



Responding to challenges facing the international refugee system: Policies, Opportunities, and Messages

The Social Change Initiative (SCI) is a recently established international NGO based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Its work is focused on improving the effectiveness of activism for progressive social change and influencing how such work is funded by donors. Migration is a priority issue for SCI and we have been supporting a series of discussions and exchanges with activists and thinkers, notably trying to influence the public narrative and supporting civil society to more effectively influence the political and policy debate.

The following note provides core messages that could be used by civil society organizations interested in influencing the forthcoming UN Summit on the large scale movements of migrants and refugees. The note and messages follow on from a meeting convened by SCI in Dublin at the end June. SCI commissioned Professor Alexander Aleinikoff to produce a discussion paper for the convening and this document can be accessed at: www.thesocialchangeinitiative.org/report. We are grateful to him and others for supporting with the production of this summary note.

In September of this year, the United Nations will host a summit on responding to large-scale movements of migrants and refugees. The UN summit comes at a time of unprecedented levels of forced migration, controversy over the welcome of refugees, tragic pictures of boats with migrants going down at sea, and no end in sight for the conflicts that cause refugee flows. The response of the international community has been deeply inadequate: there is a significant shortfall in needed funding, international responsibility-sharing has been largely absent, and persons fleeing violence and conflict have faced policies that seek to deny them entry and protection and that violate many of the rights guaranteed by the 1951 refugee convention. In addition, a lack of progress on solutions means that millions of persons have been, and will remain, refugees for many years.

Civil society and NGOs have an important role to play in urging that the Summit adopt the level of ambition necessary for reform of the system and in proposing specific recommendations for advancing refugee protection and solutions. The draft documents need to include a formal system of responsibility-sharing, specific targets for protection, assistance and solutions should be set and clarity provided on accountability mechanisms. Every effort should be made to ensure that such recommendations are included into Summit outcomes. If not, they provide a basis for post-Summit action and advocacy.

Fundamental principles

The international refugee system is a great accomplishment of the post-WWII era, establishing legal norms and institutions dedicated to protecting persons cast out of their societies. It was founded on principles that remain vital today:

- Persons forced from their homes because of violence and conflict should not be returned to a risk of serious harm and violations of human rights (*non-refoulement*)
- Persons recognized as refugees have rights under international law; those rights—if respected—will help refugees rebuild their lives and will also permit them to benefit states that have granted them protection
- Refugee status should not continue indefinitely; the international community has a *collective* responsibility and to actively seek and provide durable solutions
- International burden-sharing includes a commitment to assist countries of first asylum
- Refugee protection cannot thrive in societies whose populations do not support it; affirmation of these principles and support for the “refugee cause” requires conscientious advocacy and political commitment

Advocacy messages

These somewhat abstract principles may be translated into messages that can resonate with the situation of refugees today. Thus:

- No refugee should lose their life at sea
- No child should grow up in a refugee camp
- Refugees are not dangerous; they are *fleeing* danger. They seek safety and the opportunity to rebuild their lives, not “benefits” or government “hand-outs”
- No refugee should face detention and must be granted due process in status determination proceedings
- Refugees can contribute to the development of countries of first asylum and benefit countries of resettlement if given opportunities to do so
- While the challenges are real and situation faced by millions of forced migrants is precarious, these are *manageable* problems if all actors do their part in providing relief, resources, rights and solutions.

Specific “asks” for the UN Summit and beyond

The global system of refugee protection needs serious reform. It is not coping with the current flows nor providing solutions to long-standing refugee situations. The Summit must mean that things will be different the day after. Some specific recommendations to urge on UN member states could include:

- Introducing a robust system of responsibility-sharing in responding to emergencies and resolving long-standing refugee situations
- Setting specific goals for solutions (in particular, resettlement)

- Adopting a comprehensive planning and implementation “business model” that includes humanitarian and development actors, hosting states, the private sector, and refugees, with the purpose of fostering refugee self-reliance and providing assistance to hosting communities
- Increased support for refugee hosting states and communities (with an enhanced role for development actors)
- Initiating a global campaign to respect and promote refugees’ rights (with particular attention to the rights to work and to freedom of movement within the hosting state)
- Instituting “policies of welcome” for persons fleeing violence and conflict (including campaigns against discriminatory and xenophobic rhetoric and actions and in support for private sponsorship of refugee resettlement)
- Expanding protection to forced migrants not covered by the refugee convention (such as persons fleeing generalized violence and persons displaced by climate change)