The Global Compact on Refugees: The Role of Cities

How the Compact fares on urban issues,
and how it can work at the local level

Jessica Brandt, Brookings Institution
Joanna Henderson, International Rescue Committee

The Need for Urban Engagement

Local governments are at the forefront of addressing the challenges associated with forced displacement worldwide. Today, more than half of the world's 25 million refugees reside in urban areas.[1] Among internally displaced people, estimates are as high as 80%.[2] Displaced populations move to towns and cities for safety, economic opportunity, the promise of self-reliance, and the ability to exercise choice in where and how to live. Local governments are critically important to addressing needs, particularly when displacement is increasingly protracted. That is because municipalities host the systems and provide the services that refugees depend on to survive and to thrive – housing, education, health care, and employment. Relevant interventions are often designed, delivered and financed at the local level.[3] City authorities play a key role in identifying people of concern and in the planning and delivery of protection and solutions. For these reasons, the focus on the role of cities during the eleventh annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges is welcomed and critical to the success of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The Dialogue provides an opportunity to explore and define the role of cities in implementing the GCR, take stock of best practice, and support the development of effective national and municipal level policymaking and programming for cities hosting displaced populations.

This paper examines how the GCR fares on urban issues and offers a path toward effective and meaningful implementation of the Compact at the city level. It is intended to complement and facilitate discussion during the Dialogue. It builds on and complements consultations with mayors during a workshop hosted by the Brookings Institution, together with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and 100 Resilient Cities – Pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation (100RC), in September 2017 on the

---

[1] See UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016," (Geneva: UNHCR, 2017) https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5b27be547/unhcr-global-trends-2017.html.

[2] Cosgrave, John, Nicholas Crawford, and Irina Mosel, "10 Things to Know About Refugees and Displacement," (London: Overseas Development Institute), https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11168.pdf.

[3] Katz, Bruce and Jessica Brandt, "The Refugee Crisis Is a City Crisis," *City Lab,* October 27,2017, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/10/the-refugee-crisis-is-a-city-crisis/544083/?preview=aHZSEZzNPQT143PsHVE-KTy4BOc.

role of cities and the GCR. It also builds on the content of the resulting policy brief, "The Global Compact for Refugees: Bringing Mayors to the Table: Why and How."[4]

GCR and Cities in Context

In recent years, a range of international frameworks, policies, and coalitions have been developed to recognize that displaced populations in urban settings have unique needs and that local governments are central partners in managing the impact of displacement. The GCR builds on this momentum.

For example:

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the central role that cities play in building safe, inclusive, and resilient societies and in managing displacement. The GCR complements global efforts to promote sustainable development and to align development and displacement agendas towards the goals of protecting and meeting the needs of refugees. There is now important work to be done to ensure that displaced populations are included in national and city-level development plans through implementation of the GCR.

- The New Urban Agenda, adopted in 2016, acknowledges the centrality of cities and local authorities in managing displacement and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s own policies and programming responses increasingly acknowledge the particular needs of the urban displaced and the role of cities.

- In recognition of the growing trend toward urban displacement and the need to work differently and with new stakeholders and partners to address and meet needs of the displaced, as well as the communities that host them, important coalitions have emerged. Those include the Global Alliance for Urban Crises – a multi-stakeholder initiative centered on local authority engagement and collaboration.

The Development of the GCR and the Role of Cities

The two-year process to develop the Compact aimed to engage a wide range of stakeholders, yet local authorities were notably absent from these discussions as integral partners. Nor was the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) piloted or informed by the experience of towns and cities with sizable refugee populations.[5] Brookings, IRC, and others supported efforts to highlight the views of

---

[4] Brandt, Jessica and Lucy Earle, "Global Compact for Refugees: Bringing Mayors to the Table, Why and How," (Washington, DC: Brookings, January 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-global-compact-for-refugees.
[5] Ibid.

mayors and to more systematically engage urban leaders in the Compact process. UNHCR responded positively. Going forward, engaging city leaders in the implementation process will be an important step toward shaping the relationship with cities as central partners to meeting protection challenges in cities and towns and towards a sustainable GCR.

How does the GCR Text Fare on Urban Issues?

The current GCR text recognizes the important role local governments and city networks play as stakeholders in comprehensive refugee responses. Indeed, local governments are relevant to each of the four objectives of the Compact – to ease pressures on host countries; to enhance refugee self-reliance; to expand access to third country solutions; and to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.[6]

Broadly, while the GCR recognizes the important role that local authorities play in managing and responding to displacement, it does not detail how the Compact can and should work at the local level. Nor does it detail how local authorities should be engaged as partners and stakeholders in providing input and expertise on decisions that affect their communities. The following sections offer an analysis of key components of the text relevant to cities.

