NGO Joint Statement

Thank you Mr. Chair,

Allow me to start please, as one of the only Syrians taking the floor today, by thanking the generosity of the people in Syria’s neighboring countries who have welcomed us in their communities. I would also like to thank Switzerland as the host country for this conference and as my host country—admitting me as a refugee, providing me with medical care and hopefully offering me an opportunity to pursue my education.

I will now deliver the statement on behalf of the NGO community.

In 2016 a number of events will be dedicated to addressing forced displacement in a more comprehensive manner, and today’s event was 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 in this regard.

*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.

*Second, NGOs call on States to provide alternative or complementary pathways beyond the aforementioned mechanisms.* These should prioritize extended family reunification and medical evacuation, and 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, demonstrating the principled political leadership that is possible. Other countries, including those that have not traditionally resettled refugees, need to step up to share the responsibility to protect refugees.

We are extremely concerned that States continue to view refugees and migrants as a security concern or a burden. 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, they 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 refugees 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 and incompatible with the Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. It is high time for a common European strategy to ensure additional open and safe legal channels. 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.

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. We urge 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 on www.icvanetwork.org.