

How NGOs have helped shape resettlement

Amy Slaughter

NGOs have a rich history of involvement in case identification and referral for resettlement, and have helped to increase numbers, improve processes and make resettlement more equitable, and accountable, for refugees.

While one can easily grow impatient with resettlement's shortcomings, it is important to consider how far resettlement has come over the past decades and the role that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played in its evolution.

The involvement of civil society in resettlement pre-dates the creation of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and the establishment of formal resettlement programmes by receiving countries. Faith-based and secular humanitarian groups actively identified and assisted refugees to resettle prior to, during and after the second world war. With the Indochinese crisis in the 1970s and 1980s the United States (US) developed the Orderly Departure Program with the aid of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) to screen eligible applicants. UNHCR's role was primarily to broker the arrangement between Vietnam and the US rather than to identify the people to be resettled. Similarly, for Indochinese who fled to Thailand, NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) identified and processed them for resettlement.

The other dominant caseload in the 1980s and early 1990s were Soviet religious minorities. As for the Vietnamese, NGOs were the frontline screening agents for resettlement, most notably the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Vienna and Rome. In fact, prior to the mid-1990s, NGOs working closely with governments were responsible for the bulk of case identification and referral. Until that time, resettlement was seen largely as a foreign policy or immigration concern of receiving states, to be handled through their own channels with little involvement by UNHCR.

The shift to the greater role for UNHCR in resettlement that we see today came in

the mid-1990s following the end of the Cold War. In particular, the US changed its policy in 1995 to give priority to referrals submitted by UNHCR, as opposed to prioritising lists of specific groups of concern to the US that could access resettlement directly through one of the State Department's NGO partners. Intended to create a more equitable global system focused on humanitarian needs, the move had the unintended consequence of chronic referral shortfalls for the next twelve years as UNHCR did not immediately have the capacity to substitute for the cases historically generated by NGOs through the 'direct access' programmes.

Struggling to fill quotas

Responding to criticism over this and warnings that it could undermine UNHCR's credibility with resettlement countries, threaten future funding and result in reduced quotas,¹ UNHCR set about developing a 'rationalised' resettlement programme, with consistently applied criteria and professional, trained staff. It was at this point that the resettlement criteria we know today were codified and the first *Resettlement Handbook* was published in 1996. The first coordinating forum was created – the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement – with the original brief to strategise on closing the gap between referrals and quotas. It was also at this point that, in its effort to rise to the demands of resettlement countries, UNHCR focused intensively on building its internal capacity rather than building on partnership models with NGOs, as had been successfully employed by resettlement states. The partnerships between states and NGOs had existed in parallel with UNHCR's

referral system, meaning that UNHCR did not have a rich history of partnering with NGOs on resettlement on which to build.

The notable exception to this trend was the development in 1998 of a deployment scheme administered by ICMC to supplement UNHCR's resettlement staffing. Due to the scale of the scheme, however, it has not played out quite as envisioned, which was the temporary secondment of NGO staff. The high demand for staffing has resulted in the majority being hired specifically for deployment to UNHCR, sometimes without prior NGO experience.

There were experiments with other forms of partnership for case identification and referral during this time. Notably, in the early 2000s, IRC in Pakistan began a project to identify at-risk Afghans and refer them to UNHCR for resettlement consideration. The rationale was that the scale of the refugee crisis in Pakistan left UNHCR handling only those cases that self-identified for resettlement, whereas an NGO could focus on outreach to find the most vulnerable cases. IRC worked closely with local NGOs in the identification process and, not having to deal with the full enormity of the crisis as UNHCR did, could dedicate resources to conducting home visits and better verifying the merits of the cases.

In Kenya in 2002, in the wake of a corruption scandal that halted UNHCR resettlement activities, HIAS developed a resettlement identification and referral programme.² The US State Department, frustrated with the continued lack of sufficient UNHCR referrals to fill its annual admissions quota, offered a series of NGO trainings intended to result in NGOs authorised to refer cases to the US. This initiative was eventually abandoned, in part because the trainings resulted in few agencies signing on and few referrals from the ones that did.

