



# RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ACCESS TO SERVICES WORKING GROUP

MAY 2018





# Report and Recommendations of the Access to Services Working Group

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## Introduction

Global displacement is currently at record levels, with 65.6 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, including 22.5 million refugees.<sup>1</sup> The global distribution of the world's refugee population is highly uneven. Overall, 84% of the global refugee population resides in low- and middle-income countries, while the six wealthiest countries, which represent 50% of the world's economy, host less than 9% of the total.<sup>2</sup> Refugees and the communities and countries that host them are the groups most affected by forced displacement across borders, and thus, their experiences and perspectives should play a leading role in shaping the policy and programmes designed to support them. Currently, however, these groups are systematically under-represented at all levels of policy-making and programme design. For instance, only 4% of the organisations<sup>3</sup> that participated in the Summit on Refugees and Migrants in New York in September 2016 were from the top five countries hosting refugees.<sup>4</sup>

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)<sup>5</sup> is a response to the need for the international community to come together and find ways to equitably share responsibility for meeting refugees' needs. It offers an opportunity to create a more comprehensive approach to equitably respond to large-scale refugee movements and protracted situations. It also represents a chance to fundamentally strengthen the international refugee regime and the mechanisms through which refugees, host communities and their organisations participate in the response, including in formulating and implementing policies, programmes, and actions.

In response to this opportunity, a group of refugee-led organisations, national civil society organisations from some of the world's major refugee-hosting countries<sup>6</sup>, and allies from around the world came together in late 2017 to build a joint platform to provide input to the GCR and other refugee-related policy-making processes. The first step was a participatory and inclusive international civil society consultation and policy development process that has engaged nearly 500 organisations and academics from 47 countries.<sup>7</sup> From among these participants, the following five working groups were formed to develop concrete policy recommendations: Durable Solutions and Responsibility Sharing, Women and Displacement, Legal Rights and Asylum, Access to Services, and Representation and Participation.

This paper puts forward a set of initial policy recommendations drafted by the Access to Services Working Group. It reflects inputs from 27 member organisations and academics, including 10 refugee-led and 17 national organisations, from Uganda, Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, Singapore, Sudan, Germany, Nigeria, Macedonia, the UK, and the



US. These recommendations will be discussed and further developed at the International Refugee Congress to be held in May 2018.<sup>8</sup>

## Background

The need to ensure refugees' access to public services<sup>9</sup> such as social security, education and housing, as well as to labour markets, is a point of consensus within the international community. This is crucial for fulfilling their basic rights, ensuring life with dignity and enabling them to integrate effectively into host communities. Nevertheless, access to these services is often limited, unavailable or denied. Among other factors, the quality and availability of service delivery is impacted by a refugee protection system that, by and large, relies on a relatively small number of lower- and middle-income countries to host large refugee populations, often for many years. The uneven distribution of responsibility for refugee protection among states further strains the already limited capacity of many states to deliver reliable, predictable, accessible, and quality services. This manifests in many ways, including inadequate and unpredictable international funding for humanitarian and development programmes, as well as a lack of access to longer-term solutions for refugees. In September 2017, the budget of the United Nations Refugee High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was underfunded by 46%, which negatively affected its ability to provide basic assistance to refugees across many different host countries.<sup>10</sup>

Policy changes are needed, both to ensure a more equitable division of responsibility between states as well as to improve access to services for refugees in the immediate and longer term. Both the *nature* of services in question as well as the *structure* of policy implementation should be examined and undertaken on a collaborative basis by national governments of refugee-hosting and donor countries; international and regional institutions; and civil society organisations, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, and academia.

## Justification

Given the protracted nature of many refugee situations worldwide and funding gaps across the sector, policy changes should target a more equitable division of responsibility between states as well as measures to improve access to services for refugees in the immediate and longer-term. Policy commitments such as the GCR must galvanise a fundamental shift in the way refugee influxes are managed in order to improve the well-being of refugees alongside the well-being of host communities. Reassessing which actors bear responsibility and how this responsibility can be discharged is integral to this process, as is rethinking how states and relevant stakeholders fulfil basic needs. There is also a need to radically reconsider which actors are included when policies are made. First responders as well as actors providing ongoing support to refugees and host communities, including local civil society and refugee-led organisations, can play a key role in reassessing existing operations and designing new mechanisms. Their expertise, however, is generally underutilised, and policy debates are usually driven by the goals and interests of traditional donor countries and international institutions.





