



**Social, Humanitarian and  
Cultural Committee  
(SOCHUM)**

*Refugees and the impact of  
COVID-19*



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## **Letter from the Executive Board**

### **Introduction to SOCHUM**

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) is the Third Committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations and derives its legitimacy from the original United Nations charter. SOCHUM broadly focuses on: protection and promotion of human rights among the members of the international community.

SOCHUM acts as a bridge between the General Assembly and the United Nations Security Council by proposing resolutions rooted in promoting peace and security among nations. All 193 member states participate and have equal voting rights in the third committee of the General Assembly. Although the committee itself cannot impose legally binding resolutions, it can bring the most alarming human rights violations, humanitarian crises, and general social issues to the international table by encouraging the bigger organs of the United Nations to act upon them.

The mandate of SOCHUM is social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, it also includes areas such as:

1. The advancement of women's rights
2. The protection of children
3. The treatment of refugees through the elimination of racism and discrimination
4. The promotion of fundamental freedoms and the right to self determination
5. Indigenous issues and a range of social matters such as issues related to youth, family, ageing
6. Persons with disabilities
7. Crime prevention, criminal justice, and international drug control

Keep in mind that SOCHUM's resolutions are purely suggestive, and non-binding.



## Agenda overview: Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees

The COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 60 million people and taken the lives of more than 5 million. While some countries and demographics were successful in coping with the virus, the 79.5 million people forced to flee their homes due to conflict and instability continue to remain particularly vulnerable. Due to limited testing, the exact number of covid cases are impossible to determine, and refugees face a plethora of critical challenges in addition to health risks, such as the lack of education and economic exclusion. Delegates of SOCHUM must find a way to provide adequate healthcare measures, and uphold the social and economic well-being of refugees amidst the challenges presented by COVID-19.

### Health

The lack of adequate healthcare measures has historically been one of the primary problems faced by refugees, and the COVID pandemic has made the situation even worse.

- The lack of face masks, personal protection kits, clean water and soap increases the vulnerability of refugees to COVID-19, and other transmittable diseases
- Refugees often lack the funds to obtain adequate treatments for COVID and other diseases
- Refugees find it harder to access vaccines
- The lack of social distancing measures in refugee camps



- Majority of refugees live in poor urban areas, and densely populated camps with inadequate health care infrastructure and facilities

While implementing effective social distancing measures, and giving refugees access to vaccines and COVID-tests is the priority that delegates must focus on, it does not mean that healthcare issues prior to the pandemic are neglected. For example, poor water and sanitation conditions lead to cholera. Tuberculosis, HIV type 1, Hepatitis B and malaria are other notable diseases that continue to run rampant in refugee camps.

The lack of immediate access to first-aid and healthcare professionals in some camps is also a cause for concern, and can lead to increased occurrence, severity, and fatality of these diseases. The pandemic has also made it harder for health equipment and supplies to reach these refugee camps, which is another problem that delegates must tackle.

## Economic Inclusion

The financial challenges already faced by refugees have been greatly heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 lockdowns, for example, which became frequent at the height of the pandemic worldwide, did not allow refugees to continue earning their daily, already low-income wages. Apart from significantly affecting refugees' abilities to survive and provide for their families, this also leads to a lack of quality medical care for the refugees who do get COVID-19 or any other potentially fatal diseases. Despite refugees' right to work under international law, about half of all refugees are not allowed to work in the countries they are taking refuge in. This is due to a variety of reasons - usually due to governments worried about the influx of refugees having a negative impact on the locals by taking away jobs from locals and hence driving down wages, as refugees are



generally willing to work for lower wages. The pandemic and lockdowns have led to record lows of local workers in the workforce, which has exacerbated this issue and greatly hurt refugees' economic situations worldwide.