For a new generation of resettlement professionals, UNHCR was the only referral agent known. And for many European countries, reliance on UNHCR and lack of NGO involvement had been the norm so the memory of significant NGO involvement faded. By 2003, total

UNHCR referrals to be divided among all resettlement countries were 35,000, equal to just half of the US's quota alone.

Resurgence of NGO involvement

Seeing the discrepancy between unused slots and acuteness of needs witnessed in the field, more NGOs felt compelled to find ways to shore up the operational capacity. Recognising that the crucial gap continued to be around staffing to conduct case identification and referrals, RefugePoint³ was founded in 2005 with the initial goal of ensuring that available resettlement quotas were fully utilised, particularly for African cases, which had historically fared poorly compared with other regions.

NGOs loaning resettlement staff to UNHCR has now become commonplace. With ICMC by far the largest provider, these 'auxiliary workforces' collectively produce around 60% of all resettlement referrals annually. Beyond deploying staff to UNHCR, international NGOs continue to work with and train national NGOs so as to expand the reach of resettlement to cases that otherwise would not gain access, using their unique position in refugee communities to identify the most at-risk cases and refer them to UNHCR for consideration. There is now an online Toolkit hosted on UNHCR's website intended to encourage NGOs to identify cases and, correspondingly, to encourage local UNHCR offices to welcome and process NGO referrals.⁴

While it is difficult to disentangle the various contributions that resulted in significantly expanded capacity and quotas being met, the fact that in recent years NGOs have become trusted, relied-upon sources of resettlement referrals – combined with UNHCR having adopted a more welcoming approach to partnering with NGOs – has undoubtedly served the programme well.

Beyond added capacity, NGO involvement has brought other benefits. While by necessity UNHCR must focus on generating sufficient referrals to respond to donor and resettlement country demands, NGOs are freer to focus on vulnerability and the merits of individual cases.

One of RefugePoint's goals has been to ensure equitable access to resettlement, both in the sense of geographic distribution of resettlement opportunities and demographic distribution within those geographies; this has also been a stated goal of UNHCR and resettlement governments over the years. RefugePoint has tracked the percentage referred country by country in Africa, for example, and what emerges is an improving picture. In 2005, refugees of 23 different nationalities were referred from 28 different host countries in Africa. By 2015, it was up to 28 nationalities referred from 34 host countries and referral numbers for those same years increased from 15,000 to nearly 39,000.

Conclusion

The increased involvement of NGOs in the identification and referral process over the past decade has brought with it a steady spotlight on issues of equity and accountability, which has improved and strengthened the resettlement programme overall. Leading up to the mid-1990s,

resettlement was an activity driven by a few resettlement countries for mixed humanitarian and foreign policy motives. In its next phase, resettlement became formalised and led by UNHCR. In its current phase, resettlement might benefit from greater accountability, with the time ripe for establishing common impact measurements around resettlement, beyond referral numbers. As a community we might develop measures, for instance, to answer the questions about how effective resettlement is as a durable solution, how equitably it is implemented, and whether it is reaching those who need it the most.

Amy Slaughter slaughter@refugepoint.org
Chief Strategy Officer, RefugePoint
www.refugepoint.org

1. Frederiksson J and Mougne C (1994) *Resettlement in the 1990s: A Review of Policy and Practice*, UNHCR Evaluation Report www.unhcr.org/3ae6bcfd4.pdf
2. See article by Melonee Douglas, Rachel Levitan and Lucy Kiama, pp34-37.
3. Originally under the name Mapendo International
4. UNHCR (2015) *UNHCR-NGO Toolkit for Practical Cooperation on Resettlement* <http://bit.ly/UNHCR-NGO-resettlement-toolkit>