

Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

Vol. 10: Strengthening Access to Family Reunification as a Durable Solution for Refugees

Quick summary: *RefugePoint has been a leading contributor in strengthening family reunification as a durable solution for refugees, creating refugee-centered pathways, and coordinating with partners and governments to enable refugees to safely and successfully reunite with their families.*

System change description

This evaluation finds that RefugePoint has been a lead contributor¹ in strengthening access to family reunification as a durable solution for refugees.² RefugePoint was integral to conceptualizing family reunification as a pathway for refugees to relocate to a safe country. The organization was a central partner in the Central Mediterranean Situation (CMS) pilot³ and serves as a main convener of partners and states through the Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN).

Through the CMS pilot, RefugePoint and partners created an end-to-end pathway for refugees that supports them from the initial identification and eligibility screening to case management to eventually families being reunified. This involved documenting systemic, administrative, and legal barriers to accessing non-refugee-specific family-based visa programs and contributing to successful case outcomes for many refugee families. Lessons from the project informed the family reunification guidelines of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), codifying key aspects of the work for future efforts. Overcoming these barriers required legal expertise, knowledge of refugee protection, and strong coordination among partners and institutions. RefugePoint and partners worked closely to develop this pathway by addressing the multiple barriers refugees faced. They also coordinated to enable refugees to successfully unite with family members. RefugePoint further strengthened

¹ See the publication [No Royal Road: Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation](#) for a typology of roles (p. 30).

² Family reunification has long been a priority in refugee resettlement programs and is embedded in many nations' immigration laws, particularly with respect to spouses and minor children. With resettlement opportunities shrinking, humanitarian actors are looking to non-refugee-specific visa opportunities of which refugees might take greater advantage. It was recognized that additional assistance would be required to help level the playing field for refugees to access these visas.

³ The [Central Mediterranean Situation pilot](#) was a three-year initiative launched in 2019 to enhance family reunification for at-risk children and youth in four countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and Sudan) with one or both parents, primarily in Europe or North America.

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).^{*} 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.

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

this work through its role in the FRUN and through its refugee-centered approach to direct service work with refugees.

Stakeholders emphasized improved coordination among civil society members (NGOs and RLOs), UNHCR, legal partners and governments as an important element of systems change that emerged from both the CMS pilot and the ongoing work of the FRUN. This coordination contributed to new processes, shared problem-solving mechanisms, and formal and informal structures for collaboration and case advocacy. RefugePoint's support for including and engaging refugee-led organizations (RLOs) as part of this coordination was another aspect of changing the system identified by RefugePoint staff, partners, and UNHCR. Partners described expanded collaboration with RLOs, such as receiving family reunification cases directly from RLOs, and a growing recognition of their crucial role in the family reunification process. The FRUN now has two seats on its Advisory Group dedicated to refugee- and/or diaspora-led organizations, a move led by RefugePoint that provides the FRUN with refugees' perspectives to better inform its work.

RefugePoint was also one of the leaders of the Multi-stakeholder Pledge Supporting Refugee Family Reunification at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2023. The forum marked an important milestone in catalyzing awareness and action on family reunification across states and civil society organizations. This pledge received 42 commitments from national and local governments, civil society organizations, private sector stakeholders, philanthropists, and academic institutions. Pledge partners set the goal to help at least 1 million refugees reunite with their families by 2030 by addressing legal and policy barriers, providing practical support, and gathering data. The governments of Brazil and Portugal stepped forward to join other global leaders of the pledge, the first time countries sought leadership roles in family reunification since the establishment of the FRUN in 2020. Other countries made commitments to support family reunification through their pledges.⁴ For example, Uganda pledged to enhance access to birth documentation for refugees born in the country, which is fundamental to family reunification. Lithuania pledged to expand the period for filing for family reunification from three to six months. Several other countries—such as Scotland, Spain, Uruguay, and Wales—made broader statements in

support of family reunification, such as streamlining family reunification procedures or promoting family reunification as important for integration. In 2024, pledge partners directly assisted an estimated 8,165 refugees to access family reunification services through individual outreach and counseling, practical and legal support, and integration.⁵

Why change was needed

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights characterizes *family* as “the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”⁶ Most governments now accept the right to family unity as an inalienable right, prompting continued efforts to refine a fractured system of family reunification for refugees. Refugees often encounter onerous documentation requirements; labyrinthine eligibility and application procedures; long processing times; prohibitive costs associated with visas, travel, and housing; language barriers; and complex bureaucratic rules across departure and destination countries. Refugees often must report to an embassy or consulate in another country, but lack the legal status to cross borders to reach it.

