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
to increase resettlement commitments over time. Ultimately, over 100,000 Bhutanese were resettled. 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.

**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
Surge and selection: power in the refugee resettlement regime

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There is an imbalance of power – and a resulting lack of agency for refugees – in the structure of the current resettlement regime. The top-down process of selection also poses ethical dilemmas, as recent surges in resettlement operations show.

Of the three durable solutions, resettlement is often the last option advocated by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and the last option desired by refugees. Yet in many conflicts there comes a tipping point at which UNHCR works with states to seek resettlement for a select few refugees. Less than 1% of all refugees receive the option to resettle in a third country.

How does a refugee become one of the few? The answer is: refugees usually cannot choose. The current structure of the resettlement regime requires UNHCR to choose refugees first and then to refer them to states. States then decide whether or not to accept them.

The refugee resettlement regime is designed to identify and protect the ‘most vulnerable’ refugees. At its core lies the 1951 Convention definition of a refugee, which UNHCR uses to conduct refugee status determinations and register refugees in countries of asylum. Given limited resettlement places offered by receiving countries, UNHCR has developed seven prioritisation categories to identify refugees with more serious or urgent protection needs. UNHCR sorts, filters and prioritises refugees in accordance with these categories to make referrals for resettlement to states. The resettlement referral selection process varies by region and UNHCR office, and protection officers may use participatory assessments, the Heightened Risk Identification Tool, or other referrals to identify the most vulnerable refugees for resettlement.

The UNHCR Resettlement Handbook states that selection “should not be based on the desire of any specific actors, such as the host State, resettlement States, other partners, or UNHCR staff themselves.”

In reality, very few states accept refugees for resettlement on a ‘dossier’ basis, that is, without further scrutiny of individual cases or additional selection criteria. In fact, most states assert their own specific selection criteria, thus creating the final layer of selection in the resettlement regime. Often