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From Theory of Change to SMART Pledges: Lessons for Pledges at the Global Refugee Forum and Beyond

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Introduction

In the lead-up to the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019, states and other stakeholders are being asked to make pledges that further the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). [UNHCR](#) has called upon states and other stakeholders to “announce concrete pledges and contributions that will achieve tangible benefits for refugees and host communities.” To a large extent, this seeks to build on the scale of commitments made at the [Leaders’ Summit](#) in September 2016, especially in relation to financial pledges, commitments to increase refugee resettlement, and pledges by refugee-hosting states to adopt progressive policy changes in relation to access to work and education.

But what makes for a good pledge? Can the value of a pledge be measured by its financial footprint? Or can the value of a pledge be measured in terms of the change it affects? And how can the impact of pledges be measured over time?

This short paper draws on the experience of the implementation of pledges from the 2016 Leaders’ Summit (see Annex 1) and the experience of translating targets to pledges to change in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the early experience of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to identify features of pledges that contribute to lasting change. Based on desk research and the experiences shared by members of the GCR Experts’ Group, especially in relation to realizing the GCR’s objectives, specifically in relation to commitments to refugee women and girls and increasing access to education and work rights, this paper seeks to provide guidance primarily to states as they prepare pledges for the GRF and suggests how the impact of pledges can be measured over time.

In reviewing pledges made at the Leaders’ Summit, for example, two types of pledges can be identified: those that are intended to contribute to structural change, and those that are primarily programmatic and immediate in nature. The experience of these two types of pledges since 2016, and the absence of follow-up on these pledges from the US administration, suggests that pledges have had the greatest impact when they include three features:

1. They are focused on addressing structures sources of inequality and marginalization
2. They are part of an on-going process of dialogue with national actors and refugees
3. They are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Time-bound¹

In preparation for the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, this paper draws from these experiences and lessons from the field of development studies to argue for **pledges that are rooted in a theory of change will have the greatest impact beyond the GRF**. The paper concludes with recommendations on what forms these pledges could usefully take.

¹ The meaning of SMART is adapted from: Lee Ann Jung, "Writing SMART objectives and strategies that fit the ROUTINE." *Teaching Exceptional Children* 39.4 (2007): 54-58.

Theory of change

Theory of change approaches have been used for many years in the development sector and are essential in the development and implementation of development projects. Lessons can be learned from the application of a theory of change approach to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The MDGs reflected a donor view of development and were largely constructed without input from local civil society, and based on the specific visions of development organizations, and empirical targets. Thus, they lacked a certain legitimacy necessary for success. In contrast, the SDGs were developed in consultation with local development civil society organizations, universities, media, think-tanks etc. The process was designed to garner input from those who generally do not participate in policy related discussions (Bexell, 2015).

It has increasingly been argued that structural issues relating to development cannot be thought of in a silo, initiatives must reflect a multi-sectoral approach, acknowledging the intersection of multiple sectors of development, as well as the varying levels at which policy discussion takes place (Persaud, 2017). This also speaks to the importance of challenging western assumptions about development so as to remain culturally sensitive, and to design context specific initiatives (Eisenbruch, 2018).

We can also learn that even with the inclusion of multiple voices in the policy making process, the most transformative change often does not occur from the global policy down, but through grassroots and civil society social inclusion from local contexts. Through the diffusion of norms, and policy learning, local initiatives can be scaled up to the national and international level (Weldon & Htun, 2013).

It is apparent from recent analysis that new ways of thinking about change are necessary to understanding how these themes and objectives in the SDGs are met. For example, scholars seeking to understand changes to the protection of women and girls suggest that it is necessary to understand the underlying cultural factors that contribute to violence against women (Eisenbruch, 2018). Similarly, increased emphasis on the participation and empowerment of women is seen as a key contributor to change (Michau et al. 2015; Weldon & Htun, 2013). Increased access to education is also seen as necessary for meeting the SDGs and is thought to have transformative potential if a more holistic approach is taken to reduce the barriers that children face in accessing quality education (UNESCO, 2016). Measuring the success of education programs also needs to look at the quality of education that is being received in addition to the quantity of students attending (Commonwealth Education Hub, 2016). With respect to livelihoods, we have seen an increased focus on the drivers of inequality, as well as an emphasis on a broad range of economic and non-economic factors that lead to improved livelihoods (Ellis, 2000; Rider, Gordon, Meadows, & Zwick, 2001). The inclusion of these non-economic factors is often difficult to quantify, and thus it is important to find new assessment tools. In this sense, a participatory approach to assessment is seen as an improvement (Donohue & Biggs, 2015).

This theory of change can aid in our understanding of how meaningful change occurs within the global refugee regime (Betts and Milner 2019). A theory of change is both a **dialogue-based process** and tool used for understanding each component in a project that will lead to specific desired outcomes, especially affecting structural change.

