

Mr. Filippo Grandi  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Case Postale 2500  
CH-1211 Genève 2 Dépôt  
Suisse

December 4, 2017

To the High Commissioner:

In September 2017, at the Global Mayors Summit that took place during the United Nations General Assembly in New York, you remarked, “Cities are frontline players in dealing with refugees.” You committed UNHCR to “step[ping] up its engagement with mayors around the world.” We agree, and we are ready to undertake this work alongside UNHCR and the Member States. It is essential that cities be engaged in national and international decision-making processes regarding refugees.

Cities play a central role in addressing the needs of refugees, whether they arrive independently or through formal resettlement channels, and the international system needs to keep pace with present realities. Whereas the iconic image of a refugee is a person residing in a camp, today at least 60 percent of the world’s refugees reside in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> Programs that provide these refugees with housing, healthcare, education, and social services are, in many cases, delivered at the local level, while designed and financed in close cooperation with the other levels of governance.

For these interventions to be sustainable and efficient, they must integrate with existing city systems. Municipal authorities should be responsible for providing basic services for all residents, even when their numbers have surged unexpectedly.

As cities, we must accomplish these tasks within an increasingly complex context as we grapple with mixed migration flows, fraught national politics, and limited budgets. Local authorities need approaches that benefit refugees and host communities alike — policies and programs that build resilient, inclusive, and prosperous communities from the outset. Refugees are members of our communities, whether they stay for one year or twenty.

Over the course of the next year, UNHCR can make good on the commitments you made in September as it works with Member States to develop the Global Compact on Refugees. This is

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Urban Refugees,” UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/urban-refugees.html>.

a prime opportunity to commence the work of engaging with global mayors. Including municipal leaders in the process of crafting the programme of action will enhance its effectiveness as well as its legitimacy.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Habitat have recognized the centrality of city leadership on these issues and partnered with the government of Belgium to convene a *Global Conference on Cities and Migration* on 16-17 November, 2017 to solicit feedback on the Global Compact on Migration. We urge UNHCR to do the same.

In particular, we—as mayors responsible for welcoming and integrating refugees in our communities—encourage UNHCR to:<sup>2</sup>

**Open up discussions on refugee policy and operations to municipalities from around the world that are receiving refugees.**

In particular, city leaders should be invited to contribute to, and give feedback on, the programme of action of the Global Compact on Refugees—first, at the stocktaking discussion at the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges in Geneva on 12-13 December 2017; then, during the process of formal consultations slated for February through July 2018.

**Ensure that the experiences of towns and cities with sizeable refugee populations inform the programme of action that will accompany the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.**

At least 60 percent of the world’s refugees now reside in urban areas. The New York Declaration notes this fact and signals the need to ensure that the delivery of assistance to refugees and host communities is adapted to the relevant context.<sup>3</sup> We urge UNHCR to use the practical application of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework to further refine operational responses to urban refugee populations, and in particular, to explore the potential for durable solutions in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These ideas are laid out in greater depth in, *Engaging City Leaders in the Global Compact Process: Recommendations for Action*, a written contribution submitted to UNHCR in October by the Brookings Institution, the International Rescue Committee, and 100 Resilient Cities – Pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation, in coordination with the New York City Mayor’s Office. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/metropolitan-revolution/2017/10/17/engaging-city-leaders-in-the-global-compact-process-recommendations-for-action/>

<sup>3</sup> General Assembly resolution 71/1, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, A/RES/71/1 (3 Oct 2016), available from [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1)

<sup>4</sup> In line with the New York Declaration’s invitation to UNHCR to “consult with all relevant stakeholders [...] with a view to evaluating the detailed practical application of the comprehensive refugee response framework and assessing the scope for refinement and further development,” (A/RES/71/1), Annex 1, para 18.

**Create mechanisms to source and share innovative approaches to refugee reception and integration directly from and with cities.**

Cities are self-organizing in networks to exchange knowledge on common challenges and create collections of good practices.<sup>5</sup> However, in the absence of a centralized repository of information, this knowledge lives in disparate places and is not easily accessible by practitioners. UNHCR can become a powerful sourcing and distribution mechanism for good integration practices. In order to do so, it should optimize its existing database to meet the needs of local practitioners and draw upon localities' expertise.

**Engage regularly with municipal authorities.**

UNHCR should consider creating a formal mechanism through which to consult with local authorities on refugee-related decisions that directly affect local communities.

**Advocate with Member States to improve their refugee responses.**

Member States should engage in meaningful collaboration with municipal authorities, including by facilitating the flow of technical expertise and resources to localities where refugee inflows are putting additional pressure on municipal services and other functions.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas in detail with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

[list of signatories in attachment]

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<sup>5</sup> 100 Resilient Cities – Pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation, “Global Migration: Resilient Cities at the Forefront,” <http://www.100resilientcities.org/turning-migration-challenges-into-opportunities-to-build-resilience/>

## **List of Signatories**

Yousef Shawarbeh, Amman, Jordan

Giorgos Kaminis, Athens, Greece

Kasim Reed, Atlanta, USA

Ada Colau Ballano, Barcelona, Spain

Marvin Rees, Bristol, United Kingdom

Rahm Emanuel, Chicago, USA

Muriel Bowser, District of Columbia, USA

Mike Rawlings, Dallas, USA

Ann-Sofie Hermansson, Gothenburg, Sweden

Eric Garcetti, Los Angeles, USA

Manuela Carmena, Madrid, Spain

Giuseppe Sala, Milan, Italy

Valérie Plante, Montreal, Canada

Bill de Blasio, New York City, USA

Anne Hidalgo, Paris, France

James Kenney, Philadelphia, USA

Jorge Elorza, Providence, USA

Mauricio Rodas, Quito, Ecuador

Immigrant Rights Commission, San Francisco, USA