

NGO Statement on Oral Update on ExCom Conclusion

Dear Chair,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs, with the objective of reflecting the diversity of views and commonality of purpose within the NGO community.

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.

On voluntary repatriation, most refugees 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. 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.

On local integration, we need to acknowledge that this is a gradual, two-way 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. As a result, many refugees are left vulnerable to exploitation, human rights abuses, and denial of basic legal protections.

On resettlement, NGOs commend those States that ensure their resettlement programs are truly protection-focused and align with UNHCR's resettlement priorities, we ask all States to eliminate restrictive selection criteria. We call on States to maintain and expand resettlement programs, noting that resettlement is and should always remain a central protection tool and lifeline for refugees in greatest need. We ask for new States to establish resettlement programs.

To expand resettlement and maintain its protection focus, states must adopt multi-year planning and funding as well as flexible, unallocated quotas to the greatest possible extent, using remote interviewing and other innovative modalities for efficient processing.

On complementary pathways, they should be seen as an addition to, not a replacement of resettlement. These pathways provide alternative routes to safety and stability for additional refugees, amplifying the essential role of resettlement that offers protection to the most vulnerable. Complementary pathways should also be responsive to the international protection needs of refugees and support their access to basic rights and services. The international community should maintain its focus on the most fundamental right of refugees, which is the right to protection, and the positive impact of family and social stability.

Complementary pathways should not only be possibilities outlined in domestic legislation but must be granted in practice when the conditions are met. By facilitating access to these pathways, we not only enhance the prospects for individual refugees along potential avenues to achieve durable solutions, but destination countries also benefit from education, labor and family reunification by enhancing social stability, economic growth, and

workforce diversity. This leads to a more dynamic and resilient society, with individuals better equipped to contribute to the local economy and community development.

On family reunification, it is a rights-based pathway recognising that family unity is a right for all. 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. Additionally, policies that prioritize family reunification are crucial as they enable refugees to rebuild their support networks and stability, which further enhances their ability to integrate and contribute to their host communities. Facilitating family reunification not only provides emotional and social support to refugees but also strengthens the socio-economic fabric of both refugee and host communities.

NGOs have the following recommendations to advance complementary pathways:

First, greater investment in host country contexts can unlock opportunities. It is important to recognize the links between the socio-economic inclusion of refugees in their host communities and opportunities for complementary pathways, and to make this link explicit in policy and programming. Self-reliance programs that support refugee access to education and livelihood 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. Train-to-hire and other skills-building initiatives, education and livelihoods programs in host countries can feed directly or indirectly into complementary pathways, allowing refugees to develop the experience they need to pursue skills-based pathways such as education visas and labor mobility. Host community members may participate in such programs as well, allowing them to tap into international opportunities and further enhancing local community development.

There are excellent opportunities for greater collaboration with partners working on self-reliance activities in host countries. Leveraging expertise and cultivating strong, trust-based and equitable partnerships with local civil society organisations involved in supporting forcibly displaced populations can generate additional pathways to safety. It is important to include development actors, and the private sector both as employers and advocates, in developing self-reliance activities. Furthermore, it is crucial to provide adequate funding to establish self-sustaining pathways, including by supporting NGOs engaged in these strategies.

Second, education is a fundamental human right and a critical component in the development and integration of refugees. Providing accessible and quality education to refugees not only empowers individuals but also contributes to the socio-economic development of host communities. Through education and skilling, we can reduce barriers such as language, cultural, financial constraints, and lack of recognition of previous qualifications. Hybrid models can also be adopted that combine education, employment, and apprenticeships, that can enhance the employability of refugees and facilitate their economic integration. We call on States and donors to continuously fund education of refugee children and youth in first asylum countries and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for refugees, including vocational and digital competence training programs. These can also support access to complementary pathways.

Third, we recognize the importance of the private sector in efforts to expand access to labor mobility pathways for refugees. By engaging with governments and private companies beyond the traditional resettlement countries and exposing them to the untapped potential amongst especially younger refugee populations, we can build business cases for global market demand and provide holistic solutions. Private companies can offer financial assistance to refugees, facilitating the reunification of families by covering relocation and initial settlement expenses. This dual approach not only addresses economic barriers but also promotes social cohesion and stability within communities.

Fourth, while language proficiency is undoubtedly important for successful integration, we recognize the need for flexible and inclusive policies that consider the diverse linguistic backgrounds of refugees. By advocating for more accessible language testing options, we aim to ensure that language requirements do not serve as barriers.

NGOs would like to draw attention to the following cross cutting issues for durable solutions and complementary pathways:

- Gender mainstreaming and equity are essential for ensuring that all refugees, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities and rights. Special attention must be given to addressing the unique challenges faced by women and girls as well as persons at heightened protection risks. This can be achieved by increasingly incorporating gender perspectives in all policies, programs, and practices. Data collection and research that will explore intersectionality of age, gender, diversity, and disabilities are encouraged, to inform inclusive programming tailored to diverse needs, and to influence the accessibility of and inclusion within programs.
- Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) should be prioritized as it is crucial for the well-being and resilience of refugees. MHPSS community-based and outreach approaches need to be incorporated into health services to reach refugee communities and build on community coping strategies and resources. MHPSS services need to tackle integration and social cohesion components by building and tailoring non-specialized services that address needs of both refugees and host communities, assessing innovative and community-led initiatives to promote integration and prevent discrimination and stigma. Existing barriers to accessing MHPSS should also be addressed.
- The multi-sector collaboration approach that unites line sectors towards achieving durable solutions, such as Education in Emergencies, Protection and Livelihoods, are a commendable establishment that aligns resources, ideas, and advocacy initiatives, all serving the best interest of refugees, along all trajectories of displacement. Cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination facilitates robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness and impact and ensures accountability to stakeholders. Meanwhile coordinated data collection, evidence and information sharing helps us understand and continuously adapt to global trends and informs joint advocacy efforts.
- We have seen many admirable and innovative adaptations in recent responses to people fleeing different crises, particularly displacement from Afghanistan and Ukraine. These include: the use of new visa pathways; rapid creation of additional quotas; use of community sponsorship; freedom of movement and refugee choice about where to settle; proactive provisions for family unity; and quick access to employment authorisation. However, these policy responses have not been equitably applied – including more recently for those displaced from Sudan, Myanmar and Palestine. We call on states to take the best innovations and adaptations in creating safe pathways and develop them into future responses to crises. With regards to emerging complementary pathways in many countries, we call for equitable access regardless of nationality, and for access to be more widely available to refugees in protracted situations.

Finally, meaningful refugee participation and leadership is a 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. The international community must 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. 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 emphasize the importance of involving refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in decision-making processes and program implementation. RLOs play a crucial role in representing the voices and perspectives of refugees, ensuring their meaningful participation in all aspects of our work. In particular, RLOs are well-placed to share information within their communities about opportunities for complementary pathways and to provide supports to refugees navigating them.

In conclusion, as representatives of NGOs committed to advancing durable solutions, we urge States to consider the comprehensive framework outlined in this statement.

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

Thank you.