

Lessons Learned Exercise

Design, planning, and delivery of the UNHCR 2019 Global Refugee Forum

July – October 2020

Raj RANA
External consultant

Summary + Recommendations

This first GRF was seen as setting the tone, to make the GCR a game-changer. The event set a clear baseline. The Forum was about building a base, with UNHCR opening up the space for multi-stakeholder dialogue and engagement. It was about building excitement and momentum. On all of these counts, the event was a success.

There was recognition of UNHCR using its authority as a convenor to bring together such a group for the sake of refugees. It was perceived as UNHCR recognizing that solutions for refugees require engagement and investment by a broad range of stakeholders. These all were loyal to the initial concept for the GRF of late 2018.

The GRF was a vast event in scale. Despite the attempt to consolidate and limit the number of side events in the face of an overwhelming number of proposals from participants, the number of side events was still very high and difficult for smaller delegations to cover. The programme for three days of GRF was 30+ pages long. Some stakeholders noted that it was difficult to have a full sense of the forum, it was simply so large.

The success of the GRF was also based on a large volume of human resources from UNHCR HQ and globally that were invested. While the work of the GRF team and the event itself were funded, the design and preparatory work in the thematic areas of focus were seen by some as being at the expense of existing work plans and priorities in the Divisions. Yet, simultaneously, the GRF preparations became an extension of daily business and pursuit of new opportunities to further protection and solutions strategies by Divisions, Regional Bureaux, and Country Offices.

The GRF preparations reached their tipping point by September. The internal engagement efforts succeeded, with UNHCR and external stakeholders sufficiently clear on the opportunity and expectations of the Forum. This was a period of UNHCR working in sync globally, regionally and nationally. This was aided by significant targeted outreach, regional dialogues and tailored messaging. There was increasing pressure from external stakeholders to fully understand what was expected from them—potentially too late in the process, given the delays related to the summer break in Geneva-based processes. The preparatory meetings were highly appreciated, seen as well managed, clear and inviting stakeholders into the dialogue.

Co-sponsorship group leads also took on all of the events organisation linked to their theme. This resulted in **entire HQ teams effectively working on the GRF full time for several weeks, in most instances, aligning GRF outputs with their own thematic and operational objectives.** While funding was made available to support these efforts in summer 2019, given the time required for recruitment, this support was too late to support all of the groups that required extra resourcing.

While there were solid levels of satisfaction from participating stakeholders, some found it difficult to engage with the frequency and granularity of the preparatory discussions and co-sponsorship groups. By the time there was the requisite clarity for stakeholders on the implications of pledging, sponsoring, commitments and funding, some lacked the time to generate substantive contributions. A broad range of external **stakeholders underlined that they require some months to rally their respective internal stakeholders and make pledges and commitments.**

It was the energy of the GRF, the bringing together of the rich mix of stakeholders, that impressed interviewees. This was also transformed into a caution: by doing so many things at once it was a means of being all things to all stakeholders with the associated

risks. **Each segment of the multi-stakeholder grouping was left to judge the GRF against their specific expectations rather than against a singular strategic intent of the GRF.** With a charged schedule and a massive volume of participants, some interviewees admitted that there was little space for substantive dialogue at the event itself. Somewhat more intimate engagements occurred in co-sponsorship groups and in bilateral engagements between UNHCR with States and other stakeholders. Ultimately, the GRF seemed to serve a strong element of awareness-raising, where different types of participants could get a brief on who-is-doing-what-and-where for refugees, which was a necessary step in establishing a baseline.

The **GRF enjoyed a high volume of some 1,100 pledges.** There was consensus that many of the pledges were made late, typically as they were not universally understood, or that States wanted to announce their pledges at the GRF itself. This made impossible the intent to match or streamline pledges in advance. The spirit of pledging was different across States and stakeholders.

The GRF delivered on the GCR's *proviso* for '**meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth**'. Some 70 refugee representatives participated in the GRF. Those representatives were extremely positive about the opportunity and the responsibility it carried. Stakeholders were genuinely impressed that refugees were represented at all levels in and all formats of the GRF. Despite refugee representatives being substantively engaged in the GRF at all levels, there were anecdotes that underline that **refugee participation was equally important in terms of re-framing the prevailing narratives and perceptions of refugees.**

Looking towards the 2023 GRF:

- **There is no clarity on the impact of COVID restrictions over time.** Even if there are significant improvements in the management of the pandemic, there has been an inevitable shift towards virtual and hybrid events, which will challenge the rationale for a large-scale physical event such as the GRF. Beyond the savings in carbon, there is the **potential that virtual events are attracting increased levels of participation, as the barriers** (language, time, travel, visas, number of attendees) **are lower for Ministers, capitals and refugees alike.**
- **There is the seduction to consider GRF 2019 as *the* hard-earned blueprint for the next GRF and beyond.** That said, **there were calls to right size the next GRF** and to move beyond being all things to all people.
- **There were equally calls to conceptualise the next GRF as a global moment instead of a global physical event** with the key takeaways and substantial deliverables, also in the form of pledges, commitments and initiatives, to be borne in the lead and follow-up to the event itself.

