Thank you, Chair.

This statement has been drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

While the current refugee and migrant situation has presented a number of challenges to Europe, we have seen an outpouring of support from European citizens, local authorities and volunteers, which have been crucial to mobilizing resources and refocusing our attention on the human element of forced migration. Despite a rise in nationalist and xenophobic responses in some European States, individual citizens and leaders will continue to mobilize this support in the spirit of solidarity and shared humanity.

As a result of these efforts, some real progress has been made, including an increase in reception capacities and more adequate standards; in the swifter implementation of registration procedures; and in the distribution of winter clothing, food and other essential items.

NGOs welcome the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RRMRP) for Europe, which provides a much-needed framework to guide our efforts to ensure that protection and assistance are offered to those making dangerous journeys throughout Europe. Many NGOs have stepped up their efforts, and now more than 50 national and international NGOs from all sectors are involved in and contributing to the RRMRP.

That said, we still have many remaining challenges for 2016:

We call on the European States to

- ensure that search and rescue operations continue to save lives as a matter of priority, and to ensure that these operations have the adequate capacity and mandate. Protecting human lives, rather than protecting borders, must be the priority for operations in the Mediterranean

- ensure that migration routes and procedures are safe, humane and predictable. European states should immediately cease border closures and other restrictions on refugee movement which systematically increase the vulnerability of people and deny fundamental rights to asylum.
urgently strengthen reception and support systems which ensure the respect of human rights to liberty, security, freedom of movement and human dignity – in line with International and European standards.

To this end, we welcome the development of cross-border information-sharing mechanisms and a tracking system of vulnerable cases, as referenced in the RRMRP, but acknowledge that its implementation to-date has been ad-hoc and insufficient.

The current refugee situation has seen thousands of children make their way into Europe, either with or without their families. For those who travel alone, the risks and challenges are particularly acute. In 2016, a critical challenge will be to strengthen existing child protection systems, in order to fully protect the rights of children on the move.

Furthermore, the detention of children based on their or their parents’ migration status is never in the best interest of the child; it is a clear child rights violation, which constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of migrant children.

There should be an end to discrimination based on nationality to ensure a fair and thorough refugee status determination procedure for all nationalities. Nationality must not be the basis of arbitrary discriminatory decisions.

Greater attention also needs to be paid towards the heightened risk of statelessness faced by the children of Syrian and other refugees resulting from birth registration challenges as well as gender-discriminatory nationality laws that prevent women from passing nationality to their children. In this context, NGOs welcome UNHCR’s #ibelong campaign as a framework to help galvanise efforts to eradicate statelessness. Also welcomed, was the adoption of European Council Conclusions on Statelessness in December, which hopefully will provide impetus to efforts to improve the protection of stateless persons in a migratory context.

In addition to supporting efforts to improve birth registration practices in neighbouring and transit countries at home, we call on the European States to put in place nationality legislation and practices which ensure the right of all children to acquire a nationality.

We need to realize and accept that the current refugee and migrant crisis will not end until States provide safer and more appropriate options for those fleeing war and persecution. The solution is not to add obstacles, danger and uncertainty to the journey of some of the world’s most vulnerable people, but rather to plan appropriately and to assist refugees and host communities across Europe to support themselves, and secure protection for however long it is required.

To this end, we call on European States to improve refugee resettlement and additional legal pathways to admission. We encourage states participating in the 30th March high-level meeting on global responsibility-sharing of the admission of Syrian refugees, to use the opportunity to present increased and realistic pathways for admission based on need.

A more ambitious intra-EU relocation scheme is also needed, in addition to the swift implementation of the existing commitments made by European states.
Finally, the NGO community is concerned by the EU-Turkey deal. The proliferation of restrictive measures at national and EU levels based on a strategy of containment of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece and ultimately in countries neighbouring the EU is extremely alarming. European governments must live up to their fundamental human rights obligations. Without this, they risk undermining the foundations of international refugee and human rights law, which are the very foundation of the freedoms and prosperity that all Europeans enjoy. We strongly encourage that 2016 be a year of international solidarity and a recommitment to our shared human rights values.

A longer version of this statement can be found at www.icvanetwork.org.

Thank you, Chair.