

## **UNHCR BACKGROUND GUIDE**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950, by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country.

In more than five decades, the agency has helped an estimated 50 million people restart their lives. UNHCR now has more than 16,803 personnel and work in a total of 134 countries to help 70.8 million persons.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Topic 1: Countering toxic narratives about refugees and migrants.....</b>	<b>3</b>
The Challenge.....	3
Responses and Solutions.....	6
Questions to Guide Debate.....	9
<b>Topic 2: Economic Inclusion of Refugees.....</b>	<b>10</b>
The Challenge.....	10
Why economic inclusion is key.....	12
Responses and solutions.....	13
Questions to guide debate .....	15

**BACKGROUND GUIDE**

**COUNTERING TOXIC NARRATIVES  
ABOUT REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS**



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is launching the MUN Refugee Challenge to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

 **The Challenge**

There are powerful voices around the world that are determined to denigrate refugees and turn them into objects of fear and loathing. This is very often the result of narratives and sentiments centred on a phobia of the outsider – based on ethnicity and race, religion, income, language and similar signs of “otherness”. This, in and of itself, is divisive and can lead to violence and persecution. More practically, advocating on behalf of refugees, fundraising and lobbying can all depend on prevailing public and political attitudes towards refugees.

**Hate speech:** There is no international legal definition of hate speech, and the characterization of what is “hateful” is contested. According to the United Nations, hate speech is generally understood as “any kind of communication, in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in others words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.”

**Incitement to violence:** According to the United Nations, “incitement is a very dangerous form of speech, because it explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility and violence, which may also lead to or include terrorism or atrocity crimes”. International law prohibits incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.

**Fear of the “other”:** Very often, refugees are grouped together with migrants in the public mind; in turn, migrants – and asylum-seekers – can be negatively portrayed as a particularly mobile and predatory subset of “foreigners”. The terms are often used carelessly and interchangeably but in a generally negative sense; or they are used in an outright hostile manner.

**Refugees and migrants as “threat”:** Outsiders are generally depicted by the far right as a threat to Western values, culture, religion, jobs, school places, health systems and other public services, and a source of terrorism and crime. A 2016 poll by the Brookings Institute in the US showed that 46% of Americans who opposed accepting refugees were concerned about perceived links to terrorism. And yet statistics show that refugees are the least likely section of a population to get involved in violence – they are refugees because they fled violence and persecution.

The perpetrator of the recent mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March, which left 49 dead, was apparently motivated by “identitarian” ideology, akin to theories such as the “great replacement” of white Europeans by people of colour. Former refugees were amongst those killed.

**Social media:** In March 2018, the chair of the UN’s Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar, investigating the circumstances of the violence that drove more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from their homes, said that social media had “substantively contributed to the level of acrimony” among the wider public. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, added: “We know

that the ultra-nationalist Buddhists have their own Facebooks and are really inciting a lot of violence and a lot of hatred against the Rohingya or other ethnic minorities. I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended.”

An article in the Financial Times reported on the work of two PhD students at Warwick University in the UK, who studied social media use in their native Germany between 2015 and 2017. “During surges in online anti-migrant sentiment, they estimated that areas with higher Facebook populations saw up to 50 per cent more anti-refugee incidents — mostly violent crimes, including refugees’ homes being set on fire — than the national average. They attributed this to the spread of hate posts. ‘Social media can push potential perpetrators over the line,’ says Mr Schwarz. ‘Their views get more extreme [from reading hate posts] and, at some point, they might decide to assault someone.’”

***Contexts, questions and public opinion:*** Several pollsters and academics have pointed out that the results of public opinion surveys depend very much on the question being asked, as well as the situation in the country where the survey is being conducted.

A June 2017 report by the Royal Institute for International Affairs (RIIA) in the UK cited Ipsos MORI global data from 2016, which found that over half of those surveyed agreed with the statement: “Most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren’t refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage of our welfare services.” However, it added that people in the UK were more inclined to be well disposed toward refugees when they were isolated as a distinct category, while responses were more likely to reflect negative attitudes if people were asked simply about “immigration”.