Beginning from a contextual level of analysis, the theory of change approach maps out a pathway that will lead to desired outcomes by addressing the actions of stakeholders and the contextual conditions necessary for success. This type of approach is particularly useful because it allows for on-going questioning of what influences change, and utilizes learning and evidence to respond and adapt to these changes (Vogel, 2012). Theories of change also help researchers and practitioners to recognise the assumptions and motivations underpinning various interventions, and can offer a method for reflexivity (Valters, 2014). Approaches based on theories of change lend themselves to more efficient monitoring and evaluation, and are salient due to their focus on key stakeholders, and emphasis on learning as a

critical element of innovation in complex situations; they additionally necessitate the use of both qualitative and quantitative factors (Thornton et al., 2017).

Transformative change is a process and takes time and must include a multitude of voices at various levels. Change also takes place when issue areas are not considered in a vacuum, but in a holistic and multi-sectoral fashion. Culture and context are crucial, as is the participation and motivation of local and national leaders and civil society. A theory of change approach represents a new way of thinking that seeks reflexivity, adaptivity and looks to challenge underlying assumptions about how change occurs.

Pledges from Leaders' Summit

This understanding of a theory of change drawn from the development literature can help us better understand why some pledges made at the 2016 Leaders' Summit have been implemented and some have not, and to what extent those that are adopted will be transformative. Pledges made by donor states included funding for UNHCR mandates and specific initiatives for areas such as education. Pledges made by refugee-hosting states were more wide reaching with some countries pledging to overhaul their refugee policies relating to encampment and local integration or status; or to increase refugee access to education and livelihood opportunities.

What was notably missing from all pledges was a consideration of gender equality and differentiation between groups within refugee populations and host communities.

While many of the donor pledges have been implemented, the impact of these financial commitments has been mixed. Likewise, the implementation of pledges from host countries has been inconsistent. As illustrated by the summaries in Annex 1, pledges that have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented are ones that had buy-in at the national level, support from local organizations, and had clear and measurable objectives. Many pledges in host countries are also made possible through the designation of donor funds to specific initiatives, such as commitments made by Canada for education in Lebanon and Jordan and the success of the refugee sponsorship framework, or the commitment made by the United Kingdom for livelihood access in Ethiopia.

There has also been a great deal of progress made with pledges made by countries who are participating in the roll out of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). States involved in the CRRF have the participation of a wide range of stakeholders and partners. As noted in the theory of change literature, successful innovation occurs when initiatives are planned across multiple sectors and levels and have specific objectives or goals. They are also successful when specific context is taken into consideration, and capacity for success is increased - for example: when education access is improved through the conversion of refugee schools into government schools in Chad, or when new legal structures allow for improved livelihoods access and freedom of movement in Ethiopia.

While there have been many successes from the Leaders' Summit, there are also pledges that have made more limited progress, or there has been a rollback of political will for implementation. Several of these instances are cases where pledges were made as part of dialogue with the Obama Administration or can be linked to the change in administration in the United States and the lack of political follow-up from the White House on commitments made at an event initiated by the previous administration.

Similarly, pledges that were not the result of local buy-in and consultation have been more limited in their implementation, as is the case in Greece and in Jordan. Lack of progress can also be linked to insufficient donor funding which inhibits the capacity of host states to implement commitments. Increased conflict and insecurity in a number of the regions where commitments were made has challenged the ability and desire of states to take in and support further refugee populations.

SMART pledges

Building from the lessons of theories of change from the development sector, the impact of pledges made at the Leaders' Summit, and the experience of members of the GCR Experts' Group, we can identify three key features for pledges at the Global Refugee Forum that are more likely to have the greatest return on the investment of resources pledged.

1. Pledges should be in support of on-going processes of dialogue with national actors and refugees

An important lesson from the Leaders' Summit is that pledges connected to on-going processes of dialogue in national contexts will have a greater likelihood of impact, even in the event of changes in the external political environment. This is also a lesson from the theory of change literature from the development sector.

To this end, it is important for actors developing pledges for the GRF to actively consult with partners in national contexts, especially national civil society actors, to identify and craft pledges that will reinforce and support on-going dialogue in national contexts to promote protection and solutions for refugees. Likewise, such local engagement will also be critical in assessing the impact of pledges made at the GRF.

