



World Refugee Council Discussion Paper No. 1

Keeping the Promise

Three Proposed Accountability Mechanisms for the Global Refugee Regime



Centre for International
Governance Innovation

The logo for the World Refugee Council, featuring a purple square with a white triangle pointing upwards and to the right, and the text "WORLD REFUGEE COUNCIL" in white capital letters.

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Three Proposed Accountability Mechanisms for the Global Refugee Regime

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About the Series

World Refugee Council discussion papers are thought-provoking pieces intended to stimulate thought and discussion among political leaders, refugee experts, academics and civil society actors to help generate ideas and solutions for the global refugee system. The measures and concepts in these documents do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Refugee Council.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

COP	Conference of the Parties
CRRF	comprehensive refugee response framework
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
IDPs	internally displaced persons
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RSC	responsibility-sharing council/commission
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNGA	UN General Assembly
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
UPR	universal periodic review
UPR4R	universal periodic review for refugees

Introduction

Accountability is lacking at every point in the refugee cycle — from upstream, where refugee flows are triggered violently and with impunity by criminal regimes and non-state actors, to downstream, where governments shirk their treaty commitments and moral obligations for political gain.

The United Nations' New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants of September 2016 envisions greater international cooperation and responsibility sharing, and calls on the United Nations to develop two "global compacts," one for refugees and the other for migrants, for presentation at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in the autumn of 2018 (UNGA 2016). The key piece of the refugee compact is the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF), which, led by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), aims to establish a "multi-stakeholder approach" to situations of mass influx (*ibid.*, Annex 1, para. 2), and a "programme of action" to help operationalize the CRRF (UNHCR 2017, 1-2). The stakeholders include "national and local authorities, international organizations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, regional coordination and partnership mechanisms, civil society partners, including faith-based organizations and academia, the private sector, media and the refugees themselves" (UNGA 2016). In early March 2018, the UNHCR released the first draft of the compact (UNHCR 2018). Its contents are currently being negotiated by UN member states.

The global refugee regime lacks a formal accountability mechanism. As a result, the costs of non-compliance with the norms and principles of the UNHCR's 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees are virtually non-existent. Nor is there a mechanism to help ensure that states will share responsibility in situations of mass influx. Indeed, the modern refugee regime in many ways represents a classic case of strong standards being undermined through no meaningful enforcement of those standards. There is no institution to bring out, in Abraham Lincoln's words, the "better angels of our nature" (1861).

The first draft of the compact does call for the creation of a "global mechanism for international cooperation," which would consist of two components. The first would be regular "global refugee summits," the inaugural meeting to occur in 2019, with subsequent gatherings to be convened every three years, the primary purposes of which would be to secure and track "pledges and contributions, including financial, material, and technical assistance (including through standby capacity); as well as resettlement places and other pathways for admission including scholarships, labour mobility schemes or private scholarship arrangements" (UNHCR 2018, para. 17). The second proposed component is the "Global Support Platform," an ad hoc body that would be "activated" by the UNCHR in cases of "a significant refugee situation" (*ibid.*, para. 22) and serve as a tool for mobilizing resources.

The summits and platform are potentially important innovations that could generate more support for the refugee regime and foster a system of better responsibility sharing. But they do not go far enough. The compact makes it clear that contributions are to be voluntary (*ibid.*, para. 6), and the compact itself is explicitly "humanitarian and non-political in nature and outlook" (*ibid.*, para. 8). As such, the compact is unlikely to be able to address states' bad behaviour or their failures to fulfill their promises. Of course, this absence of meaningful enforcing mechanisms is a problem in no way unique to the global refugee regime. However, the costs of failing to hold states to account are enormous, both to refugees and to the few states to which the responsibility of caring for refugees has fallen. It does not have to be this way.

