
“Towards a global compact on refugees”

Thematic discussion four: Measures to be taken in the pursuit of solutions

14 November 2017

Panel one: How can we support voluntary and sustainable return?

Summary

Some key considerations in terms of supporting voluntary and sustainable return included the following:

- The New York Declaration recognizes the importance of voluntary and sustainable return as a preferred durable solution for refugees.
- It is not an “option” but an imperative for the international community to support countries of origin to re-establish conditions favourable to voluntary and sustainable return – starting from the onset of a refugee emergency. The “right of refugees to have rights”, including the right to return itself, was also emphasized.
- Returnees have skills and capacities, and are assets rather than liabilities to their home countries. Investing in education, vocational training and self-reliance of refugees while in exile can facilitate eventual return.
- The need for political will was stressed.
- The importance of a coordinated, holistic and non-fragmented approach was also stressed.
- It is important to establish linkages between programmes for refugee returnees and programmes for internally displaced persons, including to avoid refugee returnees being further internally displaced.
- The lead role of national and local authorities in return processes was emphasized, supported by a broad coalition of actors, including donors, other States, development and peacebuilding actors, regional bodies and financial institutions.

Suggestions for the programme of action

From the concept note

1. Tripartite agreements and a “support group” for voluntary return
 - Tripartite agreements provide a standard model on which to build – they can facilitate dialogue and information sharing between refugees, countries of origin, and hosting countries (including through “go and see” and “come and tell” visits).
 - Tripartite agreements are not the only basis for return: it is important to respect the decision of refugees to return spontaneously as long as this decision is taken voluntarily; as recognized in the New York Declaration, voluntary repatriation is not necessarily conditioned on accomplishment of political solutions.
 - UNHCR was encouraged to take stock of past agreements, including lessons learned, in order to establish guidance for future tripartite agreements.

- It is crucial to support tripartite agreements through necessary funds, and material and technical assistance, in the country of asylum and on return.
2. A “support group” was welcomed as a potential complement to tripartite agreements.
 - More information on the proposed support group was requested, including its composition and tasks - any new platform must add value and link to existing mechanisms.
 - UNHCR’s role is oversight to ensure that protection standards are met and rights of returnees upheld; and to play a catalytic role in bringing together key actors to ensure that returnees are included in national development plans and programmes, and/or peace and reconstruction efforts.
 3. Specific attention to rebuilding conditions in countries of origin
 - Return is most sustainable when it forms part of a holistic peacebuilding, reconstruction and recovery strategy.
 - Further thinking was requested on what concrete mechanisms for funding and resource allocation can be put in place to ensure sustainability, beyond the references in the concept note.
 - Important factors in ensuring sustainable return include:
 - housing, land and property rights – this was particularly emphasized by many speakers;
 - access to jobs/employment – the ILO guiding principles may provide some support in this regard;
 - re-establishing basic services (such as health and education);
 - civil documentation, which can help to prevent statelessness; and
 - measures to support dignity and integrity.
 - The majority of returnees go back to urban centres: this can ensure better access to services, and reduced vulnerabilities. The “new urban agenda” could provide a useful basis on which to build, as could the global alliance for urban crises.
 - The inclusion of refugees and returnees in peace and crisis recovery strategies and national development plans was encouraged, particularly women and youth.
 4. Additional support in the context of return
 - A “whole of community” approach to avoid tensions between returnees and people in return areas was recommended.
 - Colombia’s victims law provides a model, particularly focused on a participatory approach including women.
 - Support for social cohesion programmes was also encouraged.
 - Support for those with specific needs including children, as well ensuring as family unity for returnees, were emphasized.

Additional suggestions for the programme of action

1. Work towards solutions, notably voluntary repatriation, is needed from the outset of a displacement situation. A regionally-centred dialogue focused on addressing root causes was suggested; the proposed global refugee response group could also play a role.

2. UNHCR was encouraged to explore synergies with the global compact on migration in the area of return.
3. Measures to include women and youth through a community-based and participative approach were suggested.
4. Use of innovative technologies to facilitate recognition of land rights or to establish digital identities was encouraged.
5. Cooperation with the private sector was urged (e.g. for access to housing, skills sets).
6. Some standards to guide notions of “voluntariness” and “safety” were encouraged.
7. States of origin could integrate the “guiding principles on internal displacement” in national laws and policies, as returnees may be internally displaced upon return.
8. States, UN agencies and partners could expand and collaborate on collection of interoperable data to cover the entire displacement continuum, including internal displacement.

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23 November 2017