It is, however, crucial to note that such processes in national contexts require support for national institutions that can be counterparts in these processes, and who can be drivers of change in the development and implementation of pledges. As argued by Asylum Access:

Refugees and the local civil society organizations that support their inclusion are among the key actors that can inform and advise host country policy. Refugee voices combined with knowledgeable, connected and locally-led NGOs are uniquely positioned to provide host governments with technical assistance on legislation, argue persuasively for policy reform based on evidence and practices, and bring refugee voices to the table. Currently, such groups are totally underutilized. Greater funding and participation for locally-led advocacy organizations and refugee representation will help achieve more effective governance frameworks for refugees. (Asylum Access, nd, 3)

In response, all stakeholders can consider including these sample pledges in their GRF commitments:

- Affirming the important role of refugee participation detailed in the Global Compact on Refugees, we pledge to include refugees in a substantive way in the development and implementation of refugee programming.
- Noting the importance of national ownership, the principle of localization, and the unique contributions of local and national institutions, we pledge to actively support national and local organizations and host communities in the development and implementation of refugee programming.

In addition, pledges can have greater impact when they relate to commitments and processes in other issue areas, especially at the regional, national and local level. The encouraging signs of the IGAD process, for example, highlight the benefits of approaches that realize the benefits of linking responses to refugees in broader humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts.

Realizing these opportunities, all stakeholders can consider including these sample pledges in their GRF commitments:

- Mindful of collective efforts since 2009 to develop complementary and comprehensive responses for refugees that leverage the contributions of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding initiatives, and recalling the commitment through the Sustainable Development Goals to “leave

no-one behind”, we pledge to build from past efforts to actively seek opportunities to promote solutions for refugees through relevant initiatives within the UN System and in regional and national processes.

2. Pledges should include a focus on structural sources of inequality, marginalization and exclusion

Also clear from the theory of change literature is the understanding that pledges will be limited in their impact if they are not mindful of the structural sources of inequality, marginalization and exclusion. Absent such considerations, pledges may inadvertently reinforce such inequalities.

An emphasis on supporting the participation of national institutions and refugee-led organizations, as outlined above, will go some way to addressing these concerns.

More generally, however, a group of 20 organizations recently endorsed a set of guiding principles to ensure that pledges are mindful of diversity within refugee populations and the need to take intersectional considerations into account. To do this, the brief calls for the incorporation of age, gender, and diversity, including disability (AGD), considerations into the crafting of pledges (WRC 2019).

The guide notes that “Achieving any one of the following will ensure [that a] pledge is AGD sensitive:

- The pledge... acknowledges and addresses the different needs and capacities of girls, boys, women, men, and LGBTQI+ persons, including those with disabilities, in all their diversity.
- The pledge... contributes to the promotion of safety and dignity, access to justice, and the provision of accessible and quality services, including sexual and reproductive health care for all, without discrimination.
- The pledge... advances gender equality and addresses the structural barriers that prevent the equal participation of all, particularly women and girls, including persons with disabilities.
- The pledge... targets groups of individuals that are usually excluded to promote their ability to genuinely engage in decision-making processes and take on leadership positions (e.g. (older) women, adolescents, girls, persons from minority groups, persons with disabilities, or LGBTQI+ persons).
- The pledge... promotes mechanisms that are AGD inclusive to ensure accountability to all affected people.”

Building from these principles, the guide provides a number of examples of AGD inclusive pledges, including:

- We will support the individual registration of all refugee women, men, girls, and boys and ensure information and registration processes are adapted and accessible, particularly for those with disabilities.
- We will target funding to organisations led by women, youth, and persons with disabilities within refugee and host communities, which are on the front lines of delivering life-saving services in refugee responses.

3. Pledges should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Time-bound

Finally, the lessons from the development sector and experience of the Leaders’ Summit point to the impact of pledges that are specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented and time-bound.

At the first preparatory meeting for the GRF, on 29 March 2019, ICVA’s statement on behalf of NGOs stressed the importance of matching pledges with “specific gaps, challenges and opportunities in existing

refugee situations.” The statement called for “a context-informed approach as the preferred way to ensure that pledges lead to concrete changes in the lives of refugees and host communities across the scope of the Compact’s objectives and within the four-year time-frame until the next Global Refugee Forum in 2023.” NGOs encouraged “host countries, and where feasible countries of origin, and UNHCR to initiate inclusive processes to identify specific challenges, gaps and opportunities against which to pledge. Such an approach will not only ensure that pledges match specific gaps in specific situations, thereby ensuring accountability vis-à-vis affected people including for gross human rights violations, it is also the only way to generate collective ownership at country level, and to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation of affected communities, local civil society, and local businesses.” (ICVA, 2019)

As such, feedback from members of the GCR Experts’ Group made clear that stakeholders should ensure that their pledges at the GRF are SMART:

- **Specific:** Pledges should be focused on specific needs identified through national processes;
- **Measurable:** Pledges should include a commitment to a process to measure the implementation of the pledge through longitudinal, disaggregated data collection around indicators of shared understandings of success;
- **Attainable:** Pledges should be based on commitments that are attainable, both in terms of programmatic practicality and given an understanding of the environment in which pledges are to be implemented;
- **Results-oriented:** Pledges should be focused on delivering results that have qualitative and quantitative measures (i.e. not only number of students enrolled in school, but the quality of education they receive), and for results to be mindful of the AGD approach, outlined above; and
- **Time-bound:** To help ensure accountability, the results of GRF pledges should be measurable within a specified period of time, ideally within the four years leading to the next GRF in 2023 but also in the two years leading to the first high-level officials’ meeting in 2021.

