

Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) 2021

NGO Statement

Bern, 15.6.2021

NGOs call for a rapid resumption and expansion of resettlement and complementary pathways, enhanced refugee participation and for more studies and active debates on climate-induced migration and adequate policies to mitigate its effects.

Preamble

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic obliged the Swiss Chairs and UNHCR to organize the 2021 WGR and ATCR in a virtual format. Despite the associated loss of in-person exchanges, this also created significant benefits such as wider participation, in particular of persons with refugee experience and a reduced carbon footprint of the event. As climate change is increasingly contributing to global displacements, we recognize our responsibility to make the ATCR process more climate-neutral and opting for a hybrid or virtual conference format in the future would allow to maintain a lower carbon footprint beyond the current pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic also forced resettlement and complementary pathways practitioners to resort to alternative ways of operating. Despite some related challenges, these new operational models allowed to continue resettlement processes and they could prove useful in other, non-COVID related contexts as well.

Resumption of resettlement and complementary pathways

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought global resettlement operations almost to a standstill and in 2021, pandemic-related travel restrictions and health measurements continue to impact refugee departures. This is even more regrettable in view of the fact that for 2021, the Projected Global Resettlement Needs are higher than ever before and this trend is likely to continue further.

We encourage all parties to enhance their efforts to resume and speed up resettlement operations. To this end, practitioners should use more widely remote interviewing and processing mechanisms which have successfully been applied by various resettlement countries in country operations. We also suggest to pay attention to populations which have been specifically affected by the pandemic pause on resettlement, and to give priority to helping them catch up as soon as it is possible to resume.

We also encourage further investments in fostering the digital literacy of refugees earmarked for resettlement and post-arrival, providing adequate support to women in particular.

The pandemic has obliged us to review our ways of operating and to explore new working models. We call on States to consider using these innovative tools and solutions also beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic. Remote interviewing and processing and the acceptance of dossier submissions deserve to be applied more systematically, in particular in countries where States have no embassies, where security is challenging and/or where access to refugees is difficult for other reasons. We also encourage States and NGOs to explore the possibility of pooling processing capabilities and resources to bring programmes to scale (such as through the example of the resettlement support facility in Turkey).

We are concerned that several countries fail to prioritize or explicitly exclude refugees and people seeking asylum in vaccination strategies, even as they experience high-infection-risk settings. We call on States to include refugees and other forcibly displaced and stateless people in national vaccine deployment plans to ensure that they have equal access to vaccines. Including refugees in vaccination is key to ending the pandemic. There is also an urgent need to ensure equitable access of refugees and other forcibly displaced and stateless people to other important vaccines.

Some countries have authorized only “essential” travel during the pandemic and allowed exclusively urgent and emergency cases to depart/arrive. We strongly suggest to consider resettlement departures under essential travel and to authorize all refugees earmarked for resettlement to travel, in line with the respective health regulations.

In 2020, most countries were unable to meet their resettlement quotas and this will likely apply to the 2021 quotas as well. We are concerned that this might result in a loss of valuable resettlement places or even a pullback from resettlement States for the longer term. We urge States to add their unfilled quotas to their resettlement programs within the next 1-3 years (2022-2024) so that no valuable resettlement places get lost. Moreover, the current pandemic should not prevent resettlement stakeholders to launch pledges with new commitments related to resettlement and complementary pathways. To ensure more dependability and better planning and to make resettlement programs more resilient to internal and external changes, we call on States to opt for multi-year programs. This would also allow for an ongoing mechanism to carry forward spaces unmet in one year to next year.

