

**HPG**Humanitarian  
Policy Group**Briefing Note**

# The Global Compact on Refugees

## Lessons from Bangladesh

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### Key messages

- As the first large-scale refugee displacement since the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh has served as a test case for the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The GCR has been applied in a limited manner in the response to the Rohingya crisis and has yet to demonstrate its influence on policy and practice.
- The challenging context of the Rohingya crisis makes evident weaknesses in the GCR, including a lack of clarity on its scope, character and purpose, alongside unresolved questions around leadership and accountability.
- There is a misplaced assumption that financial incentives alone will ease pressures on refugee-hosting states and enhance refugee self-reliance. Global responsibility-sharing should propose more than financial tools, in particular diplomatic efforts to advance solutions.
- The GCR is weighted towards local integration and refugee self-reliance to the detriment of third-country solutions and return. It does not propose sufficient new tools for supporting safe, voluntary and dignified return or expanding access to third-country solutions.
- For the GCR to be more useful at the country level, it needs to be contextualised meaningfully. This includes adapting its objectives and broad principles to national realities and developing national-level indicator frameworks, based on an understanding of the current state of play, interpretations of the GCR and opportunities for progress.

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Cover photo: A displaced man living in Unchiprang camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

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## Introduction

In 2018, 181 UN Member States endorsed a long-awaited Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). This was the culmination of a process set in motion by the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. While a non-binding, voluntary framework, the GCR aims to ‘provide a basis for predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing among all UN Member States, together with other relevant stakeholders’ (UN, 2018: 1). The Compact has two components: the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) – a country-level framework and plan of action primarily for refugee self-reliance and local integration – and a broader Programme of Action, which outlines principles for responsibility-sharing and areas in need of support. The GCR’s objectives are to ease the pressure on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third-country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

In the three months from August 2017 – as consultations on the GCR were taking place in Geneva – more than 700,000 Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh to escape escalating violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> The scale and speed of displacement were unprecedented in both Bangladesh and the wider region, creating significant humanitarian needs and impacting host communities (UNDP, 2019). Throughout this mass displacement the Bangladeshi government kept its borders open. Most refugees – estimated at more than 900,000 – are settled in densely populated camps in Cox’s Bazar. The government has taken responsibility for the camps through extension of civil administration systems, supported by a large humanitarian response.<sup>2</sup>

The Rohingya crisis is the first large-scale displacement since the New York Declaration was endorsed and as such serves as a test case for the GCR. Although the GCR itself was not formally endorsed until late 2018, a year into the Rohingya crisis, many of its key principles were put in place by the 2016 New York Declaration and discussions on the Compact were well underway as the crisis in Bangladesh unfolded. The crisis also represents a clear example of why an instrument such as the GCR is needed. The Compact was drawn up to tackle exactly this type of large-scale refugee situation, which, while not yet protracted, is creating pressures in neighbouring low- and middle-income countries and requires international responsibility-sharing.

This briefing note draws on findings from a forthcoming working paper exploring the use, applicability and relevance of the GCR in relation to the Rohingya crisis. The research drew on more than 50 interviews with stakeholders in Bangladesh at the regional and global levels in September and October 2019, providing a snapshot of use of the GCR in this context at this point in time. It is a collaboration between HPG at ODI, the British Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and Research for Policy Integration and Development (RAPID).

### The GCR in Bangladesh: relevant, but limited application

Interviews for this study suggest that proactive or explicit application of the GCR in Bangladesh has been limited.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, governmental actors and humanitarian responders in Bangladesh reportedly contributed to the formal consultation process of the GCR while it was being developed.

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1 For the purposes of this report, co-authored by British Red Cross and HPG, the term ‘Rohingya’ is used in reference to individuals self-identifying as Rohingya, noting that this is not the terminology of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which ordinarily uses the term ‘people from Rakhine’ as an element in maintaining safety and operational access to provide vital humanitarian assistance to those in need wherever they are.

2 The term ‘refugee’ is used here to refer to the Rohingya population in Bangladesh in line with applicable international frameworks. However, the authors acknowledge that the Government of Bangladesh has not formally designated the current Rohingya population as ‘refugees’ under national frameworks, instead referring to Rohingya people in Bangladesh as either forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals or as undocumented migrants from Myanmar. Only 30,000 Rohingya and their children (estimated to total 34,000) are officially registered as refugees in Bangladesh from the 1990s.

