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POLICY BRIEF

THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR REFUGEES

BRINGING MAYORS TO THE TABLE: WHY AND HOW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.N. member states are now more than halfway through a two-year process of developing a new Global Compact for Refugees (CGR)—one that is designed to improve responses to displacement by making them more comprehensive, predictable, and inclusive of relevant stakeholders. Although the process aimed to engage a wide range of actors, municipal authorities have been notably absent from the discussions. With approximately 60 percent of refugees and at least half of internally displaced people residing in urban environments, that is a consequential oversight.

This paper makes the case for engaging municipal leaders in the GCR process, offers recommendations for how to do so in the period that remains, and suggests steps that the humanitarian community can take to ensure that the conversation continues thereafter.

Principally, it recommends that the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR): 1) Invite mayors to provide feedback on the draft GCR it will release next month, during the period of formal, U.N. member state-led consultations; and 2) Ensure that it reflects the experiences of urban communities that host substantial numbers of refugees, including in the Middle East.

Going forward, UNHCR should also consider developing a consultative mechanism through which local authorities can provide ongoing input to decisions that affect their communities; support the exchange of good practices among humanitarians and urban leaders; encourage the designation of municipalities as entities eligible to receive assistance funding, where relevant; and liaise directly with municipalities that seek technical advice and support, regardless of the engagement of their national governments. Taking these steps will help ensure that the GCR is maximally effective, and therefore legitimate.

When world leaders convened in New York for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly in 2016, they did so against the backdrop of seemingly interminable violence in Syria, an engine of vast human suffering. With displacement worldwide at a record high, they used the occasion to host a high-level Summit for Refugees and Migrants aimed at improving the international community's response to large movements of people.

At the summit, member states unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which included commitments to protecting the rights of people on the move and to sharing responsibility for their well-being. As importantly, it called on the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to implement a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and laid out a process for developing a new Global Compact for Refugees (GCR), which is on track to be adopted this year.

The Compact is an opportunity to shape the global refugee regime for years to come—to make it more responsible, more predictable, and more inclusive of relevant stakeholders.

The process itself was also intended to be broadly inclusive of multiple stakeholders. But one voice has been notably absent: that of urban leaders, who are critical to meeting the needs of refugee populations as well as host communities, while managing often fraught attendant politics. That can, and should, change. Engaging local authorities in the Compact process as essential constituents—not just as marginal stakeholders—is important to its effectiveness and legitimacy. Fortunately, there is still time to make that a reality.

Exactly one year after the New York Declaration was adopted, mayors from around the globe convened in New York City at two events designed to showcase their perspectives on the world's refugee and migration crises, bringing forward their experiences and their views on the need for change. Below is the case for engaging towns and cities in the GCR process, ideas for how to accomplish that goal in the months that remain, and recommendations for ensuring that the conversation continues beyond 2018.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

The current wave of displacement is breathtaking in scale. More than 65 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. The majority of them, more than 40 million, have sought shelter within their own countries. More than 22 million others are seeking new lives as refugees, in neighboring countries or farther afield.[1]

Perhaps more importantly, in several key respects, this wave of displacement is different in character than those that preceded it. Here is what has changed:

Displacement is increasingly protracted. Today, those who take flight are more likely than ever before to remain in exile for extended periods. At the end of last year, more than two-thirds of all refugees, some 11 million of them, were in a protracted refugee situation—one in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years, with no immediate prospect of finding a durable solution.[2]

Displacement is increasingly an urban phenomenon. The displaced are also more likely than ever before to seek protection in cities, rather than in refugee camps. Today, it is estimated that globally, approximately 60 percent of refugees and at least half of internally displaced people reside in urban environments.[3] Among Syrian refugees in Turkey, the

1 These statistics are the latest currently available from UNHCR, and represent totals at the end of 2016. They do not capture displacements since, notably including the Rohingya crisis. See UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016," (Geneva: UNHCR, 2017) http://www.refworld.org/docid/594aa38e0.html.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Overview 2015: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence," (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2015) http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Media/201505-Global-Overview-2015/20150506-global-overview-2015-en.pdf.

proportion of refugees living outside of traditional camps is above 90 percent.[4] Urban centers often grow in size during conflicts as people seek relative safety there. The ways in which the displaced settle and build homes can increase their exposure to natural hazards, and problematize the provision of basic services. Those displaced by war into towns and cities may not return home quickly; many never will.

