

Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

Vol. 1: Normalizing a Role for NGOs in Refugee Resettlement Referrals

Quick summary: Acting as a lead contributor, RefugePoint has helped expand equitable access to refugee resettlement by increasing and normalizing a role for NGOs in making refugee resettlement referrals.

Systems change description

Access to refugee resettlement has been expanded in part through the involvement of NGOs in identifying and referring refugees for resettlement in the past 20 years. The role of NGOs in this process has expanded meaningfully and formalized since the early 2000s, evidenced by three key areas: the emergence of dedicated resources, a shift in mindsets at UNHCR regarding the acceptance of an NGO role in this work, and a growing number of NGOs engaged.

U.S. State Department policy has long formally recognized the role of NGOs in resettlement referrals, stating that NGOs trained by the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services may submit resettlement cases for consideration.² Until recently, PRM provided no resources to NGOs to support this work. However, as of 2022, PRM has formally resourced this work through the Equitable Resettlement Access Consortium (ERAC), a three-year initiative funded by PRM that is a collaboration between RefugePoint, HIAS, and the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP). This initiative helps to develop new global systems to facilitate and broaden NGO resettlement referrals. ERAC systematizes NGO referrals through formal recognition and funding, expands the base of NGOs making resettlement referrals by developing partnerships with grassroots NGOs in new locations globally and cultivating their capacity to identify and refer suitable cases, and was an indication of the Biden Administration's interest in expanding access to resettlement through NGO referrals.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has increasingly acknowledged the formal role of NGOs in identifying and referring refugees for resettlement since the mid-2000s. An early example of UNHCR's growing

ABOUT THIS SERIES

RefugePoint partners with refugees to access life-changing solutions and transforms how the world supports them. This series showcases examples of how RefugePoint contributes to systems change, which we understand as changing one or more of the factors that keep existing refugee response systems from serving refugees adequately and equitably. These factors include policies, practices, resources, relationships between actors, distributions of power, and mindsets (beliefs and ideologies).¹ This brief presents the results of an externally-led, participatory evaluation that draws on extensive interviews with RefugePoint partners, colleagues, and other stakeholders, participatory sense-making activities with RefugePoint staff, and document review. The brief summarizes what has changed, why change was needed, how change came about, RefugePoint's unique role, and the relevance of the change for refugees.

¹ Kania, J., Kramer, J., & Senge, P. (2018). "[The water of systems change.](#)"

² See U.S. State Department [Policy 9 Fam 203.4](#) Referrals for Refugee Status (section 1.d).

recognition of NGOs' role is a toolkit on UNHCR–NGO practical cooperation on resettlement first published in 2011 and later updated in 2015. Compiled jointly by UNHCR, HIAS and RefugePoint, the toolkit marked an important symbolic step towards greater acceptance of NGO referrals.³ A UNHCR representative expressed the sentiment that NGOs will continue to be part of this work moving forward: *“I think we will never go back to a situation where UNHCR is the only organization that makes referrals.”* (Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR) The UNHCR's Projected Global Resettlement Needs⁴ report now includes a short section on NGO roles in resettlement, providing one small but significant example of this recognition.

The number of NGOs engaged in resettlement referrals has also grown. UNHCR representatives noted that NGOs have always played a role in identifying refugees for resettlement, though typically, those referrals were made to UNHCR for consideration rather than directly to governments, and they were not tracked or quantified. In 2014, UNHCR and RefugePoint partnered on a project to map engagement of NGOs in refugee resettlement. With private funding, RefugePoint deployed a staff person to UNHCR-Geneva who developed a survey for UNHCR country operations. The survey found that two-thirds of operations across 61 countries included individuals identified and referred by NGOs, either through protection referrals or resettlement referrals.⁵ More recently, ERAC has approved 13 new NGOs as U.S. referral partners, with five more pending approval as of December 2024.

Need for change

UNHCR has historically been the primary entity submitting refugee referrals to resettlement countries. Certain events and contextual factors sometimes limit UNHCR's ability to submit resettlement referrals to third countries, prompting a need for alternative mechanisms such as direct NGO referrals.⁶ Furthermore, UNHCR has limited reach within certain locations or within some refugee populations for which NGOs have better connections.⁷ Some refugee populations may struggle to access UNHCR due to the distance between UNHCR offices and refugee communities, security requirements for UNHCR buildings, lack of transportation, or other considerations. NGOs located close to refugee communities or who are trusted by refugee communities have demonstrated they can effectively identify some of the most vulnerable refugees who might not otherwise gain access to resettlement.



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Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR

Levers of change

Levers of change are relatively small changes that actors such as RefugePoint can make that can bring about a bigger change in the overall system.⁸ The evaluation identified the following as the most important levers used by RefugePoint to help bring about a change in the system.