3 The de facto application of the GCR will be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

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The Government of Bangladesh has signalled its support for the GCR at the international level with a focus on addressing the root causes of displacement (Dhaka Tribune, 2018) and is among the governments that formally endorsed the framework at the UN General Assembly.

On the other hand – while our research revealed a more ‘de facto’ way in which some of the Compact’s principles are indirectly being considered or applied without being explicitly discussed as ‘implementing the GCR’ – the application of the GCR at the country level has thus far been constrained. One UN agency respondent stated that the Government of Bangladesh declined a proposal to become a pilot country for the CRRF, although this was early in the crisis. While the GCR is referred to as part of UNHCR’s ‘Solidarity Approach’ – a proposed comprehensive approach for engagement on the Rohingya crisis (UNHCR, 2019b) – this has so far gained limited traction.<sup>4</sup> Although some actors have used, discussed or referred to the Compact internally and externally, this has not been in a comprehensive or coordinated way. While it was formally adopted only a year ago, the lack of more explicit and strategic discussion of the GCR is notable.

Despite this, policy-makers and practitioners in Bangladesh largely considered the GCR’s objectives and wider principles operationally relevant to the crisis. However, mirroring the divided policy environment in Bangladesh, there are clear differences over which aspects are considered most relevant. For example, government officials stated their perception that supporting conditions in countries of origin to enable voluntary return with safety and dignity (Objective 4 of the GCR) is the most relevant objective in the GCR, but – for reasons discussed below – rejected refugee self-reliance (Objective 2) as an outright goal.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, while also stressing the importance of return as an eventual solution, international (and, to some extent, national) humanitarian actors were more likely

to prioritise self-reliance, including in relation to supporting prospects for sustainable return.

The GCR’s wider cross-cutting principles were considered pertinent, even if not always applied in practice. For example, many respondents felt that the principle of taking a developmental approach to refugee situations was being applied. While respondents did not consider that the GCR – or process towards it beginning from the New York Declaration – could be identified as a direct causal factor behind this approach, some considered it an extension of policy innovations which themselves led to the Compact. The concept of a multi-stakeholder approach was also considered relevant to ongoing debates around complex coordination systems and ‘localisation’ of the response, as well as concerns about sometimes fraught working relationships between actors (see Wake and Bryant, 2018).

Overall, as well as containing operationally relevant principles, most respondents considered that the Compact could be a useful framework at the strategic level. Respondents said that the GCR could be useful for framing a vision for the response shared by different stakeholders, which many felt was absent. Similarly, they considered the GCR, and its follow-up processes and indicators, a useful tool for ensuring accountability – particularly for donors and humanitarian responders. Many interviewees also felt that, due to the challenging policy environment and the crisis’s sudden onset and enormous scale, various elements of good practice – for example focusing on the impacts of refugee movements on host communities – were not being meaningfully implemented, or were being implemented too late. The GCR was viewed as potentially useful for encouraging stakeholders to collectively identify where good practice is currently not being applied and take timely measures to address this. Whether the Compact can live up to its overarching vision as a ‘game changer’ for refugee responses worldwide is, however, another question (UNHCR, 2019c).

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4 UNHCR describes the Solidarity Approach as ‘a comprehensive approach for engagement aimed at addressing the root causes of the displacement, seeking sustainable solutions, and providing a platform for coordinating and supporting international efforts in a coherent and predictable manner’ (UNHCR, 2019b). While it refers to the GCR, it is separate from and not explicitly linked to global CRRF processes.

5 Expressions of government positions elaborated throughout this briefing note are based both on direct interviews with government officials and interviews with stakeholders in regular discussions with them.

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## Challenges to the Compact's application

The GCR has not been proactively applied in Bangladesh more extensively because of the specific and complex dynamics of the crisis, as well as weaknesses in the Compact itself.

### Contextual factors limiting implementation

The complexity of the context is threefold: the scale and speed of displacement, the root causes of the crisis and the refugee policy context in Bangladesh.

The root causes of Rohingya displacement are complex. There have been repeated instances of displacement over several decades, where returns have proved unsustainable. As outlined by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, the current situation was caused by a specific escalation of extreme violence, marginalisation and the limitation of the Rohingyas' basic rights over a sustained period; most Rohingyas have become de facto stateless (UN Human Rights Council, 2018).