The importance of education for refugee girls and boys cannot be overstated. Education plays an essential role in promoting social cohesion and giving children a vital pathway to integration and social and economic prosperity. However refugee children face many challenges in accessing educational opportunities. Some are constantly on the move; others lack legal status; while others, unable to retrieve previous educational records or certify their level of educational achievement, are barred from entering schools. Schools in many host countries are already overcrowded and do not have the capacity to accommodate a large influx of refugee students. Regardless of schools' physical capacities, language barriers can pose another constraint to educating refugee children. Refugee children who are unable to pursue an education face the risk of cognitive and emotional underdevelopment. The effects on their immediate and long-term economic and social well-being may be devastating and leave them vulnerable to exploitation.

Access to emergency and long-term healthcare is another crucial need and basic right. In the majority of refugee-hosting countries, healthcare systems are inadequate and under-resourced, meaning that safe and accessible healthcare is a challenge for both citizens and non-citizens alike. Refugees often find themselves without access to national insurance and healthcare systems. When there is access, the costs of services are often prohibitive. Formal psychological support is also rare in many refugee-hosting countries, yet it remains a strong need for refugees dealing with the trauma of conflict and the struggles of integration.

Refugees are often under pressure to secure a livelihood and achieve self-sufficiency without access to international humanitarian assistance or support from host countries. Such conditions, partly driven by budgetary constraints and investment choices, are unsustainable for those refugees who are children, home-bound caregivers, elderly, or living with disabilities. In some countries, refugees lack the right to work and freedom of movement, which impedes their ability to secure legal employment and/or pursue work opportunities where they are available. The cost of obtaining a work permit can be prohibitive in many instances, and waiting periods can be long. The chances of securing gainful employment are diminished by high unemployment rates in many refugee-hosting countries, which affect refugees and host communities alike. In some instances, those who do pursue employment lack the skills and competencies to match the labour-market demands, and often find the wages offered inadequate to achieve a sustainable livelihood. Refugee entrepreneurs and small business owners face particular challenges in accessing capital and connecting to national and international markets. Therefore, many refugees are among the “working poor,” those who struggle to achieve self-sufficiency for themselves and their families even though they are employed.



## Recommendations

The Access to Services Working Group identifies the following priorities for policy development and action planning. As follow-up to the International Refugee Congress in Istanbul, this working group will collaborate with experts and officials to create the necessary policies and instruments for their implementation.

### 1. Achieve overall improvement in access to and delivery of services

- a. Key actors should commit to achieving clear, measurable, and time-bound results and work to respond in a more coordinated and comprehensive manner. National governments should synchronise their social and economic policies to ensure a series of harmonised, mutually reinforcing policies that can improve refugees and host communities' access to basic services, employment, vocational skills training, and education.
- b. National governments, civil society, and international organisations should develop and use comprehensive assessment tools to collect concrete data about the exact needs and priorities concerning refugees, while remaining consistent with privacy principles. Data could include refugees' levels of education or former occupations, market assessments, and recommendations for improving access to services.
- c. National governments, civil society, and international organisations should employ refugees in assistance efforts, both in the emergency phase and longer-term response, such as staffing schools and health facilities with trained professionals who are able to speak refugees' languages.
- d. Corresponding to the above point, national governments, civil society, and international organisations should increase the resourcing and availability of translation services – including through use of technology – at hospitals, schools, and other service points to prevent language from becoming a persistent barrier that significantly hinders refugees' access to social services. These services should be provided free of charge to increase refugees' awareness of and access to social services.
- e. In the immediate displacement phase, actors engaged in emergency response should focus on food security and access to essential needs at the level and in a form that is necessary and appropriate within the context of each host country and the availability of resources.
- f. National governments and international institutions should recognise that access to these essential services is the foundation for long-term development and well-being, and should not be rolled back after the emergency phase of a crisis.