Leading by example: RefugePoint has been involved with NGO referrals since its inception in 2005. Some of its earliest efforts involved identifying groups of refugees to bring to the attention of UNHCR and PRM, such as the Gatumba Massacre survivors in Burundi, the Sudanese Lost Girls and Darfuris in Kakuma, etc. The agency also began making direct referrals to the U.S., Canada, and Australia for individual cases in Nairobi in 2005. Over the years, RefugePoint has consistently provided high-quality resettlement casework and referrals. As a U.S. Department of State Official noted, *“They were one of the first NGOs to really be interested in submitting ... not all NGOs are interested in submitting referrals... But RefugePoint wanted to do both [referrals and other direct service work with refugees], and I think was determined that they could do both without clouding their original mission... And in a way that ... has been with integrity and without reproach.”*

Evidence-based advocacy: RefugePoint has been a thought leader that pushes other actors in the system to think in new ways, as noted in multiple interviews. A former staff person said, *“I hope it's an organization that sticks around for a long time and continues to push the boundaries. [RefugePoint] challenges the usual stakeholders to push them to do more, to do better, to think outside the box. And I think it's important that there are organizations like this to do so.”* (Johanna Babb, former RefugePoint staff) RefugePoint has been

³ UNHCR. (2015). [“UNHCR-NGO Toolkit For Practical Cooperation on Resettlement.”](#)

⁴ UNHCR. (2025). [“Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2025.”](#)

⁵ UNHCR. (2015). [“UNHCR-NGO Collaboration Around Resettlement Identification.”](#)

⁶ For example, in 1999, UNHCR became aware of a resettlement corruption scandal in Kenya that led to a temporary pause in their resettlement referrals.

⁷ For example, as the U.S. expanded resettlement out of Latin America, there was a recognition of the importance of local partners as UNHCR did not have extensive reach into local communities.

⁸ Meadows, D. (2015). [“Leverage Points-Places to Intervene in a System.”](#)

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a sustained voice advocating with UNHCR and the governments of the U.S., Canada, and Australia for an expanded NGO role in resettlement referrals since its founding and continues to be a strong voice. Advocacy has involved working behind the scenes with key stakeholders such as PRM and UNHCR and publishing reports on the role and value of NGOs in referrals.⁹

Convening partners and stakeholders: Convening organizations that understand and work within the existing resettlement infrastructure, seeking to add value while also advocating for systems improvement have been key to effectively engaging with UNHCR and government stakeholders in this area. A partner has reflected on RefugePoint’s use of this approach: “They create networks and series of partners to do the work rather than going it alone. They’re not on an empire-building exercise, they’re trying to change the way that things work. It’s a generous approach to other organizations in the ecosystem. I think they’re really easy to work with ... kind and generous with their time and eager to partner, eager to explore things, not wedded to one methodology.” (Becca Heller, IRAP)

RefugePoint’s contributions

What unique role did RefugePoint play in pulling the levers that helped bring about this change? Drawing on a typology of roles actors can play in advocacy work,¹⁰ the evaluation found that RefugePoint has played a **lead contributor** role, working closely with UNHCR and partners like HIAS and IRAP to expand and formalize a role for NGOs in identifying and referring refugees for resettlement, utilizing the levers of change identified above. A theme that emerged from this evaluation was that change happens when contextual factors create a need or opportunity, and NGOs have the capacity and flexibility to step in. RefugePoint has been both ready and able to step in when needs and opportunities arise and has led in innovation related to third country solutions and NGO referrals. A RefugePoint staff



Safiya and her children pose for a photo outside their home in Nairobi, Kenya.

Photo by Chris Jensen

member described this: “We wouldn’t have predicted – it’s not like we planned 10 years ago to be here now. We’ve just taken each next step, and capitalized on each last step, and worked with partners to take advantage of that progress and those opportunities for all of us to have a collective impact.” (Martin Anderson, RefugePoint)

RefugePoint has also represented a strong example of an NGO effectively identifying and referring refugees. It directly engages with work on the ground and is one of the main NGOs making third country referrals. RefugePoint implements other programming within communities where refugees live that position it to identify individuals with resettlement needs that UNHCR might not identify. As a UNHCR staff member noted: “In Kenya, through their other services, they are in an excellent position to identify the most at-risk refugees and those for whom resettlement is actually the only solution. So it was a very comprehensive approach towards seeking solutions for the most vulnerable individuals.” (Inge De Langhe, UNHCR)

Relevance for refugees

Normalizing a role for NGOs has helped expand equitable access to resettlement. Organizations working directly in refugee communities are well-placed to identify cases most in need of resettlement and who may face barriers to accessing resettlement or UNHCR

9 See [UNHCR-NGO Collaboration around Resettlement Identification](#) (2015) and Slaughter, A. (2017). [How NGOs Have Helped Shape Resettlement](#), *Forced Migration Review*, 54.

10 Coe, J., & Schlagen, R. (2019). [No Royal Road. Finding and Following the Natural Pathways in Advocacy Evaluation](#). Center for Evaluation Innovation.



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Inge De Langhe, UNHCR

more generally, due e.g. to challenges refugees may face to accessing UNHCR facilities and staff directly. A RefugePoint staff member noted, “*We believe that NGOs*

tend to have a better reach into communities to identify the cases that need resettlement the most so that it’s less of a numbers game ... by NGOs working together with UNHCR, UNHCR broadens their reach further and deeper into communities to find vulnerable people.” (Amy Slaughter, RefugePoint)

RefugePoint has also sought to engage local organizations in this work and strongly advocated for them to be more central in identifying refugees for resettlement. Such organizations have historically been limited in their access to engage in this work. A UNHCR representative described: “*RefugePoint went and did a whole lot of work with local NGOs, and decided not to expand its own structure, but rather to support local NGOs... They’ve got training programs with refugees they bring in [for their “traineeship program” as part of the resettlement deployment scheme]. So they are putting their money where my mouth is [supporting priorities UNHCR advocates] in a lot of ways.”* (Jackie Keegan, UNHCR)

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Attribution

Elizabeth Frank conducted and authored this evaluation. Patrick Guyer and Amy Slaughter served as editors and convenors of the evaluation.