**U.N Refugee Summit: Abstract Discussions in the Face of a Deadly Crisis**

n the first of a two-part prelude to the U.N. summit, Alexander Betts, the head of Oxford’s Refugee Studies Centre, plots the flawed origins of a meeting some states celebrate having sabotaged.

World leaders will meet at the U.N. General Assembly on September 19 to discuss the large scale movement of refugees and migrants. Triggered by the European refugee crisis and its relationship to displacement from Syria, it represents one of the most high-profile political meetings ever to consider refugees and migration.

But the summit’s key documents have been produced quickly and with clear limitations. They focus mainly on the agreement of abstract principles. Some states are privately celebrating having managed to strip them of almost all substantive content.

Meanwhile, the world faces major institutional challenges in addressing large movements of refugees and should be working towards institutional transformation. The need for refuge will only intensify, driven not mainly by the traditional notion of “persecution” but by fragile states afflicted by mass violence and the emergence of new shocks such as climate change. A global refugee regime created for Europe and for the early Cold War faces fundamental limitations to its business model.

The challenges are stark:

* Some 56 percent of the world’s 21.3 million refugees have been in exile for at least five years; less than 300,000 of them were resettled, repatriated or integrated locally in 2015. Yet limitations on access to work, freedom of movement and education remain.
* Just 10 countries host nearly 60 percent of the world’s refugees, and 86 percent of the world’s refugees are in developing regions of the world.
* The refugee regime is now subject to systemic noncompliance by states, to the extent that many of the most generous hosting states around the world are non-signatory states to the 1951 Convention.
* Migrants not recognized as refugees are consistently denied even basic human rights. Increasingly, people are fleeing serious human rights deprivations that fall outside the refugee framework.
* The majority of the world’s refugees are in urban and peri-urban areas and receive no access to international assistance whatsoever.

And yet the upcoming summit is the child of political compromise. It does not represent a clear-sighted vision by the U.N. secretary-general. Its origins lie in the European refugee crisis and its links to the conflict in Syria. But it has not been convened to concretely address that situation.

In September 2015, the U.N. secretary-general’s representative for migration, Peter Sutherland, proposed an international conference on Syrian refugees and the Mediterranean. Similar conferences have successfully addressed the needs of Indo-Chinese refugees and Central American refugees in previous decades, for example, and an operational conference along these lines was certainly needed.

In October, Sutherland presented a concept note along these lines to the U.S. government, the U.N. deputy secretary-general, Jan Eliasson, and the other three members of the “Quartet” – the group of principals responsible for key aspects of multilateral work on migration: Antonio Guterres (UNHCR), Bill Swing (IOM) and Prince Zeid (OHCHR). All backed it in principle. It would have been the right option.

However, concerns were present in the UNHCR about responsibility for an international refugee conference being distributed across the wider U.N. system. The UNHCR has been keen to preserve its de facto monopoly as the lead U.N. agency working on refugees.

Fearing mandate competition, the UNHCR pushed back against a wider, jointly run refugee conference with a specific focus on Syria and the Mediterranean. It argued that it should be left to handle more concrete operational matters. It pushed instead for increased humanitarian assistance and resettlement places for Syrian refugees through UNHCR. In the absence of decisive leadership, a compromise was reached that would involve a division of efforts.

What should have been a single, focused process became utterly fragmented. Initially disillusioned by this failure of U.N. leadership, the White House announced its own refugee summit to be held a day later.

From early in 2016, UNHCR mobilized to ensure that the secretariat for the September 19 meeting would be staffed by its allies. Current and former UNHCR staff were seconded in significant numbers. The result was a secretariat with relatively strong expertise on refugees and relatively weak expertise on migration. UNHCR’s main concern was to ensure that the “refugee” elements of the conference remained within its control and the “migration” elements did not address areas that “blurred” or “fudged” the boundary between refugees and migration.

The secretariat was given only three months to prepare the secretary-general’s report for the conference, intended to serve as a basis for states’ negotiated outcome document.

By early 2016 the two September meetings had at least managed to identify complementarities of purpose. The U.N. summit would focus on the development of two “global compacts”: one on responsibility-sharing relating to refugees and the other on migration. Meanwhile, the U.S. summit would focus on increasing humanitarian assistance, resettlement places and improving refugees’ access to jobs and education.

The secretary-general’s report was ambitious. It proposes commitments across three main pillars: areas relating to both refugees and migrants, a global compact on responsibility-sharing for refugees and a global compact for safe and orderly migration.

But the substantive content of these sets of commitments was left to the “negotiated outcome” document to be agreed by consensus at the General Assembly.

The open-ended report includes reference to “vulnerable migrants” but without offering a definition. It includes reference to “internal displacement” but without any clarity on whether this is within the scope of the summit. It has left negotiating states with a lot of work to do.

Unsurprisingly, the “zero draft” of the negotiated outcome reflected many of these ambiguities. Although ably led by the U.N. ambassadors of Jordan and Ireland, the process opted to focus on the agreement of abstract principles. The declaration that will emerge from the summit will be thin on content and connections to practice.

How morally tenable is it to invest the international community’s finite political capital into a summit about abstract principles when there are tangible protection crises from Greece to Kenya to Jordan to Australia?

Yes, the hope is that by beginning with principles and by convening at a high-level, a framework for change can emerge. But such an approach simply defers the need for institutional transformation.

We now know that the intended outcomes – global compacts on refugees and on migration – will not be agreed in final form during the summit. In practice, both will now need to be developed during follow-up processes.

The summit’s focus risks willfully misunderstanding that the greatest challenge for protection and solutions is not about states’ lack of new or additional commitment. The norms exist, it is operational outcomes that are most urgently needed today.

Every day, we see violations of existing agreements by governments:[Australia’s use of Nauru](https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/07/29/australians-starting-to-see-through-fear-mongering-over-refugees), [Europe’s emerging migration partnerships with human rights-violating regimes across Africa](https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/08/30/expert-discussion-the-future-of-the-e-u-turkey-refugee-deal), [Kenya’s threat to forcibly return Somalis](https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/06/23/somali-refugees-struggle-in-shadow-of-forced-return). Meanwhile, the dominant humanitarian model fails to address refugees and governments’ needs in a sustainable way. At best, the summit outcome documents approach these challenges obliquely. At worst, they allow governments to dress their abuse of refugee and migrant rights in humanitarian rhetoric.

If it is to succeed, the hope is that this summit can at least catalyze initiatives that have a relationship to practice. For that to happen will take vision and courage from governments, international organizations, business and civil society. The summit must be a launching point for transformation, not an end in itself.

*The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Refugees Deeply.*