Prioritize the needs of vulnerable refugee populations around the world

There is a need to align resettlement quotas and selection criteria with the needs identified by UNHCR, including a greater focus on extremely vulnerable and “forgotten” refugee populations, such as LGBTI refugees, disabled and medical cases, vulnerable women and unaccompanied minors, independent of their current location. States’ resettlement programs should become more diversified, accepting more populations from more locations. The selection process should be more transparent and protection-focused, minimizing any selection criteria that eliminates those that UNHCR has identified as in need of resettlement. This includes criteria based on nationality, religion, family size, health status, etc. More priority should also be given to protracted situations such as the Saharawi refugees (from Western Sahara) and refugees from Yemen. It is essential to preserve the humanitarian nature of resettlement.

Enhance meaningful refugee participation

We are pleased that efforts to strengthen refugee participation at the ATCR have been continued and that the ATCR Refugee Steering Group is playing an active part in planning and organizing the 2021 WGR and ATCR. We hope that refugee participation at the ATCR will be further strengthened and formalized, including by an increasing attendance of refugee representatives from regional and global networks and by further building the capacity of the RSG so that it can gradually play a liaison role between the ATCR community and refugee communities at large. To this end, RSG focal points should be compensated for the time they invest in regular coordination and organizing efforts within the ATCR process.

Moreover, we call on States, UNHCR and NGOs to have more active participation of people with refugee experience within their structures and throughout all their activities. There needs to be meaningful refugee engagement, for example in ensuring refugees contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and practices for resettlement, complementary pathways and integration. In addition, States, UNHCR and NGOs are encouraged to invest in capacity-building initiatives for refugee leaders, including for refugee-led organizations in the Global South and to exchange best practices on enhancing and sustaining meaningful refugee participation in policies and programs. There is also an

ongoing need for better communications with refugees at all stages of processing; with the pandemic, this need has been further exacerbated.

Provide more support to host communities and resettled refugees

In addition to involving refugees more systematically in the planning and implementation of integration processes, it is necessary to strengthen the involvement and capacities of host communities as well so that they can better prepare for delivering strong services and supporting the resettlement and integration of refugees. We encourage States, NGOs and the private sector to enhance their collaboration with host communities. Pre-departure and post-arrival support and information need to be better linked to facilitate the socio-economic integration of resettled refugees. To this end, States and NGOs should partner with the private sector to engage in the integration process, for example through sponsorship, training, employing and mentoring resettled refugees.

Expand complementary pathways

We recognize the potential benefits of complementary pathways for certain refugees, in particular with regards to family unification and also for countries with small or no resettlement programs. To ensure that these pathways result in a durable solution for refugees, protection safeguards needs to be sustained and States need to offer access to permanent status.

We are concerned that in certain countries, beneficiaries of complementary pathways are included within the number of resettlement beneficiaries. Resettlement is a tool for global solidarity and responsibility sharing and as such should be additional to and separate from efforts to share responsibility for asylum-seekers. Therefore, complementary pathways need to be clearly distinguished from resettlement and they need to be perceived as an additional mechanism to resettlement, not as a replacement. Moreover, complementary pathway opportunities need to be adequately mapped, including in non-resettlement countries and the information-sharing with refugees about these options need to be improved. We encourage States to adapt policies that are conducive to the expansion of legal pathways and facilitate family unification, labor mobility and educational schemes. Moreover, we call on UNHCR, States and NGOs to enhance their efforts to provide adequate information, coordination and sharing of good practices with regards to the establishment of safe complementary pathways.

Prepare for the impact of climate change on migration and resettlement

While the COVID-19 pandemic gets a lot of attention, the impact of climate change on migration and resettlement needs to be addressed as well. Forced displacement due to the dramatic effects of climate change is already a reality for millions worldwide and could impact over 200 million people by 2050. The vast majority will most likely end up as internally displaced people or as refugees in neighboring countries and many of those displaced by climate-related natural disasters will not be able to return to their homes but will need to be resettled elsewhere permanently. Yet, to date, climate-induced migrants are falling within what has been defined by some as a 'protection gap'.

We urge comprehensive studies on climate-induced migration and active debate to advance the development of policies, strategies, and programs to meet the resettlement and protection needs of climate displaced persons.