



---

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

---

### DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950 to assist some 1.2 million European refugees left homeless by World War II. Today, UNHCR has a staff of more than 6,000 and aids approximately 20 million people in 115 countries worldwide. UNCHR's primary responsibility is to ensure respect for refugees' human rights.

The Executive Committee (ExCom) of UNHCR is the group of countries that discuss refugee issues and approve the work done by UNHCR staff around the world. ExCom is made up of 70 countries.

### TOPIC: SHARING REFUGEE BURDEN AND RESPONSIBILITY

#### INTRODUCTION

Because **refugees** flee their home countries to escape violence or persecution, they almost always need emergency assistance, food, water, clothing and shelter. If the refugees must stay in their **host country**—the country that takes them in—for a long time, they also require health care, schooling and jobs.

Assisting and protecting refugees is therefore a great burden for host countries. The burden is even more serious for developing countries, since hosting refugee populations can impact economic development. Countries that already suffer from widespread poverty and a weak economy may not have the resources to properly assist and protect refugees.

Hosting refugees is, above all, an important and necessary responsibility. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes the right of refugees to seek safety in other countries. And **asylum**, a legal term that means to provide safety, is an important international human rights standard. But because the costs involved with hosting refugees are high, countries must make an effort to share this responsibility with others. Burden-sharing means dividing the cost of hosting refugees among several different countries. It helps the host country provide better protection to the refugees and offer resources so they are healthy and safe.



But countries disagree over who should share this burden and how. For instance, countries may insist that they are only able to protect refugees in their own regions. Some insist that more countries should host refugees so that one host nation does not have the greatest, or the only, burden.

## BACKGROUND

Safeguarding refugees is an important responsibility that countries must take very seriously. Although hosting refugees can be expensive and difficult, refugees must be protected at all costs. But to effectively protect refugees, a host country must have the proper resources—and providing food, clothing and shelter is only a small portion of the overall cost. There are also great economic, environmental and security costs associated with hosting refugees.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of burden-sharing in refugee crises dates back to when the international community first started to recognize refugees. Paragraph Four of the Preamble to the *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* states that, “The grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international cooperation.”

*Source:* “Burden-Sharing: Discussion Paper Submitted by UNHCR Fifth Annual Plenary Meeting of the APC,” [www.worldlii.org/int/journals/ISILYBIHRL/2001/17.html](http://www.worldlii.org/int/journals/ISILYBIHRL/2001/17.html).

## CRITICAL THINKING

*Why do countries have a responsibility to protect the human rights of refugees, or to accept refugees at all? Is it a legal responsibility? Is it a moral responsibility?*

### *Economic Impact*

Refugee flows affect the economy of the host country in several serious ways. First, refugees need public services such as education, health care and sanitation facilities. They also require resources that may sometimes be scarce, such as energy, food, water, transportation and employment. When the host country’s government must use money or resources to help a refugee population, fewer resources are available for its own citizens.

This impact is even more severe when the host country is poor. Unfortunately, many of the countries that host the largest refugee populations are developing countries. Refugees fleeing a conflict area may go to a neighboring country that is facing economic troubles because of that same conflict.



### *Environmental Impact*

Any large influx of people can disrupt ecosystems by creating large amounts of waste and by using more natural resources. Countries face this problem when hosting refugee populations. Refugees require land, a scarce resource in many countries, to live on and sometimes to grow food on. Increases in the demand for other natural resources such as food, water and fuel also place strains on the environment. Refugees may also need to cut down trees and other vegetation to use as firewood or material to build shelters. When this demand for resources is extremely large, it can affect the long-term ability of these resources to renew themselves.

### *Security Concerns*

Even though refugee camps are designed to protect refugees, they are often located near conflict areas. Refugee camps are often the targets of attack. And violence can break out in a camp just like it can in any community. But policing camps and protecting refugees can be expensive. Cities and towns spend millions of dollars to protect citizens and the same is true for areas that must protect refugees.

#### **CRITICAL THINKING**

*How might a refugee population destabilize a host country? Can host countries prevent this without compromising the safety and health of its own people?*

### *Burden-sharing*

There are many different ways for the international community to help share the burden with countries that host refugees. Assistance can come in the form of technical expertise, human resources, money or supplies. But the most effective way to share a refugee burden is for other countries to host some of the refugees on their own territory. Even though financial contributions are helpful, the most serious burdens are faced by states that actually have refugees living within their borders.

