

THE ESSENTIALS

A CALL TO  
**action**

TRANSFORMING THE GLOBAL REFUGEE SYSTEM

WORLD  
REFUGEE  
COUNCIL

CONSEIL  
MONDIAL  
POUR LES  
RÉFUGIÉS





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# the essentials

## AN ACTION PLAN FOR TRANSFORMING THE REFUGEE AND IDP SYSTEM

The global number of people forcibly displaced from their homes is the highest since World War II. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports that 68 million people around the world fled persecution and conflict, sought asylum or were internally displaced in 2017, and that their numbers continue to rise. That year, almost three million more people were forcibly displaced than in the year before. It was the fifth year in a row that a postwar record was set, and the forecast is for even greater escalation.

Bold new measures to address the crisis are necessary and urgent. Consider these facts:

- In Syria, more than 12 million people, half the population, have been forced to leave their homes.
- In Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees live precariously in makeshift camps along riverbanks, their fate unknown.
- In Colombia, thousands of people arrive each day from Venezuela, many experiencing physical and sexual threats and assault at the border by militias. Women and girls, in particular, desperately need protection.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, one-quarter of the world's refugees seek shelter.
- In several countries in Europe, where millions of refugees have sought safe harbour, they find instead “not welcome” signs.
- In 2018, the United States admitted the lowest number of refugees since 1977, relinquishing its leadership on refugee resettlement.

The magnitude of this human suffering is evident in more than hard statistics. It is manifest in a hardening of hearts and of policies, a retrograde turn in twenty-first-century attitudes. The humanitarian commitment of nations, once a norm, has given way to nativism. Xenophobia — fear and exclusion of the “outsider” — has gathered force in America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere.

As populist politicians prey on anti-immigrant fears, refugees are stereotyped and vilified as security threats. Strangers at the gate are seen as criminals breaking down the door. Hostile faces greet them. Once-open arms are now closed.

The tragedy extends beyond humanitarian issues. The refugee crisis brings with it roiling political instability, the progressive weakening of the European Union being a prime example. It does not take a political scientist to see a pattern, or to connect the dots from the

European Union's inability to provide timely and comprehensive solutions for refugees to Brexit.

The World Refugee Council (WRC) understands that the resettlement and protection of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) need not be incompatible with social cohesion. The WRC recognizes that governments can welcome refugees only to the extent that their populations grant them the social licence to do so — and that such licence is given only when people have confidence in their government's ability to control their borders and manage the migration process. The successful rescue of the Vietnamese “boat people” in an earlier generation offers evidence of how resettlement can overcome barriers presented by different languages and cultures.

A grave concern for the WRC has been a public policy response that is entirely inadequate and wildly disproportionate to the catastrophic levels of suffering and misery. According to the UNHCR, more than 50 percent of all refugees are children younger than age 18. Yet, youth fail to be included in refugee and IDP decision-making and governance fora. Individuals in Afghanistan, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria and other countries around the world continue to be forcibly displaced as a result of conflict, persecution and violence. Host countries, such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Colombia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uganda, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran and Jordan, are left to shoulder the costs of supporting refugees without adequate international support. These host countries feel abandoned by the international community.

The United Nations, humanitarian agencies, the private sector and civil society face enormous hurdles in making positive contributions to the refugee and IDP system. The authoritarian regimes responsible for displacing people are not held accountable.

Prohibitions in international law are outdated, ineffectual and ignored. The financial requirements of the refugee system are not close to being met. At the United Nations, the power of the Security Council veto hinders action.

Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said in his most recent report on forced displacement that the crisis requires “a new and far more comprehensive approach so that countries and communities aren't left dealing with this alone.”

This “new and far more comprehensive” approach is precisely what the WRC is demanding.

### A New Political Approach

The WRC is an independent global body comprising 24 distinguished political leaders, policy thinkers and doers — former heads of government, former foreign ministers and parliamentary leaders, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, a business leader, a jurist, academic experts and human rights activists.