A study conducted by More in Common in 11 European countries also revealed that while only 55 per cent of people agreed with the statement “my government should provide financial assistance for refugees, alone or alongside charities”, 72 per cent agreed with “my country has a responsibility to accommodate at least some refugees”.

In Kenya, a top refugee-hosting country, an IRC study found that 94 per cent of citizens support the delivery of public services to refugees and that only 27 per cent see refugees as a security threat. Nonetheless, a significantly smaller portion supports longer-term needs such as access to land (39 per cent) and citizenship (31 per cent).

**Audiences matter:** While some people are overwhelmingly hostile to refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers, and others are welcoming, most are conflicted. According to research by More in Common, most people find themselves in the “conflicted middle”: they feel empathetic towards refugees, while also experiencing real anxieties about issues such as job security, public services, cultural change and terrorism.

**Bullying:** In recent years, the problem of bullying in school has gained attention. Research conducted in Italy showed that migrant and refugee children tended to be victims of more bullying than their peers.

## Responses and solutions

**Laws against hate speech:** Rather than prohibiting hate speech as such, international law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence. Hate speech that does not reach the threshold of incitement is not something that international law requires states to prohibit.

**Combating disinformation about refugees:** Distorted or “fake” information about refugees and migrants regularly surfaces online. Many companies, media and governments have taken steps to combat fake news.

Fact-checking media play an important role in debunking myths about refugees. For example, in 2018 an item of fake news claiming that an American teenager had killed a refugee who had raped his sister was circulating online. But if people look for information about it on Google, all the first results redirect to fact-checking websites, such as Snopes or Truth or Fiction, that explain in detail why this “news” is false.

In 2019, the BBC and several tech firms, including Google, Twitter and Facebook, announced that they would join forces to fight disinformation. The plan includes the development of an early-warning system for organizations to alert each other rapidly when they discover life-threatening disinformation, with the aim of undermining it before it can take hold. In 2019, Apple also launched a media literacy initiative to equip young people with the critical-thinking skills to enable them to detect fake news.

**Countering the “invasion of hostile aliens” narrative:** Focusing on rebutting false facts and figures is tempting – and in some cases is necessary. But it is equally important to address the fear of difference. The “conflicted middle” respond more to emotional appeals than statistics – something populists have spotted, preying on fears of “the other” and the threat of losing national/cultural identity.

Stories in the media showing the human side of refugees – as unique individuals whose lives have been overturned by conflict or persecution – are particularly effective. Although they need protection, refugees are also seeking independence, self-sufficiency and dignity. UNHCR also seeks to highlight positive stories of generous and compassionate people who welcome refugees.

**Messages and messengers:** The RIIA report recommends encouraging both “regular” people and celebrities to speak out on behalf of refugees and to demonstrate ways in which they have supported and welcomed them, rather than politicians, representatives of NGOs and other figures who would be expected to do so. In other words, a pop star is more effective at influencing public attitudes to refugees than a UNHCR official.

**Creating encounters between refugees and host communities:** A number of civil society groups have attempted to engage with public opinion by encouraging contact between refugees, migrants and host communities, and by trying to promote refugee and migrant voices in public debates. These groups encourage volunteers to gather and distribute items that refugees need, and organise events at which refugees and host communities can meet and interact, for example by cooking and eating together.

**Getting the public involved:** To that end, UNHCR runs campaigns that aim to put ordinary citizens at the forefront of positive messaging about refugees. For example, a targeted campaign such as the Somos Panas (We are Friends) campaign in Colombia aimed to reduce manifestations of xenophobia towards Venezuelans living in the country. The campaign promotes messages of solidarity from Colombians to Venezuelan children, women and men, as well as messages of gratitude received from Venezuelans. Since its launch in December 2017, the campaign has reached more than six million people and over 235,000 opinion leaders and members of the government. Other campaigns have included **No Stranger Place**, which showcased Europeans who took refugees into their own

homes; and **From Far and Wide**, which profiled Canadians who supported resettled refugees.

