

# The Global Compact on Refugees Three Years On:

Navigating barriers and maximising incentives in support of refugees and host countries



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## Executive Summary

December 2021 will mark the third anniversary of the affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the second anniversary of the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), and the first opportunity to take stock of progress measured against GCR objectives and GRF pledges at a High-Level Officials' Meeting (HLOM), scheduled to take place in Geneva in mid-December.

However, three years on, little is still known about the results, challenges, and opportunities from GCR implementation. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, new and re-emerging crises, and in some cases, a concerning trend of hardening of positions and negative rhetoric toward refugees and migrants in domestic politics are testing international support for refugees and the communities and countries that host them, as encapsulated in the GCR.

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) commissioned this research in September and October 2021 to help fill this important accountability gap around GCR implementation. This qualitative report draws from 48 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and a complementary desk review, offering detailed analysis of how the GCR is influencing responses in three select host countries – Uganda, Colombia, and Bangladesh – and four key donors – the European Union (EU), United States (US), Germany, and Denmark. It also explores whether and the ways in which other states are supporting refugees in terms of financial, political, and other kinds of assistance. It is designed to complement the forthcoming first report against the GCR Indicator Framework developed in 2019, by providing a snapshot of changes in refugee policies and practices since the adoption of the GCR and the type of support still needed to facilitate access to durable solutions. While this report intentionally focuses on donor and host governments, DRC, IRC, and NRC recognise the importance of including countries or origin, as well as local and refugee voices in future research efforts of this kind.

## Key findings and implications

### *Operationalising responsibility-sharing*

- 1. The GCR does not seem to be considered in at least two of the major host countries under review in this study, calling into question the political will of the international community to ensure better and more predictable responses to**

**protracted displacement contexts.** While Uganda was an early implementer of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), a central part of the GCR, and has embraced the GCR as a tool to call for more predictable and equitable responsibility sharing, in the two other host countries researched for this report, Bangladesh and Colombia, GCR accountability remains lacking. Colombia has made significant progress in extending protection and assistance for the 1.7 million 'Venezuelans displaced abroad.'<sup>\*</sup> However, the Government of Colombia refers to people displaced from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) as migrants, and the Government has not appeared to use the GCR objectives to frame their response, despite United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) guidance that the majority fleeing would at the least meet agreed upon definitions of who comprises 'refugees.' In Bangladesh, the Government has consistently not recognised the more than 742,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh as refugees, and the lack of effective incentives (financial and political) to operationalise the GCR has meant the GCR is never referred to, despite the Government's joining 180 other States in voting to affirm the GCR in December 2018.

- 2. Donor states often perceive the GCR as foreign policy, rather than a domestic responsibility. Donors often risk undermining the GCR by being constructive abroad but obstructive at home.** Many have argued the paradigm shift regarding refugee policies that has emerged was the result of the so-called refugee and migrant crisis in Europe from 2015 onwards. This framing of migration management is not just affecting donors' external actions, with the last few years seeing a hardening of rhetoric, policies, and political positioning across donor countries, but it is also weakening the asylum space within some countries. Elements of the new EU Migration and Asylum Pact, continued political deadlock on responsibility sharing within the EU, and Denmark's recent pursuit of the externalisation of asylum procedures illustrate the growing disconnect between strong donor support for the GCR alongside improved international responses to refugees and host communities abroad, and a different agenda at home, which frequently undermines the international protection regime.

### *Improving the quality and quantity of funding*

- 3. It remains unclear whether the GCR has supported increased and more predictable funding for refugees, host communities, and host countries, as well as greater medium to long-term development financing rather than short-term**

<sup>\*</sup> This is the term used by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to describe those fleeing the largest exodus in recent history in Latin America.

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**humanitarian assistance.** GCR approaches require more - not less - funding when a combination of humanitarian, catalytic, transitional, and development financing is needed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) preliminary findings for 2020 indicate that Official Development Assistance (ODA) rose by 3.5 percent in real terms compared to 2019, but these figures encompass more than solely funding to refugees and host countries, and therefore cannot confirm whether funding has increased for refugee situations. In 2021, refugee response plans in all three identified host countries remain chronically underfunded like previous years (between 34 and 44 percent funded per current reporting).

- 4. Development approaches and medium- to longer-term development financing are being more widely adopted, and key donors are supporting some promising 'nexus' approaches aligned with the GCR.** While the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is not new, this framing for the GCR has spurred increased engagement of the World Bank Group (WBG) and development cooperation from all four identified donors. Although the development financing agenda for some donors has been squarely framed in migration management terms, there is a need for new financing windows, instruments, and partnerships in host countries' refugee responses. With a development-oriented approach now a widely recognised norm, discourse needs to move from calling for development actors to engage, to holding them accountable for their role in providing long-term financing, to more effectively addressing the protracted nature of forced displacement.
- 5.** Among donors, the GCR/CRRF approach provides a useful basis for discussion of the implementation of nexus approaches, but pre-existing structural factors are impeding further progress and full accountability for supporting refugees and hosts. All donors researched stated that in refugee situations they are applying a nexus approach using both humanitarian funding and development cooperation. They mentioned that while conceptually the GCR logic is now part of their overall strategies toward forced displacement, further work is needed to ensure harmonisation and synchronisation of approaches leading to impact at scale and more predictable support to refugees, host countries, and host communities.

## *Creating enabling conditions for implementation of the GCR*

- 6. Most changes in refugee policy and practice in the last three years have been linked to local solutions.** For some host countries, implementing a GCR approach requires a significant shift in policies and practices to see refugees not as a burden and to fully realise their economic potential. At the 2019, GRF host countries made over 280 pledges

in relation to law- and policymaking, with many focusing on national inclusion and legal and policy frameworks in line with the GCR. There has also been some promising momentum around such shifts in approaches, including Colombia's continued efforts to support the regularisation of Venezuelan refugees and migrants and their access to protection, health and education services, and labour market opportunities. However, more needs to be done to take these pledges as the starting point and support coordinated multi-stakeholder support to move many of them toward implementation.

