

A 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief

Addressing Refugees and Forced Migration

November 4, 2020

Challenges and Call to Action

The Saudi G20 Presidency has identified refugees, migrants, and trafficking in its goal to “empower people by unleashing opportunities for all, including in particular empowering women and youth.” The G20 Summit offers a crucial venue to coordinate and advance responses for refugees and internally displaced people, who are primarily hosted in communities of low- or middle-income countries.¹ With the COVID-19 emergency heightening burdens on both forced migrants and host governments, urgent financial and human needs demand action.

Action on refugees and forced migration issues is central to the priority objectives of respecting human dignity, ending conflict, and promoting sustainable economic and social development. The many aspects of forced migration call for purposeful measures from global leaders, as the present situation causes great human suffering and uncertainty and places severe economic, political, and social stresses on, especially, refugee-host states. The number of forced migrants worldwide is at historic highs and is growing: at the end of 2019, an estimated 79.5 million people were refugees and internally displaced persons. The global COVID-19 pandemic and associated emergency further strain both refugees and the communities that host them. Dangerous and significant spillover effects worldwide are anticipated.

Religious institutions, including faith-based operational organizations, play substantial roles in direct support to forced migrants at all stages (advocacy, conflict resolution, service provision, resettlement) and places (conflict zones, host countries). The core values of religious communities involve compelling and unifying calls to compassion and hospitality. Deeper collaboration among religious institutions and faith-inspired organizations, G20 members governments, and those present and working in refugee-hosting communities can foster the types of “tools, partnerships, and funding” needed to implement UNHCR’s Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees. Religious actors bring to the table as a leading concern the imperative of action to protect the children in forced migration settings. Religious communities act as transnational actors able to provide services and advocacy across borders.

The Religions for Peace (RfP) UNHCR Multireligious Council of Leaders launched in September 2020 offers a forum to engage and advance both critically needed norms and principles and practical, urgent action to address the crises of forced displacement.

G20 leadership should engage with religious communities and organizations in a common effort to advance, in short order and respecting the dignity of those involved, the three-durable solutions for refugees and forced migrants: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. Specific recommendations highlight the need for cooperation with faith communities on critical needs linked to the COVID-19 crisis. These include food security and health care, security and safety, and education as priorities. Action required establishing effective coordination

mechanisms with faith communities at appropriate levels, and addressing dangerous migration routes through constructive programs.

What's at Stake:

The number of refugees worldwide has reached historic levels and is climbing. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that in 2019 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, of whom 26 million were legally or practically defined as refugees. Still larger numbers (45.7 million) are displaced within their own countries (IDPs).² Of the 79.5 million, the large majority of refugees, 85%, are hosted in poorer countries, which face disproportionate burdens. Over 68% of refugees come from five countries (Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar); 3.6 million were Venezuelans displaced abroad. The country hosting the largest number of refugees is Turkey (as it has been for some years), with 3.6 million, followed by Colombia (1.8 million), Pakistan (1.8 million), Uganda (1.4 million), and Germany (1.1 million). Many smaller states host large numbers of refugees in proportion to their population; in Aruba, for example, with a total population of 105,000, displaced Venezuelans represent one in six people, and Lebanon follows, with one in seven people of the total population of 6.8 million people a refugee.³ Rather than temporary situations, many refugees are in a limbo status for many years, as each of the three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement, has come under increasing strain.

The number of protracted conflicts worldwide is rising and fewer refugees are returning home. Conflicts, the cause of forced migration, are lasting longer and lasting peace solutions are few and far between. Protracted refugee situations in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same country have been displaced internationally for more than five consecutive years in a host country, now involve an estimated 15.7 million people, in 51 protracted situations spread across 32 different countries.⁴ In 2019, the case of Burundian refugees in neighboring Rwanda and Uganda was newly classified as protracted, but no protracted situations were removed from the list. Between 2000 and 2009, 10 million refugees were able to return to their countries of origin, while over the last 10 years only 3.9 million people were able to return home.⁵ The inability of refugees and IDPs to return home or find lasting solutions in their countries of asylum places increased burdens on international systems designed to protect and support refugees, and the communities and countries in which they seek refuge.

