

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME
STANDING COMMITTEE
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NGO Statement on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways

Dear Chair,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs, representing a diverse set of views. A similar statement, also on behalf of NGOs, was recently delivered at the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement.

Chair, the last time we addressed resettlement at the Standing Committee was in 2017. That year, in our statement¹, NGOs began by applauding the concrete commitments made the previous September, when States had pledged to double annual resettlement quotas to 360,000. Yet, in 2019, we managed to resettle only 17% of that number, just over 63,000 refugees, while the number of refugees in need of resettlement has increased substantially, to nearly 1.5 million in 2020².

Much has happened in the meantime, of course, including the widely celebrated affirmation by the United Nations General Assembly of the Global Compact on Refugees. In this milestone document, the international community agreed to the objective of expanding access to third country solutions, and resettlement and complementary pathways were described as an integral part of arrangements for burden- and responsibility-sharing.

The Compact mandated UNHCR to lead stakeholders in the development of a Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways, a process that ultimately led to the long-term vision of 3 million refugees benefiting from resettlement and complementary pathways to 50 destination countries over the ten-year period ending in 2028. In recent months, stakeholders have contributed to a comprehensive Global Action Plan for the Strategy and have started to report on progress to date. Of course, while we are now halfway through the titular three years of the Strategy, we have just begun the ten-year period encompassed by its vision.

The first Global Refugee Forum was meant to be a rallying point for mustering the commitments needed to achieve that vision. Unfortunately, the pledges related to resettlement and complementary pathways were disappointing. While the total number of related pledges was high, including 52 by States, very few, if any, of these pledges were for new programmes, new financial contributions, or new quotas. In sum, they fall far short of what is needed to achieve the vision of the Three-Year Strategy.

The development of robust and successful complementary pathways programmes is a necessary step if we are to meet those goals. Through the Global Compact on Refugees, States have committed to expanding the number and range of legal pathways available for refugees, through family reunification, education visas, labour mobility, various humanitarian visa programmes, and more.

¹ NGO statement on Resettlement delivered at UNHCR 69th Standing Committee, 28-30 June 2017: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/ngo-scom-statement-resettlement-june-2017>

² UNHCR Projected resettlement global needs 2020, July 2019: <https://www.unhcr.org/5d1384047.pdf>

NGOs are already working with States and UNHCR on many successful programmes, and we are eager to capitalize on these accomplishments to help grow, improve, and advance complementary pathways. Of course, in doing so, we must ensure that programmes maintain appropriate protection safeguards – including age, gender, and diversity sensitivity, including disability – and guarantee access to a true, durable solution.

Critically, the growth of complementary pathways must be in addition to, not at the expense of, resettlement. This is not simply a matter of numbers, though the numbers are important. Additionality also means preserving resettlement as a humanitarian, needs-based programme, free from the qualifications-based selection criteria used to identify candidates for many complementary pathways. Even if the number of refugees accessing complementary pathways is additional to the number benefiting from resettlement, the distinction is meaningless if similar criteria are used for both complementary pathways and resettlement.

Indeed, as articulated in the Three-Year Strategy, resettlement programmes must be responsive to the needs of refugees and have maximum protection impact. Every year, in its Projected Global Resettlement Needs document, UNHCR highlights specific populations in need of resettlement and provides targets for how many of them it intends to submit for resettlement that year. However, the resettlement quotas offered by States do not always reflect the priorities that have been identified, and often appear to be driven by other factors that may have little to do with the needs of refugees. There is a concerning trend of resettlement States prioritizing resettlement for refugees with certain language skills, health status, educational background, employment experience, and other selection criteria. Some States are prioritizing resettlement only from those host countries that are willing to cooperate on other migration policies which may be in conflict with the humanitarian nature of resettlement. Other States may choose to prioritize large populations of easily accessible refugees, emphasizing processing efficiency over refugee protection. The result is that UNHCR may be unable to refer the very individuals it has identified as being most in need of the small and decreasing number of resettlement opportunities.

Speaking of closing space for third country solutions, we are pleased to note that some States have responded flexibly to the recent global coronavirus pandemic. Some urgent cases continue to travel, and other, modified processing has continued as well, though at a reduced pace. The pandemic nevertheless represents a major challenge for resettlement and complementary pathways, at a time when many systems were already struggling. Yet upholding the values of the Global Compact on Refugees is important now more than ever. There should be no distancing from commitments made. All effort must be made to sustain resources throughout the crisis, so that programmes can resume normal processing as quickly as possible, allowing refugees in need of solutions to travel as soon as they are able. This means, among other considerations, ensuring that systems remain in place to respond to the protection needs of particularly vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied and separated children. To take one example, the unaccompanied and separated minors in the Emergency Transit Mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda remain in urgent need of a durable solution, and we urge that they be prioritized for departure as soon as the situation permits.

Critically, States which are not able to use all of their quotas this year must do all that they can to rollover the unused numbers to their quotas for next year. In addition, if stakeholders are willing to think creatively about how to mainstream the many adaptations currently being utilized to sustain processing – like remote interviewing and dossier submissions – it is possible that the system will be more innovative and responsive in the future. In effect, the current crisis could become our opportunity to streamline and modernize a system that has been stifled for many years by increasingly heavy layers of bureaucracy. If, collectively, the international community of resettlement and

complementary pathways stakeholders takes these and other proactive steps, then the net effect of the pandemic may be more like a pause than a setback.

We live in an era in which we see the bonds of multilateralism and international cooperation straining, a trend only amplified by the current global pandemic and its many border closures and other travel restrictions. In the context of resettlement and complementary pathways, these forces manifest themselves in the form of increased and heightened xenophobia, with myriad consequences. We see some States using their resettlement programmes not to provide a durable solution to refugees but to achieve other unrelated or even conflicting policy objectives, sometimes claiming – and thereby abusing – the notion of the ‘strategic use of resettlement.’ We hear, repeatedly, the suggestion that refugees are security threats, despite the demonstrable fact that resettled refugees are the most vetted immigrants in most countries.

Fortunately, we also see numerous reports highlighting that refugees are positive contributors to the communities where they live, and we see communities in more and more countries embracing and promoting this perspective, in the form of a growing number of community sponsorship programmes. There is wide recognition of the value of welcoming refugees, not only for the sake of humanitarianism, but for all the refugees can and do contribute to our societies.

If we wish to see robust and sustainable resettlement and complementary pathways programmes, we must make this point loudly, clearly, and repeatedly, and we must incorporate it into all of the policies, practices, and principles of our global system for third country solutions. While national governments must lead many of these policy changes, to be successful they require the involvement of the entire tripartite community of UNHCR, States, and NGOs, as well as all parts of society, including all levels of government, civil society, local communities, faith communities, and, critically, resettled refugees themselves. By engaging the whole of society in our resettlement and complementary pathways conversations, we complement and amplify our argument that refugees strengthen our societies and have a positive long-term impact on our communities.

Lastly, we would like to close by reaffirming the many pledges made by NGOs at the Forum related to resettlement and complementary pathways. NGOs are integral contributors to nearly all parts of the resettlement and complementary pathways system – from identification and casework in countries of asylum to integration and building welcoming societies in receiving countries – and we remain ready to do our part to grow resettlement, advance complementary pathways, and promote welcoming and inclusive societies.

Thank you, Chair.