The Government of Bangladesh kept its borders open to the Rohingya as they fled and has upheld the principle of non-refoulement. However, interviews indicated that although the government has allowed support for refugees' basic needs through humanitarian assistance, and despite incremental progress, access to more extensive rights – including education, work and freedom of movement – is constrained, as are approaches that might be perceived as supporting refugees to stay in the longer term. The Government of Bangladesh has endorsed the non-binding GCR but it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor has it recognised recent or many previous Rohingya arrivals as refugees under national frameworks. Unusually, the government designated the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as the lead agency in the response instead of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>6</sup>

### Limits on implementation due to weaknesses in the Compact

Application of the GCR in Bangladesh has also been hindered by issues related to the Compact

itself, particularly a lack of clarity on its scope, character and purpose, and questions of leadership and accountability.

First, clarification is needed on whether the GCR can be applied in a context where the host government has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and, perhaps more significantly, does not recognise a forcibly displaced population as refugees. Multiple interviewees – including humanitarian and government respondents – cited this as a key reason why the GCR could not or would not be applied. Close reading of the Compact suggests that it may have been designed to be applied more broadly, including in countries that are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. For example, the Compact refers to 'a number of States not parties to the international refugee instruments [who] have shown a generous approach to hosting refugees' (UN, 2018: 2). While this is specifically in the context of encouraging these states to consider acceding to these instruments, it nonetheless indicates that, for the purposes of the Compact, individuals in these contexts would be considered 'refugees' under the Compact's scope, in a similar way to the wider use of the term 'refugee' in other international instruments, such as UN General Assembly resolutions. Most of the world's major host countries for refugees – including Bangladesh – adopted the GCR at the UN General Assembly, indicating a perception of applicability beyond the 1951 Convention signatory states. From a pragmatic perspective, many of the countries hosting the world's largest refugee populations have either not signed the 1951 Convention or have signed with reservations – and have not given formal refugee status to displaced individuals – suggesting that the GCR requires wider applicability if it is to be considered a truly global tool.

Second, interviews with stakeholders involved in the Rohingya response indicated a lack of clarity about what exactly the GCR is intended to do. In particular, in a context like Bangladesh where the government has not opted to become a CRRF pilot country, it is unclear how it should be implemented

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<sup>6</sup> In Bangladesh, IOM has historically responded to displacement and in 2017 was designated by the government as the lead agency to respond to the crisis. This resulted in ad hoc coordination approaches and later a hybrid leadership structure between IOM and UNHCR. Several respondents commented that this leadership and coordination model had impacted possibilities for the application of the GCR.

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and what this would look like in practice. Actors had varying understandings of what implementing the GCR would mean in Bangladesh. Respondents were unclear whether the GCR would need to be implemented as a whole, or whether stakeholders could pick and choose elements of it. Some felt that it was simply a means to mobilise resources, while others referred to it as a diplomatic tool. Some saw the Compact as a normative framework, whereas others felt it could be an operational blueprint or a mechanism for accountability for host or donor governments, or for the UN and the wider humanitarian community. Further clarification is needed on the GCR's purpose and what implementing it would mean in practice, particularly in contexts where the CRRF is not being piloted.

Finally, leadership of and accountability for the GCR remain unclear. The Compact is unlikely to be implemented meaningfully at the country level without clear leadership. At present there is no clarity around who it is primarily intended for, which actors should take leadership and who is ultimately accountable for its implementation: whether this is host governments, donor governments, the UN system, the wider humanitarian system, national civil society or indeed refugees themselves.

While the GCR posits a 'catalytic role' for UNHCR, the agency's unusual position in Bangladesh limits its ability to play a leadership role and push conversations forward. Interviewees felt the government's decision to designate IOM, rather than UNHCR, as the lead response agency prevented the more explicit and strategic use of the Compact.

For its part, the government has shown strong leadership in pushing forward country-level implementation of the GCR's counterpart, the Global Compact for Migration. However, interviews indicate that, despite the government's support for the GCR in international fora, this has yet to be translated into similar country-level discussions. While there is value to the multi-stakeholder approach put forward in the GCR, in Bangladesh – and elsewhere – there is a need for clearer guidance on roles, leadership and accountability between different stakeholders in order to support meaningful and strategic implementation.

## Lessons from the Rohingya crisis

Beyond these broad questions, the Rohingya crisis offers several insights relating to the GCR's specific objectives and overarching principles.

