

**NGO Statement on General Debate  
Agenda item 3**

Thank you, Chair.

This statement was drafted with a wide range of NGOs and refugee-led networks. Significantly, it is informed by the first Global Summit of Refugees held in June, which brought together refugee-led organizations to consider how the forcibly displaced can contribute to decision-making.

NGOs acknowledge UNHCR's vital work for refugees, IDPs and stateless people and wish to reflect on its Strategic Directions aiming to protect, respond, include, empower and solve.

**Protect**

NGOs support UNHCR objective to be a "strong, principled and persuasive advocate for the rights and needs" of persons of concern. With rising levels of displacement and xenophobia, the need for robust **advocacy and leadership** is considerable. Too often, refugees are denied basic rights, including the right to work and move freely, obtain documents, and access basic services. NGOs commend UNHCR's principled response to situations such as the treatment of refugees in Nauru and those stranded in the Mediterranean. We also call on everyone to more consistently speak out about gross human rights violations.

We continue to call for **reinforcing the existing normative frameworks and institutional practices** to guarantee protection to displaced people. This includes barriers to accessing timely refugee status determination, due process, and other legal pathways to regular status. We therefore endorse UNHCR's decision to prioritize registration and documentation of refugees, the protection of unaccompanied or separated children and measures to protect and empower displaced women and girls. Guaranteeing the principle of *non-refoulement* remains paramount.

NGOs call on UNHCR and States to consider that **lack of access to legal advice and representation** often means that vulnerable people may not understand their rights and cannot access protection. CSOs are willing partners in ensuring legal processes are accessible and understood by those who need it. Furthermore, we remind that the **detention** of those seeking protection should be avoided. Detention is never in the best interests of the child.

**Respond**

Because of shortfalls in humanitarian funding, refugees are often struggling to survive. NGOs also acknowledge UNHCR's pledge to reinforce its capacity to respond to emergencies and call on States to make renewed financial commitments. The willingness to **work with partners**, including national and local actors is commendable. UNHCR should also consider how to effectively **involve refugees and host communities in coordination and planning mechanisms** to ensure responses are informed by

affected people. Refugee-led organisations can bring distinct perspectives and capacities that complement NGOs' expertise. Any engagement process must recognize and consider the diversity within refugee populations. Moreover, engaging with affected populations at the onset of an emergency may present challenges but there is significant potential to draw on diaspora or refugee-led networks in early stages.

## **Include**

Refugee-led organisations consider that refugee policies and responses should not be 'needs-based' but 'rights-based'. Separate policies or support systems are usually inefficient and divisive. NGOs thus welcome UNHCR's objective of promoting "the **inclusion of refugees, IDPs and stateless people in mainstream national systems**". States should consider how to better enable access to national systems, while considering barriers to access that stem from the traumatic displacement experience and specific needs of certain groups.

Recognizing that displaced people can contribute their skills to national systems, some call for UNHCR to go beyond showcasing positive contributions to provide **access to employment and other economic opportunities**. There are teachers, doctors, nurses and engineers among displaced populations whose skills could be applied to refugee responses through employment by UNHCR.

## **Empower**

NGOs acknowledge UNHCR's efforts to ensure **accountability to affected populations**. We commend the establishment of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council and facilitating participation of refugee-led organizations in your Annual Consultations with NGOs.

However, more could be done to create space for displaced populations to organize themselves, plan and act. Indeed, many existing **participatory approaches face the shortcomings** of passive processes, where feedback is sought on already developed programmes. Instead, effective participation is needed, affording affected populations a vote in decision-making processes. As **regional and global refugee-led networks develop**, we call on all stakeholders to consider how to support, enable and collaborate with displaced communities.

## **Solve**

In order to offer real alternatives, discussions about solutions must start by recognizing the need for **refugee participation in decision-making**. In many instances, far-reaching decisions have not been adequately informed by community perspectives or lack consistency and transparency in their application. For example, the cessation of protection for Rwandan and Chin refugees left thousands fearing for their future. Repatriation should offer viable solutions based on legal counselling, community dialogue and information on countries of origin.

Making visible serious **human rights violations** causing forced displacement through different communication strategies is an alternative to challenge impunity in countries of expulsion, combat discrimination and call for solidarity.

Family unity is a top priority for refugees because forced separation exacerbates their anguish and trauma. We therefore support UNHCR's pledge to **promote family reunification** and urge States to

review policies which may keep families apart, to expedite family reunification and augment humanitarian admission programmes.

NGOs reiterate their support to the #Ibelong campaign to **end statelessness by 2024**. Statelessness can be a root cause of displacement and displacement, in turn, can lead to statelessness. The High Level Event planned for 2019 will provide States the opportunity to promote achievements and make pledges on statelessness, as will the Global Compact.

We repeat the need for increased State accessions to Statelessness Conventions. Every country's nationality laws should contain **safeguards to ensure that no child is born stateless** and remove gender, racial, ethnic or religious discriminations.

While calling for more durable solutions and complementary pathways, NGOs caution against a shift toward **complementary protection** that would not provide similar rights as defined in the Refugee Convention and where States' decision-making may be discretionary and lack due process.

Finally, as we await the adoption of the GCR, we repeat that the need for **joint work on protection and durable solutions** has never been greater.

A detailed version of this statement is available on [icvanetwork.org](http://icvanetwork.org)

Thank you.