
Expanding the role of NGOs in resettlement

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With global resettlement needs growing and more refugees living outside camps, NGOs are uniquely positioned to identify and interview vulnerable refugees and to play a larger role in refugee resettlement.

Camps, for better or worse, have been the backbone of global refugee resettlement, with most referrals coming from camp-based populations and submitted to resettlement countries (those countries offering to resettle refugees) almost exclusively by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. With large refugee populations living in camps and registering to access services, UNHCR and its partners were easily able to identify and refer cases for resettlement. Resettlement countries were comfortable with the opportunity provided by camps for organised and systematic registration, refugee status determination (RSD), identification, referral and submission procedures.

As more refugees began to settle outside camps, the traditional identification and referral mechanisms that the resettlement programme relied on did not translate well from camps to urban settings and UNHCR was forced to identify refugees in need of resettlement mainly through data from registration and RSD. In host countries where registration and RSD data were unreliable, and where UNHCR was not able to effectively reach the most vulnerable refugee communities, identification became challenging.

In response to this changing refugee landscape, in the early 2000s Canada and the US approved two non-governmental

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organisations (NGOs) in the Africa region – RefugePoint (then called Mapendo International) and HIAS – to submit out-of-camp cases directly to them, creating a parallel structure to UNHCR’s resettlement process. These ‘direct referrals’, though few in comparison with the number of UNHCR submissions, in some years accounted for a significant proportion of the total submissions in Nairobi and Kampala, the two urban locations where they operate. This relatively modest direct referral programme continues to operate in Africa.

Despite increased demands by resettlement countries for cases, direct NGO referral programmes have not increased proportionally, either in terms of programme location or numbers of NGOs engaged. To meet the need, donors, resettlement countries and UNHCR should support and implement NGO direct referral programmes more widely, expanding the number of specialised NGOs engaged in case referral and increasing the overall number of appropriate, vulnerable cases referred.

The value of NGO direct referrals

In addition to increasing the overall numbers of cases submitted, there are other significant benefits of expanding NGO direct referral programmes.

First is the creation of parallel pathways in the resettlement system. This is more than just creating access; parallel pathways allow the programme to continue if one pathway breaks down or experiences a stoppage. For instance, if UNHCR must focus its efforts on submissions to one particular country to support an upcoming adjudication mission (thereby decreasing submissions to other countries), NGOs can assist in filling the gap so that no resettlement country has to experience a lull in submissions. Additionally, if funding for UNHCR submissions is cut, NGOs that have private funding designated for resettlement activities are well positioned to continue providing these countries with referrals.

Second, direct referrals from NGOs alleviate some of the pressure on UNHCR to produce submissions. In the Middle East,

for example, where resettlement caseloads are primarily urban, UNHCR struggles to produce enough submissions for resettlement. This is partly because resettlement approval rates for identified cases – many of whom are from Syria and Iraq – are as low as 50-60%, and partly because of higher than average drop-out rates. NGOs, often located in refugee neighbourhoods, with established relationships to vulnerable refugee communities, are well-positioned to identify refugees who fit the approval profile for specific resettlement countries. UNHCR does not always have the time or staff capacity to properly sort the cases according to where they have the best chance of being approved. NGOs’ more nuanced approach is an asset to the programme and part of the reason why their approval rates are so high.

Third, direct referrals increase access for particularly vulnerable individuals. For instance, most LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) refugees cannot live in camps because UNHCR is not able to provide them with adequate protection from the refugee community. Similarly, there are women at risk and sexual and gender-based violence cases who also are not afforded protection from other refugees in the camps. In general, these individuals feel less exposed and can access better protection in urban areas through NGOs’ services and programmes. Some extremely vulnerable refugees are reluctant to refer themselves for resettlement to UNHCR, having no established relationship with any of its staff. NGOs, by contrast, work closely with these vulnerable refugees by providing services over an extended period, and create environments that encourage them to disclose details of persecution based on gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. In some cases, these NGOs are the only agencies that more marginalised groups approach when they first arrive in a country of asylum.

Fourth, NGO direct referrals are cost efficient. For NGOs, outreach and identification of resettlement cases occurs daily through regular programme activities, which amounts to a subsidy of these resettlement-related services.

Best practice

While NGOs' role in identification and referral is welcomed by resettlement countries and UNHCR alike, the NGOs' role in submitting cases directly to resettlement countries – rather than to UNHCR – is controversial. Critics argue that this model can cause refugees to perceive direct referral NGOs as gateways to resettlement. To mitigate this, NGOs should only submit cases that are referred to them by external partners. If they deem a client to be in need of resettlement (a so-called internal referral), the case should be referred to UNHCR or to another agency approved to submit cases directly. As an added measure, RefugePoint and HIAS conduct regular case conference meetings with UNHCR, prior to submission, to verify family composition, mitigate fraud, prevent overlaps in service delivery and better ensure the integrity of the programme. In any case, all NGO submissions go through the same security checks by the resettlement country as the UNHCR submissions.