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Annex 1: **Cases of progress and delay in implementing pledges from the 2016 Leaders' Summit**

This Annex presents a summary of select cases where progress has been made on implementing pledges from the 2016 Leaders' Summit among major refugee hosting states. It also identifies cases where pledges were made but implementation of these pledges has been delayed or remained stalled. Along with discussions with members of the GCR Experts' Group and a desk review of related literature and reports, these cases formed the basis of the paper's argument on the importance of local ownership on the making of pledges and their implementation.

Examples of progress

Livelihoods

Ethiopia pledged to end their encampment policy and allow refugees access to the labour market by 2028. In 2019, Ethiopia passed a law allowing refugees the right to work, live outside of refugee camps, and access to financial, health and education services. Work is ongoing towards the development of the *Ethiopia Economic Opportunities Program* which aims to create opportunities for refugees and nationals. The government target of 100,000 economic opportunities will include 30% for refugees. Strong engagement with national partners was identified as a key factor explaining this level of implementation.

Djibouti pledged to introduce a new Refugee Bill to provide access to education, legal work and the justice system. As part of the new legal framework, refugee ID cards now provide access to legal employment. Integrating refugees into development planning in Djibouti greatly supported this transition.

Zambia pledged to use recently secured funding to improve economic productivity for host communities and refugees. In 2017 new legislation passed to allowed refugees to legally open bank accounts. This change has taken place in the context of sustained domestic political support and recognition of the contributions that refugees can make to the national economy.

Education

Chad pledged to assume responsibility for and improve access to secondary education for 75,000 refugee children by providing sufficient textbooks, accrediting qualified refugee teachers, increasing the number of qualified teachers in public schools with refugees. Chad has converted all refugee schools into government schools, and enrolled refugee teachers in training programs for national certification. This ensures that refugee children are studying alongside Chadian children. The implementation of this program is associated with the willingness of humanitarian actors to make refugee schools accessible by Chadian nationals.

Ethiopia pledged to increase enrollment of refugee children within available resources from 148,361 to 212,800 overall, including increasing refugee preschool enrollment from 46,276 to 63,000; increasing refugee primary school enrollment from 96,700 to 137,000; increasing refugee secondary school enrollment from 3,785 to 10,000; and increasing refugee enrollment in higher education from 1,600 to 2,500. Since 2016, more than 50,000 refugees have been enrolled across all level. This progress can be attributed to sustained regional engagement and the signing of the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education.

Lebanon pledged to facilitate access to public schools of Syrian children of school age. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education has with donor support continued to operate and expand the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) program. Almost half of school aged Syrian children are enrolled, but there is continued room for improvement. This progress has been made due to the leadership role afforded to municipal authorities in responding to refugee needs and donor support.

Examples of delay

Jordan pledged to allow all children to attend school, including an additional 50,000 Syrian refugees in 2016/2017. While Syrian children do have free access to education, they continue to face barriers of documentation and access to educational resources. Jordan also pledged to continue to issue work permits toward a goal of 50,000 permits to Syrian refugees by end of the first year of implementation of the Jordan Compact and up to 200,000 work permits by 2020, and an additional 4,000 work permits under UNHCR's pilot program. At the end of 2018 120,000 work permits had been issued and renewed, but only 50,000 were valid. Low uptake in both initiatives has been attributed to a lack of refugee participation and local consultation in the design of the program.

Tanzania pledged to undertake a review of 2003 National Refugee Policy and 1998 Refugees Act by the end of 2017 to ensure the domestic regime is compliant with international standards. Tanzania also pledged to provide durable solutions for Burundian refugees from the 1972 caseload who were not naturalized but allowed to apply for citizenship and improve protections by increasing access to education and labor market. Tanzania has now pulled out of the CRRF, is advocating for the repatriation of Burundian refugees, and has stated its intention to cease naturalization for Burundian refugees. This change in priorities is due to a perceived lack of consultation and national dialogue and a sense that domestic concerns were not being fully addressed.

Greece pledged to create an education plan which enables migrant and refugee minors access to public education in 2016-2017. The Ministry of Education created a system of afternoon classes within public schools, creating a segregated school for a particular group of students. The intention was for this system to be transitional with students eventually entering the mainstream school system. However, refugee students still remain segregated. This delay in implementation is due to a lack of local buy-in coupled with the perceived limitations of cooperation with the EU, especially limited levels of cooperation with Greece in the relocation agreement along with EU-imposed austerity measures that limit funding for social services for Greek nationals.