New Models to Operationalize Responsibility Sharing

Better enforcement and compliance in the refugee regime is not a new issue. For decades, scholars and refugee advocacy groups have proposed accountability mechanisms for the refugee system, based on the principles of respect for refugee law (notably the core principle of *non-refoulement*¹), better coordination, sufficiency, predictability and fairness. For example, in the late 1990s, James C. Hathaway and R. Alexander Neve's "Making International Refugee Law Relevant Again: A Proposal for Collectivized and Solution-Oriented Protection" (1997) advocated for the creation of a system of sharing based on temporary protection, while Peter Schuck's "Refugee Burden-Sharing: A Modest Proposal" advocated for a "quota-cum-market" (1997, 248) arrangement in which states could "pay to be relieved of their burdens" (ibid., 284-85), allowing them to free themselves of having to provide protection to refugees.² In anticipation of the 2016 UNGA meeting, Amnesty International called for a new "transfer mechanism" for resettling refugees that would be "triggered only if a country receiving refugees reaches a certain threshold, relative to its population, wealth, and other independently verifiable and relevant criteria" (Amnesty International 2016b, 5), with the threshold being 10 percent of the country's "total capacity as calculated using the agreed criteria" (ibid.).

The three options described in the following sections are based on models found in other global governance systems that could operationalize the norm of responsibility sharing: a universal periodic review (UPR) mechanism, similar to the one attached to the UN Human Rights Council; a review conference mechanism, such as the ones that have been established for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); or a review committee, similar to the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) model.

Although each of these new options has its own merits (and shortcomings), there are common elements among them.

They Foster Compliance

First, these accountability options operate on the premise that peer review among states can foster greater compliance. No state enjoys being the subject of international scrutiny. Some will attempt to deflect or discredit criticism of their records and those of their allies. Some may also use a review to discredit opponents. This is the nature of international politics. But peer review mechanisms can also serve as catalysts for states who may want to do better but do not have the political capital at home to make much needed reforms. Moreover, they can serve as fora for sharing best practices and galvanizing political will in support of responsibility sharing.

They Function as Political Fora

Second, the mechanisms are all meant to be political fora. According to its constitution, the UNHCR is not permitted to engage in matters of politics. Yet, there is nothing apolitical about refugee protection. An accountability mechanism can help to ensure that states actually follow through on their promises.

They Engage Stakeholders

Third, all of the mechanisms are multi-stakeholder mechanisms. Although any decision-making power will ultimately rest with states, each mechanism allows space for UN agencies beyond the UNHCR, and for civil society, the private sector and refugees themselves, to engage, to bring new ideas to the fore and to facilitate collaboration.

They Provide Permanency

Fourth, the mechanisms are intended to be permanent. Although ad hoc or temporary intergovernmental processes can help to cultivate new norms, they generally have little enforcement capacity. Any new mechanism must be permanent. Otherwise, it risks irrelevance.

1 *Non-refoulement* provides "that no one shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threat to life or freedom" (UNHCR 2010, 3).

2 See also Schuck (2013).

They Could Strengthen the Compact

Fifth and finally, each mechanism would potentially reinforce the global compact on refugees. Many human rights advocates, including Amnesty International (2016c), remain skeptical that the refugee compact will lead to any meaningful reform. Sadly, there is a danger that the compact will fail to tackle the structural shortcomings of the current refugee regime, and thus support the status quo at the expense of refugees in need of protection and livelihoods. An independent responsibility-sharing mechanism could help to ensure that this will not be the compact's fate. While the mechanism could well be subsumed by the United Nations in some fashion, it also has the potential to be, initially at least, an independent coalition of countries willing to cooperate outside of UN institutional structures and ideological strictures, as the anti-personnel land mines treaty was at first, attracting participants as the effectiveness of the mechanism is proven.

