



ATCR 2019-2020 Refugee Participation: Report of focus groups to January 2020

A. Introduction

The **Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement** (ATCR) brings together the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the governments and NGOs of resettlement countries, providing an opportunity for information-sharing and strategizing in support of resettlement.

Canada is chairing the ATCR process for the year 2019-2020, culminating in the 26th ATCR, to be held in Geneva June 15-17, 2020. The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is co-chair and the ATCR NGO Focal Point.

One of the objectives of the 2019-2020 ATCR process, chaired by Canada, is “to make meaningful refugee participation a permanent part of ATCR activities and process, for which all relevant stakeholders have responsibility.”

As part of that commitment, the CCR invited organizations in Canada and around the world to lead focus groups with refugees and former refugees.

The purpose of focus groups is to gather input from people with refugee experience on the issues related to resettlement and complementary pathways discussed within ATCR. The input will contribute to a Refugee Statement that will be presented at the ATCR.

The first round of focus groups were held in late 2019 or January 2020, with a view to presenting the input from the groups at the Working Group meetings to be held in February 2020 in Ottawa. A second round of focus groups is planned to take place by the end of April 2020, to feed into the ATCR in June 2020.

B. Focus Groups held

Eight focus groups have been held, seven in Canada and one in Australia led by:

- KEYS Job Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada
- London Cross Cultural Learner Centre, London, Ontario, Canada
- Franco-Queer, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- Saskatoon Open Door Society (SODS), Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
- Catholic Social Services, Immigration and Settlement Service, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
- Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA), Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
- Settlement Services International, Australia

83 people with refugee experience participated in the focus groups, originating from a wide range of countries including Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Sudan, Burundi, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Yemen, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Mexico, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Iran, Somalia, Congo, Egypt and Pakistan.

Participants in the focus groups received background information on the ATCR process and current priority issues, and then discussed the following questions:

- What is working well and not well in resettlement programs?
- How can we persuade more countries to start refugee resettlement programs, and existing countries to resettle more refugees?
- Apart from resettlement, what other legal immigration channels should be available to refugees to move to a third country (for example, family reunification, as workers or students, or humanitarian programs)? What needs to change to make these channels work for refugees? What safeguards are needed to protect refugees?
- How can we build more welcoming communities for refugees?



SSI Refugee Participation Focus Group, Australia photo:@SSI

C. Summary of key themes

Participants in the groups provided a wealth of valuable comments, among which some key themes emerged.

Resettlement:

- Access to resettlement for refugees is a great concern.
- Refugees need better access to full and accurate information about the resettlement process.
- It is extremely difficult to get refugee status determination (RSD) for refugees in some countries. RSD is subjective and depends on the interviewing officer. Lack of RSD can affect access to RSD.
- RSD must be fair for women, girls, minors and human rights defenders as they are extremely vulnerable.
- Resettlement processes are cumbersome and very long, including long security checks.
- While waiting for resettlement, refugees should receive better orientation and have access to language and other training programs, to facilitate their integration after resettlement.
- There are concerns about corruption, by UNHCR during selection process, by IOM and by host countries.

Complementary Pathways

- Participants welcomed Complementary Pathways (CPs).
- While waiting in host countries, refugees should be able to learn various skills so that they can be admitted in resettlement countries under CPs. This depends in part on countries of asylum providing documentation and access to education and work.
- CPs must allow families to come together. The current system promotes family separation and fear.
- More involvement is required by the private sector in CPs.
- Brain drain – consideration must be made on the loss of trained human power from countries of origin.

Welcoming Communities

- We should promote positive /success stories about refugees and the positive impact refugees make on resettlement countries. Acknowledge the skills and talents of refugees and show the benefits of accepting refugees.
- Shared migration narratives can be helpful in fighting polarization and xenophobia.
- Community engagement: Working with civil society such as faith groups, community groups, and media.
- Awareness campaigns to fight misconception and misinformation about refugees.
- Schools should provide information/awareness sessions for students so that they gain a better understanding of refugees and the refugee crisis.

Recommendations:

- Establish a tripartite monitoring system including experts from the NGO community to monitor UNHCR's protection services and ensure that they are professional, humane and free of corruption.
- Refugee communities should organize themselves. They should be helped to develop their own networks.
- Refugee networks to partner with other agencies and with media.