The current direct referral partnership model has been lauded as a best practice by resettlement countries, with each of the NGOs being encouraged to increase their respective submissions from Nairobi (RefugePoint and HIAS) and Kampala (HIAS) while the latest direct referral agency, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), has been approved to submit cases from the Middle-East North Africa region. Despite the request for increased submissions from many countries since 2011, surprisingly only Australia has agreed to join Canada and the US in accepting direct referrals. Furthermore, IRAP is the only NGO that has been approved to submit cases to the US since that time. UNHCR has projected that there are 1,190,519 refugees in need of resettlement in 2017, and that given its current resources its target for actual submissions is 169,789.¹ While secondments and deployments from NGO partners are one option to increase submissions, submissions by NGOs provide an additional opportunity to increase resettlement numbers.

So far, to increase submissions, UNHCR and the resettlement countries have come up with creative solutions such as combining

RSD and resettlement interviews, limiting RSD to those being referred for resettlement, diversifying the NGO partners for the deployment scheme, and introducing shorter resettlement referral forms. However, for the most part, the response to the requested increase in quotas has been achieved through surge operations – which are not sustainable.

Resettlement countries that have employed surges readily admit that the associated costs are unsustainable and that the speed with which cases were processed led to integration difficulties and increased anxiety among refugees and caseworkers, and was one of many contributing factors to high dropout rates prior to departure. The most easily accessible vulnerable cases were identified for submission, which is not the same as prioritising cases based solely on vulnerability. In effect, the surges, while producing larger numbers of people for resettlement, have taken resources from more protracted caseloads, exacerbated tensions between refugee populations and created an imbalance between addressing vulnerable cases and achieving targets.

A new model for a new normal

A NGO direct referral system must play a larger role in assisting UNHCR to achieve growth while simultaneously prioritising vulnerability. To effectively expand the NGO direct referral system, the following steps are needed:

Approve more NGOs to conduct direct referrals: Just as UNHCR has implementing partners for the services it offers to refugees, so too should the resettlement programme have at least one NGO implementing partner for resettlement submissions in every location where there are resettlement operations. This NGO should be well-established in the host country, and offer other programmes and services. With UNHCR committed to actively pursuing alternatives to camps for refugees and with host countries increasingly choosing not to construct camps, the need to identify and refer vulnerable refugees in non-camp settings for resettlement is critical. The role of NGOs in such referrals is not disputed but there is a need for more

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NGOs to be approved by resettlement countries to submit cases directly.

Train NGOs to conduct direct referrals: An NGO training programme should be designed by UNHCR and the three current direct referral NGOs, with input from resettlement countries, and be offered on an annual basis. Currently, the direct referral NGOs train their partners on how to refer cases to them. However, there is no induction training available for new direct referral NGOs.

Increase the number of resettlement countries that accept direct referrals from NGOs: The US, Canada and Australia should promote this model to other resettlement countries and explain the benefits of NGO direct referrals. In particular, countries that accept referrals on a 'dossier' basis (that is, without interviewing the refugee before arrival in the resettlement country) could especially benefit from this programme if their goal is to reach the most vulnerable.

Fund direct referrals: The cost to the NGOs of the direct referral programmes has not just been financial. Because NGOs offer this service free of charge to resettlement countries, resettlement countries have little sense of responsibility to serve as a true partner. To grow the programme responsibly, NGOs need to be funded for their services, at least partially or on a matching basis. Most NGOs – particularly those based in refugee communities with deep ties to vulnerable populations – would find it extremely challenging to run a direct referral programme that does not receive the kind of funding from resettlement countries or UNHCR that other programmes do.

Strategically use NGO referral agencies to expand resettlement in specific locations: By expanding the number of NGO referral agencies and the number of resettlement countries willing to accept them, locations where the resettlement programmes are insufficient for the need could be strategically expanded. For instance, the resettlement programme in South Africa has remained stagnant for years, hovering at around 1,400 referrals a year since 2011. Currently, there is no NGO that is approved to do

direct referrals in South Africa. A simple model could be introduced whereby a resettlement agency could partner with specialised civil society agencies working with, for example, sexual minority refugees or refugees with disabilities to identify appropriate cases for referral. Targeting specific vulnerable populations in locations where, for whatever reason, resettlement has not kept pace with the needs would be a strategic use of direct referral NGOs.

While NGOs have a prominent role to play in the identification of vulnerable individuals and their referral to UNHCR for resettlement consideration, their role in the submission of cases directly to resettlement countries has been limited. With the shift to the majority of refugees living outside camps, operational modalities in most sectors have had to move away from traditional models and find innovative ways to adapt. The resettlement sector should do the same.

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1. UNHCR *Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2017*
<http://bit.ly/UNHCR-ResettlementNeeds2017>



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