

EVIDENCE-BASED IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES: WHAT ROLE FOR ACADEMIA?

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**Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer (FFVT),
Geneva Graduate Institute,
Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network (GAIN),
Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)**

1.0 Introduction

This is a report of proceedings for a workshop on the theme ‘Evidence based implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees: what role for academia? The event organised by Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer (FFVT), Geneva Graduate Institute, Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network (GAIN), and Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), was held as a side event of the Global Refugee Forum. The workshop brought together researchers from academic networks and Refugee Led Organisations. Its overall goal was to facilitate an exchange among researchers on common issues related to the role of academic research in advancing the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and to discuss the potential importance of the multistakeholder pledge, [‘Shifting Power: Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally’](#). On the role of academia, the workshop focused on three questions that is: 1) What role can academic research play in guiding the implementation of the GCR and developing tools for impact monitoring? (2) What barriers exist for academics seeking to influence the implementation of the GCR? And (3) How can academics collaborate to overcome these barriers?

In their opening remarks, Prof. Vincent Chetail (Graduate Institute), Ms. Madeline Garlick (Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees) and Prof. Liliana Jubilut (Co-Chair for GAIN) emphasised why academics are key stakeholders in the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees. Here stakeholders were defined as *‘those who have a stake, those who stand to benefit from the success of the Global Compact on Refugees or to lose if its implementation is insufficient’*. Moreover, the role of academia is spelled out in different sections of the GCR. The introduction recognizes “academics and other experts” as relevant stakeholders in the implementation of the GCR. Section 43 establishes a Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network involving universities, academic alliances and research institutions in issues related to refugees, other forcibly displaced people, and stateless people. Section 69 emphasises education and support to facilitate recognition of equivalency of academic, professional, and vocational qualifications. Finally, section 95 mentions complementary pathways for admission to third countries’ educational institutions and identification of refugees with skills that are needed in third countries. Academia also plays a crucial role of generating knowledge, conducting research which informs both policy and practice, capacity building through teaching and training programmes, and research publications critical for decision makers. In addition, academics are expected not only to produce evidence, but also to advocate for evidence-based policies nationally, regionally, and globally.

Prof. Vincent Chetail (Graduate Institute) reiterated that *‘Perhaps most importantly we as academics have a specific responsibility, a specific duty to advocate for evidence-based policies that align with the Global Compact. Through research and publications, we can influence the development of national and international policies, promote inclusion and a breaking down stereotypes which are so numerous in this area’*. Academics can help ensure that the GCR is implemented in the real world through meaningful collaborations with other key stakeholders such as national governments, international organisations, Non-Governmental or Civil Society Organisations, and refugees and displaced persons. The GCR lays down a challenge for academia to strengthen cooperation towards refugee protection, inclusion, and solutions. Academia is well ahead in responding to this challenge. Reflecting on the central role of academia in implementing the GCR, Prof. Chetail noted that *‘academia and in particular universities, research centres, and consortia already play a pivotal role in supporting the implementation of the Global Compact but they can do more to ensure its transformative potential can fully be realized.’*

In addition, academia has the potential to transform the lives of untold numbers of displaced persons through education, research, and amplification of their voices in policy making processes. For instance, the multistakeholder pledge by academic institutions calls for a paradigm shift in

refugee research to empower researchers from low and middle-income countries and to amplify the voices of those most affected by displacement. Globally, this pledge is led by GAIN, the De Mello Chairs, the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada and Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer (FFVT). Other supporters of the pledge include the IDRC Research Chairs Network, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), the Organization of Human Scientists for the Developing World (WSD), the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, the Refugee-led Research Hub of the University of Oxford, the Tertiary Refugee Studies Network, the U.S. Refugee Advisory Board, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) and Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT).

2.0 Collaborating and networking among academics

Collaborating and networking among academics can help strengthen the collective voice of academia and contribute meaningfully to the realization of the objectives of the GCR and the GRF. Networks are important in fostering connections, sharing ideas, and encouraging the exchange of best practices among academics. A good example of such a network is the Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network (GAIN). GAIN is

the global academic interdisciplinary network mandated by paragraph 43 of the GCR. GAIN has fostered a wide range of global academic collaborations in refugee research and teaching over the last four years and boasts over 213 members globally. GAIN is also committed to strengthening and making more visible the work of researchers from lower and middle-income countries, many of whom have first-hand experience of forced displacement. This commitment for instance is exemplified in the composition of the workshop panel.