The Three Options

Option One

A Responsibility-Sharing Council/Commission and a Universal Periodic Review for Refugees

In 2006, the UNGA established the Human Rights Council and the UPR process. Both the Human Rights Council and the UPR were flagship achievements of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's reform efforts. The UPR, which operates under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, is based on the premise that all countries — developed and developing, North and South, democratic and non-democratic — are guilty of committing human rights violations, and all should have their records scrutinized and evaluated on a regular basis, in this case, every four years. The UPR is a peer review mechanism that operates on the principle that pressure from other member states — “naming and shaming” —

will prompt states to address any human rights failings in order to avoid embarrassment.³

- While as a matter of course the UPR processes could be strengthened to address refugee issues more systematically, a similar body could be designed for the refugee system. A responsibility-sharing council/commission (RSC), with an accompanying universal periodic review for refugees (UPR4R), could be established on the grounds that some form of enforcement or compliance mechanism is needed to ensure that states fulfill their responsibilities to refugees and to the refugee protection system.
- An RSC and a UPR4R would work in much the same way as the UPR of the Human Rights Council. It would be state-driven, and all member states would have their records on responsibility sharing reviewed every four years. States would be evaluated using a wide range of criteria, such as those proposed by Oxfam's “Syria Crisis Fair Share Analysis,”⁴ which could include but would not be limited to: financial contributions to and by host countries and front-line states; access to asylum; commitments to resettlement and alternative pathways for refugees to move; integration and inclusion of refugees into communities; and access to livelihoods.
- This new body's work would have some overlap with the work of the Human Rights Council, but repetition with respect to the enforcement of international law is not necessarily a bad thing.
- The RSC and the UPR4R would be housed within the UN system but outside the UNHCR, whose mandate requires it to be non-political, because holding governments accountable for their actions or lack of action is an inherently political process that could put the UNHCR in a difficult position. Like the Human Rights Council, the RSC would report to the UNGA. It would be funded through the regular UN budget, not the UNHCR's budget. States would be elected to three-year terms. No country would have a permanent seat. Seats would be allocated according to categories:

3 Certain country reviews under the UPR have focused attention on the treatment of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Asylum Access 2016), and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have submitted reports to the Human Rights Council criticizing governments for their policies toward refugees and IDPs (see Amnesty International 2016a).

4 See www.oxfam.org/en/research/syria-crisis-fair-share-analysis-2016.

- countries that host significant refugee populations and are participants in the CRRF;
- donor countries; and
- countries that resettle significant numbers of refugees.

The RSC would receive information from the Human Rights Council, UN human rights rapporteurs, the UNHCR and relevant treaty-monitoring bodies. NGOs — particularly refugee-led NGOs — would be eligible to apply for consultative status with the RSC and would be eligible to submit evidence to the UPR4R reviews, as would private sector actors that have committed to creating employment opportunities for refugees and are members of the UN Global Compact on Corporate Social Responsibility.⁵

Option Two

A Review Conference for Refugee Responsibility Sharing

In 1970, the United Nations established the Review Conference of the Parties to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which meets every five years. The purpose of the conference is to assess progress on implementation of treaty provisions relating to, among other concerns, “nuclear testing, qualitative nuclear-weapon developments, security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon States by nuclear-weapon States, and on co-operation in the field of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.”⁶ The conference strives for consensus in the final document, and has a strong normative function. It does have the authority to name and shame countries that violate the treaty. For example, the 2000 conference “deplored the nuclear test explosions carried out by India and Pakistan in 1998”⁷ and the final document “reaffirmed that any new State party to the Treaty will be accepted only as a non-nuclear-weapon State, regardless of its nuclear capabilities.”⁸

In 1995, the UNFCCC established the Conference of the Parties (COP). Unlike the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference, the COP meets annually. All states that are parties to the convention are represented at the COP, and

the purpose of the meeting is to “review the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that the COP adopts and take decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention, including institutional and administrative arrangements.”⁹

Structurally, the COP presidency rotates on a regional basis, and is supported by a secretariat that facilitates partnerships with academia, research centres, civil society and the private sector. Every COP also includes two subsidiary bodies, one for scientific and technological advice and one for implementation, each of which includes a number of thematic subcommittees.