Convened by the Centre for International Governance Innovation in May 2017 and supported by the Government of Canada, the International Development Research Centre and major international foundations, the WRC has travelled to host countries on five continents to better understand the situation first-hand, consult those people with direct experience and develop innovative approaches to addressing the escalating crisis.

Under the leadership of Canada's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy and colleagues from around the world, the WRC is promoting engagement across all phases of the displacement cycle. An assertive political approach is imperative. As former High

Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata wrote in *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s*, “There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.” There are only political solutions.

The United Nations' Global Compact on Refugees is charged with improving the world's humanitarian responses to displacement. As an explicitly non-political initiative, the Global Compact on Refugees does not have a mandate to address the root of the problem: the need for political will. The WRC's intent is to support and enhance the United Nations' efforts by addressing this missing and critically important political component.

As an independent body with experience working with high-level power brokers, the WRC has the political experience and skills needed to identify practical solutions that can bring about transformative change.

A new approach is needed even more urgently with respect to IDPs, those people fleeing violence and conflict but remaining within their own borders. Their numbers have doubled over the last two decades and keep increasing. Today, there are some 40 million IDPs in more than 100 countries. As one example, the small nation of Yemen has two million IDPs, of which 76 percent are women and children.

Not having crossed an international border, these people have fallen off the international community's agenda. The UNHCR's *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* are non-binding, and IDPs are not protected by the 1951 Refugee Convention.

As an immediate step, the WRC calls on the UN Secretary-General to appoint a representative to address the situation of millions of IDPs around the world. This representative should be mandated to coordinate the international response of humanitarian, development,

economic, and peace and security actors in collaboration with affected states.

The 1951 Refugee Convention was formulated in the postwar era, when the causes of global migration were much different from today. At that time, refugee questions were dominated by Cold War politics, and by people fleeing communism.

Today, refugees are fleeing violent conflict often caused by authoritarian oppressors.

The future offers the prospect of more humanitarian crises, as people are forced to flee the consequences of environmental breakdown and climate change. To prepare for these inevitable realities, we must act now to fix the refugee system.

One of the WRC's priorities is urging international jurists and practitioners to draft a new protocol to the 1951 Refugee Convention that will foster a system of collective responsibility for refugees.

The absence of responsibility sharing is a particularly glaring weakness in the refugee system. Developing countries are shouldering most of the costs and responsibilities of hosting refugees. Many developed nations are turning their backs, and there is no mechanism to hold their governments responsible. Nothing — beyond their conscience — prevents some governments from finding ways to block refugees from their territories. Among the top 10 refugee-hosting countries, Germany is the only developed nation.

The drafting of the new refugee convention must include provisions for responsibility sharing.

### Making the Culprits Accountable

In its consultations, the WRC found accountability to be in short supply at

every stage of the refugee journey. Those responsible for causing displacement go unpunished and undeterred. Borders are closed to people fleeing for their lives. The UNHCR's appeals for resources are routinely shortchanged.

The cases of Myanmar (and the future of the stateless Rohingyas), South Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen and others raise multiple questions on holding governments accountable for their actions in persecuting and displacing their own populations. These cases also illustrate how neighbouring countries resettle, reintegrate or create the necessary conditions for the return of these displaced populations.

Depressingly, there is little discussion about possible resettlement in other countries of the Rohingyas, Yemenis and others who have been forcibly displaced.

Accountability requires metrics with indicators, regular monitoring and transparency. The WRC recommends the development of a new peer review system to evaluate each state's performance in relation to its shared responsibilities to the forcibly displaced. The WRC envisages a peer review system similar to those of the UN Human Rights Council and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which also offer instructive lessons for the task of responsibility sharing.

### Finding the Money

Funding to provide services and solutions for the forcibly displaced is unreliable, insufficient and far too dependent on voluntary contributions. Traditional humanitarian donors are overstretched and donor fatigue is increasing. At the time of writing, 10 donor countries were providing 77 percent of the UNHCR's financing.

Although funding has risen appreciably in recent years, it fails to match

growing demand. The UNHCR's budget is entirely dependent on voluntary contributions when refugee crises materialize.

This system must change. Instead of accepting the status quo of voluntary funding, the WRC will lead a push for a regime of assessed contributions, to be supplemented by a suite of innovative financing mechanisms that can produce increased and efficient use of resources.

