

# Preventing displacement, addressing root causes and the promise of the Global Compact on Refugees

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**Preventing displacement by addressing its root causes requires a holistic approach and engagement by a wide range of actors. The starting point must be a better understanding of root causes and their complexity.**

In December 2015, the eighth annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges focused on the theme 'Understanding and addressing root causes of displacement'.<sup>1</sup> Those gathered acknowledged the need for the international community to prioritise prevention and to address root causes. This would require putting displacement on the governance agenda of the UN, all international and regional organisations, and all States, in order to be better able to detect drivers and triggers of displacement, and to transform early warning mechanisms into prompt action. To do this, it was noted, we should

recognise the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for a holistic approach.

Addressing the root causes of displacement is a formidable challenge. With a record 70.8 million people around the world forcibly displaced, it is imperative to address the underlying and often overlapping factors that fuel violence and conflict, whether they emanate from serious human rights violations, the breakdown of the rule of law, the arms trade, extraction industries, severe inequality, authoritarianism, or environmental change and degradation. Where such drivers of displacement are not addressed, flight

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– including when this entails crossing international borders – is often a preventive, self-protection mechanism exercised by the individual or community. Indeed, it may be the only viable option for survival. The role of humanitarian action is not to promote or enable restrictions on these coping mechanisms but instead to advocate, with others (including States, regional organisations and bilateral donors), to address the root causes of displacement.

### Preventing displacement

Many instances of displacement could be avoided, or their impacts at least minimised, if compliance with international human rights as well as international humanitarian law were to be assured. The more advances we make in this respect, the less people will be uprooted and forced to live in exile. In this regard, it would be worth examining how a lack of respect for each human right leads or could lead to displacement, and how this could be addressed. Maintaining the rule of law is essential: it separates justice, stability and preparedness from chaos, anarchy and arbitrariness.

Undeniably, climate change is also a driver of displacement, and is now firmly on the agenda of most international actors. Although definitively linking climate change to specific displacement remains difficult, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recognises the seriousness of the consequences of climate change, including for refugees and other people of concern. Recent history has borne witness to cross-border movements in situations where conflict or violence has interacted with disaster or adverse effects of climate change.

It is evident that prevention is not the sole remit of any one actor. It requires joint strategies and initiatives that contribute to social cohesion and empowerment, alongside the promotion and defence of human rights. A division of labour, in respect of mandates, expertise and comparative advantage, enhances complementarity and maximises impact. Displacement is both a humanitarian and development challenge. Enhanced coherence between

humanitarian and development actors can better position and equip refugees – most of whom would like to return to their home countries when it is safe to do so – to engage in post-conflict reconstruction.

In all our interventions, we must place as much emphasis on ‘understanding’ as we do on ‘addressing’. A recent OECD Working Paper<sup>2</sup> reviewed evaluations of stabilisation activities by international actors in fragile and conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan, one of the biggest refugee-producing countries for over 30 years. It noted that efforts often started from the assumption that joining humanitarian, development, defence and diplomatic actors through joint programming, with a focus on ‘quick wins’, would help reinforce support for the State as a legitimate actor, improve governance and help lead to stability. The report highlighted several instances where this was in fact not the case. It observed that understanding the political economy and main drivers of conflict and fragility needed much more attention in many development programmes.

Despite the challenges, we should strongly advocate for the operationalisation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.<sup>3</sup> Although this is not a new discussion, the context has changed – politically, economically and socially. Contextualising displacement and its root causes, and learning through evidence, is a time- and resource-intensive process but it is a process that we must invest in and prioritise if we are to make headway in our efforts to address root causes. No less important is the need to learn from refugees, to fully comprehend the factors that forced them to flee in the first place, and to appreciate their lived experience of displacement.

### The role of UNHCR

There are a number of entry points for UNHCR to support and contribute to prevention. Some are well understood and of long standing, and include promoting gender equality specifically, and the rule of law and human rights more broadly, while also investing in education and livelihoods. Engaging with affected communities

and individuals is at the very centre of UNHCR's programmes. The Age, Gender and Diversity policy promotes a community-based approach and is intended to enable the participation of displaced and stateless people in decisions that affect their lives. In addition to ensuring that the voices of displaced communities, and women in particular, are heard in peace negotiations, there are other essential elements in promoting sustainable voluntary return in post-conflict contexts, such as securing access to justice and supporting the reintegration of demobilised armed elements, thereby helping to bridge the gap towards peace.