A review conference for refugee responsibility sharing — an idea that Patrick Wall (2017) has proposed as a possible enforcement mechanism attached to a responsibility-sharing framework convention — could play a similar function. It could meet annually, or no less frequently than once every five years. Its principal purposes would be to monitor compliance of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol; review each member state’s fair contributions to responsibility sharing during the previous five years, based on an agreed-upon formula; and establish new target contribution levels for the next five-year period. As with the COP, the refugee responsibility-sharing review conference would be supported by a secretariat, and would include thematic subsidiary bodies and sub-committees that would review particular aspects of refugee responsibility sharing (*ibid.*).

The advantages of a review conference system are that it would serve as a mechanism for strengthening norms; provide quantifiable benchmarks by which member states could be held accountable for their behaviour/compliance; and, in setting multi-year targets, bring predictability to the refugee system. At least initially, membership would be determined “on the widest possible geographical basis from those States with a demonstrated interest in, and devotion to, the solution of the refugee problem” (UN Economic and Social Council 1958).

Like the Nansen Initiative — a state-led, multi-stakeholder consultative process designed to build consensus toward a “protection agenda for people displaced across borders in the context of disasters

⁵ See www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles.

⁶ See www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/background.shtml.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See <http://unfccc.int/bodies/body/6383.php>.

and the effects of climate change,” in which the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration are “Standing Invitees to the Steering Group”¹⁰ — the refugee responsibility-sharing review conference would complement the work of the UNHCR by focusing on issues that either fall outside the UNHCR’s mandate or that the UNHCR is unable to address, due to a lack of capacity and a need to respond to the crisis of the day. The review conference could pay particular attention to questions of prevention, forecasting and contingency planning, and serve as a venue for inter-agency cooperation by bringing together humanitarian, development and peace-building actors, as well as civil society and private sector actors. It would serve as a clearing house for best practices.

Option Three

An OECD-DAC-style Peer Review Committee for Responsibility Sharing

The OECD’s DAC is a peer review mechanism that “functions as a forum where bilateral donors come together to exchange experience and to address issues of common interest or concern. Its overarching objective is the continuous improvement of member efforts in all areas of development co-operation, through the exchange of good practices and the promotion of co-ordination and collaboration” (OECD 2017).

The DAC “reviews and assesses” all members’ development cooperation systems every five years, with the aim of improving performance and holding “members accountable for the commitments they have made,” and sharing best practices (ibid.). Much of the focus of the DAC is on promoting “good development partnerships for better impact on poverty reduction and sustainable development in developing countries” (ibid.).

The peer review involves five stages:

- preparation and planning;
- fact-finding, analysis and report writing;
- the peer review meeting;
- approval and publication; and
- follow-up (ibid.).

A similar peer review committee could be established for the refugee regime. Its overarching mandate, like that of the OECD-DAC, would be to improve the practices of donor states, specifically as it relates to support for host and front-line states. And, like the OECD-DAC, it would aim to foster “good partnerships” between countries in the North and South, and serve as a clearing house for best practices on a variety of issues, including improving refugees’ livelihoods and access to social services.

The committee could also develop its own response index for gauging the quantity and quality of state contributions to responsibility sharing, and conduct independent evaluations of the CRRF.

The secretariat could stand alone or reside within the UN system. In either case, it would be independent of the UNHCR. Membership would be limited to the 10 largest donor countries *and* host countries participating in the CRRF. Indeed, one of the advantages of this type of mechanism is that host countries would be full participants and have significant input both on the levels of financing required for hosting large numbers of refugees and on the effectiveness of the CRRF. International financial institutions, civil society, refugees and private sector actors would be actively involved in the fact-finding stage of the evaluation.

Conclusion

The mandate of the World Refugee Council is to generate new ideas to strengthen the refugee regime, and addressing the current lack of accountability is a core pillar of its work. As indicated above, a permanent, multi-stakeholder peer review mechanism — regardless of its form and structure — that meets every few years offers one means of addressing this lack of accountability in a way that is currently not being addressed by the global compact negotiations. Based on well-established precedents in other global governance sectors, a mechanism whose mandate is not purely humanitarian could serve as a tool for overcoming political deadlock, thus enabling more meaningful and equitable responsibility sharing in situations of mass influx. It could institutionalize and strengthen networks of actors who are committed to assisting refugees at all stages of displacement without being driven by the crisis of the day. And above all, it could

¹⁰ See www.nanseninitiative.org/secretariat/.

move humanity one step closer to a regime in which the promise of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees will be realized, and all refugees will be able to enjoy the protection with dignity to which all human beings are entitled.