Currently, more than 100 million people are forcibly displaced and only a small number have successfully navigated family-based visa programs to reunite in destination countries. Family reunification is a primary reason for refugees to relocate whether through formal pathways or via irregular migration.⁷ From 2017 through 2023, the total estimated number of first-time family permits issued was 916,050.⁸ The number of refugees in need of family reunification far exceeds the number of permits granted annually. In response to this situation, RefugePoint implemented a targeted approach to proactively identify refugees eligible for family reunification, assist them in navigating the process, and coordinate with pro bono legal providers in the destination countries to create an end-to-end pathway from country of asylum to destination country.

RefugePoint's unique contribution

This evaluation concludes that RefugePoint has been a lead contributor to strengthening family reunification as a durable solution for refugees. Partners identified

4 See the Multi-Stakeholder Pledge [webpage](#) for a list of individual pledges and the [2024 Pledge Community Report](#) for progress on the pledge. Information supplemented by key informant interviews.

5 The [Family Reunification Pledge Community Report 2024](#) summarizes progress made in the first year of the pledge.

6 See the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [here](#).

7 The Mixed Migration Center has conducted research on reasons for migration and destinations and has found family reunification to be a primary factor for families' intended destinations. In two 2022 studies, one of refugees and migrants in [Tunisia](#) with a family reunification aspiration (n = 189 survey respondents) and one in [Sudan](#) (n = 181), the Center found that more than 90 percent of respondents in both studies reported family reunification as a reason for their intended destinations.

8 The [Safe Pathways for Refugees](#) report compiles statistics from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries and Brazil on yearly permit grants for nationalities from eight key refugee origin countries (Afghans, Eritreans, Iranians, Iraqis, Somalis, Sudanese, Syrians, and Venezuelans). These statistics cover all people of concern, including refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and internally displaced persons. Permits are any first-time authorization issued by a receiving country and include those who were not ultimately able to relocate to the destination country.



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Hannah Elford, UNHCR

RefugePoint as a thought leader and key implementer. In 2018, RefugePoint and the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) developed a concept note that was later implemented through a tripartite agreement with UNHCR through the CMS pilot. Based in Tunisia and covering four countries between 2019 and 2022, the project was created to focus on serving refugee children. It aimed to proactively identify unaccompanied children in Africa whose parents or other close relatives had already immigrated to Europe or beyond. Currently, there are an estimated 153,300 unaccompanied and separated refugee children worldwide, with Africa hosting the largest number.⁹ RefugePoint, IRAP, and UNHCR coordinated across geographies to promote the use of family-based visa programs and mitigate risks associated with the Central Mediterranean route.¹⁰ This became one of the first targeted initiatives coordinating among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UNHCR on family reunification as part of complementary pathways for refugees.

RefugePoint has also been a lead contributor to the FRUN, leading the network alongside UNHCR and serving as the secretariat and supporting it with private funding.¹¹ Launched in 2020, the FRUN is a platform for civil society organizations, RLOs, United Nations agencies, and states to share information,

foster cooperation, and advocate for refugee family reunification. RefugePoint and the FRUN were both part of the pledge leadership of the Multi-stakeholder Pledge Supporting Refugee Family Reunification during the 2023 GRF.¹²

RefugePoint has ensured that initiatives such as the CMS pilot and the FRUN, were well informed by drawing on its direct casework experience with refugees and its expertise in child protection. For example, RefugePoint researched and highlighted the dangers facing children who travel from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. These dangers include trafficking, abuse, detention, and death. For the CMS pilot, RefugePoint deployed 15 staff experts across seven countries who identified eligible cases, provided beneficiaries extensive support throughout the application process, and liaised with IRAP to connect relatives in destination countries with pro bono legal assistance. Each deployment was time- and resource-intensive, tailoring support to individual refugee's needs.¹³ RefugePoint Experts were responsible for on-the-ground case management, resolving complex barriers, liaising with consulates, escorting refugees to appointments, and addressing other unique needs as they emerged. As one UNHCR staff noted:

“The uniqueness of RefugePoint in this space has been [that] they continue to be one of the leading actors in family reunification, because they have this in-house expertise, this overview of third country solutions and context understanding, this commitment to localization and engagement of refugee-led organizations, and the capacity to be flexible and dynamic.” (Hannah Elford, UNHCR)

Across all efforts, RefugePoint has used and promoted a refugee-centered approach, resulting in more collaboration with RLOs. *“We’ve created a new working group that is focused on refugee-led and diaspora-led organization engagement and is chaired by two RLO leaders. We’ve created things like the Kenya Interagency Working Group where, from the very start, RLO members are at the table with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), RefugePoint, and other actors, so they’re embedded in it,”* explained Jenn Wilson from RefugePoint.