In relation to the GCR, the activities of GAIN are also an example of the whole of society approach and the relevant role academia plays in producing knowledge. Prof. Luisa Feline Freier emphasised that the idea for the workshop is twofold. First, the workshop reflects on evidence-based implementation of the GCR and what could and should be the role of academia in it. Second, the workshop acts as a stocktaking exercise to showcase good practices and thinks ahead on protection and solutions for the next four years until the next GRF and beyond. To reaffirm GAIN's commitment to an ongoing and interconnected debate between theory and practice, the workshop was also linked to another event focussed on 'promoting evidence-based implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees through teaching, research, and solidarity'. The linked event reinforced the relevance of evidence-based knowledge and the three axes of action of GAIN: teaching, research,

and solidarity. The design of the workshop also aimed at examining the potential of the multi-stakeholder Global Pledge '[*Shifting Power: Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally*](#)'. Put together, these different approaches aim at improving North-South and South-South cooperation and at promoting academic engagement that is inclusive, diverse, and non-hierarchical.

3.0 The Round Table

3.1 Professor Wundamage Natesa, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Professor Wundamage is the founder of the national network of academics Ethiopian Economic Network for Refugees and Forcibly Displaced. This Network brings together academics in universities, research institutes, and other researchers working on the question of forced displacement as well as refugees, Civil Society Organizations, and government institutions working on refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. The university is engaged in **teaching** programmes related to forced displacement at the undergraduate and graduate (Master and PhD) levels. Select courses include refugee law and human rights (such as the LLM Human Rights). Students are also encouraged to do critical research on refugees and forcibly displaced persons. Whereas the results of their research are available at the university repository, they are rarely used to inform policy and programmes.

Another key activity for the Network is community engagement with public universities and centres for refugee studies such as the Centre for African Refugees. The centre provides legal advice to refugees, including both oral and written statements, and in exceptional circumstances, court representation. This work however is not without challenges. The main challenge is the fact that research is carried out in a context restricted by politicians and finances. Research on refugees and forcibly displaced persons is concerned with issues of human rights, which brings into the limelight sensitive political issues related to governance in Ethiopia. Moreover, governments and civil society actors do not commonly rely on empirical or scientific evidence to inform their policies and programmes. Consequently, findings from academic research are mainly found on the shelves of university libraries, not used to inform policy and programming. Regrettably, universities face financial constraints, which not only limit their research, but also challenge their retention of the requisite human resources. Consequently, many academics work outside academia as national and international consultants, something that negatively impacts their research activities. Despite these drawbacks, academia is better placed to organize and carry out politically sensitive research. Academia can contribute by developing tools for research and conducting collaborative research with Civil Society Organisations, national governments, and international organisations.

3.2 Prof. Opportuna Kweka, IDRC Research Chair, University of Dar-Es Salaam, Tanzania

Through reports and publications, academia bridges the gap between actors and the communities they serve. Collaborations between academia and other stakeholders are widely considered important in executing our mandate to displaced persons. In terms of collaboration, the university is collaborating with a number of stakeholders on the ground. Prof. Kweka explained that academics can also encourage the collaboration of other by writing about it. Nevertheless, there are several challenges for academia. National political regimes remain barriers for academic research in many contexts. Without their support, it is difficult to conduct research. Prof. Kweka's strategy has been to discuss with the government informally in advance of the research. Prof. Kweka's recent work has focussed on bridging the gap between the climate change regime and the humanitarian regime. Since these two major global challenges – displacement and climate change – are interconnected, Prof. Kweka explained that the people involved in COP and the GRF should be in the same room together and pool resources together. Prof. Kweka has learned as an IDRC Research Chair to push for positive things that you hope to see in addition to being critical about the negative things.

3.3 Prof. Maha Shuayb University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, LERRN Working Group Lead

Prof. Maha Shuayb emphasised that solidarity with other scholars and with displaced populations is a useful tool that academics can and should deploy more often. Giving an example of the conflict in Gaza, Prof. Shuayb opined that it is prudent for academics to stand in solidarity with the persons who were previously forcibly displaced and individuals currently being displaced from their homes. Academics must also be constantly aware of the politics of knowledge production and issues of power in knowledge production. The politics of knowledge production is most evident in the inequalities in academia, such as in the global North versus South divide in academic research. Drawing examples from her research on the politics of knowledge production and from her research on refugee education, Prof. Shuayb raised pertinent questions for academia, especially in its quest to play a big role in the implementation of the GCR: Which academics are listened to? Who listens? Does the humanitarian regime listen to academics? What kind of knowledge is being produced and for whom? Who is cited? Who is doing the research? Global North or global South scholars?

