

# Issue brief on the Global Compact on Refugees

## Establishing Effective Mechanisms for Responsibility-Sharing

April 2018

### Introduction

The process to draft and adopt a Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is well under way.<sup>1</sup> Since releasing an initial draft of the Compact in January, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has convened three rounds of formal consultations in Geneva among UN Member States. There are three additional rounds scheduled before the text is to be finalized in advance of the UN General Assembly in September 2018.

While the text of the Compact has become more detailed and prescriptive through the consultation process, a critical tension remains unresolved: The objective of the Compact is to promote a more comprehensive, predictable, and equitable response to large-scale refugee situations that will lead to tangible benefits for refugees and host communities alike, but every element of the Compact is explicitly voluntary and non-binding.

The key task for UNHCR and Member States is to establish governance mechanisms within the GCR that can actually mobilize political leadership and engagement among both donor and host states that results in improved refugee response efforts. This issue brief presents recommendations on the two of the currently proposed mechanisms to help achieve that objective – the convening of regular global refugee summits and the establishment of a Global Support Platform.<sup>2, 3</sup>

### Global Refugee Summits – State Leadership is Essential

The latest version of the GCR, Draft 1, calls for regular ministerial-level global refugee summits to serve as a vehicle for Member States to make pledges – both financial and non-financial – in support of the Compact’s goals and for UNHCR to report on the implementation and impact of those pledges, while taking stock of the progress of the Compact. The idea for regular, high-level global summits is an important one since it institutionalizes follow-up arrangements after the GCR is adopted. However, there is a key issue that must be

addressed. Draft 1 indicates, in paragraph 16, that UNHCR will convene the first global refugee summit in 2019 and subsequent summits “will be convened” every three years, beginning in 2021.

UNHCR has an essential role to play, but for the summits to garner the most success, they should be co-chaired by significant host and donor states, as well as UNHCR, and the GCR should be explicit on this point.<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 7 of the Draft 1 notes that an objective of the GCR is to “mobilize political will on the part of the international community to address refugee challenges.” However, UNHCR is not in the same position as governments to unlock political impasses that limit the best opportunities to protect and assist refugee populations.

The “Obama Summit” of 2016 is not a perfect model, but elements from it can be useful.<sup>5</sup> Upon the initiative and leadership of the United States government, the UN Secretary-General and seven Member States, co-hosted a summit among 52 senior government leaders that garnered concrete commitments – including from the private sector – aimed at increasing global responsibility-sharing for refugees. Pledges related to increased funding for humanitarian assistance, an expansion of resettlement opportunities, and commitments to promote refugee access to education and employment.

The abrupt about-face in U.S. refugee policy following the election of Donald Trump certainly dampened the positive momentum garnered by the summit. There has been no global follow-up event, nor any formal tracking of progress against commitments. Nonetheless, some states have continued to implement their pledges from 2016. For example, Ethiopia, which hosts around 900,000 refugees from neighboring countries, pledged at the summit to expand its Out of Camp Policy to benefit 75,000 refugees.<sup>6</sup> Not only did Ethiopia fulfill this pledge and more, but the government has announced that it intends to completely end the policy of encampment within the next ten years.

To be sure, the current U.S. administration is less willing to assume the mantle of leadership on these issues, and it will be challenging for UNHCR to find government partners to co-chair and play an active role in Refugee Summits. But we believe there will be the greatest opportunity for progress if summits are structured in this way.

**As a co-host of the Refugee Summits, UNHCR would play a critical role in tracking pledges, developing progress reports, and serving as the consistent, central agency to the whole process – especially as levels of political engagement by different governments ebbs and flows. For serious commitments to be garnered, however, state leadership at each summit is an essential ingredient.**

## Global Support Platform – A Standing Mechanism with Diplomatic Leverage

In addition to regular global summits, the establishment of a Global Support Platform is outlined in Draft 1 of the GCR as a tool to mobilize more equitable and predictable responsibility-sharing for particular large-scale refugee situations, whether new or protracted. This could be foreseen to include situations like the massive movement of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh or the tens of thousands of refugee arrivals from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo into Uganda. Protracted situations could include the issue of the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya which has housed Somali refugees for over two decades.

Paragraph 22 of Draft 1 notes that the platform’s composition of states “would vary depending on the context to be addressed.” Upon activation by the High Commissioner for Refugees, the GSP would launch into an effort to marshal resources for a response from all relevant stakeholders, including international financial institutions, like the World Bank, as well as bring other governments into the fold. **For maximum effectiveness, the GSP should exist as a *standing group* of core states with rotating leadership so that political engagement can be sustained over time, rather than an ad-hoc group that is brought together by UNHCR.** Additionally, states that are most directly impacted by a refugee situation on which the GSP is specifically seized would be invited to join the Platform as key temporary members.