Populist nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise in traditional Western countries of asylum. Historically, the United States, Canada, Australia, and the countries of Western Europe were open to receiving asylum-seekers and refugees. Today, with the possible exception of Canada, political forces within those countries express concern that the arrival of large numbers of displaced people, largely from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, will increase the likelihood of terrorism and impose a burden upon their economies.

New actors are stepping in to provide services to newcomers and host communities. Service-providing agencies, urban councils and technical departments, community-based organizations, police forces, even academics and business leaders, have a role to play in this new environment.[5] Local authorities are well-placed to link humanitarian actors to these interlocutors, as well as affected populations, and to play a role in much-needed coordination.

Urban considerations are gaining prominence in multilateral fora. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by U.N. member states in 2015, are a set of commitments to ending poverty, protecting the planet, and advancing shared prosperity. Goal 10 calls on states to reduce inequality, not just among countries but also within them. Facilitating orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration is one of the associated targets. Goal 11 calls on states to make cities safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. Taken together, these goals constitute a drive toward ensuring that cities are places of opportunity for all. The New Urban Agenda, agreed at the Third U.N. Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in 2016, makes reference to displaced populations, noting their contributions to urban economy and society, and calling for efforts to facilitate their inclusion into the city.

THE CASE FOR ENGAGING CITIES

Meeting the needs of the displaced

These changes have significant consequences for meeting the protection and assistance needs of people who have fled their homes. In particular, they suggest that the displaced require access to social services in the medium- to long-term. Short-term emergency measures are not a sustainable means to provide education, skills training, psychosocial support, or health care. The displaced also need the right to earn a sustainable livelihood, as well as opportunities to do so, and to live in decent housing, without the threat of eviction. All of this must be accomplished within an urban context, where there may already be pressure on labor and housing markets as well as social services, and tension between established residents and new arrivals.

This is true for cities across the globe. While the refugee experience, and the pathways by which refugees arrive, are clearly very different in Amman as compared with Atlanta, or even Athens, there are also significant commonalities. While media attention has focused on the Syrian refugee emergency and the spontaneous movement of people into Europe, there are also pressing questions of how best to meet the needs of urban refugees and host communities in the towns and cities of the Middle East and the growing urban centers of East and Central Africa. As a collective and individually, the voices of municipal authorities need to be heard, as refugee response adapts to an urbanizing world.

4 European Commission, "Turkey," (Brussels: European Commission, 2018) http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf.

5 Roger Zetter and George Dikun, "Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas," *Forced Migration Review* 34, (February 2010): 6, http://www.fmreview.org/en/urban-displacement/FMR34.pdf.

When faced with a choice between dependence, isolation, indignity, and enforced idleness, it is not surprising that the majority of refugees, where they are permitted, will choose life in a town or city over life in a camp, despite its many difficulties. Urban centers are equipped with schools and other training facilities. There are markets and demand for goods and services. This attracts many displaced people who wish to find jobs or other income generating opportunities, educate themselves and their children, and in the process regain some kind of "normalcy." Notwithstanding this desire for self-sufficiency, displaced people can struggle to meet their basic needs and to access the services they need in urban areas. This is particularly the case given that in forgoing formal camps, they often forgo formal assistance. This matters, because refugee populations can be extremely diverse in terms of the skills and resources they have to contribute.

Where refugees are struggling, the agencies and organizations established to support displaced people should step in, in collaboration with local governments. However, the characteristics of displacement in urban areas problematize the provision of protection and assistance. These populations can be highly mobile—at risk of abuse by unscrupulous landlords, or unable to meet rental payments as their assets deplete. Further, refugees may choose not to register with the U.N. or with local authorities, meaning they are not easily identified for support by local or international agencies, and may not be aware of their rights and entitlements. Often "disappearing" in to the urban fabric, living alongside the urban poor, their situation is quite different from the camp-based situations to which many humanitarian actors are accustomed. In the face of these trends, humanitarian actors are called upon to adapt. Those who know cities best—mayors and municipal technical staff—can help them do that.