The FRUN expanded its network by including RLOs and other NGOs that support refugees. As a result, the FRUN is more grounded in the experiences of refugees and benefits from engaging RLOs as partners.

⁹ Although it is difficult to determine the number of unaccompanied minors by country, UNHCR provides a global estimate [here](#). These numbers combine unaccompanied and separated minors.

¹⁰ The Central Mediterranean route is a commonly used migration path to Europe that encompasses the Mediterranean Sea between North Africa, Italy, and Malta.

¹¹ RefugePoint has funded the secretariat since the inception of the FRUN and currently serves as its secretariat.

¹² The pledge states: *“Aligned with the goals of The Roadmap, the Multi-stakeholder Pledge on Supporting Refugee Family Reunification aims to help at least 1 million refugees reunite with their families by 2030, through addressing legal and policy barriers, providing practical supports to overcome administrative and logistical hurdles, and gathering data and evidence on the need for and impact of family reunification.”*

¹³ Learn more about RefugePoint's Deployment Program [here](#).

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“The fact that they were bringing us together, trying to harmonize us, to harmonize this work, and see how better we can do it, for the benefit of the community, was commendable.”

Chocho Fashingabo, Youth Voices Community

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. RefugePoint has identified levers of change important to its work, all of which the organization has engaged as part of expanding family reunification.¹⁴

Convening partners and stakeholders. The strongest lever RefugePoint applied to this work was collaborating

with stakeholders and serving as a neutral convenor. A representative of a partner RLO articulated RefugePoint's value as a convenor: *“The fact that they were bringing us together, trying to harmonize us, to harmonize this work, and see how better we can do it, for the benefit of the community, was commendable.”* (Chocho Fashingabo, Youth Voices Community) RefugePoint has also been instrumental in leading the FRUN, providing a space for various stakeholders to coordinate and learn from one another. A RefugePoint staff member describes this:

“[The] FRUN [is a forum] where all stakeholders involved in family reunification come together to discuss challenges, address them, and identify opportunities. It also serves as a network where states learn from one another's approaches, helping to inform policy and practice changes at a more global scale.” (Janet Ouma, RefugePoint)

Leading by example and testing new ideas.

RefugePoint has taken the lead in developing and delivering a creative approach to assisting refugees to pursue family reunification, both through the CMS pilot and through its ongoing work with refugees in Kenya. Through its family reunification work, RefugePoint has innovated and learned by doing, identified barriers to family reunification and ways to strengthen family reunification efforts, and shared these lessons-learned with partners, including through the FRUN.



Bahati, a former client and currently RefugePoint's Technical Advisor, Refugee Leadership and Refugee-Centredness Programming, embracing her father as they reunite in Canada after years apart.

Photo by RefugePoint

¹⁴ The five levers of change are (1) Convening partners and stakeholders, (2) Testing new ideas and compiling evidence, (3) Leading by example, (4) Building capacity of others in the sector, and (5) Influence and advocacy.



Samira and her son Omer reunite in Canada after seven years apart.
Photo by RefugePoint

Relevance for refugees

Family separation can negatively affect refugees' mental well-being, physical health, integration into destination communities, and ability to successfully rebuild their lives. Refugees who are separated from their families often report feelings of guilt, stress, and distraction. Consequently, some refugees accept entry-level employment to send money to their families instead of investing in their own training, education, and life.¹⁵ On the other hand, united refugee families who successfully reestablish themselves are better able to find community in their destination countries, support their relatives abroad, and sometimes advocate for other refugees. An RLO partner expressed these ideas in saying, *"Family is the foundation. Without family reunification, integration is very hard. Separation affects children and parents deeply. When families are apart, people struggle with their mental health and cannot fully settle or participate in society."* (Yordi Lassooy-Tekle, Migration Inc.).

Over the years, RefugePoint has directly assisted about 2,000 refugees with family reunification casework. *"The actual families who have been reunified, of course, that's a huge impact. I do think that a lot of cases that we work on with RefugePoint are cases that would not be able to reunify if they were not identified and represented through this kind of project, or through this kind of effort."* (Kristine Rembach, IRAP)

Across its efforts, RefugePoint's refugee-centered approach ensures that it includes RLOs in important discussions, decisions, and spaces. According to an RLO leader who joined the FRUN, *"RefugePoint genuinely listens and is willing to work with refugee-led and grassroots organizations, acknowledging our role, experience, and knowledge."* (Yordi Lassooy-Tekle, Migration Inc.)

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Yordi Lassooy-Tekle, Migration Inc.

¹⁵ Phillimore, J., D'Avino, G., Strain-Fajth, V., Papoutsis, A., & Ziss, P. (2023). Family reunion policy for resettled refugees: Governance, challenges and impacts. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 5, 1075306.

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Attribution

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