In addition to mobilizing resources, a standing GSP could be in a position to exert diplomatic pressure. When Kenya threatened to shut down the Dadaab camp in 2016, engagement by regional and donor governments helped ease Kenya back from that threat. The government has since pledged to maintain access to asylum for Somali refugees.<sup>7</sup> The GSP could help to sustain this kind of positive political engagement. In Bangladesh, the government took measures that restricted the role of UNHCR and which raised protection concerns. The GSP could be utilized to help address this kind of political impasse.

**The core group of states of the GSP should include those that have demonstrated a commitment to supporting refugee responses, as both donors and hosts (like Germany, Canada, and Uganda, to name just a few) as well as the governments that are sitting as the chair and vice-chair of UNHCR’s Executive Committee (ExCOM).** While ExCOM itself, with a membership of over 100 countries, is too unwieldy to serve as a GSP-type mechanism, a linkage between the GSP and ExCOM leadership is important to avoid overlap and duplication with UNHCR’s existing governance structure. As the GSP is envisioned to be Geneva-based, standing members should be represented at the ambassador level (i.e. permanent representatives to the UN in Geneva). However, when the Platform is called upon to engage on a particular crisis, foreign ministers could collectively engage as appropriate.

**As described in Draft 1, the GSP could initiate solidarity conferences to “broaden the base of support beyond States participating in the platform.” As with the global summits discussed above, solidarity conferences should also be co-led by a combination of donor states, host states, and UNHCR.** Last year, the Uganda Solidarity Summit was co-hosted by the UN and Uganda, but included no leadership role for key donor states. Ultimately, the Summit garnered only 17% of the \$2 billion target. In contrast, the Supporting Syrian and the Region Conference of 2016 included governments substantially involved in refugee support. It was co-hosted by the UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, and the UN Secretary-General, with UNHCR in a key supporting role, and generated \$12 billion in pledges.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The adoption of a Global Compact on Refugees offers an opportunity to establish governance mechanisms that can mobilize and sustain political leadership to ensure a more predictable, equitable, comprehensive, and inclusive global refugee response system. A voluntary and non-binding compact is unlikely to create new political will, but the right balance of government leadership, combined with UNHCR support, can harness existing political and diplomatic influence. Further, efforts toward this end must not stop once the Compact is finalized and must be articulated in the Follow-up Arrangement section of Draft

1. The Compact offers the opportunity to take a number of steps in the right direction, but it is by no means the end of the road.

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## Endnotes

1. United Nations, The Global Compact On Refugees, Draft 1, March 9, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/Zero-Draft.pdf>
2. For a broad analysis of Draft 1 of the Global Compact on Refugees, as well as on the draft of Global Compact on Migration, please see Refugees International’s Issue Brief “The Status of the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration: A New Commitment to the Well-Being of Refugees and Migrants?” March 2018. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/globalcompactsisssuebrief>
3. Refugees International would like to acknowledge the generation of ideas on this topic among various stakeholders over the past several month, with particular appreciation to the Experts Group discussion convened by the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility on March 17, 2018, in New York City. For additional analysis on responsibility-sharing for refugees, see “Responsibility-sharing for refugees: Lessons from policy and practice for the Global Compact on Refugees,” Dr. James Milner, Carleton University, April 12, 2018.
4. The top donor governments to UNHCR include the US, the EU, Germany, Japan, and Sweden. The countries that host the most refugees include Jordan, Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, and Ethiopia.
5. White House, Joint Statement on Leaders’ Summit on Refugees, September 20, 2016. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/joint-statement-leaders-summit-refugees>
6. United Nations, Summary Overview Document: Leaders’ Summit on Refugees, November 11, 2016. [https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/public\\_summary\\_document\\_refugee\\_summit\\_final\\_11-11-2016.pdf](https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/public_summary_document_refugee_summit_final_11-11-2016.pdf)
7. Intergovernmental Authority on Development, Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and Reintegration of Returnees in Somalia, March 25, 2017. <https://igad.int/communique/1519-communique-special-summit-of-the-igad-assembly-of-heads-of-state-and-government-on-durable-solutions-for-somali-refugees>
8. Refugees International thanks Dr. James Milner, Carleton University, for providing historical comparisons of refugee pledging conferences in preparation for a March 2018 Experts Group meeting hosted by the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility.