Summary

Local governments play a fundamental role in receiving, welcoming and including refugees into their communities. As such, they can contribute substantially to their protection and assistance and help to enable solutions to their plight. Mayors and cities are among the first to acknowledge the skills, courage and energy that refugees bring to their communities, along with opportunities for economic and civic growth. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) expressly recognizes local authorities as relevant stakeholders in a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder refugee response. The Compact reflects many good practices developed by cities over decades, including those supporting refugees’ economic, social and cultural inclusion. Its implementation will enhance opportunities for cities and city networks to share good practice and innovative approaches in urban settings, while encouraging all actors to deliver assistance in ways that benefit refugees and host communities alike.

Context

At the start of 2018, there were some 68.5 million forcibly displaced persons—including 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum-seekers—around the world. The vast majority of refugees under UNHCR’s mandate (85 per cent) are hosted by developing countries; the simple majority (some 52 per cent) are children. In line with the global trend of increasing urbanization, today nearly two of every three refugees live in urban areas. In addition, an increasing number of returnees choose to settle in urban areas upon return to their respective countries.

The GCR, elaborated through consultations among UN Member States, is anticipated to be adopted by the UN General Assembly in December. It has been developed in a global context in which 10 countries host 60 per cent of the world’s refugees; 10 countries provide almost 80 per cent of UNHCR’s funding; and more than two-thirds of UNHCR’s resettlement submissions go to only 5 countries. Despite the generosity of these countries, the gap between the needs of refugees and the actions required to meet them is both large and growing. Against this backdrop, the GCR establishes the architecture for a stronger, more predictable and more equitable international response to large refugee situations.

The GCR provides the elements of a comprehensive refugee response, with the objectives to: (1) ease pressure on host countries; (2) enhance refugee self-reliance; (3) expand access to third country solutions; and (4) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. While not legally binding, the GCR guides the international community as a whole in supporting refugees and

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1 A refugee is someone who has left his or her country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of a serious threat to his or her life or freedom. The international legal definition of the term is contained in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Refugees are entitled to protection against forcible return and have rights and duties as set out in the 1951 Convention, as well as relevant regional and national instruments.
the countries and communities hosting them through the mobilization of political will, a broadened base of support, and specific arrangements for more equitable and predictable burden- and responsibility-sharing.

In particular, it engages a wider range of States, as well as multi-stakeholder partnerships including development actors, the private sector, and civil society, in a “whole-of-society” approach. It fosters the resilience and self-reliance of refugees—in a manner that also benefits host communities—by facilitating access to and building the capacity of local and national services, as well as livelihood opportunities, backed by appropriate support from the international community. For refugees, this will mean that they are less dependent on aid, better equipped to return home when conditions allow and, in the meantime, contributing to the communities in which they live.2

While the right to seek asylum and international protection as a refugee is established in international law, and reflected and implemented in national law, local authorities are often responsible for meeting the immediate needs of refugees and asylum seekers. The GCR specifically recognizes the importance of local authorities as relevant stakeholders in refugee response. Not only are they often the first to respond, but they also experience the impact over the longer term. Local policies and inclusive city planning can therefore have a significant impact on protection and resilience outcomes for refugees – influencing whether refugees become marginalized and dependent upon humanitarian assistance, or whether they actively participate and contribute economically, socially and culturally, to the communities in which they live.

Mayors and cities are showing increasing solidarity with refugees at the local as well as international levels. Close to 100 cities world-wide have signed on to the Cities#WithRefugees campaign, and the Global Parliament of Mayors recently resolved to implement the GCR in their cities. This year’s High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, taking place 18-19 December, is dedicated to “Protection and solutions in urban settings: Engaging with cities.” Convening a broad range of stakeholders, including mayors and representatives of local government, refugees and members of host communities, the Dialogue will consider the many ways in which cities can and do support the objectives of the GCR, as well as how the international community and a whole-of-society approach can, in turn, better support them in these efforts.

Recommendations

Drawing upon the long experience and good practices of cities across all regions, as well as the new opportunities presented by the Global Compact on Refugees, actors working in urban environments are encouraged to consider the following, consistent with national legal frameworks:

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2 In its approach, the GCR complements and adds specificity to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which seeks to “leave no one behind” in inclusive and sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 11 specifically calls for cities to be “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” and seeks “to substantially increase the number of cities and human settlement adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans toward inclusion” by 2030. The New Urban Agenda further commits member States to full respect for the human rights of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants, regardless of status; acknowledges that although large movements into cities can pose challenges, they also bring significant social, economic and cultural contributions; and commits to promoting access to livelihoods and legal income–earning opportunities, with special attention to the needs and potential of refugees.
Mayors and local authorities

Access to services: to provide refugees access to local services and facilities – including social services such as education, health, housing and social protection systems – on an equal and non-discriminatory basis;

Needs and vulnerabilities: in the provision of municipal services, to take into account specific needs or vulnerabilities of refugees, also applying an age, gender and diversity approach;

Self-reliance: to advance refugees’ integration in the labour market through trainings, access to financial services and employment generation, including in partnership with the private sector and local chambers of commerce;

Targeted information and support: to support community centres for refugees and migrants (often in collaboration with community-based and refugee-led organizations) offering, for example, counselling, information and guidance on access to services; legal assistance; language training; support for documentation;

Social and cultural inclusion: to offer access to inclusion and integration services, such as language courses and social solidarity projects; and to emphasize language of welcoming and belonging, countering xenophobia;

Inclusive city planning: to ensure that policies and programmes include refugees and address their specific needs and vulnerabilities, also applying an age, gender and diversity approach;

Refugees’ participation: to actively include the perspectives of refugees in city policies and programmes, for example through the establishment of a representative municipal council or forum;

Institutional mechanism: to facilitate refugees’ inclusion across sectors and departments of local governance, and ensure a “whole of government” approach, some cities have benefitted from establishing a function or office of inclusion or refugee and migrant affairs;

Exchange of good practice: to build the knowledge available to all local authorities by contributing to the sharing of good practices and innovative approaches, including through twinning arrangements, as reflected in the GCR and supported by UNHCR, as well as other relevant actors, including cities’ networks.

City networks and coalitions

To continue to provide space for cities to develop and share knowledge and good practices in this area, and to draw upon UNHCR for support and expertise in refugee protection and solutions.

The international community, including the United Nations, international organizations, humanitarian and development actors, civil society and the private sector

To support cities welcoming and receiving refugees, in consultation with national authorities and in respect of legal frameworks, through investment, technical support, and capacity building for institutional capacities, infrastructure and accommodation at the local level.

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