

## Developing a CRRF in Afghanistan which is fit for purpose: [lessons learnt from the East and Horn of Africa](#)



# INTRODUCTION

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016, sought to respond to protracted refugee situations by providing additional support to refugee-hosting countries to promote refugee integration. It aimed to further integrate development and humanitarian actors, and to promote a 'whole of society' approach, addressing displacement from its onset, and mitigating the impact of protracted refugee situations.

In order to operationalise the New York Declaration, UNHCR was tasked with developing its annex, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) which envisaged responding to large-scale refugee crisis through the application of four key pillars:

- 1) Easing pressure on host countries
- 2) Enhancing refugee self-reliance
- 3) Expanding access to third-country solutions
- 4) Supporting conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity

To date the CRRF has been rolled out in several regions that are currently affected by large-scale refugee situations, including the East and Horn of Africa and Central America. Much of the progress which has been made to date to operationalise the CRRF has been seen in countries in East and Horn of Africa. It should be noted that each country has taken different approaches, and, have therefore achieved varying levels of success. Several studies and analysis documents have been written setting out the CRRF's ambitions and participating countries' progress towards their achievement. This paper does not therefore provide a precis.

In the summer of 2018, Afghanistan - alone in the region - signed up as a CRRF pilot country. To date, little has been done to develop the parameters of Afghanistan's CRRF; given the lack of innovative policy development in the Afghan displacement axis. This should be considered as a potential missed opportunity, and one which should be rectified. As several countries are now some years into their implementation of the CRRF it is appropriate to take stock of their experience, and to reflect upon what lessons can be brought to Afghanistan.

In mid 2019, the ADSP conducted a series of interviews with key stakeholders representing INGOs, policy development bodies and the United Nations (UN), in order to identify areas of best practice which should be considered when developing Afghanistan's CRRF response. Interviewees had a wealth of experience working in various African nations including Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia. As part of the interview, they were asked to reflect upon their specific country of expertise, and to discuss strengths and weaknesses in the respective nation's CRRF response.

These interviews were synthesised into seven recommendations, each offering a clear insight for policy makers to take into consideration.



# 1. Local leadership is crucial to ensuring that the CRRF responds to the needs of authorities and populations

Respondents from Ethiopia and Kenya emphasised the importance of field-level leadership in ensuring the progress of CRRF implementation. Interviewees that were associated with both countries reported that, while initial efforts to operationalise the CRRF were perceived as being led either by UNHCR Geneva or by national-level governments, activities only gained momentum once the focus shifted to the **provincial or county levels**. Further support was garnered when there was a recognition of increased buy-in from local authorities and communities. The success of this approach in both locations was attributed to the ability to tailor CRRF interventions to a region's specific needs. As Ethiopia and Kenya host diverse refugee groups, there is a recognition for there to be a move away from a 'one-size-fits-all' and a 'top-down' approach.

Respondents familiar with both contexts also noted that working at provincial or county levels provided an opportunity to build trusted relationships with local authorities, who were often keen to bring in increased funding and development opportunities for their constituents. Securing funding for projects which responded to local needs empowered local authorities, and, resulted in the generation of significant levels of good will. Practitioners were then able to capitalise upon this good will by working with local line ministries to bring about concrete changes on the ground.

This approach was contrasted with **national level interventions**, which largely focused on securing large policy 'wins' and were characterised as being beset by inertia. Respondents also reported that, even when progress was made with regard to national-level policy, a failure to successfully cascade those policy developments to lower levels resulted in a lack of visible impact.

Given Afghanistan's diversity of languages, ethnicities and cultures, and the wide variety of social, political and economic needs, this recommendation will prove valuable in the Afghan context. Initiatives such as the Afghanistan Citizen's Charter<sup>1</sup> have attempted to devolve political decision-making and increase community-level participation in local governance. In order to be successful, lessons learnt from East Africa suggest that the CRRF should, where possible, be integrated into these existing programmes. Where integration is not possible, practitioners should ensure that principles of localisation are maintained throughout.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://mrrd.gov.af/node/401>

## 2. Focus on incremental improvements rather than securing large, overarching policy developments

The second recommendation identified by respondents in Kenya and Ethiopia was that **CRRF activities will be at their least successful when they are solely predicated on national-level policy change**. In Kenya it was reported that, while an unfavourable policy environment existed - characterised by the government's insistence on closing the Dadaab refugee camp - there would be significant obstacles to the roll-out of national activities. On the other side, dialogue with county-level authorities proved much more successful in securing incremental gains for refugees in those areas.

The same claim was made by respondents in Ethiopia who reported that, while the early days of CRRF implementation were characterised by non-stop meetings at the national level, more progress was made once focus shifted away from securing the 'big wins' in favour of a pragmatic focus on achievable outcomes. One respondent emphasised the importance of conducting a thorough context analysis in advance of CRRF roll-out activities, in order to identify and mitigate potential sensitivities in advance of activity implementation.

Indeed, respondents in both contexts reported that, in their opinion, one of the key benefits of the CRRF was the ability to **put the (previously unmentionable) topic of durable solutions firmly back on the agenda**. This finding showcases the gulf which exists between policy and practice, and the need to ensure that global policy processes don't outpace national or regional political will.