## Mental Health

Due to the nature of the refugee crisis and the fact that refugees are already struggling with traumatic experiences from the countries they are fleeing, the mental health of refugees has always been an issue with regards to dealing with the refugee crisis. COVID-19 has only made this situation worse. Due to refugees - who most often do not have access to quality healthcare due to their poor economic situation - fearing possibly losing their jobs due to the pandemic, contracting COVID-19 and hence either losing their livelihoods or their lives, the refugee mental health crisis has also been worsened by COVID-19.

## Access to Asylum

Similar to a refugee's right to work under international law, the right to seek asylum is a human right under international law ("Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." - Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14 (1)). Due to the nature of COVID-19 (a potentially fatal, transmissible disease) however, this right has been put in jeopardy. Due to safety concerns of the Coronavirus spreading rapidly through the world, over 150 countries had closed their borders and about 100 of them did not make exceptions for refugees. Naturally, this has led to refugees being unable to seek refuge and hence being forced to remain or go back to the country in which they were at significant risk through war, unfair persecution, discrimination, etc.



The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) believes that governments can and should protect their countries from COVID-19 while still ensuring a refugee's right to asylum remains preserved.

### Access to education

The future of millions of young refugees hangs by a thread due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee education.

Refugee girls are even more vulnerable. An alarming study by The Malala fund estimates that nearly 50% of all refugee girls in secondary school will not return when schools reopen at the start of the 2020 school year as a result of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has forced many countries to close their regular schools and limit classroom numbers in educational institutions. While some countries have promptly switched to digital learning programs, many nations simply do not have the means and technical infrastructure to do so. In addition to this, refugee children in many parts of the world already face discrimination when it comes to education, resulting in even more unsatisfactory education.

Ensuring that countries provide adequate access to schools and education for refugees amidst the pandemic is one of the crucial aims of this committee. Remote schooling is just one option out of many that delegates must consider when proposing solutions to the lack of refugee education.

### Past efforts by the UN



A Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 was launched in March 2019 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), outlining the responsibilities and roles of different organizations in addressing the humanitarian, health and economic impact of the pandemic. The target of this response is to provide 250 million people with COVID-19 assistance.

## UNHCR

UNHCR has focused on responding to the health and economic needs of refugees. UNHCR has been the lead UN agency in “advocating and ensuring that refugees, migrants, IDPs, people of concern and host population groups who are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic receive COVID-19 assistance.”

- UNHCR is distributing soap, shelter material and other core relief items.
- UNHCR is expanding cash assistance to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.
- UNHCR is enhancing monitoring to ensure the rights of refugees are respected.
- UNHCR is advocating for the inclusion of refugees in national health systems and recovery plans.
- UNHCR also supports governments with medical equipment and supplies.

## Specific Country examples

PLEASE REFER TO [THIS DOCUMENT](#) BY THE UNHCR FOR IN DEPTH INFORMATION ON THE UNHCR EFFORTS IN SPECIFIC COUNTRIES. We feel that this information is summarized enough to be used as information from a background guide. However, the information provided in the document linked is just a foundation like everything else in this guide. We strongly recommend that



you do your own research and use the given info as merely a starting point for your research.

## WHO

In May of 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR signed an agreement to improve the provision of healthcare and services to stateless and/or forcibly displaced people.

- The WHO and governments from around the world have been working together to try and ensure that important medical equipment is reaching as many people as possible, such as refugees and stateless people.
- The WHO has also been working with the ministries of health of many countries at the forefront of the refugee crisis (such as Thailand, Turkey and Lebanon) to ensure the protection of all communities - including refugees - from COVID-19 by imposing safety measures, monitoring cases, trying to ensure medical treatment for as many people as possible, etc.
- The WHO also works to raise awareness about COVID-19 safety measures and practices. They conducted a 9-day COVID-19 safety awareness campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, in cooperation with the ministry of health, in order to spread information about the Coronavirus and help the 1 million refugees in the region.

## Role of external bodies in improving the situation

### Businesses



The private sector has an enormous capacity to empower refugees as full participants in the global economy. Businesses have the tools and capacity to contribute to win-win solutions that support the integration of refugees into society while simultaneously benefiting the company themselves.

Businesses can help the situation of refugees in two broad methods.