First, while there will be great variation in the existence of, and ability to collect, data from one urban center to another, municipal authorities have an active role to play in standardizing, collecting, analyzing, and sharing data. Technical staff are well placed to know where and how basic services are provided, and the extent to which they are meeting existing needs. This information should be the cornerstone of a response to urban refugees, informing engagement between local authorities and refugee agencies to ensure access to and uptake of services by displaced populations. Many of these services—housing, water and sanitation, security—would be designated "life-saving" in a camp-based response, and yet when the populations of many municipalities in countries bordering Syria grew exponentially in the early years of the conflict, they were left without any financial support to deal with the increased demand.

Second, in a similar vein, towns and cities have knowledge and understanding of the local private sector and civil society, and how they are operating. They are well-positioned to build partnerships with these actors, and to serve as a bridge with humanitarian agencies, to find alternative channels of service provision to meet needs.

There are also a variety of planning tools and approaches that municipalities use that are of relevance to humanitarian actors. It cannot be taken for granted that towns and cities affected by displacement have the urban planning and management capacity that refugee-supporting agencies can seamlessly engage with. Nevertheless, with the increasingly protracted nature of displacement, it is critical that agencies engage with urban planners, or, if they do not exist, employ the spatial and strategic analysis of the planning profession. This is to make sure that investments in support of refugees—whether in relation to housing, livelihoods, or other types of infrastructure—do not, at a minimum, impede future sustainable development, and preferably also help to create benefits for the hosting population. The location of shelter, for example, could exacerbate risks to populations from climate change and other natural hazards if not well-planned. But despite the obvious practical advantages of engagement with urban authorities and technical staff in the planning of refugee responses, this does not always happen in

a meaningful way, nor as a matter of course. If well planned and managed, investments can actively contribute toward more sustainable urban growth trajectories.

Getting the politics right

Welcoming refugees who arrive spontaneously, or increasing the number of refugee resettlement slots, are fraught political decisions for national leaders. Balancing the moral duty to respond to a humanitarian catastrophe with the needs and wishes of constituents is complex, and particularly so at a time of rising ethnic nationalism in Europe and elsewhere. The decision of Chancellor Angela Merkel, in 2015, to allow 1 million refugees into Germany is seen by commentators as having contributed to her inability to secure a decisive victory in recent elections. Responding to rising levels of xenophobia in the United States, in September 2017 President Trump reduced by more than half the number of resettlement slots for refugees for 2018 that had been announced by President Obama at the New York Summit in 2016.

Popular attitudes toward refugees are also problematized by the conflation, by politicians and in the media, of refugees and migrants. The confusion between the categories of recent arrivals is also generated, in Europe, by the current situation of "mixed flows" of refugees and economic migrants. Migrants, who choose to move in order to improve their lives, are quite different from refugees—individuals forced to flee their homes, often to save their lives. As such, they are—and should be—treated differently under international law. Yet migrants and refugees increasingly make use of the same routes across borders and face similar challenges along the way—destitution, exploitation, homelessness, gender-based violence, and racist harassment among them. Local leaders are responsible for protecting all vulnerable people, including environmental migrants, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied minors.

A second problem is that large numbers of forcibly displaced people do not fit the legal definition of "refugee." The primary legal instrument and intergovernmental organization for refugees were set up in the aftermath of WWII, in the context of the Cold War, with a particular goal in mind: to prevent a repeat of the Holocaust experience, where Jews were denied entry into potential countries of asylum, and to protect individuals escaping persecution at the hands of their government. But today, weak states, not strong ones, are the primary drivers of displacement. Because the victims of this phenomenon do not always suffer individual persecution, they are, in many cases, not recognized as refugees and thus are not entitled to appropriate legal protections.

Despite these factors, the goodwill shown by cities around the world in welcoming refugees has been both high-profile and remarkable. Residents and urban authorities have stated that refugees are welcome, in some cases in explicit defiance of higher levels of government. In a similar vein, sanctuary cities in the United States have reiterated their commitments to preventing deportation of undocumented immigrants. Residents of towns and cities around the world have spontaneously provided support to and solidarity with refugees—through donations of food and clothing and opening their homes. The business community, an important thread in the fabric of urban life, has also stepped up its engagement. It is important to stress, however, that the authorities in many towns and cities may not have recent experience in providing support to large numbers of vulnerable, traumatized people, many of whom are minors or young adults. These willing actors need support and training so that the assistance they give is appropriate and sensitive to the diverse needs of the populations they serve.