Across South Asia, the concept of durable solutions for Afghan refugees are highly sensitive and, with the exception of returns, are not frequently discussed. On the basis of the recommendations made by respondents in East Africa, it may be wise for practitioners in Afghanistan to see the CRRF as an entry point through which to **initiate discussion of durable solutions**, rather than as a vehicle for securing large-scale policy change. This will avoid the risk of inertia and ultimate failure which initially beset the roll-out of the CRRF in East Africa.

### 3. Donor engagement is crucial to success

The respondents were clear that **specific, appropriate, and large-scale donor engagement was critical to CRRF success** in all locations. In each of the countries examined, the sustained engagement of institutional actors such as the World Bank and other bilateral donors was identified as a crucial enabling factor. All respondents reported that comprehensive, well-funded interventions ensured ongoing interest and continued buy-in from national and local authorities.

Moreover, they also reassured refugee hosting nations that, far from being a liability which would leave them – in the words of one respondent – “holding the baby”, the CRRF could provide positive, tangible, contributions to their economic well-being, and truly deliver upon its aim to be an instrument of solidarity. Participants in Kenya identified the World Bank’s region-wide IDA 18, IDA 19 and DRDIP initiatives as providing a crucial incentive for governments to deliver on region-wide agreements. Similarly, in Ethiopia the funds committed by the EU, Dutch and Swiss governments were seen as providing an opportunity for external actors to shape the development of the CRRF, and encouraging cooperation and coordination between actors who, traditionally, worked in silos. Finally, in Somalia, the structure of grants provided by the EU, DFID and Danida encouraged the development of district-led programming, thereby empowering local authorities and contributing to the development of thriving grass-roots interventions.

To date, the type of large-scale, multi-actor and multi-year funding identified by the respondents from the Horn of Africa has not materialised in the Afghan context. Despite the clear need for a coordinated regional approach, cross-border programming has largely failed to materialise. In order for the CRRF to achieve its ambition of supporting countries coping with protracted refugee situations, this failure must be addressed.

## 4. Paradigm shifts require the establishment of strong national coordination mechanisms

A common reflection from all respondents was a **caution against having the CRRF being wholly incorporated into existing plans or structures**. It was noted that this very well may be perceived by government actors as a simple continuity of policymaking, thus encouraging a 'business as usual' approach. Interviewees emphasised that, in order to bring about the CRRF aims of integrated refugee service delivery and a 'whole of society' engagement, it is necessary to establish overarching coordination bodies under the leadership of national governments. These coordination bodies are the only ones which can propel through the necessary changes, and, oblige line ministries that are currently not familiar with refugee affairs, to engage with the integration process.

Respondents reported that efforts in this particular area in the East and Horn of Africa yielded mixed results. For example, in Ethiopia, a coordination body was in existence, and it had a clear mandate and Terms of Reference (ToR). However, it was felt that, in practice, coordination meetings were ad hoc, and that very little concrete progress had been achieved with regards to integrated service delivery. Similarly, in Kenya, there had been limited success in bringing non-traditional refugee actors to the table, and little had been done to challenge entrenched ways of thinking. Only in Somalia was there evidence of genuine success in this regard. Respondents considered that the decision by the Somali government to make the National Action Plan the primary CRRF delivery vehicle had been successful. The result of this approach was that the national sector working groups were able to meet regularly, and, were able to draw together a diverse group of actors.

This finding has interesting implications for Afghanistan, where the Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) was established to ensure the inclusion of IDPs and returnees in the National Development Programme. While this paper intended to provide an evaluation of DiREC's work, it is important to note that the model appears to have worked well when applied in Somalia. Practitioners in the Afghan region should therefore consider placing CRRF implementation under DiREC or, should DiREC be disbanded before CRRF roll out, establishing a similar body to provide national-level coordination and oversight.

## 5. In order to secure genuine ‘whole-of-society’ buy-in, the CRRF must be seen as responsive to the perspectives and needs of a broad range of stakeholders

Without a doubt, the UNHCR has played a crucial role in the development of the CRRF at a global level. In addition, the UNHCR has also displayed a significant commitment to its roll out and successful implementation at regional and national levels. However, it is acknowledged that successful implementation is not something that the UNHCR can achieve alone. According to the interview respondents in each country, during the initial stages of CRRF development, when the document was largely seen as a policy developed and championed from Geneva, it was not received with immediate openness. This resulted in a lack of interest from stakeholders and therefore it limited the success in terms of implementation.

Indeed, some respondents expressed concern that the CRRF was conceptualised primarily as a fundraising tool for UNHCR and – sometimes – government line ministries, leaving little room for participation from other actors including NGOs and civil society. This perception had the effect of limiting buy-in and engagement, thereby immediately inhibiting the CRRF’s ability to mobilise the whole of society response it sought. It should be noted that this view was expressed solely by NGO respondents. UN respondents referred to what they considered to be broad consultations during the CRRF’s development. This divergence of opinion suggests a need for greater communication between stakeholders from the outset of a process. It also raises the notion that **involvement of civil society actors should occur from the outset** to avoid any perception of the CRRF as a UNHCR initiative that others are simply invited to rubber stamp.

