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Displaced Syrians and the Global Compact on Refugees

Workshop Statement



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A group of concerned researchers and practitioners met at a workshop at The Institute, New York University Abu Dhabi in December 2022 to attempt to bridge the divide between researchers, humanitarian aid and advocacy practitioners. Displaced Syrians and the Global Compact on Refugees were the starting points of discussions.

It was noted that findings of academic research did not always reach practitioners and decision-makers. An illustration of this was that, except for short policy briefs, most academic research was not read or considered by practitioners. At the same time, researchers are often not aware of what information would be useful to fill knowledge gaps for practitioners so the latter could better understand and design programmes that respect the dignity and well-being of refugees

It was further noted that many researchers do not view the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) positively, largely regarding it as another political move that distances the Global North from substantive engagement with refugees. Researchers generally regard the GCR as a failure, in that it has not improved the situation of most refugees. However, in some local contexts researchers find that the GCR is a useful reference point for local civil society efforts to support refugees' resilience. Practitioners also do not regard the GCR as a 'game changer', but rather see it as reinforcing the politics of states to shift more of the burden of responding to the growing needs of displaced people on to civil society rather than on governments.

It was further articulated that researchers and practitioners do not always have a clear understanding of each other's roles. UNHCR, for example, though it does engage in development plans as a protection and advocacy tool for the inclusion of displaced and stateless people in their host states, it is not a 'development' agency and should not be appealing for development funding. Nor is it equipped to deliver results on durable solutions for Internally Displaced People. Moreover, discussions underscored that history, regional and local context are significant for understanding not only the conflicts that drive out refugees, but how they can survive in dignity and well-being. Historical background and local context are also essential in understanding the potential for temporary and durable solutions, as well as newly-emerging possibilities through complementary pathways.

The participants outlined a number of recommendations.

- **The concept of 'protection' needs to be redefined**, particularly in protracted situations. Research that addresses the cultural context of human rights-based approaches to protection can inform UNHCR's thinking and implementation of solutions.

- **The ‘encampment’ versus urban self-settlement realities** need to be better understood and more carefully articulated in terms of options for refugee and displaced persons’ housing. While the social, economic and politically restrictive effects of refugee camps have been well documented, the consequences of significant social, economic or political vulnerability for self-settled, non-camp / urban refugees is under-researched. Workshop participants recommended that researchers and practitioners move beyond the camp / non-camp binary and consider refugee rights, protection, and agency in a more nuanced way to move beyond this traditional perspective.
- **Complementary pathways in the global context of anti-immigration nationalism** need to be addressed in more robust fashion by both researchers and practitioners. They need to examine and promote alternative pathways to refugeehood, such as family reunification, education, and labour mobility. More focus is needed on research in these areas, as well as greater engagement of UNHCR with such organizations such as CARA, and universities as sanctuary. Furthermore, greater engagement with UNESCO is needed to enhance diploma / degree certification to permit refugee professionals to find employment in their fields of specialization.
- **The deportation of Syrians** from Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey has begun in earnest, and needs to be urgently addressed. Deportations, both actual or through increasingly coercive measures to force Syrians to leave their host states, violate the prohibition of ‘refoulement’ / involuntary return. Research and reports by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Human Rights Network have clearly documented why it is unsafe for any Syrian to return. Returnees not only face torture, persecution, disappearance, and arbitrary detention in all parts of the territory, but also in a country that is a humanitarian disaster after 11 years of sanctions and conflict.
- **Regional refugee response** and resilience plans may not be sustainable in the long-term; national response plans need to seek support from non-traditional partners (i.e., UNDP, and World Bank) and find ways to create partnerships with the private sector. Contextual, fine-grained ethnographic information that details refugees’ lived realities and complex socio-cultural and altered gender relations and family dynamics needs to replace what is often official UNHCR rhetoric.
- **The conspicuous absence of Gulf countries** in academic discussions needs to be addressed both by practitioners and researchers. Across the Gulf, a form of temporary protection or ‘permanent temporariness’ underlies policies that de-centre humanitarianism, but fail to address the growing ‘de facto’ statelessness of Syrians and other displaced people in the region. Gulf countries do not recognize ‘refugees’ or ‘displaced persons’ under their law, but regard such individuals as labour migrants, who in fact have little or no option to ‘return’ to the countries of nationality.
- **The role of remittances from Syrians in the diaspora as well as the active engagement of Syrian NGOs** needs to be properly recognized, encouraged, and supported, rather than being lumped together under ‘anti-terrorism’ laws and policies that subject them to ‘politically-motivated’ scrutiny and the broad sanctions imposed on Syria. Meanwhile, UN organizations are regarded as ‘neutral’ despite recent research that questions their accountability, transparency, and procurement practices that suggest close ties between some UN agencies and the Syrian government.
- **Humanitarian aid to Syrians** inside and outside the country should not preclude a sustained effort and international will in finding a solution to the long-standing crisis that has engulfed Syria since 2011. Overall the conditions of Syrians are worse than they were ten years ago.
- **The Ukrainian Crisis of 2022** has opened new avenues for protection and support of refugees and asylum-seekers following the implementation of the 2001 EU Council Directive on Temporary Protection for Ukrainian refugees. The EU Directive requires host states to make employment or social welfare available, provide accommodation or housing, education, and banking services, and allow freedom of movement within EU countries. The EU Temporary Protection Directive should also be implemented for all Syrians who do not yet have status within the EU. It should be triggered for new Syrian arrivals from any of the host countries (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan) on a phased basis to relieve the pressure on them.

Disclaimer: The statement that these points reflect are the position many of the participants held, but do not present a consensus of views from all.

Cover photo: Everyday life for Syrian refugees in Za’atari refugee camp, Jordan, 2019.
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