Another major deficiency is the disparity in funding between refugees and IDPs. Although the number of IDPs is more than twice the number of refugees, only 15 percent of the funds requested by the UNHCR are intended for IDPs.

Oppressive regimes, those responsible for much of the forced migration, are in many cases corrupt, stealing from their treasuries and placing the money and other assets offshore. The WRC recommends that "frozen" assets in foreign banks be seized and reallocated in support of refugees and IDPs.

Certain governments have already begun to seize stolen assets and redirect them in support of humanitarian initiatives supporting those impacted by the crimes of corrupt leaders. This process will hold leaders accountable and may also serve as an additional source of financing for the global refugee and IDP systems.

While the World Bank has developed new instruments of financing to support refugee-hosting countries, allocations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and regional development banks should also be tailored to help displaced populations and refugee-hosting states in the developing world. Additionally, the IMF should allow more flexibility in managing debt in refugee-hosting countries. Private equity markets can also be leveraged to generate new resources and investment.

Finally, the World Trade Organization should negotiate special relief terms for countries hosting large numbers of forcibly displaced persons.

## An Inclusive, Decentralized System

The WRC heard that while Tanzania responded generously to five different waves of refugees over two decades, it felt abandoned by the international community. Tanzania and many other countries do not want to incur debt to support refugees. They believe other states must meaningfully contribute to the system and uphold their responsibilities.

The WRC contends that the challenges facing the refugee system cannot be resolved by working within the present regime's siloed and hierarchical organizational model. The WRC encourages regional intergovernmental organizations to collect data on refugee movements; make evidence-based policies; and use appropriate, ethical technologies to enable solutions, including registration, education, resource allocation, and effective communication and information sharing.

Refugees and IDPs should be supported by facilitating their active and meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that affect them. The WRC recommends that donors channel at least 10 percent of all funding to community-based and refugee-led organizations.

Jordan, Tanzania and Colombia provide strong examples of the importance of engagement at the local level. Colombia is noteworthy for its strong legal tradition of laws and policies with respect to internal displacement. In 2011, the Victims and Land Restitution Law was approved. In 2014, there were 52 governmental entities involved in the process of

assistance and reparations in Colombia. Examples of successful engagement and positive impact at the local level should be shared and amplified where possible.

## Changing the Narrative

The surge in the number of nativist politicians has brought with it a markedly pejorative depiction of refugees. The new narrative, illustrated by the adoption of regressive, discriminatory policies, notably in the United States and Europe, frames refugees as job-stealing, destabilizing security threats. The proliferation of right-wing media reinforces and builds upon this distorted perception.

The fear of Muslims, and in particular Muslim refugees, persists, despite the evidence that such refugees are the principal victims of conflict and terrorism. As British Somali poet Warsan Shire has expressed in her poem "Home," "no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark / you only run for the border / when you see the whole city running as well."

Some countries with a more progressive outlook have had more success in bringing public opinion along with them. The WRC encourages these nations to work together with others to change the existing problematic narrative to one that is grounded in truth. Meaningful interactions and stories must be used to encourage greater empathy and an understanding of the experiences of refugees and IDPs, as well as the contributions and potential they have to offer. For example, Syrian refugees in Turkey have established an estimated 6,000 businesses providing 100,000 jobs; in Sweden, the intake of about 600,000 refugees and migrants has produced some of the highest growth rates in Europe and aided in addressing the challenges of an otherwise aging population.

As another example, between 1979 and 1981, Canada accepted 60,000 Vietnamese boat people. Within a decade, 86 percent of those former refugees were working and productive members of society. Far from being a drain on taxpayers, these new Canadians were taxpayers themselves.

Inspiration can be drawn from Canada's model of private sponsorship of refugees, which allows Canadian citizens and organizations to offer protection, support and a new home to thousands of refugees. The WRC encourages other states to adopt and adapt this model.