Recognition of Local Authorities

The Compact acknowledges local authorities as relevant stakeholders, distinct from other local actors. This is important because although local civil society organizations play a critical role in responding to the needs of refugees and host communities, local governments have unique legal responsibilities and mandates toward residents in their jurisdiction. As governments, municipalities can and should have a distinct role in migration and displacement governance discussions. For that reason, consideration should be given to granting local authorities participation privileges in future multilateral discussions, including the forthcoming Global Refugee Fora.

Beyond acknowledging the relevance of local authorities to migration governance broadly, the Compact specifically notes the essential role they play as first responders, in both urban and rural settings. It recognizes that they – along with local community leaders and "traditional community governance institutions" – are among the actors that experience the "most significant impact" of large-scale refugee movements over the medium term. This is important because local governments, recognizing the particular needs of displaced residents, are responding by creating new policies and programs designed

---

[6] Brandt, Jessica, "Mayors can help turn words into action," *Refugees Deeply*, May 29, 2018, https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2018/05/29/mayors-can-help-the-refugee-compact-turn-words-into-action.

to meet those needs, as well as the needs of host residents.[7] They would benefit from greater support from the international community for those efforts.

New Mechanisms for Local Engagement: Twinning Arrangements, Global Refugee Fora

The Compact invites networks of cities and refugee-hosting municipalities to share good practices and approaches to responses in urban settings, "including through twinning arrangements, with the support of UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders." The Dialogue itself is a forum for this sort of exchange. This is important because while municipalities are already sharing good practices with one another, their efforts to do so are ad hoc and largely driven by opportunity. UNHCR's support for more systematic interactions is valuable.

The Compact envisions the establishment of Global Refugee Fora, which will be convened every four years, for member states "together with relevant stakeholders." It is designed to be a space where various actors can announce concrete pledges and contributions toward achieving the objectives of the Compact. Over time, it will provide a channel through which to take stock of previous pledges and assess progress more broadly. Among those relevant stakeholders are local actors. The text envisions that the Fora will be co-convened and co-hosted by UNHCR and at least one Member State; that they will take place in Geneva; and be in lieu of the High Commissioner's Dialogue during the years in which they occur. The text leaves UNHCR and other stakeholders ample latitude to develop strategies and plans for operationalizing the Fora. Because the Fora will focus on implementing the Compact at all levels, and on measuring progress in specific contexts, local government participation will be crucial. Detailed ideas for making best use of this channel follow.

New Ways of Working within the Humanitarian and Development Communities

The Compact calls on the international community to provide capacity building and infrastructure support at the local level. It notes that, "In consultation with national authorities and in respect of relevant legal frameworks, support by the international community as a whole may be provided to strengthen institutional capacities, infrastructure and accommodation at local level, including through funding and capacity development where appropriate."

This is useful for two reasons. First, because municipalities responding to displacement are eager for technical advice and support from the international community.[8] Second, it suggests that at least some of the increased development assistance called for elsewhere in the text might be channeled through

---

[7] Saliba, Samer, "Urban Refuge: How Cities Are Building Inclusive Communitie*s*," (New York, NY: International Rescue Committee, 2018), https://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/document/1814/urban-refuge-report.pdf.
[8] Ibid.

local authorities. That is important because municipalities often have strategic plans that, when realized, can contribute to the achievement of development goals.[9]

The Compact also suggests that, "recruitment of local personnel by humanitarian and development agencies is encouraged." That is itself encouraging. One way of increasing the likelihood of productive interaction between local governments and humanitarians in displacement crises is
to deploy urban managers and technical experts from within the humanitarian community to provide guidance to local authorities.

Where are the Gaps?

First, the document puts a major emphasis on national ownership and leadership, noting that it is "key to [the Compact's] successful implementation," and including a call for respect for its "primacy." This emphasis is manifest in concrete ways, for example:

- The development of comprehensive response plans will be led by national governments;

- National governments are granted the authority to activate a support platform;

- The Compact promotes the inclusion of refugee populations in state-based social protection, health, and education systems;

- Additional development assistance that will flow to states and refugee hosting areas is intended to support national development priorities. This puts donors and international organizations (primarily UNHCR) front and center in responding to refugee situations.

This emphasis was designed to increase the likelihood that states take meaningful action to improve burden sharing globally, but it may have unintended consequences.

