

Written Testimony of
Asylum Access, an International Refugee Rights Nonprofit
www.asylumaccess.org

Hearing Before the
United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration

**“Oversight of the Administration’s FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program:
Fiscal and Security Implications”**

October 1, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the important topic of the role of the United States refugee resettlement program in securing safety, dignity and rights for the millions of refugees in the world.

I. BACKGROUND

Asylum Access is an international human rights organization dedicated to improving implementation of refugees’ human rights in countries of first asylum across Africa, Asia and Latin America. We provide legal information, advice, and representation to around 20,000 refugees each year in six countries – Ecuador, Panama, Mexico, Thailand, Malaysia, and Tanzania – and advocate for national, regional, and global policies that better implement and safeguard refugees’ fundamental rights to live safely, move freely, work, attend school, and build new lives as contributing members of their new homes.

Through our work, we track and assess global trends and truths about refugees and their relationships to asylum states.

The world currently confronts the largest forced displacement in recorded history.¹ More people are displaced today as a result of persecution, conflict and war than ever before – nearly 60 million, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Around one-third of them – nearly 20 million people – have been forced entirely out of their home countries, and thus are refugees.²

Most of Asylum Access’s refugee clients will never reach the United States, as less than 1% of all refugees are resettled to the U.S., Europe, Canada and Australia combined each year. Because of this, Asylum Access spends much of our time working to ensure that refugees have access to meaningful rights in countries of first asylum. We repeatedly hear from our clients that they want two things: the power and opportunity to meet their own needs rather than indefinitely depending on aid; and the ability to contribute to their communities in the countries that have become their new homes.

¹ UNHCR, *Worldwide displacement hits an all-time high as war and persecution increase* (June 18, 2015). <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.

² UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014* (2014). <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>.

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As the Senate considers the fiscal and security implications of refugee resettlement, this committee is urged to take into account two key realities: First, refugees typically contribute to their new homes in measures that far exceed the initial investment required to resettle them. Forty percent of U.S. Fortune 500 companies today were started by refugees and immigrants or their children.³

Second, U.S. and global security threats may heighten when refugees are locked in closed refugee camps for decades, are prohibited from seeking jobs or starting businesses, and are denied access to safe, lawful employment opportunities in countries of first asylum. The U.S. should demonstrate a genuine commitment to share the responsibility of responding to unprecedented global displacement, or we will lack the necessary leverage and moral authority to successfully ask countries of first asylum to provide viable alternatives to irregular and secondary migration.

II. REFUGEES: POSITIVE ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Asylum Access's experience around the world – including in countries where refugees make up a significantly higher percentage of the overall population – strongly suggest the U.S. has the capacity to effectively integrate substantially larger numbers of refugees than currently allotted. Further, our observation of common trends across all our regions of operation illuminates the potential for the U.S. to reap economic and other benefits from accepting a substantially higher number of refugees for resettlement.

a. Refugees benefit the economy

Refugees have a positive economic impact on their asylum states. Studies of refugees' economic impact have repeatedly found that where refugees are allowed to lawfully access the economy – in other words, not closed off in camps for decades or legally barred from seeking employment – their net economic impact has been positive.⁴

While this is true even in relatively fragile economies, like those of Uganda⁵ and Ecuador,⁶ it is a well-documented phenomenon in the United States. For example, refugees who arrived in the US during the period 1975-1980 earned 20% more than other immigrants a decade later, in 1990.⁷

b. Refugees are job creators

Refugees are natural job creators, as recent studies around the world demonstrate.⁸ In the U.S., forty percent of our Fortune 500 companies were founded by refugees and immigrants or their children.⁹ This is one reason 18 US mayors have asked that the U.S. resettle more refugees in their communities.¹⁰

³ Stuart Anderson, *40 Percent of Fortune 500 Companies Founded by Immigrants or Their Children*, Forbes (June 19, 2011). <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2011/06/19/40-percent-of-fortune-500-companies-founded-by-immigrants-or-their-children/>.

⁴ Ana Swanson, *The Big Myth About Refugees*, The Washington Post (Sept. 10, 2015). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/09/10/the-big-myth-about-refugees/>. See also Alexander Betts et al, *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*, University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre (June 2014). <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/other/refugee-economies-2014.pdf>.

⁵ See eg, *Refugee Economies*.

⁶ See, eg, Asylum Access, *To Have Work Is To Have Life* (June 2011).

⁷ Kalena Cortes, *Are Refugees Different from Economic Immigrants?* (March 2004). http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=524605.



c. Lessons for the U.S. from around the globe

Uganda

In 2014, the University of Oxford released the study: *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*. The study is based on extensive qualitative and quantitative research conducted in Uganda, which examined the economic lives of refugees in the country. In short, the study revealed that Uganda's economy has benefited from the daily economic lives of refugees who were permitted to work and self-employ legally in the country.

Refugees granted access to the labor market in Uganda:

- "...often make a positive contribution to the host state economy. These contributions are exemplified by the significant volume of exchange between refugees and Ugandan nationals, as well as by refugees' creation of employment opportunities for Ugandan nationals."¹¹
- Satisfy market demands through the supply of goods and services to Ugandans.¹²
- Are a strong customer base of many Ugandan businesses, purchasing both daily household goods and essential supplies to support their own livelihood activities.¹³
- Have well-established trade-connections both within Uganda and East Africa, increasing cross-border trade and diversifying markets.
- Create "centers of economic gravity, attracting people and capital from all over Uganda and, in turn, playing a crucial role in the agriculture supply chain of the country."¹⁴
- Have a proven ability to become successful entrepreneurs, building sustainable businesses that train and employ Ugandan nationals.¹⁵

Though resettlement to the U.S. involves in initial investment in refugee integration, the economic activities of refugees and their families have enormous potential for our country.

Ecuador

While refugee arrivals to the U.S. during the Great Recession were too small to yield useful data, Ecuador offers an interesting case study: Ecuador, where refugees make up 1% of the population, granted them equal access to

⁸ See, eg, *The Big Myth About Refugees*.

⁹ *40 Percent of Fortune 500 Companies Founded by Immigrants of Their Children*.

¹⁰ Elise Foley, *18 U.S. Mayors to Obama: We'll Take Even More Refugees*, Huffington Post (Sept 24, 2015). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mayors-letter-refugees-obama_56044aefe4b08820d91c1b86.

¹¹ *Refugee Economies* at pg. 5.

¹² *Ibid* at 11.

¹³ *Ibid* at 16,19.

¹⁴ *Ibid* at 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid* at 14, 16.



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employment opportunities and workplace rights in September 2008. Ecuador subsequently saw its economy grow every year for the next five years, in the midst of the worst global economic recession since the 1930s.¹⁶

Asylum Access studied refugees' economic participation in Ecuador. We found refugees filling gaps in the economy and creating – and filling – new markets and services, contributing to economic growth. When we surveyed refugees to understand what motivated them as workers and as business owners, we learned that those whose lives have been uprooted, disrupted by violence and trauma, are highly motivated to restore their self-reliance, their agency, and their sense of purpose and community. They are motivated by a strong drive to provide for their families, but they are also motivated by a desire to have a purpose and place as contributing members of society. As one refugee we interviewed said, “to have work is to have life.”

The values and drive that we found when we interviewed refugees – and that we see in our refugee clients all over the world – are highly consistent with American values. By resettling refugees to the U.S., we are building our national economic strength.

III. SHARE RESPONSIBILITY AS A MEANS OF STABILIZATION

Asylum Access's experience with refugee populations facing longstanding barriers to employment and opportunity has also led us to understand deeply the connection between U.S. resettlement policies and irregular movement by refugees seeking opportunity.

a. **Restrictive countries of first asylum can lead to irregular onward migration**

Half of all refugees today are in “protracted refugee situations” involving displacement of 25,000 or more.¹⁷ Most protracted refugee situations today have lasted at least 25 years.¹⁸ For those refugees, that's 25 years without the right to work and feed your family, without the ability to attend school or build a career. At the same time, aid funding is running out, so rations are routinely cut back. In Jordan and Lebanon this summer, the World Food Programme cut refugees' rations in half due to funding shortfalls.¹⁹

Refugees in many countries of first asylum are faced with a Catch-22: They can't lawfully work to feed their families, and international aid is running low as crises continue. As a result, some resort to secondary migration, often using irregular or illicit channels to leave a country of first asylum. (We've seen this starkly in recent weeks as refugees who initially sought asylum in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan or Egypt leave those countries and attempt to reach Europe.) Others are recruited into armed groups that promise food, opportunity, and the possibility of a future.²⁰

¹⁶ Emily Arnold-Fernandez, Stewart Pollock, *Refugees' rights to work* (Sept 2013).

<http://www.fmreview.org/detention/arnoldfernandez-pollock>.

¹⁷ *UNHCR Global Trends 2014*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Reuters, *Short of Cash, U.N. Cuts Syria Refugees' rations again* (Jul 1, 2015). <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/01/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rations-idUSKCN0PB4LP20150701>.

²⁰ See, eg, Human Rights Watch, *Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die* (June 22, 2014).

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>.



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b. U.S. refugee resettlement is needed for regional stability and to maintain leadership

Preventing onward migration and the risks created by a stagnant population requires that countries of first asylum grant refugees the rights to move freely, seek work and start businesses. The U.S. plays a powerful role in urging countries of first asylum to take these steps.

For the U.S. to be successful in such diplomacy, however, it must demonstrate a real commitment to sharing in the responsibility for refugee response. Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon each host between 1.5 and 2 million mostly-Syrian refugees. As of June 2015, the U.S. had accepted fewer than 900 Syrian refugees since 2011.²¹ While the U.S. will never receive a large percentage of the world's Syrian refugees, its current resettlement levels are so low as to appear absurd in comparison to Syria's neighbors.

To effectively aid in regional stabilization, and to advocate for policies that will protect the U.S. and the world against subsequent security risks, the U.S. must increase its resettlement commitments so that it meaningfully shares in the global response to forced displacement. Annually resettling 100,000 Syrian refugees and an additional 100,000 refugees from other parts of the world is an important step toward achieving this goal.

Only when the U.S. shares in the global obligation to offer meaningful asylum – including integrating refugees into the workforce and economy – will it have the necessary leverage and moral authority to successfully ask countries of first asylum to offer refugees such opportunities within their own countries. Only when countries of first asylum give refugees the chance to move freely, seek work and start businesses will we see a reduction in irregular secondary migration, with all the security risks such irregular movement entails.

²¹ Factcheck, *Resettling Syrian Refugees* (June 4, 2015). <http://www.factcheck.org/2015/06/resettling-syrian-refugees/>.

