NGO Joint Statement

Thank you Mr. Chair,

Today is a special day as it marks the fifth anniversary of the Syrian crisis. Over the past five years an average of 50 Syrian families have been uprooted every hour. Currently, there are more than 4.7 million refugees from Syria living in just five neighbouring countries. These refugees have fled conflict, humanitarian crisis and human rights violations and abuses. Most have lost family members in the war. Faced with limited resources and dwindling options, they are struggling to survive in the host countries. In addition to protection concerns, the lack of education, adequate shelter and health care, among many other issues, has meant that a majority are now living below the poverty line.

The NGO community broadly welcomes the High Level meeting on the 30th March for providing the international community with an opportunity to step up its commitment to the Syrian people and show solidarity to Syria’s neighbours. We see it is a way to encourage UN Member States to explore and expand complementary pathways for refugees from Syria and strengthen global responsibility sharing.

Resettlement and other pathways are critical.
Commitment to creating and expanding additional pathways, such as family reunification, protected entry procedures, work visas, student scholarships and private sponsorship, in addition to traditional resettlement programmes, would contribute to global responsibility sharing through providing refugees with increased avenues to protection while alleviating pressure on the countries that host the largest numbers of refugees from Syria.

As the NGO community, we have two specific calls.

First, we call on governments to expand the criteria for admission to countries where refugees can find safety in order to offer solutions to a more generous number of refugees from Syria. This would allow refugees who do not necessarily meet UNHCR’s criteria for resettlement to seek protection without embarking on dangerous and irregular journeys at the mercy of people smugglers and traffickers.

Second, NGOs urge governments to meet and increase pledging targets and safeguard vulnerability-based pathways to protection managed by UNHCR, such as resettlement and humanitarian admissions, which afford the most comprehensive protection. We are calling for states to commit to taking at least 10 percent of Syria’s refugee population currently living in the main host countries, the equivalent of 470,000 refugees, through resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes. This is a pledge which the international community can and must deliver on. While recent financial pledges from Member States at the Syria IV conference in London are welcomed, they ought not to be seen as a substitute for pledges to host refugees from Syria, especially as the conflict enters its 6th year and conditions worsen and hopes of the possibility to return home in the near future fade.
Such times call for principled leadership. Leadership which will not only entail securing resettlement and humanitarian admission for the 10 per cent, but respect, protection and promotion of human rights for all. Indeed, we remind all stakeholders that the respect, protection and promotion of the human rights of refugees and asylum-seekers must be at the centre of any measure which seeks to address and manage refugee movement.

**There is now a need for global partnerships and action**

In the absence of sufficient options for their organized departure, including resettlement and other safe and legal channels, and increasing border closures and erection of fences, an increasing number of refugees turn to people smugglers, traffickers, and dangerous boat and land crossings, desperately searching for protection elsewhere. Thousands have died trying to make this journey, amidst suffering beyond measure.

UNHCR and the international community must embrace both **proven and innovative ways** to provide protection to Syrian refugees while advocating for the international protection of other refugees and persons of concern. These include:

- **new legal channels and mechanisms**, including within **protection-sensitive labor migration schemes**, to widen refugee admissions and protection.
- broadened pathways to **employment and education schemes**, which would allow those refugees not eligible for resettlement to seek safety and protection without embarking on dangerous and irregular journeys.
- as well as additional measures required to ensure hosting countries lift legal restrictions that will facilitate more livelihood and education opportunities
for the majority of Syrians who will remain in the neighboring countries.

In the case of Syria, many want to return to their country and rebuild it. Alternative pathways are an investment in both the individual and the future of Syria – they offer those who are not necessarily the most vulnerable the opportunity to further their skills which they then can bring back with them to Syria one day. Such pathways complement the traditional resettlement places which remain reserved for the most vulnerable.

**How can NGOs contribute?**

There are numerous ways in which NGOs can, and already do, add value to these processes of extending protection to Syrian refugees.

Already, NGOs such as the Danish Refugee Council:

- Refer protection cases, including possible resettlement ones, to UNHCR
- Support states and UNHCR with processing by serving as a surge capacity, including through running resettlement deployment rosters
- Advocate for countries to uphold resettlement programmes as a strong refugee protection instrument and to take more refugees

Allow me to expand on these examples briefly.

- One of the strongest ways in which NGOs can support the efforts of UNHCR is through the referral of protection cases. As an operational agency with a protection mandate extending assistance to Syrian refugees, we are able to refer those beneficiaries who we deem to be particularly vulnerable to UNHCR. Some of these may then subsequently be deemed eligible for resettlement by UNHCR.
- In addition, we can assist states and UNHCR with the processing of refugees by serving as a surge capacity through adding resources. DRC’s recent programme working with the Canadians in resettling over 13,000 thousand Syrian refugees in a ten-month period is a case in point, as is DRC’s new resettlement roster, which deploys resettlement experts to UNHCR. Processing centres exist across the region, it is about providing resources to boost capacity.

- Regarding advocacy, we already encourage states to take their fair share of refugees. We would be able to strengthen these advocacy efforts of NGOs towards countries by having more and better information. We need accurate information detailing, in particular: how many have been resettled and how many have been admitted through other legal channels; as well as what percentage of a country’s pledge has been reached till date.

In addition to these measures, NGOs and other civil society actors across the world are already working with national governments to provide support to those refugees arriving in their countries, from assistance throughout their journey and protection upon arrival, to the longer-term endeavor of helping them integrate into local communities. This is also the case for Syrian refugees: as NGOs we are able to follow them from country of origin through transit to country of destination.

At the core of these different measures is partnerships. Many of the partnerships that need to be forged among actors at all levels to ensure that greater numbers of refugees can effectively be submitted for resettlement and other admissions are in place already – they simply need reinforcing and resourcing. It is important that NGOs are afforded trust by stakeholders so that we deepen and expand our engagement in these existing partnerships.
Looking forward, the international community can and must do more.

The world’s wealthiest countries, including the EU Member States, the US, and the Gulf Cooperation Countries, among others, should first and foremost commit to an ambitious and credible resettlement and humanitarian admission programme, increasing significantly the current number of places offered to refugees from Syria. UN Member States should make use of the full variety of instruments at their disposal to enhance the safe and legal access of refugees to their territories, including the implementation of existing family reunification rules and the use of labor and student mobility schemes. Countries that have not traditionally resettled refugees, in particular, should either consider resettlement or find alternative ways to share the responsibility to protect refugees. As NGOs, we stand ready to support countries in this endeavour. Put simply, resettlement and other forms of admission save lives. Without these lifelines, more refugees will continue to live in fear and be in need of protection, unable to access safe and secure livelihoods or basic services such as housing, health and education.

Now six years into the Syrian conflict, it is important to remember that for many Syrians, the ultimate solution is safe and dignified return. What we see and hear is that Syrians want to go home and rebuild their country. Until that is possible, however, offering resettlement and additional forms of admission to refugees can mean the difference between hope and despair and life and death. All states need to be part of the solution for Syria’s refugees and the meeting on 30 March will provide them with the opportunity to do just that.