***Politicians are needed, too:*** Political leadership can be extremely influential. UNHCR is working with a coalition of mayors and cities worldwide that encourage their citizens to be supportive of refugees. After the New Zealand shootings, Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister, said: “We represent diversity, kindness, compassion. A home for those who share our values. Refuge for those who need it. And those values will not and cannot be shaken by this attack.” Her comments were widely reported and praised.

***Social media – the good side:*** Tech giants, including major social media platforms, have a role to play in combatting hate speech. Some steps in the right direction came after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed that data taken from millions of Facebook profiles had been used for political advertising that tapped into people’s fears, including about immigration. Twitter announced in November 2019 that it would ban political advertisements. While Facebook has not followed suit, it banned content supporting white supremacy and hate speech in March 2019.

Social media can also be used for good by refugee advocates, NGOs and international organizations. For example, UNHCR also uses social media to boost its digital campaigns and engage people with the refugee cause.

***Acknowledging concerns:*** Attempts to engage with the “conflicted middle” without acknowledging their concerns would be counter-productive. The RIIA report recommends “promot[ing] an open discussion of solutions and initiat[ing] clear responses to real concerns.” It adds: “It is crucial to acknowledge that understanding and engaging with public attitudes works best when clearly rooted in national and local contexts.”





## Questions to guide debate

- Who should be responsible for monitoring and tackling hate speech and disinformation about refugees and migrants online? Governments, tech companies, citizens or international organizations?
- Is it fair to differentiate between refugees and migrants? Can explaining the difference help reduce stereotypes and discrimination? Or should the focus be less on facts and points of law, and more on overcoming the fear of “others”?
- How can we tackle toxic narratives about refugees and migrants in the political arena? What can political parties and movements, lawmakers, mayors and other public officials do?
- What other segments of society should be involved in countering toxic narratives about refugees and migrants?
- How can we ensure that refugees and migrants who are victims of hate speech report it and have access to justice and psychological counselling?
- What measures can be put in place to ensure that refugee and migrant children are not bullied in school?
- How would you design a campaign to counter negative stereotypes about refugees? What channels have we not mentioned that you think would be effective?
- Who do you think are the best people to speak out on behalf of refugees?

## ECONOMIC INCLUSION OF REFUGEES



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is launching the MUN Refugee Challenge to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.



### **The challenge**

***The right to work:*** The right to work is set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and various other regional and international instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic Cultural and Social Rights. Nonetheless, refugees are not allowed to work in around 50% of asylum countries. They are further hindered by restrictions on their movement, a lack of access to education, restrictions on rights concerning housing and land, and a lack of access to business-crucial services such as banking and training.

***Confusion between refugees and migrants:*** People tend to confuse refugees and migrants, yet the two terms have distinct meanings. Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict and persecution and crossing borders to find safety. They are defined in, and protected by, international law. Migrants chose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, and in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons.

Blurring the two terms takes attention away from the specific legal protections refugees require. It can undermine public support for refugees and make the numbers look less manageable than they are. Refugees and asylum-seekers only make up 10.6 per cent of all international migrants, and 0.34 per cent of the entire world population, according to UNDESA data.

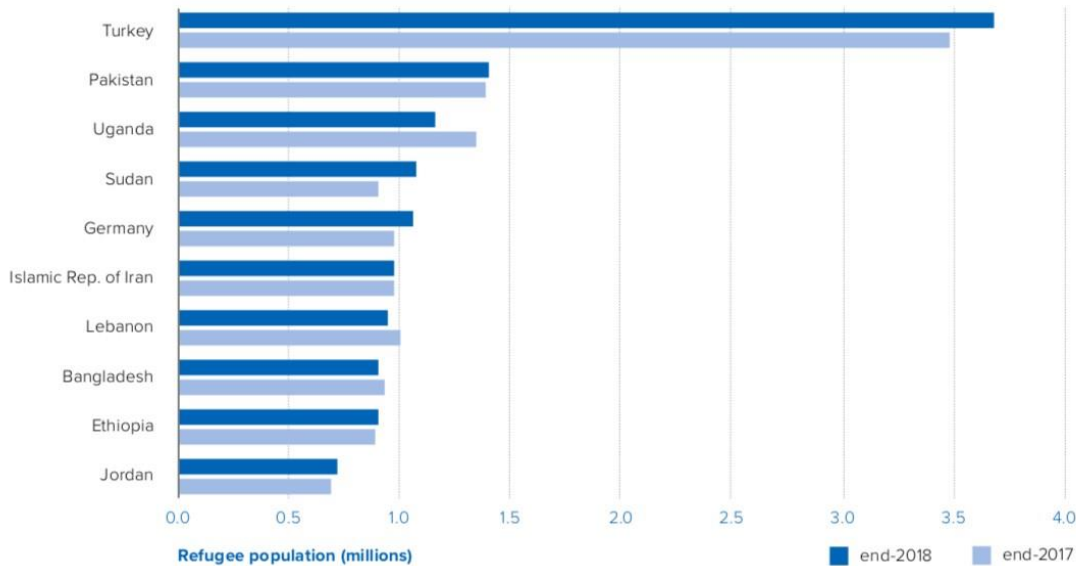
***Political discourse:*** Refugees are often cast as an economic burden for host countries, although research provides ample evidence that they are not. In Europe, for example, far-right parties often prey on the fear that refugees may be taking jobs, undercutting wages and putting pressure on public resources (e.g. hospitals, schools, transport, welfare).

***Labour exploitation:*** Refugees who face obstacles to formal job opportunities may fall victim to exploitation in the labour market. They face a broad range of challenges, including underpayment, risk of injury, job insecurity, lack of rights and discrimination.

***Refugees in developing countries:*** A large majority of the world's refugees – 85 per cent – live in developing countries. The size of the host country's population and the strength of its economy will affect how they cope with the economic impact of refugee flows. Countries bordering Syria, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, have received the largest refugee populations relative to their host populations.

According to the OECD, South Sudan, Chad and Uganda host the largest refugee populations as a share of gross domestic product. Eight of the top ten countries with the highest number of refugees in relation to GDP are in Africa. Host countries with limited economic growth and high unemployment rates need international support to cope with the cost of refugee arrivals and to facilitate the economic integration of refugees.

**Major host countries of refugees – end 2017 to end 2018 (Global Trends)**



 **Why economic inclusion is key**

Including refugees in the economies of their host countries is widely recognised as an effective way of increasing their independence, boosting the economic health of local communities, and restoring dignity to forcibly displaced people who have lost most (and perhaps all) of their possessions and livelihoods.

**Rebuilding lives:** After fleeing war or persecution, the opportunity to work and earn a living is one of the most effective ways people can rebuild their lives with dignity and in peace. UNHCR puts economic inclusion at the heart of several of its core principles, including protection, equality, access and sustainability. Through safe work, people forced to flee can meet their families’ basic needs, maintain their dignity, improve their self-reliance and resilience, and contribute to society – which is what they want.

**Safety:** Safe employment also gives refugees the means to meet their own needs without resorting to negative coping mechanisms, such as finding work in the grey and black economies or putting their children to work. It also protects them from exploitation by criminal organisations, as well as reducing the likelihood of onward movement in search of work elsewhere.

**Economic growth:** Many studies show that refugees can boost the economy of the countries that host them, even in low to middle-income countries.

In Kenya, for example, UNHCR worked with the World Bank Group on a study that found that the 180,000 refugees in and around Kakuma camp were contributing to an economy worth US\$56 million a year, sparking a programme to encourage more private-sector investment.

**Skills:** Refugees with access to labour markets often enrich their host communities with their experience and skills. Those who are allowed to go to school and progress to higher education, including technical and vocational training, are better equipped for their futures, whether in their host communities, after resettlement to a third country, or when they return home.