### Going beyond funding to ease pressure on host countries (Objective 1)

A significant finding regarding the GCR in the Rohingya context is that the GCR's objective to ease the pressure on host countries (Objective 1) is too narrowly focused on funding. The GCR discusses other forms of responsibility-sharing, for example the sharing of technical expertise, mobilisation of political will, provision of humanitarian assistance and third-country solutions. However, and perhaps linked to wider global policy dynamics, the GCR conceives 'easing the pressure' in a primarily financial sense. Indeed, the Compact states: 'a key objective ... is to ease pressures, particularly for low- and middle-income countries, through contributions from other States and relevant stakeholders' (UN, 2018: 9). The proposed indicator framework confirms 'contributions' as being primarily financial, focusing on volumes of official development aid, the number of donors providing official development aid and the proportion of official development assistance channelled to national actors (UNHCR, 2019d: 10).

This is problematic in various ways. First, the Rohingya crisis demonstrates that, while it is critical to measure efforts to reduce pressures on host countries in terms of allocated funds, it is also important to capture what these funds deliver and whether key stakeholders, particularly host governments, see these funds as effectively easing the pressures they face. The response in Bangladesh has been comparatively well funded, although after two years humanitarian funds have begun to decline. The 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan was funded at 73% and the 2018 Joint Response Plan at 69%; as at September, funding for the 2019 Joint Response Plan stood at 42% (ISCG, 2019). Additional development funds committed include increased bilateral funding directly to the Government of Bangladesh, \$200 million from the Asian Development Bank and two sets of funding

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streams from the World Bank (\$480 million and \$515 million) (Huang and Gough, 2019). Many interviewees also pointed to a District Development Plan for Cox's Bazar, which international actors are currently working with the government to develop.

International actors interviewed noted the impacts of these funds, for example their contribution to sustaining a lifesaving humanitarian response and possible longer-term development prospects for Cox's Bazar. However, others – and particularly national interlocutors – were overall more sceptical as to whether these funds had considerably relieved the pressure to date or whether they would do so in future. It was noted that, particularly for development funding committed only recently, the relatively long-term nature of development funding would mean an extended period before the government and host communities would see impacts, in contrast to the immediacy of the pressures both are experiencing. Questions around contributions of funding to easing pressure may also be due to a perception that, while significant, the funds committed do not fully meet the costs borne by the government, as well as a fear that current funding levels will not be sustained.

Furthermore, the pressures being experienced in Bangladesh are not solely financial and include negative public opinion and domestic political pressure to resolve the crisis, environmental pressures, security concerns (whether real or perceived), social pressures (including communal tensions and concerns about the impact of refugees' presence on local cultures) and pressures on the government's administrative capacity at the local and national level. While funding might be part of the solution in some of these areas, the Rohingya crisis demonstrates that efforts to ease pressure on host countries will in many cases fail unless a broader range of tools is adopted. From the perspective of government officials, the most effective way to relieve the pressures they are under would be through stronger diplomatic efforts to support conditions for return in Myanmar. Despite ongoing efforts, both government officials and other national actors interviewed perceived current efforts as insufficient. In order to genuinely 'ease pressure' on host countries, efforts to do so need to go

beyond simply addressing financial pressures; instead being conceived as a dialogue between international stakeholders and the host country in question, to develop a clear understanding of the pressures it faces, and a clear strategy for how various actors can provide support. While part of the answer may be financial, it is critical for this to be understood in a wider sense.

### **The Compact's proposed incentives for self-reliance do not address host country dynamics (Objective 2)**

There are two assumptions underlying the GCR and accompanying discussions: first, that international efforts to ease pressure on host countries will open up space for policies supporting self-reliance; and second, that such policies are self-evidently win-win (reducing the cost of hosting refugees by helping them to support themselves). While both have been evidenced in some refugee settings, the crisis in Bangladesh calls each into question.

There have been some incremental, but significant, signs in Bangladesh of policies supporting refugees' self-reliance in a wider sense. Examples include pilot skills training projects approved by local authorities, the approval of an informal learning curriculum and discussions on the use of the Myanmar curriculum within the camps and significant efforts by humanitarian actors in partnership with the government to ensure that refugee volunteers within the camps are trained, recognised and mobilised by camp authorities to respond to disaster risks (see American Red Cross et al., 2019). However, overall restrictions remain in place limiting greater progress on self-reliance.