Interestingly, UN respondents suggested that the CRRF may also pose a significant internal challenge for UNHCR, due to the explicit references within the CRRF for UNHCR to work closely – and in partnership with – with a broad range of actors. Despite being the mandated agency for refugee protection, UNHCR can no longer work unilaterally, and instead must cede some control in the name of greater inclusion.

The institutional challenge posed by the CRRF is not restricted to UNHCR; large humanitarian agencies may also find it difficult to respond to the new way of working envisaged by the CRRF. Given the extensive role they play in providing support to refugee populations, many of these agencies see themselves as key stakeholders, entitled to a seat at the table in any associated policy discussion. However, their models of fundraising – dominated by short-term, emergency grants – and preference for direct implementation may not sit well with the paradigm shift proposed by the CRRF.

This recommendation provides a useful cautionary tale for the development of the CRRF in Afghanistan. To date, Afghan refugee issues have been primarily managed under the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), a quadripartite process which brings together the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, and UNHCR. This process has been routinely criticised for being opaque, providing limited opportunity for engagement for other stakeholders. UNHCR has already announced its intention that Afghanistan’s CRRF will be incorporated into the SSAR. Unless significant effort is made to seek broader participation and represent the views of civil society, the SSAR/CRRF is likely to be viewed at best with suspicion and at worst with indifference by the very actors which the global CRRF sought to engage.

## 6. Regional momentum as key to the CRRF's establishment

In both Kenya and Somalia, respondents identified **regional momentum as a critical factor for the establishment of the CRRF**, with the role played by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) repeatedly singled out as a key enabling factor. The Nairobi Declaration, described as IGAD's attempt to 'localise' the New York Declaration, was considered to have provided much of the initial impetus for Kenya's decision to participate in the CRRF while, in Somalia, it led to the development of the IGAD plan of Action for Somali Refugees Displaced in the Horn of Africa and the Somali National Action Plan, both of which set the wheels in motion for the Somali region's CRRF.

Respondents noted IGAD's convening power, and, described its ability to apply pressure in order to secure political agreement. However, it was also noted that this approach had the effect of minimising the local-level leadership identified above as of critical importance.

It can be concluded, therefore, that regional cooperation is necessary for the initial establishment of the CRRF, but it is not sufficient enough to ensuring its success. This is a finding which bears repeating in relation to the Afghan context. It should be noted that Afghanistan, alone in its region, has signed up to participate in the CRRF, and therefore is unlikely to be able to respond effectively to what is, in essence, a region-wide challenge.

Moreover, in the Afghan displacement context there is no multinational body with IGAD's political weight. It is therefore possible, that any attempt to develop a regionally coherent CRRF may suffer and be in vain. However, this will leave more space for the growth of locally-led policies which, in the estimation of all respondents, will have a greater impact.



## 7. Today's IDPs are the refugees of tomorrow

The last finding comes specifically from Somalia which, similar to Afghanistan, is both home to a large population of IDPs, and is also a refugee-sending country. Respondents working in the Somali context highlighted the challenges posed by a CRRF which restricts itself solely to the consideration of refugees. In their view, setting up a parallel and refugee-only policy introduced an unnecessary level of confusion. This distracted policymakers and programmers, and, failed to address the clear linkages between internal displacement and cross-border forced migration.

The lesson for Afghanistan here is stark: in order to achieve maximum impact, the **CRRF must – at minimum – link to the National IDP Policy** to ensure a coherent response for all forcibly displaced Afghans. There is significant scope for more research to be conducted in Somalia in order to ensure that Afghanistan is able to capitalise on the lessons already learnt.

## CONCLUSION

As Afghanistan moves towards the development of its CRRF, the nation faces a unique opportunity to draw upon lessons learnt from other countries. This reflection will allow for the development of a CRRF that will have a tangible impact for millions of Afghans affected by displacement.

While the development of any new policy is – by necessity – iterative, there is much that can be learnt from studying the CRRF roll out in the East and Horn of Africa. Prioritising locally led activities which seek to achieve incremental change may result in a greater impact for displaced populations than elusive and contentious headline advocacy asks. Similarly, there is clear evidence of the need to foster broad and inclusive stakeholder engagement from the start of any policy development process, particularly in a context in which regional political commitment is lacking.

Finally, any policy can only be successful when backed by sufficient and appropriate donor funding. Should these recommendations be taken on board, there is scope for the CRRF to bring about sustained improvement for Afghans affected by displacement.

Date of production

Nov 2020

**Photo Credits:** NRC

**Design** Pablo Soucy / [Arbos Studio](#)



# ADSP

Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

**DRC** DANISH  
REFUGEE  
COUNCIL



NORWEGIAN  
REFUGEE COUNCIL



The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International, which aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive solutions for Afghans and Rohingya affected by displacement. Drawing upon its members' operational presence in the region, the ADSP engages in constructive dialogue and evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displaced Afghans and Rohingya.