

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME
NGO Collective Statement - General Debate
75th Session
14-18 October 2024
Delivered by: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT)

Dear Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs.

This marks the first time a refugee-led organization (RLO) delivers an ExCom statement on behalf of the NGO community, a moment we are proud of. It reflects the significance to engage refugees not just as individuals, but as institutions, and this is an example of that progress.

As we sit here today, safe within these walls, the cries of refugees for help resonate beyond our borders—pleas that are becoming harder to hear amidst the rising clamor of fear, division, and indifference. The concept of humanity is under siege. We mourn every innocent life lost in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, and elsewhere.

It is not just the displacement numbers that are alarming. It is the deepening chasm between those whose suffering is acknowledged, and those who are forgotten. Let's be honest: some civilians and refugees are deemed more worthy of protection and compassion than others.

As humanitarian workers, we once believed every life was equal, enduring sacrifices for that ideal. But now, when refugee camps become battlefields and children collateral, we face doubt: are we still upholding those principles, or have we started to apply compassion selectively?

For decades, NGOs have shouldered this burden, believing in the power of change and leadership. But today, we ask ourselves—and we ask you—how do we continue this work? We want to believe in a world where everyone has equal dignity, protection, and peace. Are we watching that dream fade?

We are at a critical moment requiring urgent, effective action to prioritize saving lives. We offer these recommendations to promote a shared humanity where everyone is granted equal dignity, protection, and peace.

- **First: we cannot forget the basics: We must prioritize saving lives and ensure access to protection and essential services, such as education and healthcare.**

Refugees and asylum seekers are often met with deterrence, pushbacks, and detention, denying them protection and sometimes involving inhumane treatment or torture. These practices worsen their vulnerabilities. States must ensure border policies respect non-refoulement, the right to seek asylum, the right to life, and the prohibition of torture and collective expulsions.

- **Second: All stakeholders must proactively address the public backlash against forcibly displaced and stateless persons, both in public discourse and political rhetoric.**

Political discourse on refugees has turned increasingly negative, with divisive narratives legitimized by politicians, normalizing xenophobia, racism, hate speech, and violence. This dehumanizes refugees, amplifies discrimination, endangers humanitarian workers, and undermines our core principles.

States must prioritize integration, inclusion, rights, and services, enforce anti-discrimination laws, prevent violence, and tackle xenophobia. Humanitarian workers must be protected, and aid operations must not be criminalized.

- **Third: we must continue to recognize the importance of meaningful refugee participation as a tool to enhance refugee responses at all levels.**

Meaningful refugee participation means that forcibly displaced and stateless people are present and allowed the power to influence discussions, policy, and decision-making processes pertaining to refugee issues. A sustained way to achieve Meaningful refugee participation is through refugee advisory boards, selecting members for both their lived experience and technical expertise.

Forcibly displaced people lead RLOs, shifting from aid recipients to active contributors, improving global responses. However, RLOs remain severely underfunded, receiving just a fraction of the 1.2% for local actors, cutting lifelines. At the global level, NGOs and RLOs are not always engaged in a substantive manner when shaping refugee policy, often consulted but not meaningfully engaged. We urge states to embrace them as true and equal partners, as outlined in the GCR.

We have a shared duty to save lives and ensure protection—this is not just policy, but a moral imperative. Our response today shapes tomorrow. We must rise above racism and xenophobia, acting with the compassion of past generations.

The NGO community, including refugee-led organizations, stands ready to support UNHCR and states in this mission.

This statement is available on icvanetwork.org and refugeesseat.org

Thank you.