International law offers few solutions and protections for internally displaced people (IDPs). In 2020, 50.8 million individuals were experiencing internal displacement. In a survey of 1,470 refugees, IDPs, and returning refugees, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre found that 47% of IDPs had been displaced multiple times and 57% of refugees surveyed had been internally displaced prior to becoming a refugee.⁶ Internal displacement and increased refugee flows are often linked: the inability of national authorities to protect and provide support to IDPs contributes to refugee flows as people seek protection in neighboring countries when they are unable to find safety in countries of origin. Lack of basic services, income-generating opportunities, and mobility pushes some refugees to return home prematurely, where they face impediments in returning to their communities.⁷

COVID-19-induced border closures have reduced the ability of IDPs to seek international protection. As of August 2020, The International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that 36% of all land border crossing points globally were fully closed and another 34% were partially closed.⁸

Refugee resettlement to third countries. Refugee resettlement has declined at the same time that refugee resettlement needs have increased significantly. This has particular significance for G20 countries as potential hosts and desired destination for many, though in practice third country resettlement has been an option for fewer than 1% of the global refugee population annually.⁹ Refugee resettlement is often reserved for the most vulnerable refugee populations as well as in places where hosting countries are unable to bear the burden of support. UNHCR recorded that between 2011 and 2019 the gap between refugees resettled and those needing resettlement annually grew from approximately 700,000 to 1,300,000.¹⁰ UNHCR, the UN body responsible for refugee coordination, reported that states admitted 107,800 refugees for resettlement in 2019, of which the United States represented 27%.¹¹

Decreasing U.S. refugee resettlement amidst surging need. The United States has historically been a leader in refugee resettlement, resettling over 3 million refugees from across the globe since the modern U.S. refugee resettlement program began after the Vietnam War in 1975. In the past few years, the number of refugees resettled has declined significantly, from 85,000 in 2016 to 30,000 in 2019, with 18,000 proposed for 2020.¹²

Devastating impact on children. Over half of refugees and IDPs are children. The global crisis, with protracted displacement situations the sad norm, is especially devastating for children.¹³ Many face violence including abuse, trafficking, forced labor, and detention. Educational opportunities are severely curtailed, and many will live with lasting trauma.¹⁴ The COVID-19 crisis accentuates the effects on children, notably with heightened risks of violence and disrupted education.

A hunger crisis affects refugees and IDPs disproportionately, notably as supply chains are disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports increasing food insecurity in conflict-afflicted countries. Without significant increases in aid and humanitarian access by end 2020, the number of individuals experiencing hunger could rise from pre-COVID levels of 149 million to 270 million. The World Food Program (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have issued similar warnings, noting that Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, and Venezuela among 25 global hotspots.¹⁵ These countries represent some of largest countries of refugee origin. Increased food insecurity in conflict-afflicted areas will increase displacement and forced migration, adding to the pressures neighboring refugee-hosting countries in these regions experience.

Livelihoods, job opportunities, and access to health care of refugees and IDPs are critically curtailed, with situations worsened by the COVID-19 crisis. In Lebanon, UNHCR reported that the number of households in which no one was employed rose from 44% to 70% between March and May 2020. More than 50% of households reported that one individual or more experienced a loss of employment within those same three months.¹⁶ Employment acts as an additional buffer for many refugee families who receive varying levels of local, national, and international

assistance, so loss of employment affects people closer to hunger and with limited means to purchase health services during the pandemic. Refugees and forced migrants in Africa, Asia, and Latin America reported to the Mixed Migration Centre that only 38% would be able to access health services if they experienced COVID-19 symptoms. Lack of access was higher in West Africa and Asia (48%) and lower in North Africa (28%). Refugee respondents noted lack of finance, limited understanding of health resources, and discrimination as key obstacles.¹⁷

The framework created by the Global Compact on Refugees¹⁸ has yet to result in significant benefits for refugee-hosting countries. The principles and values enshrined in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the processes established in the Global Compact on Refugees, if implemented effectively, should lighten the burdens on refugee-hosting countries, increase refugee resettlement, and lead to the establishment of new public-private partnerships between societies and organizations of all types. It represents a broad understanding of the need to share burdens and costs of refugee-hosting countries. However, the international community has to date not moved this into the realm of tangible action. Pledges under the Compact are being recorded and measured, but the gap between reported needs and pledged support falls significantly short.¹⁹

