

## **The Global Compact on Refugees: what can we expect?**

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Burundi. Central African Republic. Myanmar. Nigeria. South Sudan. Syria. During the past three years, the world has witnessed a spate of major refugee outflows from countries affected by armed conflict and human rights violations. At the same time, longstanding refugee populations from states such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia have been obliged to remain in exile because conditions in their countries of origin are not safe enough for them to return.

Responding to this alarming situation, in September 2016 the UN General Assembly convened a special meeting to examine the effectiveness of the international community's response to mass movements of people. That event has already had two tangible outcomes: the New York Declaration, a document that sets out the key principles that will underpin the world's future approach to the global refugee problem; and a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), established by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as a means of putting those principles into practice.

At the next General Assembly, in September 2018, UN member states are expected to endorse a Global Compact on Refugees, an agreement based on the notion that people who are forced to flee are a shared international responsibility that must be borne more equitably and predictably in the future.

How significant are these developments? On a positive note, it has been a significant achievement for the UN to focus the international community's attention on the refugee issue and to gain unanimous state support for the fundamental principles of refugee protection.

The CRRF is also a welcome initiative, focusing as it does on four key challenges generated by large-scale refugee movements: easing the pressures exerted on host countries; fostering the self-reliance of exiled populations; expanding resettlement and other safe pathways to asylum; and fostering the conditions required for refugees to go home. UNHCR's own assessment of the CRRF has been highly optimistic, describing it

as “a milestone for global solidarity,” “a game-changer”, “a paradigm shift” and even “a minor miracle.”

Unfortunately, there are several reasons to conclude that the New York Declaration, the CRRF and the forthcoming Global Compact of Refugees will not meet the expectations raised by such statements.

First, throughout the negotiation process associated with these initiatives, the world’s most prosperous states have been very eager to avoid any binding or quantifiable commitments, especially in the realm of refugee resettlement and responsibility-sharing.

Second, while states might have reaffirmed their commitment to refugee protection principles, their actions tell a very different story. Across the globe, governments are preventing people from seeking asylum by means of border closures, the erection of new barriers and the deployment of military forces. Growing numbers of refugees are being induced to repatriate against their will and to countries which are not safe.

Third, the Global Compact is being formulated at a time when the US has abandoned its traditional leadership role in relation to the refugee issue. The Trump administration has already announced a major reduction in the number of refugee resettlement places that it provides, and has threatened to make cuts in the contributions that the US makes to refugee assistance programs in the developing world.

Fourth, while UNHCR reports that global displacement levels have now reached record levels, the organization’s statistics reveal that around 40 million of the world’s 65 million displaced people recorded by UNHCR are not refugees at all but are people who have remained within the borders of their own countries. And yet the New York Declaration and CRRF are almost completely silent on the growing problem of internal displacement.

Fifth, while the CRRF has very laudable objectives, it is misleading to suggest that there is anything new in the approaches that it proposes.

In recent years there have been some very positive developments in the way that the international community responds to refugee movements: a recognition that refugees have a right to live outside of camps and to join the labor market; the replacement of inefficient relief distribution programs by providing refugees with cash payments; and a much greater concern for the needs of communities that host large number of refugees.

If the New York Declaration and CRRF can help to consolidate and strengthen such approaches, then so much the better. But let us not pretend that they have introduced an entirely new way of working.

Finally, whatever efforts are made by UNHCR, its humanitarian and development partners, it will not be possible to prevent and resolve refugee situations until the UN's peace and security machinery is able to function in a more effective manner. The Security Council is currently moribund, and unless it demonstrates effectiveness in its purpose, the impact of the Global Compact on Refugees will inevitably be limited.

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