There is a need to challenge the underlying transactional assumption behind how the GCR objectives are understood: namely, the idea that (primarily financial) efforts to ease host country pressures will be enough to incentivise less restrictive government policies regarding self-reliance. The Bangladesh case makes clear that this assumption is too simplistic, and fails to sufficiently consider the importance of host governments' own priorities, perceptions and wider dynamics in making policy decisions.

Interviews suggest a belief in Bangladesh that prospects for self-reliance (Objective 2 of the GCR)

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are ultimately constrained by the government's perception that measures to support it would mean accepting the Rohingyas' presence long-term. Many respondents indicated that the government felt this would undermine diplomatic efforts to facilitate conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return (linked to Objective 4 of the GCR),<sup>7</sup> which is seen as the primary solution and route to easing the pressures Bangladesh is experiencing (Objective 1). Meanwhile, in a context where many Bangladeshis do not have access to decent work, concessions to support refugees' self-reliance may be domestically unpopular.

Strikingly, many of the reasons why Bangladesh may be reluctant to open up policies supportive of refugees' self-reliance are similar to justifications for restrictions given by high-income countries. This reveals a double standard from donor governments, which are pushing for significant reforms that run counter to Bangladesh's overall policy approach, while not upholding some of these standards in their own countries (Hargrave et al., 2016). Many respondents pointed to this dynamic and the fact the Government of Bangladesh is unlikely to be blind to it. Without progress on implementing the GCR in donor countries, particularly Australia, Europe and North America, it is likely that host countries will continue to question the responsibility-sharing spirit of the GCR and, like high-income countries, challenge the need for progress on refugees' integration and self-reliance, particularly where wider incentives are seen as insufficient.

### **Large-scale third-country solutions are not on the table (Objective 3)**

The Bangladesh case makes clear that the adoption of the New York Declaration and subsequent GCR has not yet led to clear, large-scale pathways for third-country solutions in any meaningful way (Objective 3 of the GCR). Respondents generally perceived this objective as unrealistic as a solution to the Rohingya crisis. Interviewees pointed to the government's

reluctance to permit the Rohingyas to relocate to a third country, whether through resettlement or other complementary pathways (such as family reunification and student visas), due to perceptions that this may constitute a pull factor for Rohingyas still in Myanmar or refugees elsewhere in the region.

Respondents were also concerned about shrinking resettlement space globally (Angenendt and Biehler, 2018; Hansen, 2018). In Bangladesh, significant steps would be needed to realise the GCR's stated ambition to increase third-country pathways for this to be perceived as a realistic solution. While interviews indicate that offers by third countries of a small number of resettlement places were rejected early on, respondents from national organisations and donors indicated that openness to resettlement may be increasing as the crisis has progressed. However, this will only turn into action if the resettlement places or complementary pathways on offer in third countries comprise a significant proportion of the overall refugee population. In the current global context, this appears unfeasible.

The Rohingya crisis highlights the need to clarify whether the GCR represents a genuine commitment to scaling up third-country solutions and, if so, how this could be facilitated. Without this kind of progress, global implementation of the GCR appears heavily influenced by the interests of governments in high-income countries – to provide funding to refugee crises rather than themselves accepting refugees – as opposed to the interests of host governments in contexts of mass displacement.

### **No new tools to support safe and dignified return (Objective 4)**

Safe, voluntary and dignified return to Myanmar is critical for all actors in Bangladesh, particularly the government and refugees themselves (see Wake et al., 2019). However, it is striking that, in comparison to other objectives in the GCR, the tools offered in this area are much less detailed.

The GCR focuses on a comprehensive plan of action in host countries, but offers few concrete tools in terms of engagement with countries of

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7 Objective 4 of the GCR refers to safe and dignified return but not the voluntary nature of return. As a result, where discussing the GCR's objectives, this briefing note refers to 'safe and dignified return'. However, it is noted that the Compact highlights the voluntary nature of return in paragraph 87 (UN, 2018:17).