**Gender equality:** Employment and entrepreneurship also have a role to play in gender equality and protection. Women with an income – and who have a physical workplace to go to – are better protected against gender-based violence, are more independent and better able to provide for and protect their families. Female refugees who work also do not have to rely on an income from their children working on the streets, enabling them to attend school instead. Yet according to a 2018 report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, in the 36 countries classified by the World Bank as fragile and conflict-affected states, only 4 in 10 women are in paid work, compared to 7 in 10 men.



## Responses and solutions

**Rights:** Entrepreneurship is just one aspect of “economic inclusion”. To thrive in business and the labour market, refugees also need reassuring that they have the same rights as locals when it comes to access to services, administrative processes, and legal rights and protections. Otherwise, the danger arises that refugees will split off into separate or parallel economic ecosystems.

A list of rights that would enable refugees to work would include the granting of work permits, the right to own property, ending restrictions on foreign ownership of businesses, and permitting investment in refugee businesses from abroad (for example, from personal contacts and networks in their home countries, or from other overseas private sector supporters).

**Training and resources:** When refugees live in countries where their diplomas and experience are not recognized or where their skills are not in demand, one option is to provide skills training and apprenticeships. Refugees can be allowed access to a wide range of training programmes – from accountancy and law to technology, financial management, marketing and investment.

For example, in 2016, the German government created a programme providing regional vocational centers with the funds to enroll refugees in a six-month apprenticeship scheme including training in trades such as metal and electrical work, as well as language and integration classes.

**Supporting host communities:** Ensuring that host countries already facing economic difficulties are not left behind is a core principle of the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted in 2018. According to the Compact: “To foster inclusive economic growth for host communities and refugees, in support of host countries and subject to their relevant national laws and policies, States and relevant stakeholders will contribute resources and expertise to promote economic opportunities, decent work, job creation and entrepreneurship programmes for host community members and refugees, including women, young adults, older persons and persons with disabilities.”

Integrated settlements are a good example of initiatives that support the economic well-being of both refugees and host communities. These are areas where refugees and host populations are provided with the same rights of access to the labour market and the same opportunities to receive cash-based assistance, training and other resources. One example is the Kalobeyei settlement in Kenya.

**Private-sector support:** The private sector has a key role to play in supporting the economic inclusion of refugees. Businesses can offer employment and training, but also a wide range of technologies and goods that can facilitate refugees’ access to the job market.

An example of private-sector involvement in refugees’ economic inclusion is the Tent Partnership for Refugees, founded by Hamdi Ulukaya, CEO of Chobani, which works with businesses to identify and understand opportunities to help refugees, in areas ranging from employment and training to supply chains, service delivery and expertise.

Another example is the Association of German Chambers of Commerce, which has joined forces with the government to establish a network of more than 2,000 companies, including many small and medium enterprises, to help refugees integrate into the labour force.

**Cash-based assistance:** In 2016, UNHCR began expanding cash-based assistance, giving refugees the choice in how they spend the money and benefitting local economies as they buy essential goods in local stores and pay for local services. It also enables them to pay their rent, buy medicines, pay off debts and start businesses.

**Community support:** Integrating into a new country and finding employment, on top of recovering from the traumatic experience of fleeing war and persecution, can be extremely difficult. Host communities and NGOs play an important role in supporting the local integration of refugees and helping them access the job market. Community support can take the form of legal advice, language courses, support with writing CVs and preparing for interviews, access to computers for job search, and so on.



## Questions to guide debate

- How can we expand the rights of refugees to access the labour markets of their host countries?
- How can we convince businesses to play their part in supporting the economic inclusion of refugees? What are the obstacles and how can they be overcome?
- How can governments in refugee-heavy regions balance the need to support refugees with the needs of their own citizens when it comes to employment and business? How can the private sector help in this regard?
- How can we tackle the unfounded fear that refugees present an economic threat? How can we counter political narratives that perpetuate this?
- What are the priorities for supporting the economic inclusion of refugees in resettlement countries, such as Germany or the USA, as opposed to host countries, such as Lebanon or Bangladesh?
- In host countries, what are the priorities for supporting the economic inclusion of refugees living in camps (40 per cent) as opposed to urban areas (60 per cent)?
- How can we better link up schools and universities where refugees are studying with future employers.