Acknowledgement

This paper was prepared by Andrew S. Thompson for the World Refugee Council under the intellectual guidance and direction of Lloyd Axworthy, Elizabeth Ferris, Fen Osler Hampson and Paul Heinbecker.

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About CIGI

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.

À propos du CIGI

Au Centre pour l'innovation dans la gouvernance internationale (CIGI), nous formons un groupe de réflexion indépendant et non partisan doté d'un point de vue objectif et unique de portée mondiale. Nos recherches, nos avis et nos interventions publiques ont des effets réels sur le monde d'aujourd'hui car ils apportent de la clarté et une réflexion novatrice pour l'élaboration des politiques à l'échelle internationale. En raison des travaux accomplis en collaboration et en partenariat avec des pairs et des spécialistes interdisciplinaires des plus compétents, nous sommes devenus une référence grâce à l'influence de nos recherches et à la fiabilité de nos analyses.

Nos programmes de recherche ont trait à la gouvernance dans les domaines suivants : l'économie mondiale, la sécurité et les politiques mondiales, et le droit international, et nous les exécutons avec la collaboration de nombreux partenaires stratégiques et le soutien des gouvernements du Canada et de l'Ontario ainsi que du fondateur du CIGI, 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. The Council aims to have concluded its work by early 2019.

À propos du Conseil mondial pour les réfugiés

Il y a en ce moment dans le monde plus de 21 millions de réfugiés, et plus de la moitié d'entre eux ont moins de 18 ans. En outre, de plus en plus de personnes sont forcées de quitter leur pays natal et partent à la recherche d'une sécurité, et elles sont alors confrontées aux limites importantes qui existent quant aux possibilités d'accueil et à la qualité de ce dernier. À cause de cette situation, les réfugiés passent maintenant plus de temps que jamais auparavant en exil.

En ce moment, le système de protection des réfugiés ne permet pas de réagir adéquatement à la crise des réfugiés d'une façon planifiée et globale. Quand une crise éclate, les pays de premier asile, les pays de transit et les pays de destination finale se retrouvent sans l'avoir prévu à devoir composer avec un grand nombre de réfugiés qui arrivent sur leur territoire, le traversent ou en partent. Et le soutien fourni dans ce contexte par la communauté internationale est en règle générale ponctuel, irrégulier et nettement inadéquat.

Des idées audacieuses pour un nouveau système de protection des réfugiés

Le Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés (HCR) dirige des efforts découlant d'un consensus et visant à instaurer un nouveau « pacte mondial pour les réfugiés » en 2018. Mis sur pied en mai 2017 par le Centre pour l'innovation dans la gouvernance internationale (CIGI), le Conseil mondial pour les réfugiés (CMR) veut compléter ces efforts.

Le CMR vise à proposer une réflexion stratégique audacieuse sur la manière dont la communauté internationale peut réagir de façon globale aux déplacements de réfugiés, et ce, en se fondant sur les principes de la coopération internationale et du partage des responsabilités. Formé de leaders, de praticiens et d'innovateurs éclairés provenant de toutes les régions du globe, le CMR bénéficie du soutien d'un réseau consultatif de recherche.

Le CMR examinera les progrès techniques, les occasions de financement novatrices ainsi que les possibilités pour ce qui est de renforcer le droit international et d'y intégrer une vision stratégique pour les réfugiées et les pays concernés.

Par ailleurs, le CMR produira un rapport final fondé sur des recherches empiriques et sur les résultats d'un vaste programme de sensibilisation ciblant les gouvernements, les organisations intergouvernementales et la société civile. Son objectif est de terminer son travail au début de 2019.

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