Another factor limiting the role of academia in implementing the GRF is the power relations in knowledge production. Knowledge production is skewed in favour of scholars from the global North. Over

60% of academic publications have been produced by scholars and institutions in the global North. Consequently, much of the research on the global South is produced by global North scholars who have limited lived experience of forced displacement. In essence, academia has mirrored the imbalances in the refugee regime, which largely focusses on refugees from the global South, yet gives people from the global South limited or no input into policies and programmes that affect them. Moreover, much of the research funding is going to global North scholars and institutions. Beyond research funding, global North scholars are often commissioned by humanitarian agencies to do policy research or work as consultants. This practice raises questions about what happens to this knowledge and who uses it? For instance, in UNHCR policy documents on refugee education, there are no scholars from the global South contributing. In addition, people often cite a limited number of scholars, which influences whose voices are heard and which narratives adopted.

Another important question is whether academics can do critical research. In other words, can academics carry out independent research if it is critical of powerful actors in government and in the humanitarian regime? One cannot be a popular researcher if he or she goes against the established status quo. Consequently, academic scholarship is likely to reproduce the same unequal power dynamics that exist within the humanitarian regime.

Academics have power but some academics have more power than others. Powerful actors rarely listen to more critical academics. Academia therefore must reflect on what it means to engage in ethical knowledge production and how research benefits or takes advantages of the communities who are the subjects of the research. Academics often use these communities to build their careers. Ethical scholarship therefore needs to be embedded in solidarity. Prof. Shuayb explained that we cannot do research about communities without standing with them in solidarity. Otherwise, we are extractive. Critical to solidarity is academic freedom. Now more than anytime, academic freedom is under attack. Taking the example of Gaza, academia has overall remained silent. Prof. Shuayb reflected that 'Looking at research networks on forced migration, it's such a shame to ever consider myself that I'm a member of some of these networks. They have remained completely silent on one of the biggest displacements in current times which also included the death and killing of humanitarian workers'. Now is the right time for academia to stand in solidarity with displaced persons and to be concerned with the conflicts that generate refugees. In addition, now is the time for a serious conversation about whether this regime works, including to protect humanitarian workers, as 133 had been killed at the time of the workshop, the biggest number killed in any conflict. Prof. Shuayb concluded by advocating that scholars need to be political to do ethical scholarship.

3.4 Mr. Pascal Zigashane, Action pour le Progrès (a refugee-led organisation), Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya.

Pascal Zigashane's contribution centred on the value of research collaborations between academia and refugee-led organisations. He is the founder and Executive Director of a community-based organisation called Action pour le Progrès, a partner organization to Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). He also works as a Research Assistant with the Refugee Research Hub at the University of Oxford. Research collaborations with academia have resulted in critical reflections for the RLOs on the value of their work, the gaps, and what can be done better. Reflecting on the value of the collaborations, Mr. Zigashane said '*For academia is the other eye, in a sense that as an Executive Director, when you write a report of your own organization, of course, you always sound good. You look at what you have achieved. But when you bring in academic research, you also look at the gaps and the recommendations improve the way we work. Collaborations build and enhance our research capacity*'. Research projects have also built research capacity locally by involving and training refugee scholars. Researchers with no lived experience of forced displacement work with refugee scholars and enhance their capacity to lead and design research projects. Participation in research has made it possible for Action pour le Progrès to engage in policy dialogues and formulate

policy recommendations that will help in the implementation of the GCR. For instance, as RLOs, they carried out a research project in collaboration with LERRN and the Refugee Led Research Hub on Refugee Led Organisations in East Africa. One key highlight of this project is that the report was launched in a refugee camp, the first time a similar report has been launched in a camp setting. On working together as researchers, Mr. Zigashane called for collaborations between refugee scholars, refugee led organisations, research institutes and academia. In particular, refugee scholars should collaborate with global North researchers for capacity building. For instance, refugees working with the Refugee Research Hub gain valuable employment as professionals, which also enhances their self-reliance.

Collaborations are not without challenges. One of the main challenges is that of communication and accessibility. Who listens to the research led by refugees? Unfortunately, stakeholders from government and humanitarian organisations who are invited to come listen to findings do not come, so they cannot get this information to assist in implementing the GRF. Sometimes other partners are invited to participate in the research, but they do not reply or are reluctant to take part in the research. Another challenge is working with governments. Refugee matters are not part of their priorities, so irrespective of your findings as a researcher, it does not change the way government functions or carries out its activities.