Religious roles and distinctive contributions

Religious traditions are rich sources of ethics and values that can motivate their adherents to welcome “the other” and thus support action for refugees and IDPs.²⁰ Narratives from many world religions center around forced migration. Examples include the Exodus from Egypt or Exile to Babylon in Judaism, Mohammad’s forced migration from Mecca to Medina (the hijra) in Islam, or the infant Krishna’s escape from infanticide in Hinduism.^{21,22} In commemorating these events, many religious communities recognize the need to welcome the exile. Likewise, religious traditions look to the core principle of a common human family, thus recognizing the inherent human dignity of others. Faith communities and faith-inspired organizations draw on these theological resources to advocate for compassion, tolerance, and peace and welcoming “the stranger”. Recognizing the negative impacts of some religious voices, different traditions can and often do work to counter racism and xenophobia and combat distorted narratives. In a statement released in advance of the 2020 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis rooted his call on the world to “welcome, protect, promote, and integrate refugees, migrants, and IDPs,” in the story of the infant Jesus’s forced flight into Egypt.^{23,24} The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development is charged in part with promoting action and support towards refugees and sees its charge rooted in the social doctrine of integral human development in the Catholic Church. Islamic Relief Worldwide grounds its support for refugees in the principles and teachings of the Qur’an. There are similar calls in other religious traditions.

Religious communities and organizations play wide-ranging roles in direct support to refugees and IDPs in many situations. Many organizations are part of humanitarian relief efforts ranging from food distribution, livelihood support, education, children protection, and spiritual support. A number of organizations have missions and mandates expressly focused on refugees and migrants, while for others the work forms part of their broader programs. The leading organizations are part of humanitarian cluster arrangements. However, a continuing concern is

the limited engagement with local faith communities both in ensuring that programs reach the most vulnerable groups and in providing direct support.

Public-private partnerships between governments and faith-inspired organizations have successfully provided services to refugees in a wide range of situations. The U.S. refugee resettlement program stands out as an example of effective partnerships between faith-inspired organizations and government as six of the nine refugee resettlement agencies have strong faith links. Together, they possess decades of experience supporting and assisting refugees towards integration. In Europe, individual religious communities and leaders as well as interreligious groups (both established institutions and spontaneous local responses) support widely varied initiatives to support refugees and to facilitate their integration. Since 2015, the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), representing over 300 mosques, has played a critical role in the migration crisis; ZMD among other refugee-focused projects recruited 1,100 volunteers, organized German courses in over 40 mosques, and opened 35 mosques as sleeping spaces for up to 200 refugees to sleep. ZMD also advocates on behalf of refugees, working with the German government to ensure better integration outcomes.²⁵ These are among prominent examples of specific refugee and IDP focused programs that involve direct support or engagement as partners in broader efforts (for example with UNHCR and the World Food Program).

Faith communities seeking supplementary and innovative support for refugee resettlement programs. The primary role in refugee resettlement ultimately falls to governments. However, faith-inspired organizations, communities, and individuals are pursuing efforts to supplement traditional refugee resettlement through private sponsorship of refugees. In Ireland, the Community Sponsorship Program allows individuals, faith groups, and other community organizations to sponsor refugees and provide emotional, social, and financial support for a specific period of time. The program had settled 2,555 individuals as of October 2019, with churches and faith-inspired organizations among those serving as sponsors.²⁶ The program builds on the success of the Canadian community sponsorship model which has resettled over 300,000 refugees in Canada since the program began in the 1970s, with Canadian religious communities playing a role as sponsors. The World Sikh Organization currently works alongside 26 Canadian members of Parliament to create a special program to offer Sikh and Hindu communities in Canada private sponsorship opportunities for Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan.²⁷ Such programs offer models both of potential partnerships and innovative approaches.

Faith-inspired organizations are developing new approaches to reduce lives lost crossing the Mediterranean Sea and provide vulnerable populations with safe opportunities to enter Europe. Between October 2013 and March 2019, an estimated 20,000 people lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea.²⁸ Responding to the ongoing tragedy, the Community of Sant'Egidio launched the humanitarian corridors project, to reduce loss of life during dangerous routes to Europe that include exploitation through human trafficking as well as dangers en route. The programs opens opportunities for vulnerable individuals to receive a humanitarian visa with potential for receiving asylum.²⁹ Humanitarian corridors in Italy is a partnership between Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, and the Italian government. For corridors from Lebanon, Sant'Egidio works with Tavola Valdese and with the Italian Episcopal Conference for corridors from Ethiopia. The government bears no cost, which is borne by Sant'Egidio and its faith-based partners which provide volunteers, housing, and integration

support for language, education, and employment. Through October 2019, the initiative had received 2,760 refugees, and has since expanded from Italy to Andorra, Belgium, and France.³⁰

Religious communities play an important part in refugee integration. Many refugees join religious communities upon arrival in a second country. These communities may precede a refugee's arrival or be founded by refugees. Such religious bodies support newly arriving refugees in navigating education systems, employment, and developing new cultural understanding. Faith communities may also provide mental health services, language support, and a supportive community through which to find spiritual and psychological aid. This has special importance for single-parent households and unaccompanied minors who need focused and effective social-cultural support.

