in densely-populated urban areas and camps where social distancing cannot realistically be maintained, are exposed to greater risks as they continue working through this crisis. The lack of essential hygiene products, relief items and medical units at hot spots such as the Greek Islands are examples of the failure to protect refugees in camps during this challenging context of global pandemic. In addition, there are those who are in detention centers and prisons who might face additional risks during COVID-19 and must not be forgotten.

While we recognize the important public health imperative to slow the spread of this virus that has resulted in international travel restrictions, we implore States, UNHCR and other

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/coronavirus-covid-19.html>

resettlement actors to work with refugees in finding practical and safe ways of ensuring that refugee resettlement processes can continue. We are dismayed to see from the Projected Global Resettlement Needs report that only 4.5 percent of global resettlement needs were met in 2019, and are acutely aware of the high level of need with 1.5 million refugees in need of resettlement in 2021. We believe that there are ways that refugees can continue to be resettled safely at this time with, for example, appropriate pre-departure testing and quarantine restrictions upon arrival in place. We strongly urge that work be done to ensure resettlement programs resume as quickly as possible as the need for resettlement in the context of the challenges already mentioned has never been greater.

The need for adapting and maintaining resettlement processes in what could be a very protracted pandemic also applies to complementary pathways that are still so desperately needed. Refugees have capacities and aspirations to work, study and reunite with their families, and we urge States and all actors to continue to find ways to open up complementary pathways to refugees. The Student Refugee Program (SRP), sponsored by the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) is one example of a successful refugee migration pathway that offers a third-country durable solution through education. The SRP provides education and resettlement opportunities to young refugees from different parts of the world. Upon arrival, most refugees apply to sponsor members of their family left in refugee camps. Refugees are also particularly interested to see that the momentum that continues to gather around community sponsorship is maintained.

In addition, refugees continue to call for work to be done to ensure there are welcoming communities in resettlement countries. This is an area that requires vigilance and continuous attention, and creating a climate of welcome is an area where former refugees are willing and able to play a constructive role. *The HIAS MHPSS Group Pilot for Social Inclusion Programming* in the United States is one good example to learn from. The pilot responds to the varying needs of recently resettled refugees in the US by offering non-clinical mental health programming. The program supports refugee facilitators in leading the curriculum and project, with the understanding that refugees have the knowledge and capacity to serve as leaders within their respective communities, recognizing the difference in mental health supports among various cultural and linguistic groups.

Necessary measures should be taken to facilitate integration in the local communities by providing early access to language classes and adequate information on accessing employment opportunities for new arrivals. Government authorities should improve process and access to information on the recognition and assessment of foreign degrees and qualifications as well as the informal skills of refugees. Particular attention should be given to the fast entrance of refugee women into employment as this would be a great help to the integration and well-being of all refugees.

Recommendations

In responding to these challenges, we recommend:

1. That the systematic and transformative engagement of refugees be embedded in the ATCR, including through the formal and transparent establishment of a 'Refugee co-chair' role, selected by refugees, that reflects a shift from a tripartite to a multipartite dialogue model.
2. That there is increased allocation of resources and investment in ensuring access, consistency and sustainability of refugee participation and meaningful engagement in the ATCR. We propose that by 2022, 20% of ATCR participants should be able to contribute to this dialogue from a perspective of lived refugee/resettlement experience. Refugee voices should be central to decision making process. States need to facilitate the engagement of refugees in the design and implementation of policies and programmes to enable successful resettlement programs and support better integration.
3. That States, UNHCR and other actors work with refugee leaders to ensure resettlement processes are resumed as quickly as possible, with attention paid to access for vulnerable groups, including women and children, LGBTQI refugees, unaccompanied minors, and those languishing in camps. In addition, attention should be given to refugees affected by the pandemic and their resettlement should not be delayed due to their health situation.
4. That States make concrete steps to adopt or expand robust community sponsorship models to increase the numbers resettlement places globally and in ways that involve local and refugee communities.
5. In the event that the Coronavirus pandemic continues to suspend resettlement processes, that resettlement States and other actors increase investment and engagement with displaced communities who are at the forefront of helping the communities they live in, ensuring that any response engages refugee-led organizations at local, national, regional and international levels.
6. That resettlement States allow for "additional" opportunities for refugees through complementary pathways such as through education, employment, or other pathways, in collaboration with refugees, refugee sponsoring communities, groups, employers, educational institutions and NGOs.
7. That even as we focus on particular populations in the Projected Global Resettlement Needs document released by UNHCR, that "forgotten" refugee groups not be overlooked including protracted refugee situations, those without status or unaccompanied minors. All resettlement policies should include a gender-sensitive approach.
8. That early access to employment and professional developments be strengthened so that refugees can contribute to their new communities.

9. That refugees should be treated as partners not as beneficiaries and that refugee communities and leaders are consulted and allowed decision-making powers on the way forward. States must put in place structures that engage refugees in the design of resettlement programs, an important step towards a constructive relationship between policy makers and refugees with lived experience of resettlement.

About the Statement:

This Refugee Statement was developed by a number of individuals with refugee experience in conjunction with the Canadian Council for Refugees, the NGO Co-Chair for ATRC 2019-2020 cycle. The content of the Statement was solicited in part through a series of focus groups with those with refugee experience across Canada and around the world.

The Refugee Statement was developed and feedback from the community was incorporated by a group of volunteers with refugee experience from Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands, including: Anila Noor, Arash Bordbar, Ali Abukar, Gabriel Ndayishimiye, and Najeeba Wazefadost.