Second, the Compact does not create a repository for good practices at the local level, which could be a quite useful companion to the twinning approach that UNHCR suggests. Such a repository seems likely to speed the process of adapting and adopting innovative responses to urban displacement, and to attract the participation and engagement of local authorities in the global south, who generally have limited access to in-person exchanges. Updating *wwww.urbangoodpractices.org*, for example, in order to make it accessible to, and well-suited to the needs of municipal users is a relatively non-controversial, non-resource-intensive undertaking. Of course, sharing good practices online on its own is unlikely to

---

[9] Ibid.

improve urban displacement response. Where UNHCR could make a difference is by playing a proactive facilitation role, disseminating knowledge in ways municipal actors find accessible and effective.

Third, while the text recognizes the need for financial support for local authorities, it does not include a call for flexible funding deployed at the local level. There is a range of reasons for this – principally because the development of the Compact text was, and its implementation will be, driven by national governments. Nevertheless, there is and will continue to be a real need for financial support of local government efforts. During the course of implementation, there is likely to be an ongoing tension between nationally and internationally driven funding flows and local needs. This will need to be seriously considered and addressed. Humanitarians rarely view local governments – particularly those in the developed world – as potential partners. This results in parallel service delivery systems and a missed opportunity to build long-term, sustainable resources at the local level. [10]

Ideas for Implementation

The adoption of the Compact provides an opportunity to engage city leaders systematically in its implementation. Effective implementation of the GCR will require international stakeholders to respond to displacement through and with local authorities, recognizing the wide variation in challenges they face and the capacities they possess. This will require much greater effort than the text of the Compact points to. Below are some steps UNHCR and other actors can take to ensure that local authorities are effectively engaged in the implementation process.

Create a Space for Formalized Engagement between Municipalities and UNHCR

There are a number of discussions underway to formalize engagement between local governments and UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration on migration and displacement matters. To effectively implement the GCR, UNHCR will need to establish a space for regular, formalized interaction with municipalities that is focused on, but not limited to, implementation. In particular, the space should:

- **Be sufficiently resourced so as to** facilitate consistent engagement and follow up. Dedicated staff are essential to ensuring follow through and coordination among diverse, often bandwidth-constrained stakeholders.

- **Feed into the Global Refugee Fora**, which will be co-convened by UNHCR and member states. The proposed "Mayor's Mechanism," could serve as a model. That mechanism would formalize a relationship between the Mayoral Forum (an annual city-led dialogue on migration topics, supported by IOM and the World Bank, among other actors), and the Global Forum on

---

[10] Ibid.

Migration and Development (GFMD, a voluntary, member state-led process designed to advance cooperation on topics at the nexus of migration and development).

- **Engage a broad range of interlocutors.** These should include the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which provides assistance to migrants in need, including refugees; the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is the primary mechanism for coordinating humanitarian assistance across UN agencies and with outside partners; as well as multilateral financial institutions, among others.

- **Welcome participation of senior city officials beyond mayors themselves.** Senior city leaders with relevant operational responsibilities are essential actors, well positioned to benefit from, and contribute to, ongoing dialogue. Participation in various dialogues at the working level should be encouraged.

- **Be open to all municipalities**, regardless of size or location. Special attention should be paid to the inclusion of cities in the global south, which tend to be underrepresented in migration governance discussions, despite the enormous experience they have amassed in delivering responses to urban displacement.[11]

A space for formalized engagement between municipalities and UNCHR should not formally affiliate with any single city network, nor seek to create a new one. There are already numerous, often intersecting, networks of city officials working on migration issues – Cities of Migration, Cities of Sanctuary, Global Parliament of Mayors, Metropolis, Solidarity Cities, Welcoming Cities, and 100 Resilient Cities, among them. New networks are emerging all the time, and their memberships often overlap. Some of the most effective city coalitions have been ad hoc, built around seizing a particular opportunity. Consider, for example, the group of local authorities that submitted a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in December 2017.[12] The initiative was not carried out under the auspices of any particular network, but by cities that are active in many of them. UNHCR should take a flexible approach that leaves room for dynamism and does not privilege any particular organization.

It would be worth considering the utility of working groups on specific areas of focus that are a priority for local actors. The working groups could foster exchange of good practices, identify resource gaps that impede progress at the local level, and develop strategies for attracting new forms of support, including

---

[11] Brandt, Jessica, "Implementing the Global Compact on Migration: Ideas for City Engagement," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/research/implementing-the-global-compact-for-migration-ideas-for-engagement.

[12] Brandt, Jessica and Bruce Katz, "Trump wants out of global migration discussions. Cities want in," *Brookings Institution,* December 6, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/metropolitan-revolution/2017/12/06/trump-wants-out-of-global-migration-discussions-cities-want-in. See also: Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany, "U.S. Cities Want to Join U.N. Migration Talks That Trump Boycotted," *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/05/u-s-cities-want-to-join-u-n-migration-talks-that-trump-boycotted.

from the private sector and multilateral financial institutions. It could also provide a space to evaluate non-material barriers to progress and suggest new ways of working that might overcome them.