D. Highlights from the focus group reports

The following are more detailed highlights from the focus groups.

In the country of asylum

- In terms of the numbers of people asking for asylum, there is a strong demographic imbalance between countries close to areas of high persecution and the more developed countries. Refugees who in theory are protected by the 1951 Geneva Convention are in practice increasingly considered by Western States as “illegal migrants” and are treated unfairly and not in conformity with the 1951 Convention.
- The issue of documents was raised by many groups. Refugees face difficulty in getting documentation confirming refugee status. One participant was lucky and got a refugee card after four months but others can wait for years and even decades. She recounted the high rate of suicides among refugees in India as a result of lacking confirmation of status. Without it, you are also denied healthcare. Host countries must be challenged to valid document to live and work/education/ health care/ financial.
- Concerns about corruption within UNHCR – need for serious transformation. In many offices, acting part of the government. One participant was reported to asylum country’s government by UNHCR staff.
- People should be helped to develop realistic and practical expectations so that they could have more control in establishing ways to meet their own, individual needs.
- Lack of public education about refugee contributions to host country.
- Sufficient orientation for refugees at the UNHCR office at the country they claimed asylum.

The resettlement process

- There is need for greater transparency in the selection process.
- Long waiting times. Even when you have been accepted, there are so many processes. It can contribute to more suffering for the refugees. One of the most ridiculous is security checks.
- There are concerns about corruption within the UNHCR refugee selection process – it needs to be less impacted by individual officers and their preferences. There was also discussion about corruption with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and their involvement in the resettlement process. Participants spoke of bribery involving IOM officials, putting refugees in a more vulnerable situation.
- The UNHCR and the Government of Canada have an individualistic definition of family, particularly as it relates to individuals over the age of 18 being seen as separate from their families. Collectivist cultural understandings should be taken into account – many refugees do not see their 18 or 20 year old children as separate from their families.
- Interviews were extremely intimidating and stressful. There was a lack of communication during the process with long waiting periods. They felt they had very little control as they couldn’t ask questions or didn’t receive answers to emails.
- Refugee are unaware of policies – there is a gap in the information provided to them both pre and post resettlement There is a lack of clarity surrounding how the resettlement process works.

Preparing for resettlement

- We would like to help people being resettled to be more prepared. You can’t learn about the country you will live in for the rest of your life in 3-5 days. People can wait for months or years. Why not language and other training programs so they could come to the country with more tools to help them.

- The quality of the pre-arrival orientation for resettlement refugees is very poor. Often the individuals who deliver the pre-arrival orientation have never been to Canada and perpetuate false information, which can take a long time to unlearn and causes further psychological harm to resettled refugees. Orientation should be done by Canadians with understanding of issues of importance for newcomers. Resettlement countries need to play a much more prominent role in preparing refugees for their resettlement move.
- Participants wish they had had more information on where they were going and the challenges ahead.

We must see refugees as an opportunity and not a burden.

How can we promote more resettlement?

- Many participants said we need to promote positive refugee narratives to change the conversation. Share the positive contributions of refugees between states to encourage them to start resettlement. Urge Canada (and others) to cite success stories. Focus on contributions to the economy by refugees and newcomers.
- Publish and promote success stories and refugee contributions to destigmatize and eradicate the negative and harmful stereotypes, myths and misconceptions associated with being a refugee.
- Urge Canada (and other refugee-receiving countries) to be pro-active and ADVOCATE more countries to follow this example.
- Grass root level politicians should be kept engaged and made accountable to promote peace Education in schools, on history of refugees, who they are and why they become refugees, why we accept refugees and the benefit of having refugees come to the country (economic and social effect).
- Focus on countries with aging populations
- Examine the supply and demand of the economy and match skilled refugees accordingly. Refugee sponsorship / Refugee intake by skills matching to settlement location and host community “Win / Win situation” said by one of the participants.
- Involving the private sector to sponsor refugee groups
- Raise more awareness about the refugee crisis to engage others to take action
- Involve youth –provide more information on their experiences for new refugee youth.
- Increase unaccompanied minors’ intake.
- Review and replicate the 204-visa subclass for “women at risk in countries it is not being utilise. It is currently happening in the Australian humanitarian program but not in other countries
- Involvement of Diaspora as a resource to support the settlement experience of newly arrived refugees as well as improving conditions in the countries of migration.

