

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE  
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### NGO statement on the General Debate

Dear Chair, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

This statement was prepared in close consultation with a wide range of NGOs and reflects their diverse views.

**At a time of unprecedented global forced displacement, self-reliance models need to be the norm, rather than the exception, when planning assistance and response to ongoing crises.**

Dwindling solutions and compounding shocks to refugee and other forcibly displaced populations contribute to protracted dependency on humanitarian aid at a time when global forced displacement is also at a record high. Two and a half years on, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a [disproportionate impact on refugees](#) and other forcibly displaced populations who face: [exclusionary economic policies](#); set-backs in access to education; limited access to health services, work permits and business permits; and restrictions on freedom of movement. In some regions of the world, the pandemic contributed to a [closing of civil society space](#) and reductions in funding, particularly for the national and refugee-led civil society organizations that provide essential, frontline services to refugees. The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine has ripple effects on an already fragile global economy, negatively impacting livelihoods and supply chains, and [straining the resources](#) that support refugees and other displaced populations in other parts of the world. This is occurring at a juncture where myriad challenges, including rising global food insecurity, further exacerbate impacts. Furthermore, the [latest report](#) from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) paints a grim picture, highlighting that the magnitude of existing and anticipated climate change and environmental impacts on populations, including refugees, is much larger than previously acknowledged and is increasingly driving displacement.

In this context, the current dominant model of indefinite cycles of “emergency” humanitarian aid is increasingly obsolete and inadequate. It is time for a decisive emphasis on self-reliance approaches and objectives. This does not mean leaving refugees on their own to manage for themselves, or denying the responsibilities of duty bearers. It means actively designing equitable policies and programs that enable refugees to make voluntary and informed choices that enable them to rebuild their lives, support themselves and their families and contribute to their communities. While most refugees and forcibly displaced populations require humanitarian aid for some period of time (and some might require or desire it indefinitely for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, mental and physical disabilities and health issues), many are ready to transition off aid much sooner than current opportunities allow.

Planning for eventual self-reliance should begin early in the displacement cycle, with tools that support self-reliance for asylum seekers, refugees and other forcibly displaced populations incorporated into humanitarian aid delivery, including with a specific focus on approaches targeting particularly vulnerable populations. Doing so makes it possible to evolve traditional service delivery and “care and maintenance” models and move towards leveraging refugees’ capacities. Moreover, enhancing opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant helps lay the foundation for durable solutions and allows them to weather shocks better; it is also a core objective of the Global Compact on Refugees and is aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. And, most importantly, it's what many refugees tell us they want.

Despite broad support by the international community for the concept of self-reliance in principle, practices have proven insufficient in moving the needle on the issue for several reasons:

First, **the vast majority of existing policies and funds do not promote self-reliance outcomes.**

Restrictive policy environments in many hosting countries continue to deny refugees the right to work and access social services such as education and early childhood interventions. Underlying and contributing to entrenchment of restrictive policies are limitations of absorptive capacity in countries hosting large numbers of refugees, resulting in tensions and strain on host community resources. At the same time, more than \$30 billion dollars is spent on humanitarian assistance annually, the vast majority of which goes to short term, emergency programs that lack an exit and sustainability strategy, fail to engage development actors appropriately and promote siloed programming that does not respond adequately to the intersectional nature of refugee and displaced people’s needs.

Second, **there is limited evidence and data on the types of self-reliance programs that are most effective in specific contexts.** This means that practitioners and policymakers continue to make decisions about refugee and forced displacement response programs and policies with incomplete information and without longitudinal measure of outcomes over time that reflects the needs, experiences and preferences of displaced people.

Third, there are **few leadership opportunities for refugees themselves to share perspectives, learning and best practices on self-reliance** in program and policy discussions. Despite the fact that meaningful refugee engagement and consultation is called out explicitly in the Global Compact on Refugees, adoption of these practices by UNHCR, member states, and NGOs – while emerging – is nascent, particularly when it comes to discussions related to self-reliance, resilience and development cooperation.

In response to these gaps, there are several actions that key stakeholders can take now to promote self-reliance opportunities for displaced populations.

**Elevate champions of self-reliance and replicate effective practices.**

There are many examples of emerging policies and strategies that champion self-reliance opportunities. Initiatives such as the [Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative](#), [Poverty Alleviation Coalition](#), and the [Prospects Partnership](#) serve as conveners and field catalysts, working to shift the forced displacement and refugee response paradigm. Positive examples of [budget planning](#), funding facility [models](#) and host country policies that recognize the multi-dimensional aspects of refugee inclusion should also be held up as examples to inform development of pledges for the upcoming Global Refugee Forum and to direct discussions related to humanitarian-development cooperation at the upcoming High Commissioner's

Dialogue on Protection Challenges in December. The Ukraine crisis also brings to the forefront many examples of [positive host country policies](#) that can expand access for refugees to the labor market and social benefits.

