

## **Public Policy Memo**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The world is suffering from an international refugee crisis. According to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 103 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide as of mid-2022. (UNHCR 2023). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are a multitude of reasons why people are seeking refuge in foreign lands. In areas such as Afghanistan and Syria, war and violent conflict has decimated the population and destroyed major cities. In Venezuela, socio-economic conditions have completely collapsed creating a fragile state unable to support and protect its own citizens. In Pakistan, devastating and unprecedented floods have left a vast majority of its country underwater with nearly 10 million children in need of immediate support. (UNICEF 2022). From violence to state collapse, to climate change, the reasons why people flee are ever evolving, yet our way of handling the refugee crises is not simultaneously evolving with it.

### **CURRENT PROBLEMS WITH THE SYSTEM**

First and foremost, a problem with the current definition, which is utilized worldwide, derives from the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention that states a refugee is: "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." (United Nations 1951). While this definition may have been suitable in 1951 to address the current situation, in 2023 this is entirely outdated. For example, In Venezuela the state has suffered a complete economic collapse from

hyperinflation, political instability, and food shortages which in turn has led to mass violence. Authors Paul Collier and Alexander Betts describes this situation as a fragile state: a poor country marked by weak state capacity and legitimacy, having no defense against widespread violence. (Betts & Collier 2017). Under the current system, a citizen from Venezuela fleeing the country to seek refuge would not qualify for the designation of Refugee and in many cases are not granted asylum due to the rigid and outdated definition.

Secondly, according to the United Nations “More than 50,000 migrants die in search of a better life” (UN 2022). Tragically, safe passage does not exist for most people seeking refuge today. As authorities crack down on routes by air and sea, more migrants are forced to take dangerous paths. For example, an area known as the Darien Gap connecting Central and South America is a migration path in the remote area of the border between Panama and Colombia. Geographically this area consists of rigid mountains, dense jungles, and treacherous swamps. Migrants are forced to hire “coyotes” (local guides) often facilitated by the cartel who routinely abuse, rape, kidnap, and murder these desperate people. Equally dangerous, Migrants are dying in the thousands as they cross the Mediterranean Sea in order to seek refuge in the European Union. According to Human Rights Watch, “More than 1,200 people have died in the Mediterranean Sea in 2022, adding to the horrifying tally of almost 25,000 deaths since 2014.” (HRW 2022). These migrants are pinned shoulder to shoulder by the hundreds on makeshift boats and rafts inadequate to handle the dangers of crossing oceans.

Lastly, only 1% of refugees are resettled in new countries per year. Resettlement is referring to the process in which the United Nations work with Countries in order to bring over refugees that are currently residing in refugee camps worldwide. Serena Parekh, author of *No Refugee*, writes: “About 1.4

million of the 25 million refugees are considered by the UN to be too vulnerable to be protected in refugee camps in the Global South and need resettlement. Because so few are resettled, most refugees including those in the most vulnerable group remain in the poorest countries in the world, where they first seek refuge. (Parekh 2020). Although the UN states only 1.4 million people are too vulnerable, I suspect the number to be much higher. Refugees in camps suffer from resource scarcity, lack of sanitation, violence, and inadequate accommodations to support the ever-growing influx of people.

## **WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE**

The legal definition of a refugee according to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention needs to be immediately revised to fit the current situation of the refugee crises today. Parekh states: “It is imperative that we move away from thinking of our obligations solely in terms of helping only those who have met the criteria of a narrow, limited definition of a refugee or asylum seeker.” (Parekh 2020). The definition needs to expand in order to include people that flee their countries of origin due to harm of any sort. More of a blanket definition needs to be created by the international community in order to encompass any situation which can cause a person to flee their country of origin and become forcibly displaced.

In order to address the dangerous journey migrants take in order to seek refuge in other countries, ‘Safe Havens’ need to be created and funded by the international community where refugees can be protected and cared for. Within these Safe Havens there should be implementation of a process in which an asylum seeker can apply for asylum in safe countries directly from their current location. If approved,

transportation to the destination should be provided by the country in which the refugee will be resettled alleviating the possibility of violence and danger enroute.

To combat the low numbers of resettlement cases among refugees, Global North countries need to expand resettlement private sponsorship programs and financially alleviate burdens the program currently requires for approval. For instance, In the United States a sponsor would be required to raise an initial \$2,275 per refugee in order to help support said refugee during their first three months in America. (Politico 2023). This should be revised as a stipend from the government directly to the refugee on a monthly basis for a minimum period of One year. During this time refugees should be granted the right to work in order to become self-sufficient. Education and Integration programs should be funded and implemented by the countries that CAN afford to do so.

## **CONCLUSION**

The provided policy recommendations are not an answer to the current humanitarian crises we have at hand, yet they are a step in the right direction. These suggested policies can play a significant role in the reduction of harm to refugees in the pursuit of addressing the root causes and implementing long term and lasting solutions.

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