Religious institutions and communities play vital roles as partners and advocates as well as providers of services within refugee and host communities. Among critical roles are education and trauma care, as well as knowledge dissemination and intermediary roles that build on religious actors' commonly high levels of trust. Many religious institutions, including interreligious and intrafaith bodies and faith-inspired organizations (inter alia the Catholic Church, World Council of Churches, Caritas Internationalis, Jesuit Refugee Service, Islamic Relief Worldwide, HIAS—Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Lutheran World Relief, World Relief, and World Vision) have active and longstanding programs that involve direct action to support forced migrants and global advocacy, calling notably for compassionate and actionable responses to refugees. Religious communities and major faith-inspired organizations have engaged on refugee issues, notably during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul³¹ and throughout negotiations for the Global Compacts. Religious communities are thus transnational actors able to provide services and advocacy across). Other services provided by faith communities include specific support for reception, admission, responses to detention, and legal support for refugee status determination (for example StARS Cairo³²), and counseling in processing and detention centers.³³

The Religions for Peace (RfP)/UNHCR Multireligious Council to address displacement issues created in September 2020³⁴ offers an important platform to promote mutual exchange of experience and advocacy for action.

Recommendations

The following recommendations acknowledge the moral teachings, networks, resources, and experiences that religious communities and faith-inspired organizations have to offer to the G20 agenda in meaningful action to resolve the forced migration crisis and look to urgent common action.

- 1) In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, G20 members should give urgent attention to developing partnerships involving refugee-hosting countries, G20 members, development finance organizations, and international organizations (including faith communities), to meet immediate health care needs of refugees and IDPs. Models along the lines of a G5 Sahel pilot involving the African Development Bank (AfDB), and UNHCR suggest approaches to filling health care gaps in refugee-hosting countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ Partnerships

with local and national faith leaders can reduce challenges of public health outreach to refugee and IDP populations during the COVID crisis, including concerns about scapegoating and patterns of discrimination affecting these communities. Public health messaging that is sensitive to faith communities and that comes from trusted sources has special importance for refugee and IDP situations.

2) Partnerships on refugee and IDP issues, including with faith organizations, need urgent strengthening. At transnational and national levels, G20 leaders and governments should engage proactively with faith communities to assess critical action to support forced migrants and address the underlying crises involved. Sharing promising practices for migrant situations and long-term integration of refugees and IDPs are first steps. Given significant service delivery expertise, and strong networks, faith inspired organizations possess considerable expertise that should be fully engaged. Priority should go to engaging with local faith communities and to strengthening action to address IDPs situations.

3) Stopping dangerous migration is a priority. G20 leaders should support broader adoption of approaches along the lines of the “humanitarian corridors”. Other dangerous migration routes exist globally around Australia, from Central America to the United States, across the Sahara Desert, and the land route from Central and South Asia to Europe. Faith communities have knowledge, expertise, and transnational networks that make them make natural partners in origin and destination countries for such programs. Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiatives could increase the number of countries where refugee sponsorship is a possibility.³⁶ Engagement with national level faith organizations will allow promotion of the program’s goals and recruitment of local congregation and faith communities to the program.

4) The Global Compact on Refugees foresees a larger number of countries involved in the refugee resettlement process. G20 leaders should address steps towards this goal with clear time frames, including engaging faith leaders to build public support for refugee resettlement.

5) Ongoing efforts to support for the agenda of the Global Compact on Refugees are underway and need G20 support. Specifics include appropriate levels of financing to develop systematized indicators and monitoring mechanisms for pledges, assistance, burden-sharing, and more. Funding the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework is important.

6) Partnerships with faith-inspired organizations offer particular promise for two especially urgent issues: education and livelihood support (including arrangements in host countries). Such partnerships are most effective where shared values exist, local knowledge is needed, and cooperation with local organizations increases local ownership.³⁷

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³⁵ US\$20 Million for Sahel Drive to Curb COVID-19, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2020/7/5f1993eb4/us20-million-sahel-drive-curb-covid-19.html>.

³⁶ Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, “Guidebook: Community Sponsorship of Refugees Guidebook and Planning Tools. 2020, https://refugeesponsorship.org/_uploads/5c0eba1651687.pdf.

³⁷ Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, “Building More Effective Partnerships between the Public Sector and Faith Groups,” April 2015.