For every positive story, there are also cases of xenophobia and violence against refugees, often generated by misinformation. Harnessing the outreach potential and communication skills of local authorities where refugees are hosted—wherever in the world—is critical to raise awareness of why refugees need sanctuary and to help host communities prepare for new arrivals. Local

authorities are on the frontline when it comes to promoting integration—which is both imperative and inherently a local phenomenon.

In sum, a real and immediate turnaround in the relationship between cities receiving refugees and the international agencies mandated to support those refugees is called for. Meaningful communication and engagement between the displaced, local authorities, and humanitarian agencies is needed in the planning of each response, as well as at the level of policymaking, as the GCR process progresses, and UNHCR and others rethink their approach in line with the changing nature of displacement.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE: HOW URBAN LEADERS CAN ENGAGE

According to the New York Declaration, the new framework for responding to refugee situations encapsulated by the CRRF should be based on a "multi-stakeholder approach," and apply to "each situation involving large numbers of refugees."[6] In other words, it should embrace urban leaders as essential stakeholders, and account for urban refugees (who constitute more than half of the global total). During the U.N. General Assembly in New York last September, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi acknowledged the need to do so. "Cities are frontline players in dealing with refugees," he said. "UNHCR is ready to step up its engagement with mayors around the world."[7] That is a welcome statement. It must now be translated to action.

Thus far, UNHCR's engagement with towns and cities through the GCR process has been limited. UNHCR leadership responded positively to the recommendations submitted by the Brookings Institution, the International Rescue Committee, and "100 Resilient Cities—Pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation," ahead of its thematic consultation on the GCR held in Geneva in October 2017. These recommendations informed one agenda item during the final thematic consultation UNHCR hosted in Geneva in November 2017. That said, the agency hosted five such thematic consultations over the course of 2017. Although the pressures on urban systems and the need to adapt approaches to the realities of towns and cities were raised by participants, these issues were not addressed systematically. Nor were mayors, other urban leaders, or specialists invited to participate in significant numbers in any of these consultations.

The neglect of urban issues in the GCR process thus far is surprising, given that within the last decade, UNHCR has given the subject considerable attention. In 2009, the agency released its first serious, comprehensive policy on urban refugees. That year, the High Commissioner's Dialogue focused on people of concern in urban settings. The agency subsequently conducted a global evaluation of how the new policy was implemented and put forward an additional policy on alternatives to camps. A former UNHCR insider we spoke with believes that a spate of high-profile, large-scale emergencies—Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar, to name a few—diverted the agency's attention away from urban issues beginning around 2012 (even though the Syria crisis has a consequential urban dimension).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which is facilitating the development of the Global Compact on Migration (a parallel process, also launched as a consequence of the New York Declaration), has made a concerted effort to engage with urban leaders and on urban issues generally for some time. IOM's World Migration Report in 2015 focused explicitly on urban migration,[8] and in late 2017 the Organization co-hosted a "Global Conference on Cities and Migrants" with the Belgian

6 U.N. General Assembly, "New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants," A/RES/71/1 (September 19, 2016), http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1.

7 Damien McElroy, "UN refugee chief says world response is changing after Syria," *The National*, September 18, 2017, https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/un-refugee-chief-says-world-response-is-changing-after-syria-1.629757.

8 International Organization for Migration (IOM), "World Migration Report 2015—Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility," (Geneva: IOM, 2015) http://publications.iom.int/system/files/wmr2015_en.pdf.

government, U.N.-Habitat, and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). The outcome of this conference—the Mechelen Declaration—has been submitted as part of the preparatory process for the Global Compact on Migration.

