HIGH-LEVEL MEETING
ON GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY SHARING
THROUGH PATHWAYS FOR ADMISSION
OF SYRIAN REFUGEES
30 March 2016

NGO Joint Statement

Thank you Mr. Chair,

In 2016 a number of events will be dedicated to addressing forced displacement in a more comprehensive manner, and today’s event is an important opportunity. Unfortunately today we have been deeply disappointed by the shocking lack of political and moral leadership demonstrated by the majority of Member States. This morning we heard the representatives of major refugee-hosting countries appeal to the rest of the world for increased responsibility-sharing. Unfortunately the pledges made today fall dramatically short of what is needed.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Resettlement and other pathways are critical.

The NGO community has two specific calls.

First, NGOs call on states to commit by the end of 2016 to taking at least 10 percent of the most vulnerable refugees who fled Syria and currently live in the main host countries, through resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes.

Out of the 4.8 million of Syria’s refugees living in just five host countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt), UNHCR reports that at least 10 percent are considered vulnerable and in need of resettlement in a third country. Refugees have fled conflict, humanitarian crisis, human rights violations and abuse. Most have lost family members in the war. Despite host countries’ commendable efforts, refugees face limited resources and options and struggle to survive. Many lack access to education, livelihoods, adequate shelter and health care, among other issues, and are now living below the poverty line.

Second, NGOs call on States to provide alternative or complementary pathways beyond the aforementioned mechanisms. These should prioritize extended family reunification and medical evacuation, but also include humanitarian visas, labour mobility schemes, work visas, student scholarships and private sponsorships, among others. Broadening pathways to employment and education schemes would allow those refugees unable to access resettlement to seek safety and protection without embarking on dangerous and irregular journeys at the mercy of smugglers and traffickers.

States must deliver on these two calls, and they have the capacity to do so. To name a few, Brazil, Canada, and Germany are welcoming thousands of refugees through resettlement and other legal pathways. Other countries, including those that have not traditionally resettled refugees, need to step up to share the responsibility to protect refugees.

Such times call for principled leadership that will entail securing resettlement and other pathways of admissions. It also requires protecting and promoting human rights for the 100% of all those who have fled Syria and are unable to flee. States have an obligation to respect, protect and uphold the human rights of all people on the move. Protection must therefore be at the centre of all policies and actions that address refugee movements. The essence of refugee protection is the autonomous right to flee persecution to seek protection abroad.

Responsibility sharing is critical. We are extremely concerned that States continue to view refugees and migrants as a security concern that must be stopped or a burden that must be avoided. Closing borders, installing barbed wire fences, and succumbing to nationalist and anti-immigrant populist attitudes are
becoming a norm. States are increasingly prioritizing policies aimed to control borders and prevent population movements at the expense of human rights. Yet, evidence is everywhere that such measures are not stopping forced migration. Instead, lack of sufficient legal pathways empower smugglers and push people into increasingly more dangerous migration routes. We need to counter xenophobic rhetoric with messages that recognize the plight of refugees, and the brutality they are fleeing.

**Global partnerships and action are needed.**

Today’s challenge calls for a solution-sharing approach with States, agencies and civil society working together at a global level.

NGOs are glad that the Syria IV conference in London mobilized financial pledges from States. Now those pledges need to be delivered. And they ought not to be seen as a substitute for pledges to admit refugees. In this regard:

- States, UNHCR, and civil society organizations should embrace both **proven and innovative ways** to protect refugees from Syria while continuing international protection of other refugees and persons of concern.
- States must achieve consensus on and put in place **less time-consuming and more expedited procedures** to process refugees for resettlement. Combining refugee status determination (RSD) and resettlement interviews is one of the ways to do this.
- **NGOs play an important role in making all of these pathways work**, from identification to integration of refugees, often in formal partnerships with local as well as national authorities. **Expanded and new partnerships** are needed among all actors at all levels to ensure that these greater numbers of refugees can be submitted for resettlement and other types of admissions.
- For the majority of Syrians who will remain in the neighbouring countries, additional measures are required to **provide more livelihoods, with real access to labour markets and education opportunities**.

**Finally, the international community can and must do more.**

The world’s wealthiest countries, including those in Europe, the Americas, the Middle East and Asia, should commit to significantly increase the current number of places offered to refugees from Syria.

The recent EU-Turkey deal crosses the line into unacceptable expulsion and refoulement to the extent it implies large-scale return between countries that lack adequate systems of asylum law, process and protection. NGOs are dismayed by the one-for-one trading of human beings. The proliferation of restrictive measures at national and EU levels based on strategies of containment of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece and ultimately in countries neighbouring the EU is illegal and extremely alarming.

The response offered across Europe is woefully inadequate. National or regional notions of “capping” the number of people who can claim international protection is incompatible with the Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. It is high time for a common European strategy to ensure open and safe legal channels, not to be limited to resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes. Member States should make use of the variety of instruments at their disposal and harness the outpouring of support that has ensued in response to this perceived crisis—perceived because in actual fact, 1 refugee for every 700 citizens in Europe is entirely manageable compared to for example 1 for every 4 in Lebanon. The crisis can be handled. It was done in the past, and it can be done again.

NGOs, other civil society actors and a huge number of citizens in different regions are already working with governments and local authorities to support refugees arriving in their countries, from assistance and protection throughout their journey and upon arrival to the longer-term endeavour of helping them integrate into local communities.

**In conclusion, committing to resettle and admit the 10% most vulnerable by end of year as well as provide additional alternative pathways beyond that 10% is not only a must, it is firmly within the realm of possibility.**
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

States can and should do better. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.

The good news is that States have a second chance. It is vital that Member States here today go back to their capitals and dig deep to come up with concrete pledges in the lead-up to September.

Because resettlement and other forms of admission save lives and allow people to live in dignity. Together with refugees in need of resettlement, and as co-partners, we encourage States and the international community to assume their responsibilities. The rest of the world is watching closely how countries are treating those most vulnerable people seeking their protection. We urge that 2016 be a year of international solidarity and a recommitment to our shared human rights values.