Ending statelessness is an effective means of addressing one particular root cause of conflict and forced displacement, which UNHCR is pursuing through, for example, the #IBELONG campaign.<sup>4</sup> There are many indicators of the positive momentum

that is taking place in this area, including reforms to nationality laws and further accessions to the Statelessness Conventions.

Monitoring internal displacement can help forecast potential later displacement across international borders, and early responses to internal displacement can mitigate the risk of upheaval and impoverishment from the outset. UNHCR's guidance on its engagement with IDPs (primarily within the cluster system) also outlines a number of areas where we can contribute to promoting State responsibility through supporting the development of law and policy on internal displacement, training and capacity-building projects on child protection, and strategies to prevent gender-based violence.

Alongside prevention, better preparedness through early warning systems and contingency planning can help to mitigate some of the worst humanitarian consequences



UNHCR/Xavier Bourgois

As the region of Minawao in Cameroon faces critical deforestation due to global warming and the impact of hosting 56,000 Nigerian refugees, UNHCR and its partners Land Life Company and Lutheran World Federation started a reforestation project in January 2019. Over the next two years, they expect to plant – with the refugees – 20,000 trees in and around the site.

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of conflict and violence. For example, had contingency planning and joined-up action guided European responses to the arrivals of refugees across the Mediterranean in 2015 when numbers were starting to increase, a great deal of chaos and trauma could have been avoided. Or if we had a mechanism to ensure early and predictable funding for humanitarian responses to large numbers of new arrivals, systems could be put in place from the start to prevent critical situations deteriorating into emergencies.

### The Global Compact on Refugees

We have seen repeatedly how violent conflicts and other drivers of displacement have consequences that take on not only regional but global dimensions. If we are to overcome isolationism, fragmentation and toxic public debates we will need a concerted, comprehensive and proactive approach to refugee situations. The universal adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants by UN Member States in September 2016 was a clear acknowledgement of this imperative, as was the affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in December 2018.

The GCR aims to ensure equitable and predictable responsibility sharing to address both large-scale movements of refugees and protracted refugee situations. It represents a clear commitment by States to early efforts to address the drivers and triggers of large refugee situations, and to improved cooperation among political, humanitarian, development and peace actors. It underscores the importance of international efforts to prevent and resolve conflict on the basis of the UN Charter, international law, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and non-discrimination. It also highlights the need to provide development assistance to countries of origin in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other relevant frameworks.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the GCR provides a concrete framework for implementing the aforementioned humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol focus on the rights of refugees

and the obligations of States but they do not offer significant guidance on international cooperation; this is a key aspect that the GCR does address, and which we hope will chart a pathway to enhanced multilateralism.

However, as the GCR is non-binding, its successful implementation will depend on the mobilisation of political will, and UNHCR is working closely with States and other stakeholders to mobilise this in the lead-up to the first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019. We recognise the inherent challenges at a time when populist nationalism is on the rise, asylum space is being reduced, and containment has evolved into a response strategy. And yet, even in these difficult times, we continue to witness strong engagement on refugee issues from a range of new actors, including the international financial institutions, emerging donors, the private sector, civil society and private citizens – all epitomising the concept of solidarity in action. With this in mind, there is considerable scope for strong and substantive collaboration to prevent conflict and address the manifold root causes of displacement.

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1. High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges (2015) *Understanding and addressing root causes of displacement* <http://bit.ly/HCRDialogue2015>
2. Morrison-Métouis S (2017) *Responding to Refugee Crises: Lessons from evaluations in Afghanistan as a country of origin*, OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers, No 40 <https://doi.org/10.1787/de7e6a13-en>
3. The humanitarian-development-peace nexus – or 'triple nexus' – refers to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actors. UN humanitarian, development and peace agencies are encouraged to work together more cohesively, capitalising on the comparative advantages of each sector to reduce need, risk and vulnerability.
4. [www.unhcr.org/ibelong/](http://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/)
5. Report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Part II Global Compact on Refugees, General Assembly, Seventy-third Session, para 8–9 [www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR\\_English.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf)