



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Topic B: Protecting the Rights of Refugees Residing in Host Countries

Introduction

The number of displaced persons have increased substantially over the last few years due to conflict, disease, human rights violations, and other destabilizing situations.¹ Last year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 31.6 million and 5.8 million other people in need of international protection under their mandate alone.² With these figures combined, 75% of these vulnerable populations are being hosted in low- and middle-income countries around the globe.³ The United Nations (UN) along with other independent research has recognized that hosting refugees has a significant impact on a country's economic, societal, and environmental resources, particularly in low- and middle-income States.⁴ The UNHCR is mandated to assist in providing durable solutions through repatriation, resettlement, or local integration as well as protect the rights of refugees at all stages, particularly when they are residing in host countries.⁵ Therefore, building and strengthening the capacities of refugee host countries has become a core pillar of the UNHCR's activities to ensure this mandate is actualized.

Building a country's capacity to accept and accommodate refugees goes beyond just facilitating access to humanitarian resources. The UNHCR works in tandem with Member States to adapt national legislation, create policy and programmes, provide logistical and financial support, and devise durable solutions in case of protracted displacement. Just as any international incident that leads to human displacement requires specific assistance and solutions, so to do the countries that host displaced populations. Over the years, the UNHCR has acted as an international coordinator in developing research, constructing unique initiatives, and providing specific resources that tailor regional and national needs of refugee hosts. This lends to the global effort of protecting the rights of refugees residing in host countries.

Background

Article 14 of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* "which recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries" laid the legal foundation for the UNHCR's mandate.⁶ Since its inception, the UNHCR has made this its preliminary mission statement as the organization would go on to expand the rights and protections of asylum seekers and refugees across the world. *The Convention*

¹ UNHCR. "Figures at a glance." 2024.

² UNHCR. "Who we protect: Refugees." 2024.

³ UNHCR. "Figures at a glance." 2024.

⁴ European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. "Forced Displacement: refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs)." 2024.

⁵ UNHCR. "What we do." 2024.

⁶ UN. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948.

Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and its supplemental *Protocol* of 1967 (*1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol*) enshrined definitions of these vulnerable populations as well as their fundamental protections and rights into a sect of international law as the majority of countries adorned their signatures.⁷ Member States of the *1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol* are obligated to uphold the standards set in these key legal documents and protect the rights of refugees within their borders.⁸ The UNHCR works closely with refugee host countries to ensure these obligations are met.

Refugees are afforded the same rights as any human under customary international law as well as fundamental human rights treaties such as the *UDHR*, the *International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.⁹ Beyond rights such as basic access to food, clean water, education, health care, and employment opportunities, the *1951 Convention* also grants a special protection to refugees that host countries must uphold: non-refoulement.¹⁰ This prevents the expulsion or return of a refugee “in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”¹¹ This sentiment is also reaffirmed in many regional human rights documents such as the *OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa*, the *American Human Rights Convention*, and the *Resolution on Asylum to Persons in Danger of Persecution from the Council of Europe*.¹²

In 2016, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (New York Declaration)* to strengthen and enhance mechanisms to protect these vulnerable populations, including those living in host countries.¹³ It also laid the groundwork for the Global Compact on Refugees which “focuses on the importance of supporting [host countries], promoting the inclusion of refugees in host communities, ensuring the involvement of development actors from an early stage, and developing a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to refugee responses.”¹⁴

Current Situation

The Global Compact on Refugees is an ongoing project that provides a process for reporting progress and challenges in protecting the rights of refugees and supporting host countries, such as through their Global Refugee Forum, High-Level Officials Meetings, and yearly Indicator Reports.¹⁵ They also provide on-the-ground support to refugees in areas of legal assistance, jobs and livelihoods, and access to services such

⁷ UN. *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. 1951.

⁸ UNHCR. “About UNHCR: The 1951 Refugee Convention.” 2024.

⁹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. “International Human Rights Law.” 2024.

¹⁰ UN. *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. 1951.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² UNHCR. “Note on the Principle of Non-Refoulement.” 1997.

¹³ UN General Assembly. *A/RES/71/1: New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*. 2016.

¹⁴ UNHCR: USA. “New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.” 2024.

¹⁵ Global Compact on Refugees. “Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Report.” 2024.

as health care and education.¹⁶ The UNHCR was pivotal in the Global Compacts creation as it worked for over two years to form partnerships with governments, other UN agencies, civil societies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector.¹⁷ A coordinated global effort to effectively mobilize resources such as this is essential to the UNHCR's mission to protect the rights of refugees in host countries.¹⁸

Recognizing that the protection of refugees is largely the responsibility of the host state, the UNHCR has a variety of programmes and initiatives to provide aid and capacity building. Broadly, this can be broken down into short-term and long-term assistance. Upon arrival to a host state, refugees may require immediate care such as food, water, and housing. Due to the unprecedented nature of displacement events, the UNHCR can assist in mobilizing necessary resources to provide this type of humanitarian aid to host states that may not be prepared. In cases of protracted displacement, refugees may require more long-term assistance to start building livelihoods and initiate integration in their host country. The UNHCR and its partners have many programmes to enable a smooth transition in this regard.

Short-Term Assistance: Mobilization of Necessary Resources

Events that cause mass displacement can often lead to a crisis in neighboring host countries, especially those that are low- to middle-income. The UNHCR's Refugee Response Plan can assist Member States in coordinating humanitarian assistance and providing an overview of the protection needs for an incoming flux of refugees.¹⁹ Emergency teams can be dispatched to ensure their rights are protected throughout the humanitarian process, such as fair allowance of entry, legal and physical protection, and eventually access to food, water, shelter, and medical care.²⁰

Low- and middle-income host countries can also benefit from the improvement of infrastructure to accommodate the needs of a new influx of refugees. The UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) often works with host countries to in a humanitarian setting to implement sustainable shelter and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes in new or emerging settlement areas.²¹ The UNHCR's Educate a Child programme also works to ensure the rights of children by offering continued learning options.²² This programme has enrolled many out of school children, provided support to promote retention, and opened opportunities for secondary and accelerated schooling in host countries.²³

Long-Term Assistance: Building Livelihoods and Promoting Integration

¹⁶ Global Compact on Refugees. "The Compact in Action: Initiatives." 2024.

¹⁷ Abby Cahn-Gambino. "Explainer: The Global Compact on Refugees." 2021.

¹⁸ UNHCR. *Global Appeal 2024*. 2024.

¹⁹ UNHCR. "What we do: Coordinating assistance." 2024.

²⁰ UNHCR. "What we do: Protection." 2024.

²¹ UNICEF. "Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in emergencies." N.d.

²² UNHCR. "What we do: Primary and youth education." 2024.

²³ Ibid.

In the past decade, the world has dealt with more long-lasting conflict which has protracted refugee stays in host countries.²⁴ According to an article from a project officer for the Migration Partnership Facility, “a lack of third-country solutions, such as resettlement and true local integration, has left many refugees in limbo, rendering them largely dependent on humanitarian assistance as they have little to no access to formal labor markets and livelihood opportunities in many low- and middle-income host countries.”²⁵ The UNHCR and its partners work to create conditions that allow for increased protections of refugees’ rights during these protracted stays as well as to achieve self-reliance in host countries. Much of this work consists of legal and policy development, promotion of livelihood strategies, and partnerships to achieve integration, resettlement, or repatriation.

An essential partnership exists between the UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to assist host countries in protecting the rights of refugees through the creation of national action plans, strengthening accountable and inclusionary justice systems, and peacebuilding.²⁶ The UNDP also recently pledged to increase support to over 30 host countries to help “unlock long-term financing, invest in access to services, livelihoods, decent jobs and justice, while strengthening peacebuilding, climate action and national and local coordination and management.”²⁷ Additionally, the UN Institute for Training and Research started an initiative in 2019 to increase technical and vocational education and training (TVET) access to vulnerable populations such as refugees in host countries so as to expand opportunities for skill building.²⁸ Initiatives such as these will contribute to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 5, 8, and 10.²⁹

Future Outlook

Based on extensive legal precedent and kinship to fellow man, it is imperative to protect the rights of refugees at all stages. Assistance to and capacity building of host countries is paramount in achieving this goal.³⁰ While this topic focuses strictly on protecting the rights of refugees and assisting refugee host states, it is prudent to keep in mind that the UNHCR has an obligation to assist an additional 6.9 million asylum-seekers, and they often coordinate with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East (UNRWA) to ensure the safety of 6 million Palestinians that largely reside in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.³¹ As conflict continues in the Middle East, the UNHCR has been looking for innovative solutions in order to assist UNRWA and other displaced populations in the

²⁴ Sharmake Ahmed. “A perfect storm of crises: Why refugee-hosting countries need more support.” 2023.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ UNDP. “Justice: UNDP-UNHCR Partnership.” 2024.

²⁷ UNDP. “Press Release: Increased support to refugee-hosting countries key to addressing rising displacement.” 2023.

²⁸ UNITAR. “New TVET for Impact Initiative and Fund Will Provide Sustainable Employment Opportunities to the Most Vulnerable.” 2019.

²⁹ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “Sustainable Development: The 17 Goals.” N.d.

³⁰ Paolo Verme. “Theory and evidence on the impact of refugees on host communities.” 2023.

³¹ UNHCR. “Figures at a glance.” 2024.

region. Additionally, the UNHCR looks to the future as it strives to accomplish its own goals set out in its *2022-2026 Strategic Directions* publication.³² Many of these goals include increased assistance to refugee host countries, particularly through policy development for local empowerment, protections against gender-based violence, and non-discrimination laws.³³

³² UNHCR. UNHCR Strategic Directions. 2022.

³³ Ibid.

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