

Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) | June 2020

NGO statement

NGOs call for 'no distancing from commitments' during and following the global pandemic

Preamble

After 25 years of in-person meetings, COVID-19 travel restrictions resulted in this year's ATCR being virtual. This NGO statement – the first to an entirely remote audience – is presented by the Canadian Council for Refugees on behalf of all NGOs involved in the resettlement of refugees. The loss of in-person exchanges means we can include people who might not otherwise have been able to participate and we welcome them.

Commit to Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways

The Projected Global Resettlement Needs for 2021 have once again risen in comparison to the previous year's needs. We therefore call on all parties to renew their commitment through the Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways to enhance opportunities for refugees in acute need of a third-country solution. The pandemic has posed new challenges in the implementation of the Strategy, but we must remember that the values of the Global Compact on Refugees are more relevant than ever during COVID-19 times.

We note with regret that even before the emergence of the pandemic, resettlement commitments were far below what is required to reach the goals articulated in the Three-Year Strategy. We are deeply disappointed by the small number of pledges with new commitments related to resettlement and complementary pathways made at the Global Refugee Forum. More commitment is required from States in particular.

Sustain meaningful refugee participation

On a positive note, we welcome the encouraging progress made towards sustaining meaningful refugee participation at the ATCR as well as in national resettlement programs.

As part of the ATCR process this year, many people with lived experiences as refugees participated in focus groups and gave their input. We invite you to read the reports of the focus groups. Among the messages from those groups that we want to bring to the attention of the UNHCR and States is ongoing concern about the integrity of the resettlement process, and the need for better communications with refugees at all stages of processing. Several of the refugees consulted reported that there are serious allegations of corruption among UNHCR and state actors in some countries. These allegations need to be fully and transparently investigated.

Continue, resume and adapt in COVID-19 times

In these times when so much has been forced to shut down, we welcome the fact that urgent and emergency cases continue to be resettled and that resettlement processing is ongoing.

As travel restrictions are lifted, resettlement for all cases must resume as soon as possible, under precautionary measures. Opening the doors to refugees must be a high priority for governments: we urge States to work with us as NGOs to restart resettlement. This is a time when there is a

need for solidarity and responsibility. States must maintain the commitments made prior to COVID-19: there must be no “distancing” from commitments!

The pandemic also provides opportunities to explore creative and flexible solutions that in some cases may deserve to be made permanent. For example, we are seeing the benefits of more efficient use of technology and investments in enhancing the digital literacy of those who will be or have been resettled.

NGOs stand ready to support efforts and bring considerable resources to the table. But we must acknowledge that some NGOs face dramatic impacts, including financially, and may not survive. Resettlement countries must continue to adequately fund NGOs to ensure continuity and preparedness for when resettlement resumes. If selection and settlement structures disappear, it will be more difficult to ramp up resettlement again when movement is possible.

We cannot ignore the broader impacts of the COVID and post-COVID situation for all refugees. As with all crises, the most vulnerable are the most affected. We must ensure that refugee populations’ rights are respected and that their basic needs are met.

Respond to needs of resettled refugees

It is a fundamental principle that resettlement must be based on the needs of refugees: the focus must always be on the protection needs of individuals. We once again call on States to base their selection decisions on the needs as identified by UNHCR, rather than on other factors.

We also highlight the need to improve quality, transparency and accountability in the resettlement process.

We regret that it remains necessary to remind States that resettlement is a durable solution and therefore must result in permanent status. Resettlement should also never be presented as an alternative to granting asylum, which is the bedrock of States’ responsibilities towards refugees.

Advance complementary pathways

Complementary pathways offer an exciting opportunity to provide durable solutions for a larger number of refugees. However, this will only happen if we adhere to the principle of additionality, and include protection safeguards, without diminishing resettlement targets.

NGOs continue to have concerns about the definition of complementary pathways and we welcome ongoing efforts to clarify terminology and adopt practices that protect the rights of refugees and offer a durable solution. We note the need to take into consideration the diversity of legal and social contexts of each region and country.

Complementary pathways introduce many “non-traditional” actors into the field of refugee admission as they contribute to or implement complementary pathways projects. We welcome them into the ATCR community.

Despite the increased role played by other actors, the role of States remains critical since they issue visas and grant legal status. We encourage States to look carefully at how they can support NGOs and other actors who are working to implement complementary pathways projects.

We note that pilots to date have provided good lessons in implementation and we celebrate the successes, notably in the areas of labour mobility schemes, family reunification and educational programs.

There are some measures States could take easily and quickly to open up complementary pathways – in particular, expanding criteria for family reunification would provide pathways for many.

Promote welcoming and inclusive societies

As the Three-Year Strategy recognizes, building welcoming and inclusive societies is crucial for the success and sustainability of strong resettlement and complementary pathways programs. Refugees must be *partners* in building welcoming and inclusive societies; indeed, we have seen the benefits – both to refugees and to host communities – of including refugees in decision-making processes directly affecting their inclusion.

Continued success in this area will require investments of resources from all levels of government.

We are increasingly recognizing the importance of local communities in this area: it is in all our interests to enhance local capacity to welcome and include refugees.

Across resettlement countries, a common challenge is the lack of affordable housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the global economy poses new challenges for our work. If the unemployment rate continues to be high, we may need to reset expectations of resettled refugees and implement measures to ensure they can financially support themselves and their families.

During this period of COVID-19 when numbers of refugees arriving are smaller, we have an opportunity to focus on improving the policies and programs for the reception and integration of refugees.

Communicate how welcoming refugees makes our societies better

The COVID-19 context also provides an opportunity to reframe communication about our human connections. With the active engagement and participation of refugees, we need to communicate better how we are all connected and how welcoming refugees improves our societies.

We must communicate effectively the message that resettlement and complementary pathways restore human dignity, strengthen host societies, and bring long-term positive economic impacts to our communities.