This is not always possible, however, especially if refugees are fleeing a remote area. It would be expensive and difficult, for instance, for refugees from an African country to travel to northern Europe in large numbers. In addition, many developed countries also have laws preventing many refugees from entering the state. So even if people fleeing conflict or persecution can make it to the new land, they may be turned away. **Xenophobia**—a fear and intolerance of people from other cultures—is a problem in many countries. Racism and xenophobia may cause countries to be unwelcoming to refugees.

Another method of sharing the burden of refugees is for some countries to contribute resources to host countries. These include: wood and other materials for housing; crops or food products to feed the refugees; and experts or officials to oversee services like education, health care and sanitation.



Refugees may have to live in a host state for a long time. Therefore, it is important to remember that burden-sharing programs must be long-term and not simply implemented at the start of a refugee crisis.

### *Returning Refugees*

There is also a need for burden- and responsibility-sharing when refugees return to their **country of origin**. If the refugees' homes and land have been destroyed, they will need assistance to rebuild their communities and resume their lives. Conflict-torn countries generally do not have the means to repair their own lands, and so require aid from other countries or organizations.

It is important to understand that refugees can only be returned to their countries of origin after the threat to their safety is gone. If they are returned to a country in which they are in danger, instead of being granted asylum, this is known in international legal terms as *refoulement*. The principle of **non-refoulement**—not turning away refugees while there is still a danger to them—is an important international standard for protecting refugees.

## **PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTION**

Countries have dealt with the issue of burden-sharing on the national, regional and international levels.

### *National Reactions*

Many individual governments are creating more restrictive refugee policies. Too often, national burden-sharing initiatives are motivated by the desire to keep refugees out, rather than a desire to protect them. The resulting policies prevent large refugee populations from entering a nation, such that a single population must be dispersed among several host countries, or else the population is simply relocated to one, often impoverished, host country.<sup>2</sup> These “burden-sharing” policies do not often equally distribute the burden of aiding refugees. Instead, they may reinforce the burden placed on poor host nations.

### *Regional Efforts*

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was the first body to address the issue of burden-sharing on the regional level. Decolonization in Africa in the 1960s led to unrest and created large numbers of refugees; burden-sharing became an important issue. The 1969 OAU *Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa* states that “where a member state finds difficulty in continuing to grant asylum to refugees... member states shall in the spirit of African solidarity and international cooperation take appropriate measures to lighten the burden of the member state granting asylum.”<sup>3</sup>

The European Union (EU) has also addressed the issue of refugee burden-sharing through the *1995 European Council Resolution on Burden-Sharing with Regard to the Admission and Residence of Displaced Persons*. The resolution calls for making each European country's policies toward refugees the same, so that there is no reason that one state would be more



attractive to fleeing refugees than any other. The European Council decision of 28 September 2000 established a European Refugee Fund. The goal of the fund is to help share the financial burden associated with refugees.

Countries in Asia addressed the issue in Paragraph III of their 1987 *Addendum to the 1966 Bangkok Principles Concerning the Treatment of Refugees* adopted by the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee (AALCC). Paragraph III states, “The principle of international solidarity and burden-sharing should be seen as applying to all aspects of the refugee situation.” The document calls for burden-sharing efforts to include improving the treatment of—and conditions for—refugees, as well as providing long-term durable solutions to refugee issues.

### *International Measures*

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Executive Committee (ExCom) *Conclusion 22: Protection of Asylum Seekers in Situations of Large-Scale Influx* acknowledges the impact that refugee flows can have within a country, and calls on all countries, in the spirit of international solidarity, to share this burden at the request of the host state.

UNHCR stresses that sharing the refugee burden is key to protecting refugees and minimizing the negative effects of refugee movements. However, even when burden-sharing does not occur, host states still have the obligation to protect and assist refugees.