- 7. More focus and support on the 'how' of implementing GCR/CRRF approaches is needed.** Different stakeholders must work toward collective outcomes and support whole-of-government approaches. This requires a more nuanced political economy analysis of potential sensitivities in hosting refugees in specific host countries and more integrated multi-stakeholder engagement and commitment of humanitarian and development partners, including operational agencies and donors, to plan together and engage coherently through calibrated political dialogue, technical assistance, and financing to help shift incentives toward creating enabling legal and policy environments. Despite political goodwill, implementing the GCR in Uganda remains challenging, but it can offer key learnings that can be applied around CRRF architecture and inclusion of refugees into national development plans in other country contexts.
- 8. There are opportunities to apply the GCR more broadly, including developing creative solutions.** The research revealed that while there has been a strong level of engagement among governments with several of the key 'arrangements for responsibility-sharing' established by the GCR – most notably the GRF and the three Support Platforms for responses to displacement in Afghanistan, Central America, and the Horn of and East Africa – a number of the other 'arrangements' are yet to reach fruition. There is also the opportunity to further strengthen regional and sub-regional approaches in support of the Rohingya and Venezuelan displacement crises, in line with the objectives of Regional Support Platforms.
- 9. Although COVID-19 has played a major role in hampering refugee responses, there has been a decline, rather than an increase, in the availability of third country solutions since the GCR was affirmed.** One of the earliest and most visible impacts of the pandemic on refugees was the suspension of resettlement travel. Although resettlement travel resumed three months after the onset of the pandemic, the pandemic helped drive resettlement down in 2020 to its lowest level in almost two decades. In a year when 'The Three-Year Strategy (2019-2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways', developed under the auspices of the GCR, aimed to see 70,000 refugees

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resettled through the UNHCR alone, just 22,770 people were resettled. While the United States' recent commitment to resettling up to 125,000 refugees in 2022 is auspicious, for resettlement to be a true demonstration of responsibility-sharing, resettlement numbers need to substantially increase and more states need to be involved.

- 10. Efforts to broaden the base of states engaging actively in the international refugee protection regime have not yet yielded results.** A key objective of the GCR is to engage more states in the international refugee protection regime, with the Compact noting that more equitable responsibility-sharing must involve widening the support base beyond those countries that have historically hosted and supported refugees. A multi-stakeholder strategy to achieve this objective should focus on aligning incentives for deeper engagement, including linking refugee protection to other core state interests, and expanding visibility for states who choose to engage, for example at global events such as the second GRF in 2023.

If there were a scorecard against GCR progress three years on, the international community collectively would not pass. While there are some significant examples of changes in policies and practices, such as the cemented role of development actors in refugee responses and the real ambition of host countries to implement a GCR approach, there is still work to be done.

This work is a collective responsibility. It requires the concerted effort of host countries, donors, and many states who are currently not contributing their fair share, both in terms of financing and resettlement. It also requires the support of humanitarian and development actors, including UNHCR and all relevant UN agencies, as well as NGOs like DRC, IRC, and NRC. Through this research, these NGOs recommit to not only playing their part in implementation in countries, but also to further policy development at the regional and national levels; and to hold themselves, but also states, to account.

## Key recommendations

1. The international community must show stronger support for the GCR as a whole and **urgently prioritise more equitable and predictable responsibility-sharing** towards refugees before the next GRF in 2023. Donor governments must intensify their political and diplomatic efforts to support responsibility-sharing pledges made at the 2019 GRF. Host states must take a more consistent approach to ensure the GCR is being applied in all refugee-hosting contexts.
2. Donor governments should take immediate steps to ensure responsibility-sharing towards refugees **beyond foreign policy and international financing**. Donor governments' GCR progress should also be assessed against their role in upholding international refugee protection at home, including by safeguarding the asylum space and supporting third country solutions.
3. Existing resettlement targets globally are woefully insufficient, both substantively - to address massive protection needs - and symbolically - as a reasonable demonstration of solidarity and responsibility-sharing with countries that host the majority of refugees, even when accounting for COVID-19 setbacks. **As a priority for 2022, governments should commit to raise their resettlement targets. UN agencies and civil society must work together to hold states accountable against a further erosion of resettlement commitments.**
4. **OECD's collaboration with UNHCR on refugee-related financing flows should intensify** to provide more detailed annual data on overall levels of funding, humanitarian versus development financing, modalities, recipient countries, etc. Better data on these financial flows will lead to a deeper understanding of, and improved accountability for, the financing of refugee responses, including gaps.
5. **Development actors must play a larger and more predictable role in financing the response to protracted forced displacement contexts**, following the early groundwork laid by the World Bank and some key refugee donors. Other multilateral development banks in particular should provide much needed development financing to support host countries at the outset of refugee situations to incentivise refugee-friendly policies.
6. **Donors should take urgent steps to link their humanitarian and development sections and strategies** to facilitate greater coherence and deliver on the nexus approach. These efforts should include engaging in policy dialogues with host countries.
7. **UNHCR**, together with humanitarian and development partners and with funding from donors, **should focus more on implementing the GCR at the country level**. This includes funding sustained government technical capacity to lead GCR implementation and linking existing refugee responses to national development plans.
8. **UNHCR**, together with interested actors including states, international organisations, and civil society, **must undertake coordinated strategic initiatives to bring in a wider range of states** to support comprehensive refugee responses against which progress can be reported at the next GRF.