

The internationalisation of resettlement: lessons from Syria and Bhutan

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There is clearly political will to engage more on refugee issues through resettlement. A defining feature of this effort is its internationalisation.

Broadly speaking, the internationalisation of resettlement means enhanced cooperation and coordination between states and UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in three inter-related spheres: operational planning and experience-sharing between resettlement states, both traditional and new or emerging; increasing the numbers of resettlement places; and enhanced dialogue with hosting countries.

Established in the mid-1990s, the Working Group on Resettlement (WGR) and the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) are the principal multilateral institutions in which states, UNHCR and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engage on issues specific to the resettlement of refugees. One result of the WGR and ATCR forums has been the agreement of resettlement states and UNHCR to create 'core' and 'contact' groups for resettlement cooperation for particular populations. Core groups are advocacy-, policy- and operations-oriented while contact groups are mainly operationally focused.

Core and contact groups are, in principle, state led, but UNHCR plays a catalytic role in bringing states together to achieve results. UNHCR is well placed to identify protection needs but it also plays an important advisory role and provides technical support for states in resettlement programme design, selection, adjudication and settlement. Implementing effective resettlement programmes through high-quality and efficient processing models with robust integrity safeguards and managing refugee expectations are key aims of internationalisation in resettlement.

Collaboration over Syria and Bhutan

The Syria and Bhutan examples emerged from very different contexts. The Bhutanese Core Group (BCG) was formed in 2005 following decades of displacement and

15 rounds of failed talks between Bhutan and Nepal on repatriation and local integration. The Syria Core Group (SCG) was formed in 2013, quite early in the emergency phase of the Syria response.

The Syria resettlement response resulted in the largest resettlement commitments in recent history and the fastest processing, for which new processing approaches were successfully tried. Tools were developed including counselling templates for responding to questions frequently asked by refugees about the process and a resources website, with a view to improving the provision of information to those seeking resettlement. The SCG has provided a forum for states to support each other in upholding respect for international protection principles in resettlement programme design and delivery.

The Bhutanese Core Group (BCG) supported several countries to process Bhutanese refugees in Nepal as members of a group which had been defined as in need of resettlement. This saved considerable time and resources. The BCG members also exchanged fraud prevention information and shared the purpose-built IOM transit centre in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu. Their dialogue led to operational and policy convergence and a willingness to work together on standards.

The SCG aimed to secure sustainable multi-year commitments from resettlement states, both traditional and emerging. Success to date has been impressive, with over 224,000 spaces pledged for resettlement and other pathways. The SCG involved NGOs in mobilising domestic support for increasing resettlement and complementary pathways by generating more political attention on the issues.

While the BCG did not garner as much political attention as the SCG, it did manage



Rwandan refugee resettled in Santiago, Chile.

to increase resettlement commitments over time. Ultimately, over 100,000 Bhutanese were resettled.¹ The BCG member states issued a communiqué announcing their collective resettlement commitments and called on Nepal and Bhutan to join them in the pursuit of other durable solutions.²

Host country involvement

Engagement with host countries aims to deepen understanding of resettlement processing and to sensitise host governments to the role that resettlement plays as part of a broader humanitarian response. This engagement recognises host governments' current contribution to refugee protection (for example, by keeping open borders or facilitating registration or providing access to schools or hospitals). It also raises awareness of the scale of resettlement and the resources involved, while gaining crucial support from the host country in order to help facilitate the resettlement process. UNHCR plays a critical role in enabling this engagement as it works with a range of host state agencies across security, public health, education, diplomatic and social services. Bringing these officials together can raise awareness of how their work can affect burden sharing through resettlement efforts. This is especially effective when emerging resettlement countries and donor countries join in with traditional

resettlement countries in the dialogue.

An SCG Host Country Resettlement Group was formed in Geneva with participants from Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt to raise awareness; SCG meetings also take place in regional capitals. Core group engagement in the name of over 20

countries lends weight in dialogue with host countries, which can serve to improve levels of facilitation or achieve a more cooperative approach; the host communities feel a sense of solidarity beyond financial support.

Conclusion

These core groups have taught us that internationalisation of resettlement requires strong state leadership and active chairing, building on UNHCR's broader relationship with host governments. In addition, harnessing civil society efforts to advocate for more robust responses to help refugees, including through resettlement, can garner much-needed political will and action. Perhaps most importantly, refugees themselves need clear, consistent and relevant information about the resettlement process in order to make informed decisions about their future. Common counselling products have gone some way to addressing this.

These internationalised efforts have brought important protection dividends in both contexts including the expansion of the protection space in host countries and the alleviation of pressures on critical health and social services by resettling the most vulnerable. The multilateral efforts generated a multiplier effect of more countries becoming involved and more resettlement spaces being offered. The

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internationalisation of resettlement provides the means to pursue more lofty goals like those outlined in the concept of the strategic use of resettlement.³ Internationalisation is about how we do things, not why we do things or what we hope to achieve.

Resettlement is often sidelined in broader debates about solutions because it is seen as too limited in scope to matter. But resettlement is a critical protection tool that saves lives and that must be accessible to those with protection needs particularly in instances where other solutions will not be possible. The attention paid to expansion of resettlement and other legal pathways

at the September 2016 UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants is encouraging.⁴

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1. See press release <http://bit.ly/BhutanCoreGroup-communicue>
2. https://nepal.usembassy.gov/bhutan_05-16-2007.html
3. See UNHCR (2013) *Great expectations: A review of the strategic use of resettlement* www.refworld.org/docid/520a407d4.html
4. See the New York Declaration <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration>