

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON YOUTH (CCJ)

20 June 2021

English only

Statement by the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) on the 70th anniversary of World Refugee Day

20 June 2021 marks the 70th anniversary of World Refugee Day. However, even 70 years after the adoption of the UN Refugee Convention, there is little to celebrate as refugees continue to be unsafe and unwelcome in Europe.

Throughout history, many Europeans have experienced forced displacement. With human rights facing a backlash globally and a risk the climate crisis deteriorates uncontrollably, helping those fleeing unbearable conditions remains our shared responsibility and an unavoidable moral imperative. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that globally almost 80 million people live forcibly displaced, within their own countries and across borders, equating to approximately 1% of the world's population.¹ Yet, while Turkey and Germany rank among the five countries with the highest refugee population, Europe as a whole has offered a safe harbour to a relatively small portion of the global refugee population.² 85% of refugees continue to be hosted in the Global South.³

Refugees who make it to Europe still face a number of difficulties. In some countries, lengthy asylum procedures leave refugees in a state of 'limbo' for years. In others, refugees are forced to live in inhumane conditions depriving them of any opportunity to build a life in their new home. Equally, refugees struggle with access to safe housing, healthcare (including mental and sexual healthcare), education and employment opportunities.

The situation is particularly challenging for people who come to Europe at a young age. In many countries, refugees who arrived as children still stop receiving vital support after reaching the age of 18. Even worse, invasive and unreliable age assessment procedures risk depriving refugee children and youth of their identity and rights as children even before turning 18. In many countries, the need for specific support for young refugees and the importance of youth work continue to be overlooked.

As the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth, we

— celebrate all the efforts done locally and stress the particular importance of youth work in welcoming refugees into their new homes, enabling them to build a new life, including them in decision-making which affects them, and enabling them to become agents of change in their new communities;

— condemn any fearmongering, divisive rhetoric and calls for discrimination based on a person's country of origin, religion and ethnicity;

— join the calls to immediately end all immigration detention of children and unaccompanied minors all over Europe;⁴

¹ UNHCR, Figures at a Glance, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (last accessed May 31, 2021).

² UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/> (last accessed May 31, 2021).

³ UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/> (last accessed May 31, 2021). S. also Amnesty International, The World's Refugees in Numbers, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts/> (last accessed May 31, 2021).

⁴ S. i.e. campaign by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, available at: <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/campaign-detention-children> (last accessed May 31, 2021).

— call on the member states to simplify and speed up existing asylum procedures while preserving the fairness of the process, invest in integrating refugees from the moment of their arrival in their new communities and provide them with proper tools for their inclusion;

— join the calls of other human rights organisations to stop deportations to unsafe countries in Europe's neighbourhoods, such as Afghanistan or Syria;⁵

— join the calls by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights to stop criminalising human rights defenders who help refugees, i.e. by providing life-saving support at sea;⁶

— encourage the member states to implement Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)4 on supporting young refugees in transition to adulthood.⁷

As the climate crisis, conflicts and the human rights situation globally deteriorate, we need robust, human rights-based and above all humane asylum systems in order to prepare for future potential crises. Seventy years after the adoption of the UN Refugee Convention, it is the time for governments to start living up to their commitments and holding each other accountable for what they signed up for.

⁵ Amnesty International, Forced Back to Danger: Asylum Seekers Returned from Europe to Afghanistan, 2017, available at <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2017/11/AfghanistanReport-ExecutiveSummary.pdf?x82206> (last accessed June 6, 2021).

⁶ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, A Distress Call For Human Rights: The Widening Gap in Migrant Protection in the Mediterranean, Follow-up Report to the 2019 Recommendation, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/a-distress-call-for-human-rights-the-widening-gap-in-migrant-protection/1680a1abcd> (last accessed June 6, 2021).

⁷ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)4, Supporting Young Refugees in Transition to Adulthood, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-cm-2019-4-supporting-young-refugees-transition-adulthoo/168098e814> (last accessed June 6, 2021).