

ATCR NGO Steering Committee
Afghanistan response: Priority concerns
March 2022

In the wake of the events in Afghanistan in 2021, governments, organizations and others involved in resettlement and complementary pathways have responded in exceptional and urgent ways to respond to the many displaced Afghans.

The ATCR NGO Steering Committee, formed in 2021, welcomes the measures already taken. We recommend that the following concerns and recommendations be taken into consideration by all relevant actors as they respond to the Afghanistan crisis.

More recently, the unfolding crisis in Ukraine is leading to massive displacement. Though it is too early to understand the role that resettlement might play, many of the principles outlined below are likely to apply in this situation also.

Equity

The principle of equity must be respected. This includes equity in the areas of:

- **Afghans versus other nationalities.** The needs of refugees of other nationalities are as great as they were before the Afghan crisis. There are also other urgent situations, for example in Ethiopia, that have not received the same attention or response.
- **Afghans who fled recently versus those who fled earlier.** Already before the 2021 crisis, Afghans were in the top 5 nationalities of refugees in need of resettlement globally, according to the UNHCR.¹ Many Afghans have been displaced for very long periods, and are living in extremely difficult situations, without a prospect of a durable solution.
- **Afghans of all profiles.** Some governments are focusing on responding to Afghans of specific profiles (for example, human rights defenders or journalists). Others who are equally in need but who don't meet the priority profiles must not be neglected.

Additionality

New commitments to resettle Afghans should be in addition to previous commitments to resettle refugees. The global need for durable solutions has grown with the crisis in Afghanistan – the global resettlement response needs to increase in proportion. The response to Afghans should not be at the expense of other refugees in need of resettlement, including those displaced by crises that are not receiving the same attention, and refugees in protracted situations of displacement without a durable solution. As well as ensuring that resettlement targets are additional, governments need to allocate additional resources, so that previously committed resettlement resources are not diverted.

Building public support

Strong popular engagement and sympathy for affected Afghans has been seen in many parts of the world. This provides an opportunity, which all actors should seize on, to build public support for refugee resettlement and for creating welcoming communities, over the longer term.

¹ UNHCR, Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2022, page 14.

Expanding complementary pathways

Even with increased commitments to resettlement, only a small minority of Afghans will have access to resettlement. This provides an opportunity to develop new and expanded complementary pathways, to increase the numbers of people who can find a durable solution.

- More flexible family reunification routes should be opened, for the many displaced Afghans (and those of other nationalities) who have family connections in other countries
- Other complementary pathways should be facilitated (for example, educational pathways and non-temporary work permits)
- Barriers for refugees accessing mainstream visa pathways should be reduced (e.g. requirements related to documentation, financial assets, family size and application fees)

Community sponsorship

In recent years, more countries have established community sponsorship programs, which mobilize public support and increase overall capacity to resettle refugees. To maximize the potential of these programs to respond to Afghans and other refugees, it is necessary to:

- Ensure community sponsorship numbers are additional to government-led resettlement commitments
- Reduce barriers to sponsor, and to be sponsored
- Expand the capacity of the sponsorship programs, ensuring guarantees of quality in a manner that respects civil society's independence and expertise
- Strengthen the dialogue between governments, local authorities and civil society.

Pathways to permanent status

A solution is not durable unless a person has access to permanent status. In the aftermath of the emergency evacuation of thousands of Afghans, it is crucial that evacuees have clear pathways, within a short time period, to permanent status, and that they be given adequate support along the way. In the same way, previously displaced Afghans who are still without a durable solution should be offered pathways to permanent status.

Responding to people still in Afghanistan

Some of the responses to Afghans in need of protection have involved people who are still in Afghanistan. However, refugee resettlement is by definition a response to people who are outside their country of origin. Programs to evacuate people should be separate from resettlement and humanitarian admissions.

Resettlement countries need to take into account the concerns of neighbouring countries and give them support, including through resettlement commitments, so that borders remain open.

Strategic use of resettlement

Given that most refugees are unlikely to benefit from resettlement, it is important to consider how resettlement can contribute strategically to promoting better conditions for refugees in countries of first asylum. Through the ATRC process and the Priority Situations Core Group, resettlement countries should work together to maximise the collective impact of their offers of resettlement, humanitarian assistance and diplomatic support.

Improving information and communication

Many of the responses to the Afghan crisis through resettlement and complementary pathways have been novel and introduced very rapidly. This makes it more important than ever to work to communicate relevant information effectively so that:

- Affected individuals have clear information about processes they are going through.
- Other actors, including new players, have relevant information about the resettlement processes and complementary pathways available.