How can we develop effective Complementary pathways?

- Lack of UNHCR refugee status/confirmation should not be an ironclad condition for the refugee process (example of Group of Five sponsorship in Canada). It limits opportunities.
- Expand opportunities for immigration through education. Student sponsorship through the implementation of programs similar to WUSC where all students donate to pay for a refugee’s tuition. Develop a collaboration with colleges and universities to allow refugee to gain higher education. **The Global Diversity Scholarship by Australia National University (ANU)** was identified as a good example of complementary pathways as it opened up extra places for refugees to enter Australia and continue their education. At ANU; 2 refugees are supported to access tertiary education.
- Private and community sponsorship should be promoted.

- Current Australian refugee sponsorship program is not reflective of community needs. It is too expensive and difficult for refugee groups to meet the demands of visa fees. (The Community Support Program is an Australian government refugee resettlement program that give individuals, organizations, and businesses an opportunity to sponsor a refugee or refugee family to travel to Australia and rebuild their lives.) The high visa costs mean it is not easy to sponsor refugees. It is to be noted that it is not a complementary pathway to resettlement as the numbers are drawn from existing Australian humanitarian intake.
- There will be more opportunities if countries of asylum help refugees to be safe, including through providing legal authorization and proper documents.
- There needs to be more avenues for family members, including siblings, adult children, and undeclared family members, to join their families in resettlement countries. The current system promotes family separation and fear. One person commented that there are instances where women are leaving newborn babies behind out of fear of compromising their applications.
- There should be a complementary pathway for skilled refugees to enter the labour market
- There needs to be more collaboration between the public, private and civil sectors to fill labour shortages with skilled refugees. There was a general sentiment throughout the session that employment is an issue for resettled refugees and that more work needs to be done to harness the talent that they bring to resettlement countries. Participants saw potential in working in the private sector to fill this gap.

If I didn't have war in my country, I could have come to Canada through express skills because I am accomplished. The war gave me refugee status but that doesn't negate my experience, knowledge, accomplishments.

- Ensure these channels are easily accessible. Provide orientation sessions educating refugees about the resettlement process/basic information/expectations while in the host country. Have trained individuals/volunteers guide refugees through the process.
- Provide sufficient orientation for refugees at the UNHCR office at the country they claimed asylum.
- Create more programs to prepare/educate/build skills to prepare for job market.
- Provide resources to improve language by mentoring
- Safeguards needed:
 - Ensure their rights are enforced by the host or third country
 - Raise more awareness about sexual and labour exploitation of refugees
 - Inform refugees about refugee policy and laws
 - Understand refugees are vulnerable people
 - Ensure the political and legal system are actively involved
 - Ensure complementary pathways are developed ethically

How can we make more welcoming communities?

- For newcomers who already speak the language of the resettlement country, it is often forgotten that they are trying to navigate a system that is completely foreign to them. They feel like they do not get the support that they need to do this and that misunderstandings occur as a result.
- Years of education may have been lost in the flight from their homeland, opportunity to enrol in high school courses for adults may be needed.
- They are often told that it could take five years to “settle” and this is disheartening as they’ve already been in a state of limbo for years before reaching Canada.