### 2. Improve access to education services

- a. National governments hosting refugees should remain responsible for determining educational goals and outcomes for refugee girls and boys, as they are in the strongest position to understand the needs of children in their



regions. Achieving national standards and outcomes should be the goal of all organisations and actors working to educate displaced boys and girls; national standards should not be jeopardised by competing and parallel education processes.

- b. NGOs and other civil society actors should focus their interventions on informal learning approaches and curricula, given fluctuations in their financial resources and varying human resource capacities. Informal learning programmes should not compete with but should complement the formal education system, and should be flexible enough to absorb former child labourers, school dropouts, and those who have missed years of schooling. Accelerated learning programmes should help children fill gaps needed to enter public schools.
- c. National governments, NGOs, and other civil society organisations should offer school administrators and teachers opportunities to take part in exchanges and dialogues, to facilitate increased understanding of refugees' social and cultural backgrounds and experiences. This will enable education professionals to contribute to social cohesion among children from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, children of all ages should participate in awareness-raising classes to encourage understanding of and respect for difference. Special attention should be paid to the specific vulnerabilities of refugee girls.
- d. The international community should support national governments to expand absorption capacity in national education systems, including by building new schools, expanding classrooms, extending school hours, and increasing teaching staff as appropriate. Such support must extend beyond the provision of humanitarian and development assistance to include favourable trade conditions and other measures to expand the fiscal space available to national governments. Additionally, states should build into their budgets and financial plans the cost of transportation, school lunches, uniforms, textbooks, and school supplies. Opportunities to hire refugee teachers could be explored, as they are particularly well-placed to address potential language and cultural barriers. This would not only create employment opportunities for refugees, but would also help to address teacher shortages in some host countries, such as Jordan.
- e. Flexible admission criteria should be considered by national governments for displaced students who lack key documents. A new exam system should be introduced for admission to higher education institutions. National governments should implement alternative methods, such as tailored tests, to accommodate those children whose education has been interrupted or who are unable to retrieve previous school records.
- f. National governments in the global North and South should create pathways to increase refugee access to tertiary education and vocational training. Special visas should be offered together with professional development opportunities beyond the borders of the first country of asylum. These governments should



also encourage their own higher education institutions to develop blended learning (i.e. online and on-site) diploma programmes through partnerships.

### **3. Improve access to health services**

- a. International institutions and donors should support national governments to strengthen and expand local healthcare systems and eliminate user fees, in order to increase access to healthcare for both refugees and host communities. Such support must extend beyond the provision of humanitarian and development assistance to include measures such as concessional trade arrangements and other steps to expand the fiscal space available to national governments. Such measures will enable national governments to increase public financing of healthcare to a minimum of 5% of gross domestic product (GDP), eliminate out-of-pocket payments for essential drugs and services, and achieve greater technical and allocative efficiency in health spending.
- b. National governments should develop well-considered financial plans to establish health care programmes that provide comprehensive health services, treatment for chronic diseases, social and disability services, and preventive medicine to all residents, including refugees. Such plans must be systematically and predictably supported by the international community through the types of measures outlined above. Currently overlooked in many contexts are palliative care and reproductive health and rights. Holistic and equitable approaches are needed that recognise the impact of social identity such as gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion on healthcare delivery.
- c. National governments and international organisations should strengthen systems and support the provision of psychological and social care to refugees by training and accrediting locally trained therapists and counsellors. Accredited refugee therapists and counsellors are especially critical, as their experience and language puts them in a unique position to offer the specific support needed by refugees.
- d. National governments, civil society organisations, and international organisations should strengthen response systems for victims of gender-based violence. Raising awareness among the refugee community about protection services and legal measures and assistance is critical, particularly for women, children, and elderly people.
- e. National governments and international donors and organisations should address structural barriers to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls that may impede their access to services. These include discriminatory laws and policies, gender stereotypes, negative social norms and attitudes, harmful practices, and women's lack of autonomy and decision-making power over their health and rights, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.