To elevate best practices, we call on UNHCR, member states, donors and civil society to:

- Track and share evidence of the positive impacts of self-reliance approaches with refugee hosting countries, while also continuing to strengthen local economic development and foster economic inclusion by directing adequate resources to refugee hosting areas and engaging local organizations and host communities in response design and implementation. This includes sustained attention towards promoting positive views of refugees and the contributions they make to their host countries and communities, while also acknowledging and considering the root causes of frictions and the valid concerns of host communities and host governments.
- Advocate for and commit to multi-year funding for programs, such as graduation approaches, that expand access to livelihoods opportunities for refugees of all profiles and backgrounds, not only those deemed most likely to succeed, and fund wrap-around support services to address the wide spectrum of barriers to self-reliance.
- Track the impacts of self-reliance funding and policies over time, including via stocktaking that is based on the grounded experience of national and international civil society actors via regional coordination fora, and refugee-led organizations to design and inform pledging processes related to the Global Refugee Forum.

### **Build a robust evidence base.**

There are [limited attempts](#) at rigorous measurement of self-reliance outcomes. This has resulted in the lack of an evidence-base on effective approaches to promote self-reliance in specific contexts. Success of traditional humanitarian efforts tends to be measured according to sector-specific outputs or outcomes over the course of annual project cycles, which are not well aligned with the longer timeframes and multidimensional indicators that are typically needed to observe changes in self-reliance outcomes. Furthermore, self-reliance is often viewed solely in relation to [livelihoods programming](#), which is an essential component, but alone is not sufficient to enable self-reliance.

Greater attention is also needed to incorporate diverse perspectives when defining, measuring or discussing self-reliance. Few existing [resources](#) meaningfully include refugee voices and perspectives beyond including survey data and the majority of the literature on self-reliance originates from a small number of primarily European or North American organizations. This lack of diversity in perspectives impacts how the international community understands and promotes self-reliance.

To build better evidence, we call on UNHCR, member states, donors and civil society to:

- Promote a shared understanding of self-reliance as part of operationalizing the Global Compact on Refugees, including via meaningful participation of refugees, to help set feasible targets and goals for enhancing self-reliance.
- Develop common, multi-sector indicators to chart global progress on self-reliance, diminish duplication of effort, and inform pledging processes around the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. This would expand and enhance the existing GCR indicator framework, bringing in a more holistic perspective. Examples that can inform this process include the [Self-Reliance Index](#) and research undertaken by the Refugee Economies program at the University of Oxford.

- Prioritize funding research that systematically collects refugee perspectives on and definitions of self-reliance to inform conceptual and operational understanding of self-reliance in general, as well as to contribute to better programming design – including dedicated attention to the impacts of self-reliance approaches in the early stages of humanitarian response efforts and localized approaches to durable solutions – in specific contexts and for specific target groups.

**Involve refugees in decisions that impact them to ensure self-reliance approaches are fit for purpose.**

The growing push by UNHCR and other key actors to include refugee perspectives in consultation processes via formal channels, such as the UNHCR Advisory Board and Task Team on the meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless people, also creates a window for new avenues of participation by refugees in decision making and frameworks for self-reliance; however, a [gap still exists](#) between rhetoric and practice. There are [promising new models](#) for refugee participation in decision making processes at various levels and stages of policy and program cycles, in development cooperation discussions and in discussions related to resilience – such as those focused on adaptation and anticipatory action for climate displacement – that should be scaled, and connected to self-reliance discussions. Furthermore, a number of organizations have collaborated on developing [guidelines](#), including for specific groups like children and youth, which provide a useful framework and starting point for discussion. Recognizing there is no one-size-fits-all approach, different tools should be combined to ensure inclusion of a variety of perspectives.

To further expand refugee participation in self-reliance policy making, we call on UNHCR and member states to:

- Include refugees, including adolescents and youth, via creation of national refugee advisory boards, local consultation with refugee-led organizations and networks, and/or inclusion of refugee advisors in all official delegations to meetings of the international refugee system. Ensure participants have access to professional development opportunities – including via partnerships with refugee-led and academic institutions - and funding to ensure they can participate effectively and meaningfully; and, extract [learning and best practices](#) from existing fora such as the Refugee Engagement Forum in Uganda.
- Hold staff – at all levels – accountable to their responsibility to promote meaningful participation approaches, with particular attention to settings where refugees face barriers to engagement and where participation in humanitarian and development response efforts is limited and, promote policies that facilitate these efforts.
- Capitalize on the development of hybrid arrangements emerging from virtual meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic to promote new opportunities for remote engagement in global and regional meetings, especially recognizing the challenges associated with refugee travel to sites like Geneva, such as cost, travel papers and safety concerns.

We as the NGO community stand ready to support these efforts and stand in full support of UNHCR's attention to this issue.

Thank you, chair.