

NGO statement on the oral update on the Executive Committee Conclusion

Dear Chair,

This statement was drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and reflects a diversity of views.

We welcome the opportunity to offer input on this year's Executive Committee (ExCom) Conclusion on Durable Solutions and Complementary Pathways.

As we say nearly every year, the need for a renewed emphasis on solutions has never been greater, with more displaced people and relatively fewer opportunities for solutions. It is increasingly the norm – though one we should not simply accept – for refugee situations to become protracted, placing far too great a burden and responsibility on refugee hosting countries and highlighting that voluntary repatriation is too rare, local integration too elusive, and third country solutions too few. Displacements for refugees often last more than an entire childhood – hindering the overall well-being and rights of refugees with lifelong consequences. Many strong commitments were made to support durable solutions at last year's Global Refugee Forum (GRF), and this year's ExCom Conclusion is a welcome opportunity to sustain that momentum.

Most refugees across the world continue to face overwhelming obstacles when considering a **return** to their home country due to ongoing persecution risks, continued conflicts, and political, social, and environmental instability. Refugee children, women, those with disabilities, and other particularly vulnerable groups face additional challenges in returning home, exposing them to heightened risks of abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Although registered voluntary returns increased slightly between 2021 and 2022, the current statistics have reverted to the low levels of the past decade.

As representatives of NGOs, we stress the importance of linking the pursuit of this specific durable solution to the principle of voluntariness, which is fundamental to ensuring long-term success. We particularly call for this year's ExCom Conclusion to nuance the often-repeated affirmation that voluntary repatriation is 'the preferred durable solution' as this may not reflect the complexity of refugees' aspirations and may undercut political will for other solutions.

Moreover, we hope that the process of drafting this year's ExCom Conclusion will build on and benefit from follow-up work related to the [2022 Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities](#).¹ We look forward to discussing with UNHCR progress around this Evaluation's recommendations, especially updating relevant policies and key operational guidance, in particular the [1996 Voluntary Repatriation Handbook](#)² and the [2004 Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities](#)³, as well as the [2008 Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy on UNHCR's Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Population](#).⁴

¹ [ES/2022/04 Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015–2021 | UNHCR Malaysia](#)

² [Handbook - Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection | Refworld](#)

³ [Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities \(complete handbook\) | UNHCR](#)

⁴ [Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy: UNHCR's Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Populations | UNHCR](#)

Regarding local integration, we need to acknowledge that this is a gradual process involving legal, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions, designed to lead to refugee naturalization. Planning for this specific durable solution is largely hampered by four factors: a lack of political will at the national level, insufficient international funding for host countries, statistical complexities in measuring refugee integration or naturalization, and lack of global and contextualized guidance on how to plan and support local integration. We call on the ExCom Conclusion to tackle these challenges, thus allowing for increased relevance of this durable solution.

Furthermore, refugee access to legal support remains a pressing global concern, with many facing significant barriers to legal recourse. Limited awareness of rights, language barriers, financial constraints, and discriminatory practices often prevent refugees from accessing legal aid and representation. As a result, many refugees are left vulnerable to exploitation, human rights abuses, and denial of basic legal protections. Given that 40% of the forcibly displaced worldwide are children, granting displaced children legal access to key services in their hosting country such as education is essential to ensuring their rights are realized.

Regarding third country solutions, we find ourselves in an auspicious moment as we near the halfway mark of the [Roadmap 2030](#),⁵ with its goal of seeing 3 million refugees access resettlement and other pathways by 2030. Momentum for complementary pathways continues to grow, and resettlement numbers have rebounded from historic lows during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic to nearly 100,000 refugees traveling on [resettlement in 2023](#).⁶ It is critical that we stay on this track in order to reach the goals of the Roadmap 2030. Nonetheless, each of these pathways could be made more impactful through particular guidance in this year's Executive Committee Conclusion:

- **On resettlement**, States should be encouraged to adopt multiyear planning and funding as well as flexible, unallocated quotas to the greatest possible extent; to use remote interviewing and other innovative modalities for efficient processing; and to ensure resettlement programs are truly needs-based and in alignment with UNHCR's resettlement priorities, eliminating restrictive selection criteria.
- **On family reunification**, it is crucial for States to implement all possible policy changes, administrative leniencies, and procedural flexibilities to support exit and entry and ensure effective access to family reunification, especially for unaccompanied and separated children. This is the only rights-based pathway, and it is imperative that barriers such as documentation requirements, limited embassy access, high costs, and other obstacles are addressed to facilitate the reunion of families.
- **And on skills-based pathways**, States should lift the many barriers that refugees face when trying to pursue education visas and labor mobility; should ensure their skills-based pathways offer protection from *refoulement* and afford a clear, accessible path to permanent status; and provide access to the services necessary to support refugees' effective integration in their new communities.

