



Ensuring Prosperity for Refugees and Host Communities: Priority Actions for the 2nd Global Refugee Forum

December 2023

Overview

December 2023 marks the fifth anniversary of the affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the second Global Refugee Forum (GRF). Designed as a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, the GCR recognizes that sustainable solutions in support of refugees, appropriate responses including policy frameworks and legislation, and quality financing must go beyond addressing short-term displacement needs and focus on enhancing refugees' long-term self-reliance.

Unfortunately, the international community's failure to adequately respond to the drivers of forced displacement has left millions in vulnerable situations. Over 110 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, with 75% from just the twenty countries featured on the IRC's latest Emergency Watchlist, and over 130 million people are estimated to be forcibly displaced in 2024. Four years since the first GRF, only one-third of pledges to transform the lives of refugees and address displacement challenges have been reported as fulfilled. With 35.8 million refugees globally at the start of 2023, representing over a 35 percent increase in just one year, and a doubling of refugees worldwide since 2016, the refugee landscape has changed since the affirmation of the GCR. Additionally, there has been little progress on the GCR's priority on responsibility-sharing for resettlement. Three out of four refugees are hosted in low-and middle-income countries near their countries of origin, and 55 per cent of the world's refugee population is hosted in just ten countries. This year's GRF is a critical moment for host governments and donors to put concerted action behind their commitments, and to support refugees and host communities in line with the ambitions set out in the GCR.

Recommendations

1. Ensure economic inclusion and access to livelihoods for refugees

Priority Action for GRF: Donors and host governments should leverage national systems to support economic inclusion and access to livelihoods for refugees, through the development of inclusive, data-driven policies and scaled-up service delivery. This includes expanding the legal right to work, employment services, access to professional training and language learning, and recognition of refugees' professional and academic qualifications. Targeted support should be provided to overcome practical barriers for urban and camp-based refugees.

The UNHCR estimates that 67 percent of refugees across 99 refugee hosting countries have been granted legal access to the labor market. In spite of this progress, significant obstacles remain for refugees to find jobs and participate in host country economies. These include administrative and practical challenges related to movement restrictions, obtaining work permits, recognition of skills and diplomas, conditions at work and language barriers. Urban refugees – the majority of the global refugee population - struggle to find sustainable livelihoods to achieve long-term self-reliance.

2. Support refugee children's education, protection needs, mental health, and psychosocial wellbeing

Priority Action for GRF: Donors and host governments must increase support for refugee children's education and wellbeing by building inclusive and resilient national education systems, identifying and addressing practical barriers impeding

refugees' access to education, supporting caregivers, scaling up holistic Early Childhood Development (ECD) services, and investing in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and education in emergencies.

Almost half of primary and secondary school-aged refugees are not enrolled in the national education systems across 51 countries analyzed by UNHCR. Although national inclusive education policies have a positive impact on refugee enrollment rates, practical, legal and administrative barriers remain, such as lack of documentation and unclear legal status. The establishment of Early Childhood Development (ECD) coordination platforms to improve coordination between authorities, donors, and NGOs can increase the overall quality of the ECD response and policies. There is also an urgent need to invest in the MHPSS of displaced children and youth, while MHPSS often remains among the most underfunded sectors of humanitarian assistance, estimated to be just 0.31% of ODA funding for education. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions in and around school communities have proven to be low-cost, scalable, and have long-term positive individual and community impacts, as evidenced by the IRC's Ahlan Simsim project.

3. Ease pressure on host countries by expanding refugee resettlement and complementary pathways

Priority Action for GRF: National governments and regional governments such as the European Union must pledge ambitious resettlement quotas and demonstrate accountability towards these pledges by committing to concrete actions to improve resettlement systems. Complementary pathways should be developed with equitable access and robust safeguards in mind and offer guaranteed paths to durability.

The GCR refers to resettlement not only as a durable solution for refugees but as “a tangible mechanism for burden and responsibility-sharing and a demonstration of solidarity.” Along with complementary pathways, it can advance its objectives of *easing pressure on host countries* and *expanding access to third country solutions*. However, during the GRF in 2019, only 6% of total pledges focused on access to third-country solutions and, where ambitious promises had been made, little progress was achieved. In 2022, out of 1.5 million refugees in need of resettlement, only 4 per cent were able to depart to a third country. In 2024, 2.4 million refugees are estimated by UNHCR to be in need of resettlement – a 20 per cent increase from last year – emphasizing the need for sustainable and multi-year resettlement commitments. Complementary pathways are an encouraging development. The national governments should build shared screening, vetting, and referral systems to connect refugees with these opportunities and maximize impact.

4. Address rising needs through scaled up, multi-year funding for refugee response

Priority Action for GRF: Donors including governments, multilateral development banks and the private sector should make concrete and ambitious financial pledges that support GCR objectives and respond to forced displacement challenges. These financial contributions should be directed to countries hosting high numbers of refugees and should be multi-year, predictable, and flexible to effectively respond to emergency and protracted situations.

Refugee Response Plans (RRP) are chronically underfunded. In 2022, regional plans received \$5.4 billion out of the \$13 billion needed, leaving a 59 percent funding gap. In 2022, foreign aid from official donors towards refugee response rose as developed countries increased their ‘in-donor refugee costs’ (or domestic refugee costs) from USD 12.8 billion in 2021 to USD 29.3 billion (or 14.4% of Official Development Assistance). Meanwhile, the amount of bilateral aid for refugee situations towards low- and middle-income countries hosting the majority of refugees has globally declined since 2019. Predictable, multi-year development financing that is longer-term is essential to support interventions and services designed for displaced people and their host communities in protracted displacement contexts.

5. Shift power and resources to refugee-led and women-led organizations

Priority Action for GRF: To promote greater outreach and inclusion, national governments, donor and international organizations should build equitable partnerships with local NGOs, such as women-led organizations (WLOs) and refugee-led organizations (RLOs). This includes institutionalizing partnerships with WLOs and RLOs in an advisory capacity to help identify the most vulnerable refugee populations that may otherwise be left behind in policy and programs decision-making. Donors should prioritize enabling affected populations and local actors' strategic participation and leadership during all phases of response.

The UNHCR's assessment of progress towards the GCR objectives highlights that there is an increase and greater diversity in local partnerships involved in refugee response in 2023 compared to 2016, with Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) among these. Yet, despite many high-level commitments made globally and across contexts, the progress on localization in crisis settings remains very slow. Building equitable partnerships with local RLOs is key to implementing evidence-driven and rights-based approaches to durable solutions that put displaced persons – their needs, legitimate interests, and intentions – at the center of the policy and decision-making processes. Working with other local organizations that represent and specifically focus on the most vulnerable promotes greater outreach and inclusion. Local authorities are often the first responders to large refugee situations: partnering with them can ensure greater alignment between emergency and long-term outcomes by bolstering local systems' response and preparedness to respond to future crises, as illustrated by [IRC's Re:Build program](#).