

2019 ANNUAL TRIPARTITE CONSULTATIONS ON RESETTLEMENT

NGO STATEMENT

A statement from the International NGO Community produced by the 2019 ATCR Co-Chair,
The British Refugee Council

As we gather in Geneva for the 25th ATCR meeting, it is right that we celebrate all we have achieved over the years. Since that first meeting, over one million refugees have benefitted from being resettled across the world. Over the last 25 years the ATCR has grown significantly both in terms of the size of the ATCR community, reflected here today, and in its role as an effective framework to further the expansion and quality of resettlement programmes. We place a huge value in the opportunities provided by the ATCR and the close partnership work it facilitates between NGOs, the UNHCR and States to further our common goals.

Resettlement remains an essential protection tool and one of the few durable solutions to both save and improve the lives of refugees. As such, it is absolutely critical that we ensure selection processes focus on vulnerability as the primary, overriding consideration.

Sadly, as is repeated at this meeting year after year, the number of resettlement places needed far exceeds those that are available. Despite 1.4 million refugees being in need of resettlement, only 81,000 resettlement places were made available last year, equating to around 6% of the need. It is against this backdrop that we are deeply concerned that the number of resettlement departures last year remains significantly lower than those of just three years ago. It is critical that we work together to reverse this trend to enable us to deliver significant growth in the number of departures year on year.

We welcome the significant progress made since the previous ATCR, leading to the signing of the Global Compact on Refugees in December 2018 and the opportunities afforded by the Global Refugee Forum later this year. The NGO community looks forward to working with States to support the practical implementation of the commitments made in the GCR. We call on all actors to embrace the opportunities presented by the Global Refugee Forum, now is the time for us to be bold and ambitious if we are to realise the goals set out in the GCR. We call on our Governments to show political leadership on this issue on both domestic and international stages, highlighting that refugee protection is a responsibility for all countries. The NGO community has a key role to play to support the implementation of the GCR and we stand ready to work in partnership with States, the UNHCR and new partners to realise its goals.

NGOs are keen to explore opportunities to contribute to the development of complementary pathways, though we stress that these must always be truly 'complementary' and in addition to places offered through resettlement. It is also important to stress the need for complimentary pathways to offer permanent and sustainable solutions for refugees rather than a temporary right to reside. If we are to realise the potential of complimentary pathways then we also need to significantly increase the accessibility of existing complementary pathways and reduce the many practical barriers faced by refugees. We urge states to improve the information made available to refugees to enable them to fully explore complementary pathways as a possible option.

We note the positive developments from Canada, of piloting complimentary pathways across a range of areas including labour mobility and training. We hope that these prove successful and can be scaled up and replicated elsewhere.

We are acutely aware of the importance of family unity in this respect and urge states to ensure family reunification policies and processes are both accessible and responsive to the needs of refugees. We need to create a range of complementary pathways that are responsive and accessible to refugee family units. From a humanitarian perspective, looking for whole family solutions when creating complementary pathways would avoid the high human cost of separating families and subsequent family reunifications.

Protracted family separation has a devastating impact on both individuals and family units, undermining our collective work to promote successful integration.

High quality integration programmes that support refugees to rebuild their lives are absolutely essential for achieving successful integration outcomes. Specialist person-centred support must be made available to all refugees regardless of their route of admission, including supporting people's mental as well as physical well-being. Our working group meeting in Sheffield highlighted the importance of integration being something that is done with, not to, communities, and many different actors need to work together to build welcoming villages, towns and cities.

The increase in both the number of and scale of protracted refugee situations is a major concern to us. The conflict in Syria is now into its ninth year, resulting in an increase in the numbers of refugees in need of resettlement. Alongside our concerns for Syrians, the resettlement needs of refugees in protracted situations in other regions need to be urgently addressed. The escalating situation in Venezuela requires a rapid response from the international community in order to orchestrate durable solutions.

We are concerned to see the political uncertainties in receiving countries causing some resettlement programmes to be reduced in size or discontinued. We urge states to make long-term commitments to resettlement programmes to ensure skills and expertise within resettlement programmes are able to be maintained and that the programmes are robust to political uncertainty.

It is deeply disappointing to see some states backing away from their commitments at a time when the need for resettlement places is greater than ever. We note the long history of the United States in welcoming refugees and the continued strength of support for resettlement within communities across much of the United States. As such, we urge the US administration to return refugee admissions to historic norms.

We are troubled at the rise of xenophobia and nationalism and the detrimental effect this can have on the experiences of resettled refugees. It is our shared responsibility to build inclusive societies where such views are challenged and condemned, and for political leaders to set a tone of togetherness rather than division.

The failure of the EU to adopt a Union Resettlement Framework (URF) is unfortunate. However, for the URF to promote good practice and act as a tool to accelerate protection, it must be based on the concept of resettlement as a humanitarian tool which uses the UNHCR's principles, including the resettlement criteria, as a basis. Any attempts by Member States to use the potential re-opening of negotiations on the URF to introduce the usage of resettlement for migration management, or to reference integration potential as grounds for exclusion, would seriously undermine the humanitarian nature of resettlement.

It is also imperative for states to ensure that commitments to resettlement do not come at a cost of decreased access to asylum for people arriving at the border. The right to asylum must be protected.

We are absolutely delighted to see the significant increase in the number of refugees participating at this year's ATCR. States, NGOs and the UNHCR each have a responsibility to ensure refugees, the real 'experts by experience' are able to enjoy an equal place at the table and contribute to the discussions and decision-making at the international, national and local levels and at all stages of the development, implementation and evaluation of resettlement programmes. We are delighted to see the first ever 'refugee statement' on the agenda this year and hope that this will become embedded into the very fabric of the ATCR in the future. It is only through listening and engaging with those we seek to support that we can ever be assured that our programmes reflect their needs and aspirations. If we are to achieve our aim of greater inclusion we each need to challenge our existing structures to create an environment that facilitates and supports meaningful engagement. This includes drawing on the unique insight and expertise of refugee-led community organisations who can be key facilitators of integration but are all too often overlooked and under-resourced. We are excited and enthused by the opportunity to explore how to embed meaningful refugee participation in both the culture of ATCR and in our respective national resettlement programme plans.

We very much look forward to the discussions over the next two days, as we work together in the spirit of the ATCR to further our shared vision of ensuring greater numbers of people are able to benefit from the life-changing opportunities offered through high quality resettlement programme.

#ATCR2019

The British Refugee Council would like to thank UNHCR and the UK Government for their cooperation and support over the year. We are delighted that Canadian Council for Refugees will be taking over as the next NGO Focal Point. We look forward to continued partnership work with states, UNHCR and NGOs to further expand and enhance resettlement opportunities for some of the world's most vulnerable refugees.