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origin to support conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary return (beyond support once return has begun).<sup>8</sup> While Objectives 1 and 2 of the GCR effectively have a whole programme of work dedicated to them in the form of the CRRF, no such concrete roadmap is outlined for how stakeholders might advance conditions for voluntary return in safety and dignity. Nor does it outline who has responsibility for enabling conditions that are conducive to return. While UNHCR has a clear mandate to support return and reintegration when the conditions are in place, it is less clear what happens before this point. UNHCR has supported action in Myanmar through a tripartite memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the government of Myanmar (UNHCR and UNDP, 2018). However, the content of this MoU is confidential and it has been controversial in light of concerns over UNHCR's role in previous instances of return of Rohingya refugees, in which voluntariness was disputed (Chimni, 1993).

Across its objectives the GCR refers to fully leveraging the UN system, as well as a key role to be played by regional actors. Both could be promising in relation to improving conditions for return, but further elaboration is needed regarding roles and responsibilities and how this could work in practice. While some of the responsibilities for progress may lie elsewhere – for example with the peacebuilding community – there is nonetheless a need for clarity around how the GCR and its stakeholders would interact with these wider processes, and how the Compact could prove a catalyst for building a stronger collaborative approach.

### **The GCR needs meaningful country-level indicators and leaves too much out of scope**

A key consideration raised by the Bangladesh case is the need to develop more appropriate country-level indicators for the GCR to sit alongside aspirational global targets. UNHCR has put forward a global-level indicator framework, which contains a number of aspirational global indicators (UNHCR, 2019d). While the GCR and

its global-level indicators have been criticised for not being aspirational enough, the prevailing sense in Bangladesh was that the Compact's indicators were too far out of reach and could in fact discourage efforts to make progress.

In Bangladesh it is evident that current indicators do not capture more incremental measures of progress at the country level. For example, under GCR Objective 2 – to 'enhance refugee self-reliance' – proposed global indicators include 'Proportion of refugees who have access to decent work', 'Proportion of refugees who are able to move freely within the host country' and 'Proportion of refugee children enrolled in the national education system' (UNHCR, 2019d: 10). Given the Bangladeshi government's current policy stance on each of these issues, the proposed global indicators would indicate an absence of progress. However, this would fail to take account of the incremental ways in which self-reliance has been supported within the response. More can be done to recognise and encourage these kinds of incremental steps through a country-level indicator framework that enables actors to realistically track progress, alongside strategic engagement with the GCR's aspirational objectives at the policy and operational level.

In addition, as outlined above, the GCR indicator framework fails to measure non-financial routes towards easing pressures on host countries, including international diplomatic support to facilitate conditions for return. The proposed indicators on return (Objective 4) focus on the numbers of refugees returned and the assistance provided to returnees, but do not measure progress made towards supporting conditions for return in the first place. Nor, while undoubtedly a difficult indicator to quantify, do they measure adherence to the principle of non-refoulement. The Government of Bangladesh has consistently maintained the voluntary nature of returns and upheld the principle of non-refoulement; it is striking that the proposed GCR indicator framework does not capture this significant step.

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8 Under the CRRF pilot schemes, Afghanistan has adopted the CRRF to support return. While the CRRF could be a useful tool in a context where refugees can return with the ability to enjoy rights but need support for self-reliance, the CRRF does not address the root causes of displacement to facilitate conditions for return in the first place.



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### **Further evidence is needed to support implementation of the GCR at national level**

Country-level implementation of the GCR would be facilitated by developing an evidence base to support its objectives. There have been calls for and work towards this (UN, 2018: 8–9), but gaps remain. As outlined in the GCR, evidence around the costs and benefits of hosting refugees is critical to support a more contextual understanding of the pressures felt by host countries and communities. Such information could inform policy-level dialogue and programmatic priorities.

UNDP's (2018) study on the costs of hosting refugees was widely mentioned by stakeholders in Bangladesh as an important resource for understanding pressures and how best to ease them. However, it is crucial that this evidence base is supplemented to cover both economic and non-economic costs and gains, mapping out who will and will not benefit from hosting refugees and the perceptions of these costs and benefits among different stakeholders. Country-level implementation would also be supported by more detailed analysis of public attitudes at the local and national level to support social cohesion and host community engagement. Detailed attitudinal segmentation has been undertaken in many high-income countries to deepen understanding of public attitudes towards refugees and their drivers, but this level of analysis does not currently exist elsewhere (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). Evidence on skills mapping and demographic indicators for both host and refugee populations could also inform policy around self-reliance and developmental approaches.

