

ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOs
1 – 3 JULY 2015 - International Conference Center Geneva

THEMATIC SESSION

BACKGROUND PAPER

How can civil society help to implement UNHCR's Global Action Plan?

Friday 3 July 2015, 09h00-10h45 – Room 3

Moderated by Shaikha ALMUHAREB, (*Group 29*)

The theme of the 2015 UNHCR NGO Consultations "Solutions" is integral to UNHCR's recently launched Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024. The strategic framework for the achievement of the goals of the Campaign is set out in the [Global Action Plan](#) which is comprised of 10 Actions to address statelessness.

The goals of this Campaign can only be achieved with the full engagement of a strong network of stakeholders, including civil society actors. This session will therefore provide a space to discuss opportunities on how civil society can successfully help to implement the Global Action Plan.

Examples of initiatives by NGOs from three regions will be the focus of the discussion:

➤ **Resolving statelessness in the Kyrgyz Republic**
(Azibek ASHUROV, *Ferghana Lawyers without Borders*)

Action 1: Resolve existing major situations of statelessness

As with many countries of the former Soviet Union, statelessness remains a cause for concern in the Kyrgyz Republic. It is estimated that around 12,000 stateless persons or those at risk of statelessness still reside in the country.

Since the adoption of the 2007 Law on Citizenship, however, the Kyrgyz government, Kyrgyz civil society, and UNHCR, have been closely cooperating in order to prevent and to reduce statelessness. Ferghana Valley Lawyers without Borders have been at the forefront of the effort in the southern part of the country. The organization is running mobile and stationary legal clinics that assist stateless and undocumented persons. Ferghana Lawyers have also been closely involved in advocacy efforts to improve Kyrgyz legislation in the areas of nationality and civil registration. Currently the organization is coordinating a UNHCR-sponsored effort to resolve all existing cases of statelessness in the country.

➤ **Removing gender discrimination from the Bahamian Constitution**
(Dr. Sandra DEAN-PATTERSON, *Bahamas Crisis Centre*)

Action 3: Remove gender discrimination from nationality laws

The Bahamas is one of two countries in the western hemisphere that retains gender discriminatory provisions in its citizenship legislation. In 2013, the Government of the Bahamas appointed a Constitutional Commission, which was charged to review the Constitution of The Bahamas, including the provisions relating to citizenship. Amongst a comprehensive set of recommendations, the Commission highlighted the pressing need for Constitutional reform to remove gender-based discrimination from provisions which prevent Bahamian women who give birth overseas, from passing their nationality to their children. No such restrictions are imposed on Bahamian men. In response, the Government of The Bahamas announced its intention to hold a Constitutional Referendum to achieve full gender equality in the citizenship laws.

Since that time, the Bahamas Crisis Centre joined a coalition of advocates, whose main focus is to advance the idea of gender equality in The Bahamas, through public education and advocacy. This coalition group, also known as The Citizens for Constitutional Equality ("CCE"), is comprised of women's groups and individuals from around The Bahamas, who share a vision of equality.

➤ **Preventing childhood statelessness in the Middle East and North Africa**
(Amit SEN, *Regional Protection Officer (Statelessness) MENA, UNHCR*)

Action 2: Ensure that no child is born stateless

Action 7: Ensure birth registration for the prevention of statelessness

Conflict and forced displacement in MENA are placing refugee children at greater risk of statelessness. Civil registration systems no longer function in conflict-affected areas, and refugees face difficulties in registering births in countries of asylum, which can leave children with no evidence of their nationality. Increased family separation also poses new challenges, as refugee children may be left with no parent that can attest to their nationality on the basis of descent, or because gender discriminatory nationality laws prevent mothers from conferring their nationality to their children.

To meet these challenges, UNHCR and civil society partners, including national and international NGOs, are collaborating in countries throughout the regional to help ensure every refugee child begins life with a birth certificate serving as proof of its nationality and legal identity. UNHCR's NGO partners provide legal aid and counselling to Syrian refugees on birth and marriage registration in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, with over 300,000 informational pamphlets on birth registration distributed to Syrian refugees in these countries. NGOs also undertake assessments to monitor refugee birth registration rates, analyse obstacles and formulate policy recommendations.

Governments in the region are also taking key steps by simplifying birth registration procedures for refugees, waiving late fees, regularizing informal refugee marriages, and establishing mobile courts and birth registration services - initiatives that have led to an eight-fold increase in the issuance of birth certificates in camps in one country of asylum.