Information technologies can be leveraged as tools to support refugees and IDPs and to facilitate more effective responses to their needs during displacement. Innovations include cash-transfer technology, online lending platforms, crowd mapping and crowdsourcing, and apps for information sharing, new housing options, online education programs and so on. The WRC calls on the information technology sector to explore low-cost ways of making technologies affordable and safe for use by forcibly displaced people, while also ensuring the highest standards of privacy and security in storing data in online platforms.

## Implementing Bold Change

Given the widespread negativity toward refugees, the WRC recognizes that securing durable solutions for refugees is an ambitious goal. Nonetheless, we are convinced these negative trends will only accelerate — with states acting unilaterally, the needs of displaced people ignored and their potential unrealized — unless we undertake bold, transformative change.

In addition to the conflict-related issues that drive people to seek refuge and asylum, climate change could see tens

of millions displaced in the coming decades and further necessitates new infrastructure for addressing the plight of forcibly displaced persons.

In its recommendations in its final report, *A Call to Action: Transforming the Global Refugee System*, the WRC encourages representatives of refugee-hosting countries, progressive donor countries, civil society organizations, the private sector, scholars, and refugees and IDPs to form a new, dynamic network — the Global Action Network for the Forcibly Displaced.

Such a network would be agile, flexible, adaptable and, most importantly, inclusive.

To create this network, the WRC will seek to cooperate with a small, multi-stakeholder group of mid-sized donors, host countries and non-governmental actors.

The WRC envisages a core group of countries coming together to provide a critical mass for the Global Action Network, which will work to promote and implement the WRC's key recommendations.

The capacity of women to be agents of change in addressing refugee issues has been largely overlooked in government responses. The WRC recommends that a network of global women leaders be convened as part of the Global Action Network.

The hope is to draw upon lessons from other collaborative efforts in promoting international reform, such as the “Ottawa process” that achieved international agreement to ban landmines, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect norm for protecting civilians.

Key to these efforts is generating political will — a will that is founded on the simplest of principles, one enunciated by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a May 2018 address: “In our aspiration to relevance...in our desire to contribute to make this world a better place, despite our differences, we are all the same.”

The international community has demonstrated a capacity for successful collective action in the past. With a collaborative, innovative and resolute approach, it can rally again, to make this world a better place for the tens of millions who are waiting.

From our diverse geographic and stakeholder backgrounds, the members of the WRC are committed to achieving success. We invite you to join the process.

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We are the Centre for International Governance Innovation: an independent, non-partisan think tank with an objective and uniquely global perspective. Our research, opinions and public voice make a difference in today's world by bringing clarity and innovative thinking to global policy making. By working across disciplines and in partnership with the best peers and experts, we are the benchmark for influential research and trusted analysis.

Our research programs focus on governance of the global economy, global security and politics, and international law in collaboration with a range of strategic partners and support from the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario, as well as founder Jim Balsillie.

## ABOUT THE WORLD REFUGEE COUNCIL

There are more than 21 million refugees worldwide. Over half are under the age of 18. As a growing number of these individuals are forced to flee their homelands in search of safety, they are faced with severe limitations on the availability and quality of asylum, leading them to spend longer in exile today than ever before.

The current refugee system is not equipped to respond to the refugee crisis in a predictable or comprehensive manner. When a crisis erupts, home countries, countries of first asylum, transit countries and destination countries unexpectedly find themselves coping with large numbers of refugees flowing within or over their borders. Support from the international community is typically ad hoc, sporadic and woefully inadequate.

### Bold Thinking for a New Refugee System

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is leading a consensus-driven effort to produce a new Global Compact for refugees in 2018. The World Refugee Council (WRC), established in May 2017 by the Centre for International Governance Innovation, is intended to complement its efforts.

The WRC seeks to offer bold strategic thinking about how the international community can comprehensively respond to refugees based on the principles of international cooperation and responsibility sharing. The Council is comprised of thought leaders, practitioners and innovators drawn from regions around the world and is supported by a research advisory network.

The WRC will explore advances in technology, innovative financing opportunities and prospects for strengthening existing international law to craft and advance a strategic vision for refugees and the associated countries.

The Council will produce a final report grounded by empirical research and informed by an extensive program of outreach to governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society.



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