Finally, the Bangladesh case raises questions concerning the global evidence base around the cost of not applying the GCR, including the costs (financial, human or otherwise) of delayed attention to host communities, or restrictions on education, cash or livelihoods for refugees. For the GCR to be implemented meaningfully, evidence and data that go beyond traditional humanitarian assessments are required to build the argument for understanding and applying its principles at the national level.

### **Conclusion**

The Rohingya crisis serves as a test case for the GCR as the first large-scale refugee displacement since the 2016 New York Declaration. While recognising that the Compact was formally endorsed a year on from the start of the crisis, there are nevertheless important findings in terms of its future application and global relevance, as well as its relevance for the response in Bangladesh. Despite Bangladesh not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or granting refugee status to the Rohingya, and the constrained refugee policy environment, the objectives and cross-cutting principles of the GCR were considered relevant by stakeholders in Bangladesh and useful at operational and strategic levels.

However, overall the GCR was found to have been applied in a limited manner in the current response, with little impact on policy and programming to date. This is partly due to the complex nature of the context. The voluntary and non-binding nature of the GCR in a context not conducive to refugee rights reduces its potential influence. Without a binding framework, application of the GCR relies on sufficient incentives for the various stakeholders, particularly host governments; in Bangladesh, this research found that such incentives were lacking. The research also raises wider questions relating to the character and purpose of the GCR, what its application means beyond CRRF pilots, and issues around leadership, roles and responsibilities.

For the GCR to be a practical tool at the country level it needs to be translated in the context of national realities by actors leading on refugee responses nationally. This should include understanding the policy space and different stakeholders' perspectives on the GCR's objectives and broad principles and what would be realistic and achievable in a given context. This includes developing a roadmap for how this tool will work in specific contexts, alongside transitional country-level indicators to measure more incremental forms of progress. While the CRRF offers one such mechanism, there are few alternatives for undertaking this kind of mapping and analysis when the CRRF approach is not endorsed.

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The Bangladesh case also highlights that the GCR objective of easing the pressure on host countries should not be seen as purely financial, but also as including social, environmental, political and security pressures, as well as diplomatic efforts to improve conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified return in countries of origin. It also suggests a need to clarify what exactly is on offer globally in terms of third-country solutions, and to better understand the tools available to support safe and dignified return. The GCR is weighted towards self-reliance and local integration, at the expense of return and third-country solutions.

As implementation of the GCR continues to progress, the international community – with UNHCR playing a catalytic role – should consider the following:

- Use follow-up and review processes, such as the Global Refugee Forum, to clarify key questions around global implementation of the GCR, particularly where and when it applies, its overarching purpose and the roles of different actors in supporting and implementing it.
- Develop an approach to deploy national-level implementation strategies for the GCR for contexts where the CRRF is not being applied. This should:
  - be informed by an understanding of how the objectives of the Compact link within the specific policy space, the perspectives of all stakeholders on the GCR’s principles and possible incentives to encourage the GCR’s application;
  - be supported by evidence, particularly on non-financial costs (and benefits) of displacement;
  - set out clear roles and responsibilities, which are defined and agreed; and
  - include contextualised national-level indicators that allow for measuring progress and incremental change.
- Consider amendments to the global indicator framework, particularly to measure non-financial contributions towards easing pressures on host countries; the impact as well as quantity of contributions; progress towards supporting conditions conducive for safe and dignified return; and adherence to non-refoulement.
- Create a coalition of actors to support the development of new tools for expanding third-country solutions and supporting voluntary return in conditions of safety and dignity.
- Convene a global discussion with donors and host governments on developing innovative approaches to responsibility-sharing beyond financial contributions. This should form part of discussions on what would incentivise application of the GCR from a host government perspective, moving away from simplistic assumptions that financial incentives alone are sufficient.
- Encourage recognition among high-income donor countries that the success of policy approaches put forward in the GCR will to some extent depend on their ability to demonstrate commitment to these aspirations domestically.
- Ensure that efforts to build a global evidence base to support implementation of the GCR include independent evaluation of its country-level impact, including successes and challenges, in situations of large-scale displacement. This could be supported by the development of a common methodology for measuring progress

Addressing the issues outlined in this paper would help ensure that the GCR can fulfil its potential. The focus of the Compact needs to move from its initial global language to ensure meaningful impact in the specific refugee crises it was created to address, and indeed in the lives of refugees themselves and the communities that host them.

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