Promoting Refugee Self-Reliance through United States Global Leadership: Recommendations to the Incoming Biden Administration

The Biden administration should reclaim US leadership in the global refugee regime in its foreign policy and bilateral and multilateral humanitarian assistance. One critically important way to do this is to promote the self-reliance of refugees by uplifting the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), supporting its implementation globally and in the United States, and promoting accountability for results.

Today, the number of refugees is at record levels. Eighty percent of the world’s 26 million refugees are hosted in developing countries and 60 percent reside in urban areas rather than in camps. The rise of protracted conflicts, coupled with the effects of climate change, is creating prolonged refugee crises. Indeed, 78 percent of refugee situations now last more than five years, leaving many refugees to languish for years with few opportunities to restart and rebuild their lives. In recent years, only 3 percent of the world’s refugees have been able to access a durable solution annually. At the same time, the United States and other developed countries have further restricted the rights of asylum seekers and others in need of humanitarian protection.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol guarantee social and economic rights to help refugees get back on their feet, and yet in the current system, the vast majority of refugees remain dependent on a humanitarian system that is not set up to provide protection and support over the long run. Moreover, restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have put additional economic and social strain on refugee households.

The Global Compact on Refugees and Self-Reliance

In 2018, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the GCR with near unanimity. This global agreement reiterated the role of the international system to uphold refugee rights, and placed a specific focus on refugee self-reliance. It defines self-reliance as the “…social and economic ability of an individual, household or community to meet basic needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity” and underscores the intersection between refugee rights and opportunity.

Refugees themselves emphasize that they want the freedom to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Evidence indicates that when refugees are provided the opportunities to succeed, the host society benefits from their skills, labor, and resources, and refugees are in less need of assistance from donors or the host community. This has become
even more important during the pandemic, when the well-being of one is linked to the well-being of all.

Despite the recognized economic and social benefits of ensuring self-reliance, the reality is that most refugees are not able to sustainably meet their basic needs, much less thrive. They face a range of obstacles, including but not limited to a lack of access to the labor market and constraints on their freedom of movement. In many refugee contexts, even fewer safe economic options are available to women or persons with disabilities due to discrimination and legal and cultural barriers.\textsuperscript{14,15} In addition, they face increased risks of violence and exploitation during displacement.

The Biden administration should support the desire and right of refugees to rebuild their lives and contribute to inclusive societies by emphasizing refugee rights and strengthening their opportunities to achieve self-reliance. The GCR – the first major refugee protection agreement in a generation – provides a framework to reshape global refugee response and the opportunity for the United States to lead by example in its support for the principles and full implementation of the GCR.

Recommendations

Adopt and make specific pledges under the GCR to advance refugee self-reliance:

- **Increase and provide multi-year resources for protracted humanitarian and refugee responses to strengthen resilience and support self-reliance.** Short-term, sporadic aid is insufficient for helping people recover and rebuild their lives.\textsuperscript{16,17} The US government should take immediate steps to create a trigger to shift refugee response resources from one-year funding cycles to multi-year funding after a caseload has been displaced for more than two years, if not sooner. Interventions that include strengthening market access, promoting social cohesion, and improving sustained access to local government services, along with a matrix for measuring the achievement of self-reliance outcomes, are needed to help conflict-affected and displaced people sustainably achieve self-reliance and increase their resilience.

- **Provide targeted support for implementation of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) pledges of two to three critical partner countries.** Numerous countries have made GRF pledges and/or have created Comprehensive Refugee Response Frameworks. The Biden administration should utilize all possible diplomatic levers and financial support of the US government to help committed nations strengthen the self-reliance of refugee and hosting societies, taking into account the age, gender, disability, and diversity of their populations, and to measure the achievement of these pledges. As an example, encouraging and supporting the strengthening of asylum systems and integration services in countries like Mexico, which have legal frameworks that grant refugees the right to work and labor protections, sends a message throughout the region and globally about US priorities and the importance of refugee self-reliance. For such a message to be
credible, the administration must, above all, restore the US asylum system and its own integration services.

- **Substantially increase resources for refugee-, immigrant-, and human rights-focused civil society groups, including refugee-led organizations, to strengthen self-reliance response and advocacy efforts.** As the United States and the international community have been reminded in recent years, xenophobia has no borders. The role of civil society in the support of human rights, including refugee rights, is critical, especially when governments fail to live up to their obligations. The US government should increase its support for civil society organizations and refugee-led organizations globally, including women’s and LGBTQI+ groups, to advocate for policies that are inclusive of the rights of all refugees to pursue self-reliance and contribute to the fabric of hosting nations.

**Strengthen US advocacy on refugee rights globally, including the right to self-reliance.** Actively promote refugee rights, including the freedom of movement and the right to work, by supporting hosting countries to enact legislative and policy reforms allowing refugees to exercise their labor rights and to access school and professional training, healthcare, and other public services. The US government should allocate resources to support a human rights-based approach to migration, including efficient and just national asylum systems to facilitate self-reliance.

**Encourage Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) to increase their support for refugee self-reliance.** The administration should leverage the US position to support MDBs to fund refugee-hosting governments to create jobs for refugees and host communities in line with human rights principles. To ensure that jobs created under such projects are decent work that can support self-reliance, the US should support measures – such as the World Bank’s Refugee Policy Review Framework\(^\text{18}\) and the Compact Model Approach\(^\text{19}\) – that combat discrimination and support funding recipients to make changes to their legal framework to allow practical and legal access to the labor market for refugees, extend a full range of labor protections to refugees and fund legal empowerment programs that can assist refugee workers in asserting their legal rights.

**Demonstrate a strong commitment to refugee self-reliance in the United States in keeping with the GCR and to reinforce US global advocacy and action.** This includes self-reliance in the United States.

- **Invest in the US resettlement infrastructure and develop complementary pathways for legal admission.** Building on the Biden administration’s commitment to increase the resettlement cap to 125,000, invest the necessary resources to meet this goal by rebuilding the resettlement infrastructure, as outlined by the Penn-Biden Center, pilot complementary pathways (e.g. labor, education, family reunification, etc.), and include comprehensive measures of refugee outcomes and success, including the achievement of self-reliance.

- **Remove barriers to self-reliance.** Revoke the regulations extending the time asylum seekers must wait before applying for employment authorization and allow
• asylum seekers to apply for employment authorization immediately upon applying for asylum.

Asylum Access  
Mercy Corps  
Danish Refugee Council  
Norwegian Refugee Council USA  
HIAS  
Refugees International  
Home Storytellers  
RefugePoint (Co-Chair)  
International Rescue Committee  
Women’s Refugee Commission (Co-Chair)

1 https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/the-power-of-cities/.  
3 https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/.  
4 The three durable solutions are voluntary returns in safety & dignity; local integration; and resettlement to another location or country.  
5 https://global.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/penn-biden-center/Final%20Roadmap%20%20Rebuilding%20USRAP%20Report%20%20Roadmap%20%20Rebuilding%20USRAP.pdf.  
8 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/19/when-refugee-displacement-dragons-on-is-self-reliance-the-answer/.  
13 https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/policy/refugee-economies-in-uganda.  
17 The International Rescue Committee’s recent report estimates that at least $1.7 billion was needed in cash in 2020 to limit the number of people going hungry in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and displacement. https://www.rescue-uk.org/report/cost-living-covid-19-humanitarian-cash-transfers-prevent-hunger-and-hardship.  