As a first step, UNHCR should invite city leaders to give feedback on the draft of the GCR, comprised of the CRRF and its accompanying Program of Action that will be presented in February 2018. This engagement should take place during the process of formal, U.N. member state-led consultations that are scheduled to take place between February and July 2018 in Geneva. There are a number of ways this could occur. First, UNHCR could formally encourage member states to include local authorities as part of their delegations. Not all, or even most, member states would likely comply with this request, but it would have constructive symbolic importance. Second, UNHCR could grant local authorities observer status at the four scheduled consultation sessions. These privileges are limited, but constitute a minimum baseline that all stakeholders should be afforded. Third, UNHCR could host a separate discussion with local authorities on the draft Program of Action, and use their input to develop a position paper that could be shared with member states as part of the formal consultations. The discussion should include local authorities from municipalities in the Middle East and Africa, as well as Europe. Doing so is achievable, given that the roadmap UNHCR released earlier this year calls for stakeholder engagement of this kind, even if it omits specific mention of local authorities.

In addition, UNHCR should ensure that the Program of Action that accompanies the CRRF reflects the experiences of urban communities that host substantial numbers of refugees. Among the countries where the CRRF is currently being rolled out are several in Latin America—Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama. These contexts are fairly urban, but not characterized by the presence of large refugee populations. The overall number of refugees in these countries is low: less than 30,000 total in 2016.[9] As a result, findings from the roll-out there are less likely to be relevant to other parts of the world that have experienced large refugee flows into urban areas. In Africa, the governments of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia are using the framework. Several of these countries have sizeable urban refugee populations. Kenya's capital, Nairobi, is home to more than 65,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.[10] Uganda's capital, Kampala, is home to approximately 100,000 refugees.[11] Urban refugees and local actors in these cities, including municipal authorities, could make a valuable contribution to the process of refining the CRRF. They should be invited to do so in a consistent manner. Finally, municipalities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have developed considerable knowledge in the course of the Syrian crisis, which should be systematically incorporated into the development of the Program of Action. UNHCR could commission a research report on this subject, to be shared with member states before the conclusion of the formal consultation process, and to ensure that urban contexts are appropriately referenced in the CRRF.

Taking these steps would enable UNHCR to make progress in ensuring that the GCR process is inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, thereby increasing its legitimacy. Just as importantly, taking these steps would enable UNHCR to ensure that the process is maximally effective, and that its outcome is well suited to meeting the needs of displaced people and host communities around the world.

BEYOND THE GCR PROCESS: A PLAN TO ENGAGE URBAN LEADERS

Engaging urban leaders in the GCR process is an important step toward reshaping the relationship between local actors and humanitarians—for the

9 "Refugee population by country of asylum," World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG.

10 UNHCR, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Kenya," (Geneva: UNHCR, December 31, 2017) http://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/01/Kenya-statistics-package-December-2017.pdf.

11 UNHCR, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Uganda," (Kampala: UNHCR, April 30, 2017) https://ugandarefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/Uganda-Statistics-Package-April-2017.pdf.

benefit of displaced people who reside in towns and cities worldwide, as well as the communities that host them. The effort should not stop there. There are several important actions that UNHCR can take to ensure a progressive improvement in levels of engagement with key urban actors, and a refinement of its approaches in urban refugee response.

Creating a consultative mechanism

First, UNHCR should consider creating a consultative mechanism through which local authorities could provide ongoing input to displacement-related decisions taken at national and global levels—decisions that have significant impact on their communities. UNHCR hosts yearly three-day conferences in Geneva for NGOs, in collaboration with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) for "conversations, questions and learning."[12] A similar mechanism could be established in conjunction with networks of municipalities, ideally in a number of different regions, so as to facilitate participation and the exchange of experience.

Supporting the exchange of good practices

UNHCR has already established a database for professionals working with urban refugees, UrbanGoodPractices.org. It has the potential to be an important resource on issues including child protection, livelihoods, mental health interventions, and refugee status designation, among others. However, the database was designed for use by humanitarian practitioners, not urban ones. More importantly, despite the rapid accumulation of knowledge in this space, it has not been regularly updated in some time. UNHCR should consider relaunching a retooled version of the existing database. As a first step, the agency should consider establishing an advisory committee of city officials to offer insight on ways in which it could be adapted to promote the sharing and implementation of best practices among urban leaders. This idea is technically and politically feasible at relatively low cost. Perhaps that is why it has already gained traction. It was mentioned in the concept note UNHCR released before the final thematic consultations in November 2017.