- There is a need for more support and opportunity to use their education, training, skills and potential in the workforce in a way that contributes to the well-being of Canada.
- People need easily accessible information, in their own language
- Use social media to broadcast refugee experiences.
- Community engagement: Working with different community like church, family/private sponsorship group, community groups, faith groups to engage in supporting refugees to feel accepted.
- Media involvement: media to be involved with refugee program.
- All of the participants mentioned the role of media in dehumanising the refugees. Media stigmatisation of refugees contributed to negative perception of refugees by host communities. One participant recalled; “You sit in the bus or on train and people start to move seats and carriages as they don’t want to sit next to you”. Then another echoed; “there is this image fed into their heads about who we are, the difference...”
- In order to “change the attitude and negative perception of public towards refugees,” media needs to normalise the image by including positive stories of “refugees and host community” mingling, need to cover stories of refugees with success stories like doctors, pilots and police...”
- Provide a safe environment to provide a community to become home. Be more open to learn about backgrounds and cultures. Be open minded.
- Many people have experience traumatic experiences and they have difficulty trusting people. Participants asked themselves whether they can trust service providers. How can they be sure that people who are helping them are allies? There were a lot of comments on attitudes that might be seen as micro-aggressions (comments from an LGBTQIA group).
- Biggest obstacle is having the education and/or work experience from their homeland recognized. Sometimes it is impossible for them to access copies of their certification/degrees from their universities.
- Refugee stigma should be lifted. Should see us not as refugees but as potential citizens. For this meeting, let’s not describe ourselves as refugees. We are permanent residents and becoming-citizens.
- There needs to be more positive stories told about refugees. Furthermore, governments need to focus on using data to demonstrate the positive impact of refugees. For example, demonstrating the return on investment from investing in resettlement programs and the positive impact resettled refugees have on the economy.
- Welcoming refugees includes education recognition and ensuring that educated and talented people are able to work in their given fields. There is a lot of talent lost when people who are trained as doctors, or other highly skilled professions, end up working in transportation or other survival jobs.
- There needs to be more focus on shared migration narratives and the normalization of migration. In Canada, we all have immigrant or refugee backgrounds if we are not indigenous peoples; this shared migratory narrative needs to be discussed more often. For example, talking with people about their immigrant stories, even if they are generations old, to find more common ground among people of different backgrounds.
- Lack of awareness and understanding about refugees. Why and who are the refugees.
- Shared migration narratives also address the topic of polarization and xenophobia. Participants spoke about the growing xenophobia in resettlement countries and how this is a problem that must be addressed, such as increased hate-crimes. They also spoke about how we can address the “us versus them” mentality both between resettlement communities and refugees, and among different refugee communities within resettlement communities.
- Mentoring programs for newly arrived refugees was discussed as a useful program where learning and knowledge is shared and exchanged among both refugees and host community. For example, the “welcoming projects” run by local councils has supported one of the participants’ community belong to host community as it offered more space and open trusted conversation.

- The use of refugees as community ambassadors can support the education of host community to understand the refugees and sensitise them to welcome refugees.

Human first!

How can we promote more meaningful refugee participation?

- Need participation of refugees themselves. Need to be heard. Should be channels available so could act as monitors.
- Refugees can be part of UNHCR working platform.
- Advocacy with other agencies who work on same goal, people with other connections. media
- Refugee communities should organize themselves. NGOs to help refugees to be more organized
- Refugees should also look at themselves as community. They should be helped to be organized and learn organizing skills
- Refugee issue tends to be political and influence elections. Should be able to influence at political level
- Refugees not just here to get social service support. We are here to participate. Are survivors representing others. If you feel you are in heaven, have to open the doors of heaven to others.
- Opportunities to be created to give refugee communities venues to connect, come together, annual panels for every county / city – to create a feeling of being active citizens.
- In addition to all of the trainings and awareness provided, should be a program for civic education – how to be good citizen, how to participate
- The label “refugee” seems to void attributes that the word “human” implies. Refugees want to serve the country and improve it, but the label devalues their potential.
- Creating refugee-led national advisory bodies with and by refugees with lived experience will bring a voice to the table and influence decision-making. Participants strongly called for refugee participation to be the centre of decision-making. The participants gave range of ideas forward such as creating advisory bodies for UNHCR regional bureaus, ensuring governments have refugee representative on the table, allow access to direct input on inquiries and establishing consultancy groups in all organisations that work with refugees.
- Increasing the support of existing refugee-led initiatives will aid and support their leadership and agency. More specifically, resourcing the development of training, capacity building and refugee-led knowledge-sharing initiatives.
- Create an academic journal in which refugees themselves to collect data and information, publish their research, and report their experiences
- Refugee voice is not always prime and factored into program design, particularly in high level discussions. Participants mention the lack of engagement with politicians at higher level such policy discussions table, advisory opportunities, etc. One participant stated that there is not even a national refugee advisory body that the government can consult on matters related to refugee policy apart from professional services and peak bodies. Direct engagement needs to be valued.
- (In Australia) Community Innovation fund administered by SSI was highlighted as an avenue supporting meaningful refugee participation as the fund is provided directly to refugee groups with an idea who cannot meet the usual funding criteria.