3.5 Dr. Musallam Abedtalas, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Dr. Musallam Abedtalas' contribution centred on the value of partnerships between academic institutions and refugee scholars. IDOS took the initiative to host him as a refugee researcher. IDOS research is centred on displacement and social cohesion. He opined that the basic thing for academics is to be critical and deduce knowledge relating to a refugee issue. For example, their research shows a positive economic impact of Syrian refugees of around two percent of GDP in the short term and four percent in long term. However, the economic impact on individuals is more limited. During the past 10 years, every Turkish citizen received less than six thousand dollars from Syrian refugees. At the same time, more than 70 percent of Turkish people are against Syrian refugees and are asking for their repatriation back to their Syria.

Although academics have been discussing a resources and development approach, in reality nothing is changing. This lack of change means we have somewhere something wrong with academic approaches and with policies. From the viewpoint of academia, Dr. Abedtalas suggested that we need to change our political approach toward the refugee problem. In addition, it is important to recognize and challenge the marginalization mechanisms embedded in the social order of host countries before the arrival of refugees. We can also reframe the refugee problem as an opportunity for host countries.

4.0 Questions, comments and answers

a) The politics of knowledge production

Academics are not only responsible for knowledge production, but also have the responsibility of building bridges, creating opportunities for displaced persons, and collaborating with politicians in formulating policies. By collaborating with politicians, academics can improve the value of their research. Domestic political regimes influence the research agenda and how findings are used to inform policy. Therefore, academics must devise strategies on how best to influence politicians. For instance, politicians love to listen to what they do well as opposed to criticisms on their performance. Academics on the other hand are good at criticism as compared to giving constructive feedback. This dilemma shows the risks that academics face as they produce knowledge and speak up, similar to the dilemma faced by human rights defenders. It can be risky, depending on your location, to speak up. Academics should analyse the risks in their local contexts. We need to think about protective measures for academics. The global community of academics can come together and stand behind academics who are speaking up, saying the things that are important to say, but then getting threatened for it.

b) Ethics

Scholars from the global South are always told to be ethical in their research. However, there are ongoing questions of what constitutes ethical research. Does ethics also mean not speaking out against injustices such as genocides or ethnic cleansing? Does ethics only mean having respondents sign a consent form? The unequal production of knowledge also calls for an examination of the ethics, politics, and economics of knowledge production. For instance, how much money are some of these publishing houses making at our expense given that knowledge production is not open access? What are the dynamics involved in getting published? What are the governance dynamics within the global North academic institutions? What are the dynamics within the publishing houses? Are academics ever the subjects of research? How do we know whether the tools and strategies we use in research are ethical?

c) The Economic Benefits of hosting refugees

In reference to **the economic benefits of hosting refugees**, can we make an economic argument that refugees, such as the Rohingya refugees or Syrian refugees, are making an economic contribution to their host countries? This argument is context specific and is not generalizable to all refugee situations. For instance, while this argument is plausible for the Rohingya refugees in Thailand because they are

economically contributing to the local community and local economy, it does not hold for the Rohingya refugees who also face hostility from host populations for taking away their job opportunities and livelihoods. This situation calls for caution when advancing economic arguments, even though they remain important and can be very attractive to the local societies, governments, and business people.

d) Solidarity in Academia

On solidarity, academia is gagged and often academics self-censor their involvement in issues that are considered controversial. The fear of sanctions is real. Fear of suspension if one speaks up leads to silence, including not 'liking' a post. That is why we need to speak with one voice as academics.

e) The question of decolonization in forced migration research

Do we need to decolonize knowledge production – not to politicize but to ungag? Decolonial research practice reminds scholars that many assumptions about knowledge, truth and rationality are drawn from literature and practice developed at a particular time and place, and through unequal and unjust power and knowledge relations. For instance, care should be taken that universities do not become spaces for partisan politics. In terms of decolonizing knowledge production, there is a lack of knowledge about what is being done. From Kakuma refugee settlement, for instance, refugees work in close collaboration with LERRN to design

research. This approach is different than previous projects where refugee researchers are engaged only as mobilisers for projects designed in the North.

5.0 Concluding remarks - Prof. Geoff Gilbert

Prof. Geoff Gilbert concluded the workshop by reflecting the importance of involving people with lived experience of forced displacement in the design, the development, the deployment, and the dissemination of research. We have to involve people with lived experience right in the design of research from the outset. Why should I know what research should be taking place? Prof. Gilbert reflected on his experience as a consultant for UNHCR in Niger and Colombia when he sat down with people with lived experience to listen to their concerns without a previous agenda or questions. Then he reported back to UNHCR. This approach can be taken in other contexts but requires proper thinking from the outset in the design of research.

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