It would also be worth considering how a mechanism for ongoing engagement between UNHCR and municipalities could link to the Global Support Platforms GCR envisions. Coordination between local and national authorities from the outset of a refugee situation is essential to an effective response. Coordination structures should therefore integrate local governments.

Proactively Include Mayors and Senior City Officials in the Planning of Global Refugee Fora

UNHCR should solicit concrete commitments from municipalities toward achieving the objectives of the GCR. These could draw on the draft commitments proposed by mayors and leaders of local and regional governments under the Mechelen Declaration last year.[13] Those commitments were designed to correspond to the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) but contain ideas relevant to fulfilling the GCR. Among other things, it proposes a commitment to working "with States to fulfill at the local level their international commitments to ensure full respect for the human rights of refugees." Specific commitments could cover topics including social and economic integration, safe and inclusive urban development, and the realization of human rights, among others.

UNHCR should consider inviting local authorities to deliver Voluntary Local Reviews, analyzing progress toward implementing the Compact within their jurisdictions. These could be based on the model established by the City of New York, which in 2018, submitted a review to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) on progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. It was the first of its kind. National governments may be wary of providing space for local authorities to report on developments within their jurisdictions. Yet actors across sectors could benefit from the information contained in such reports, which would enable them to calibrate their respective actions. Moreover, the need to report on progress can incentive progress itself.[14]

Welcome Input from Cities on Key Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators

UNHCR has pledged to draft a set of key monitoring and evaluation indicators in advance of the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019. If the adage is correct, "what's measured is what's done," we should care a great deal about what is measured. Mayors and senior city officials cannot and should not draft indicators themselves. Monitoring and evaluation specialists are needed for that. Those specialists

---

[13] "Mechelen Declaration on Cities and Migration," (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2017), available at: https://www.iom.int/ sites/default/files/press_release/file/Mechelen-Declaration-final.pdf.
[14] Brandt, Jessica, "Implementing the Global Compact on Migration: Ideas for City Engagement."

should consider appropriate local goals and targets, and workshop them with local authorities – in other words, the actors that would be responsible for meeting the objectives they set. [15]

---

[15] Brandt, Jessica, "Mayors can help turn words into action."

Support New Lines of Research

UNHCR should study what municipalities are already doing with respect to identified "areas in need of support" in order to identify gaps and obstacles to filling them. This could be used to garner commitments from the private sector and multilateral financial institutions, among other actors, that would fill those gaps. These could be linked to the pledging mechanism associated with the Global Refugee Fora.

UNHCR and other humanitarian and development institutions working to implement the Compact should be proactive about capturing lessons from urban displacement crises, including from frontline states to the Syria crisis, that are relevant to improving responses to displacement in an urbanizing world.[16] More than 93% of the more than 5.6 million registered Syrian refugees in frontline states, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, reside in urban environments.[17] The GCR aims to provide a comprehensive framework that applies to all refugee situations, and should therefore consider lessons from non-camp environments, which is now the norm worldwide.

Experts and policy practitioners should also consider how to encourage sub-national participation in comprehensive plans, when it is clear in the text that "the composition and working methods of national arrangements would be determined by states." Doing so is essential to effective implementation.

Explore Ways of Ensuring Funding Reaches Local Authorities

Local authorities should aim to expand and diversify the resources at their disposal by proactively engaging development banks, traditional and nontraditional humanitarian donors, and national funding sources. Humanitarian donors might consider earmarking at least a quarter of funding related to urban displacement for local government collaboration and/or capacity building.[18]

Conclusion

The adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees by UN member states is a major milestone – one that has substantial potential to improve responses to displacement worldwide. The extent to which it does so in practice will depend in large part on the extent to which local authorities are engaged in

---

[16] Brandt, Jessica and Lucy Earle, "Global Compact for Refugees: Bringing Mayors to the Table, Why and How." See also, Brandt, Jessica and Kemal Kirisci, "In rethinking refuge, draw lessons from Turkey," *Brookings Institution* January 25, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/25/in-rethinking-refuge-draw-lessons-from-turkey.

[17] "Situation Syria Regional Response," UN High Commissioner for Refugees, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria.

[18] Saliba, Samer, "Urban Refuge: How Cities Are Building Inclusive Communiti*es*."

implementation. By taking the steps outlined above, the international community can make progress toward achieving that goal.

Acknowledgements