Furthermore, it is important for states to promote the utilization of community sponsorship programs, which can be associated with all of these pathways to enhance integration outcomes and foster community support for refugees and increase existing capacity to do so.

⁵ [Third Country Solutions for Refugees - Roadmap 2030.pdf \(globalcompactrefugees.org\)](#)

⁶ [Resettlement Fact Sheet 2023 | UNHCR](#)

States can also provide emergency protection through strategies such as issuing humanitarian visas and implementing protected entry procedures. These mechanisms not only increase existing capacity but also offer swift access to protection for refugees and their families, serving as crucial tools for their well-being.

Looking to the future, guidance from the Executive Committee on the role of third country solutions in responding to climate change and natural disasters would be useful. This could involve planned relocations, easing registration barriers for refugees escaping disasters in their initial host country, promoting the establishment of additional resettlement quotas in the event of a disaster in a country hosting refugees, and creating new frameworks and pathways to protection for refugees impacted by climate change. An existing example of this, known as humanitarian corridors, initiated by civil society, could be replicated at the governmental level as a good practice.

Lastly on the topic of third country solutions, we have seen many admirable and innovative adaptations in recent years, in particular in response to Afghanistan and Ukraine, including the use of new visa pathways; the rapid creation of additional quotas; strong links to the use of community sponsorship; freedom of movement and refugee choice about where to settle; proactive provisions for family unity; quick access to employment authorization; and more. The best of these should be mainstreamed into future responses, with an eye towards ensuring our durable solutions programs are truly durable and not just temporary measures. Ensuring durability is crucial to prevent States from unintentionally introducing new vulnerabilities into the design of innovative pathways, which could result in returning refugees to the same protracted precarity they initially experienced. Moreover, States must not use alternative, temporary pathways as a rationale for imposing restrictions on the territorial right to seek asylum and other measures that hinder people's ability to seek protection.

Moving on, we would like to emphasize three cross-cutting issues that are critical to the success of all eventual solutions.

First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge the connections between the socio-economic inclusion of refugees in their host communities (including, for example, the inclusion of refugee children in the national educational system) and opportunities for solutions. Self-reliance programs that support refugee access to education and livelihoods opportunities not only allow refugees to contribute meaningfully to the communities in which they are currently living, they help refugees pursue opportunities elsewhere as well. Through train-to-hire and other skills-building initiatives, education and livelihoods programs in host countries can feed directly or indirectly into third country solutions, allowing refugees to develop the experience they need to pursue skills-based pathways such as education visas and labor mobility. Host community members might participate in such programs as well, allowing them to tap into international opportunities and further enhancing social cohesion and local community development.

Second, another critical tool to advance all solutions would be the widespread use of refugee travel documents, issued by host countries and allowing refugees to travel globally, as with a passport. As a form of proof of identity, these documents foster socio-economic inclusion within host countries by improving access to banking and other financial services, such as international money transfers in the form of remittances and local phone-based payment systems. Internationally, refugee travel documents allow refugees to pursue study and work opportunities in countries globally, without fear of *refoulement* when leaving their host country. In this way, refugees are able to capitalize on the skills they develop in their host communities, build on those skills through additional opportunities elsewhere, and ultimately be the agents of their solution.

Finally, meaningful refugee participation and leadership is a third critical cross-cutting foundation to successful solutions.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) underscores the importance of facilitating the inclusion and participation of refugees in decision-making processes. However, the inability of refugee leaders to freely move across borders severely hampers their ability to engage in international forums, hindering their contributions to solutions.

As described above, refugee travel documents are one way to address this issue, but the challenge is not simply one of access. Beyond facilitating refugee travel to international events, the international community must also ensure the meaningful inclusion of refugee voices in these forums, recognizing their expertise and lived experiences as essential contributions to shaping policies and practices related to displacement and statelessness.

It is imperative that concrete steps are taken to address the challenges faced by refugees in exercising their right to free movement. By ensuring their full and meaningful participation in international processes, we can uphold principles of inclusion and equity for displaced people and, thereby, advance durable solutions and complementary pathways with direct input and guidance from those with lived experience of forced displacement.

We stand ready to support and collaborate with UNHCR and governments to put these recommendations into action.

Thank you.