In addition, UNHCR could consider developing a platform for dialogue that would promote the exchange of good practices. UNHCR itself has raised the possibility of pursuing twinning approaches that would pair cities facing similar challenges to discuss what has and has not worked to address them. This is a promising suggestion. It could be made even more effective by the inclusion of humanitarian actors operating within those cities. The Global Alliance for Urban Crises, a multi-stakeholder platform that arose out of consultations for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in May 2016, is comprised of humanitarian NGOs, donors, U.N. agencies (including UNHCR), researchers, built environment professionals, and local authorities, among others. It could serve as a useful convener for this exchange.

Considering municipalities in the design of funding flows

Athens—a hub through which roughly 500,000 asylum-seekers transited in 2015—was forced to apply to UNHCR for a grant from emergency assistance funds disbursed by the EU. This was because Europe's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) did not consider cities eligible entities.[13] Today, local public bodies are listed as suitable beneficiaries.[14] In the future, more systematic attention should be paid to the inclusion of cities in financial funding flows. To that end, as part of its efforts to encourage U.N. member states to improve their refugee responses, UNHCR should advocate that municipalities and local service providers be designated as entities eligible for the receipt of

12 "Annual Consultations with NGOs," UNHCR, June 2017, https://storify.com/UNHCRPartners/2017-unhcrngos-consultations-day-1.

13 Eurocities, "Refugee Reception and Integration in Cities," (Brussels: Eurocities, 2016), http://nws.eurocities.eu/MediaShell/media/RefugeeReport_final.pdf.

14 "Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)," European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/financing/fundings/migration-asylum-borders/asylum-migration-integration-fund_en.

funds for programs that design and deliver housing, education, and skills training, among other services, to refugee populations. They should also advocate for funds to respond to increased demand on basic urban services that are critical for all urban residents—water and sanitation, solid waste collection, and the maintenance of public infrastructure, including street lighting, among other services.

Offering technical support to urban areas in need

When in 2016, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo decided to launch a 400-bed Refugee Welcome Center near Porte de la Chapelle in the north of the city, her administration turned to UNHCR for technical advice and support. Because that request did not come through the national government of France, the city of Paris was refused. The episode highlights the extent to which the humanitarian community has not yet sufficiently adjusted to include local actors, even though failure to do so undermines the efficiency, sustainability, and effectiveness of responses to urban displacement.

The humanitarian community should prioritize efforts to provide technical assistance to urban leaders that seek it. Many agencies may not have in-house staff able to do this, and will need to find ways to access expertise in this area. There are a number of ongoing efforts to increase the supply of such experts, including providing humanitarian training to urban professionals, and encouraging their application to existing rosters. Support is needed for these efforts, and for the establishment of regional rosters of urban technical experts that can be deployed to support and transfer knowledge to local leaders who are responsible for coordinating crisis response and recovery. These are current endeavors of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises, but require further donor support and engagement.

CONCLUSION

The scale of human displacement today is breathtaking. That should not draw attention away from the myriad ways that the nature of displacement is changing—it is becoming more protracted, urban, and likely to occur against a backdrop of rising xenophobic nationalism, with responsibility falling to new actors, many of them community-based. As a result of these trends, urban actors have an increasingly vital role to play in meeting the needs of displaced people and the communities that host them. That is why it is essential that they be engaged in efforts to source and share best practices, and critically, in the process of improving global refugee response and national refugee policy.

Over the course of the next seven months, as the GCR is developed, the humanitarian community in general, and UNHCR in particular, has an opportunity to do just that. Although the window is short—the text will be developed and finalized in consultation with member states between February to July of this year, and adopted in September—there is still time to invite urban leaders to give feedback on the draft Program of Action, and to ensure that it is informed by the experiences of local communities that have received large numbers of refugees.

UNHCR would be well served to consider how it can engage urban actors beyond September, in particular by creating consultative mechanisms between the humanitarian community and host community governments, supporting the exchange of good practices, advocating for municipalities as eligible beneficiaries of emergency funds, and offering technical support to urban leaders that seek it.

These are achievable steps that would enhance the effectiveness of the GCR process—making it as inclusive of relevant actors as it was intended to be—and by extension deepening its legitimacy.

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