1. Hiring and supply chains: Companies can choose to hire refugees directly into their workforce, or integrate them into their supply chain by either sourcing from suppliers who already employ a large number of refugees, or by incentivizing suppliers to hire refugees. Refugees have exhibited great resilience and hard-work according to the reports and findings of many sources, and research even shows that refugees have higher retention rates compared to non-refugee employees. Companies are already beginning to view the value of refugee integration into their workforce. Companies such as Starbucks have committed to hiring 10,000 refugees within 5 years. The yogurt brand Chobani has a significant 30% of refugee employees. Another significant contributor is the Tent partnership, a network of 130 major private businesses which helps in hiring refugees and supporting refugee entrepreneurs.
2. Impact investment: Refugee lens investing is an increasingly popular topic being discussed in impact investing. The Refugee Investment Network (RIN) was established in 2018 to create new pathways for investment and sustainable economic growth among refugees. RIN recently introduced a ‘refugee lens’ to help investors qualify investments in refugee businesses and entrepreneurs.



However, businesses can also help in other ways. Businesses provide vital support by giving funds and in-kind donations. Sony corporations donated 3 million dollars through their relief fund for COVID-19. Businesses can also help raise awareness of the situation of refugees. For example, H&M and WeTransfer have used their channels to share messages of solidarity.

## Governments

Refugee-hosting governments can play a key role in facilitating the protection and welfare of refugees amidst the pandemic.

- Governments can facilitate the access of refugees to doctors, hospitals and healthcare. For example in Thailand, in 2013, all migrants and refugees were given access to health coverage regardless of their legal status.
- Governments can protect refugees from the economic impact of the pandemic by including them in their economic recovery plans.
- Governments can maintain refugees' right to territory, asylum, shelter and resettlement. For example, Portugal granted asylum seekers full citizenship rights during the COVID-19 outbreak and their rights of health were subsequently maintained.

Lastly, as representatives of these governments, we expect all delegates to be adept with their country's policy on refugees. While any delegate can simply claim that their country is willing to take in refugees, please consider your country's stance on refugees, your immigration policies, and whether your nation has the capability to host refugees amidst the pandemic. Any statement made by a delegate which is



contrary to his/her country's policy on refugees MAY be used against them in committee, and will lead to a loss of points due to violation of foreign policy.

## Refugees

Yes, refugees are one of the communities who have been worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, but many refugees are on the forefront of the battle against the disease that has taken over 5 million lives.

- Refugee scientists and doctors are contributing to emergency medical responses to COVID-19. Iraqi refugee Lubab al-Quraishi stepped up in New Jersey to provide medical support when the American state allowed internationally trained medical workers and doctors to help fight the pandemic.
- In refugee camps, some refugees have taken the responsibility of providing accurate information to the many refugees living in these camps. In the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, for example, information about the virus is spread by refugees through Radio Gar Gar radio programmes, and these programs have wide audiences of over 100,000 listeners.
- Many refugees have taken the responsibility to help populations most vulnerable to COVID, such as the elderly population, through support groups. Refugees have also taken to cooking meals for healthcare workers on the frontlines of fighting the virus.



## **Questions a Resolution must answer**

1. How can refugees help to disseminate health information to others in their communities, and how can we ensure that all refugees have access to accurate information and medical equipment?
2. How can refugees receive healthcare and COVID vaccines in countries that are already struggling with pandemic healthcare shortages?
3. How can refugees be welcomed into any countries they go to, and not be shunned as outsiders? How can we ensure that the right to seek asylum is protected?
4. How can we ensure that refugees have access to education in the midst of this global pandemic?
5. How can COVID-19 safety protocols be effectively instated in refugee camps?
6. How can refugees stay financially secure in the midst of this pandemic?
7. How can we help refugees look after their mental health in these unprecedented times?
8. How can we improve pre-existing refugee camps to adapt to the requirements of COVID-19?

In short, we want this committee to come up with solutions not just for the immediate COVID-19 pandemic, but also improve the conditions for refugees for years to come.