UNHCR launched two initiatives in response to the issue of burden-sharing. The first, called the *Global Consultations on International Protection*, was created to encourage states, international organizations, NGOs and other actors to engage in a dialogue about the issue. UNHCR believes that policy responses will be most effective when they are created by such a dialogue. The initiative is intended to enhance protection of refugees by encouraging support of protection principles like asylum and non-refoulement. It also focuses on the asylum practices of states, which are often inadequate.<sup>4</sup>

The *Convention Plus* initiative focused on the important role that developed nations must play in refugee protection. The initiative focused on the idea that developed countries have more resources to deal with refugee protection, and can therefore help to remove some of the burden from developing countries, which currently host most of the world’s refugees.<sup>5</sup>

Above all, UNHCR, as well as organizations such as the international human rights monitor Amnesty International, have stressed that countries must make protecting refugees their highest priority in burden-sharing arrangements. Amnesty International has issued a list of principles that all burden-sharing initiatives should abide by. To start, burden-sharing arrangements should be consistent with international refugee and human rights law. Refugees have the right to an effective and voluntary solution to their displacement. Arrangements should also take age and gender perspectives into consideration, and must ensure protection without discrimination.<sup>6</sup>



## *Success Stories*

The 1990 Paris Peace Accords included important burden-sharing initiatives that helped return 370,000 Cambodian refugees in Thailand to their home country. This effort was an example of successful work between UN bodies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and countries. The UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), UNHCR, and the national governments were key actors in resolving the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Another important example of successful burden-sharing was the evacuation of refugees from Kosovo in 1999. Through the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme, countries agreed to take in refugees to lighten the burden of Macedonia, which sheltered a large proportion of the refugee population. The program was particularly effective because even states outside of the region agreed to host refugees. Countries as far as Australia and New Zealand participated in the effort.<sup>8</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORMULATING A RESOLUTION**

Delegates should discuss the difficulties countries face when protecting refugees, as well as the various economic, social and environmental effects that a refugee population has on its host state. Delegates should also consider coordinating burden-sharing policy at the national, regional, and international levels. The needs of refugees at various stages in a refugee crisis, from emergency assistance to long-term solutions, should also be considered. Above all, delegates must ensure that burden-sharing helps to better assist and protect refugees in accordance with international law.

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Does your country host refugees? If so, what effect has the hosting of refugees had on your country?
2. What are your country's policies on the hosting of refugees?
3. Is your country a part of a regional effort at refugee burden-sharing?
4. Has your country been criticized for failing to adequately protect refugees?
5. What can your country do to better protect refugees within your borders?
6. What can your country do to help other countries to better protect refugees living within their borders?



## TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Refugee:** International law says that a refugee is any person who leaves and cannot return to their country of origin because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to the fact that their country cannot or will not protect them.

**Host country:** Any country that hosts refugees from another country.

**Asylum:** Protection offered to a refugee by a host country.

**Xenophobia:** Fear and intolerance of foreigners, which may include elements of racism or discrimination.

**Country of origin:** A refugee’s home country.

## SOURCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

UN High Commissioner for Refugees [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)

US Committee for Refugees [www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org)

Amnesty International [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)



## REFERENCES

---

<sup>1</sup> “Burden-Sharing: Discussion Paper Submitted by UNHCR Fifth Annual Plenary Meeting of the APC”

<http://www.worldlii.org/int/journals/ISILYBIHRL/2001/17.html>

<sup>2</sup> Christina Boswell, “Burden Sharing in the New Age of Immigration,” Migration Policy Institute, Accessed 30, August 2005, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=173>

<sup>3</sup> “OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa,” African Union, Accessed 30 August 2005, [http://www.africa-union.org/Official\\_documents/Treaties\\_%20Conventions\\_%20Protocols/Refugee\\_Convention.pdf](http://www.africa-union.org/Official_documents/Treaties_%20Conventions_%20Protocols/Refugee_Convention.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> “The State of the World's Refugees 2006,” *Chapter 8 Looking to the future: Need for greater responsibility-sharing.* <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/publ/opendoc.htm?tbl=PUBL&id=4444d3cf2>.

<sup>5</sup> “The State of the World's Refugees 2006”

<sup>6</sup> “UNHCR’s Forum & Executive Committee Basic Human Rights Principles Applicable To Responsibility- And Burden-Sharing Arrangements” 2004 Amnesty International, [http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGIOR420072004\\_1\\_March\\_2004](http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGIOR420072004_1_March_2004).

<sup>7</sup> “Burden-Sharing: Discussion Paper Submitted by UNHCR Fifth Annual Plenary Meeting of the APC”

<sup>8</sup> “Burden-Sharing: Discussion Paper Submitted by UNHCR Fifth Annual Plenary Meeting of the APC”