#### **4. Improve refugees' livelihoods opportunities**

- a. The international community should implement favourable international trade terms for major refugee hosting-country governments in order to support inclusive economic growth that increases employment opportunities for refugees and host communities alike. Investments in urban and rural infrastructure of host countries should be incentivised, on fair terms and in the public interest, to facilitate domestic and international trade.
- b. The international community should work together with national governments to explore ways in which to expand and enhance social protection systems that can incorporate refugees who are unable to find work.
- c. National governments should ensure protection of refugee workers against exploitation and abuse by enabling membership to existing labour unions or the formation of new organisations or unions; expanding access to work permits; providing sensitisation training to employers; recognising certifications from countries of origin; and opening channels for adjudication regarding work conditions and treatment of employees. International labour standards should be respected and enforced at all times.
- d. National and international policy-makers should create pathways for refugees to quickly become re-certified in existing skills and professions so that they can continue to practice their professions in their host country. National governments should expand authorised job categories for skilled and educated refugees. Other states should create legal pathways for refugees to pursue decent employment opportunities outside of their first country of asylum.
- e. National governments, with the support of international institutions, should undertake comprehensive market assessments for skill-development training for refugees. Training should be designed for underserved/underperforming sectors of the economy and should only be offered based on real market conditions in the host country.
- f. National governments, national and international financial institutions, and civil society organisations should explore and implement measures to facilitate access to financial services and investment opportunities to enable refugees to expand ventures, open businesses, and create employment opportunities in their communities. This could include alternative funding mechanisms, such as cooperative funds, to provide small grants to entrepreneurs.



## Acknowledgements

The Access to Services Working Group was led by Basmeh and Zeitooneh, Karam Foundation and Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID). The members of the working group were: Amal Alliance; Asil Foundation; Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre; Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV); Education Reform Initiative (ERG); El Ruhama for Development and Humanitarian Aid; Foundation for Rural Development; HAMI; IHH; Journalists for Human Rights; Omran Centre for Strategic Studies; Open Universities for Refugees; MAPs; Migration Hub; Refugee and Asylum Seekers Indonesia (RAIC); Rizk Institute; Society on Viral Hepatitis; Support to Life; Syrian Writers and Authors Forum and Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organisations (UOSSM). Evan Easton Calabria, Saime Özçürümez, Leah Zamore and Nasser Yassin provided expert support to the formulation of this paper. The authors would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Oxfam and the Asylum and Migration Research Centre (IGAM) for the support provided to the process.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> UNCHR 'Figures at a Glance', available at <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2017) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Based on the published list of NGOs who have been approved to participate in the High-Level Meeting, available at: [https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/20160823173049\\_0.pdf](https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/20160823173049_0.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> The top five refugee-hosting countries based on the total number of refugees hosted are: Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Uganda. UNHCR (2017), op. cit.
- <sup>5</sup> The GCR is one of the two new global compacts aimed at improving the way in which the international community responds to large movements of refugees and migrants, as well as protracted refugee situations. The New York Declaration of 2016 calls for development in response to the need for the international community to come together and agree upon ways to share responsibility in responding to large-scale displacement and help countries most affected. UNHCR defines it as "an agreement that is not legally binding but that captures, by consensus, political commitment both to principles and to concrete action by Member States.", available at <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/new-york-declaration-for-refugees-and-migrants.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> Some of the world's major refugee-hosting countries, based on the total number of refugees hosted, include Turkey, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iran, Uganda, Ethiopia, Jordan, Germany, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and Kenya. UNHCR (2017), op. cit.
- <sup>7</sup> International Refugee Congress 2018: Consultation Report (March 2018), available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ADCDeJyIfiETtL\\_7Gh2AKw\\_IM5nc1pTa/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ADCDeJyIfiETtL_7Gh2AKw_IM5nc1pTa/view).
- <sup>8</sup> 10-11 May 2018, Istanbul, Turkey.
- <sup>9</sup> These services might include, but are not limited to, access to education, jobs and legal employment opportunities, self-reliance opportunities, health services, food and nutrition, water and sanitation, humanitarian assistance, housing, and natural resources.
- <sup>10</sup> UNHCR (2017) *Highlighted Underfunding Situations in 2017*, available at <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Brochure%20on%20Underfunded%20Situations%20in%202017%20-%20October%202017.pdf>.