Compiled Recommendations

Organisational and Design Lessons

L9: There were high levels of admiration for UNHCR having assumed a role as catalyst, convenor and facilitator, seen as a willingness to take a back seat to enable the greater good and to promote the sense of multi-stakeholder burden sharing.

L15: Stakeholders expect a lead role from UNHCR for the next GRF. This should not be seen as at odds with multi-stakeholder dialogue or engagement; rather, stakeholders count on UNHCR to frame and hold together such a diverse grouping around issues identified as those which bring meaningful change for refugees.

L1: Budgeting for the next GRF in 2023 will need to be undertaken in 2021 to ensure that the institutional commitment for the 2023 GRF is reflected.

L4: Ensure the preparations process for the next GRF start with the early identification and outreach to potential co-host and co-convenors.

L6: Thematic co-sponsorship groups were the critical building block for the development and delivery of the GRF.

L5: Define resourcing and planning for co-sponsorship/thematic groups from the onset of the preparation for the next GRF.

L7: Co-sponsorship groups have to integrate the significant lead-up time required by their stakeholders to generate future contributions to the GRF.

L16: For the 2023 GRF, co-sponsorship groups should replace the RFP approach to attracting contributors to side events, instead working with their co-sponsorship groups to develop a fixed number of events, keeping the process lighter and streamlined within the larger strategy for mobilizing pledges.

L3: The potential overlap of lobbying and diplomacy was necessary to accelerate momentum for the first GRF; a mapped and targeted process along with clarity of which co-convenor, co-host, or co-sponsor leads what would be appropriate for the next GRF.

L2: While an iterative process might have been painful, this organic approach incubated what made the GRF a unique event, generated momentum and genuine ownership. *A challenge for the next GRF in 2023 will be how to leave space for similar creativity, while consolidating on the successes of the first GRF of 2019.*

L28: Ensure that the design of the process goes beyond the GRF as an event or an end in itself. A more detailed design of the post-GRF process communicated early on would have positive influence on future follow-up.

GRF Team Lessons

L11: There is clearly a need for a dedicated team for an event of this importance and scale. It should be assumed that the future GRF Team will face lower demands for socialising the GCR/GRF to stakeholders for 2023.

L10: Ensure a D2 position to support the 2023 GRF and GRF Team. This could equally be seen as a role of Special Envoy for the 2023 GRF, serving as a mobilizer and political/diplomatic navigator.

L12: Ensure the engagement of staff with GRF experience for the 2023 GRF and recruit additional experience externally, as needed. It could be equally suggested to draw further on in-house resources experiences and capacities in event planning at an early stage of preparations.

L13: The size of the planning team for the next GRF should be seen as a response to the breadth and types of roles it will be given. Assuming more time and greater clarity at the onset of planning for the next GRF, the team could focus on its strategic and oversight responsibilities, delivering the key substance from pledge follow-up and orchestrating the various internal and external stakeholders, levels and processes.

L18: If UNHCR in future chooses to employ an external events company for the 2023 GRF, they should be hired at the start of the process and be engaged to use their skills and service offer more fully, particularly for the organization and coordination of side events and development of the programme schedule.

L19: More substantial outsourcing of GRF roles and responsibilities to an events management firm would require that UNHCR first estimate the costs of diverting its own human resources to have made the GRF a success, and then make an informed comparison through cost-benefit-analysis. At the same time, UNHCR will need to retain the responsibility for the GRF's substantive content development and diplomatic orchestration.

Event Lessons

L23: Could the 2023 GRF achieve stronger outcomes with a smaller number of events?

L31: While the GRF was seen as fit for purpose as the first such event, the strategic goal, impact or outcomes could (and should) be different or more specific for 2023.

L25: While interviewees expressed satisfaction with their participation in the GRF, this should not be equated with a guarantee of repeat participation, at the same scale. Scale of event and thematic focus should be seen as directly proportional: the broader the themes, the bigger the audience attracted and vice-versa.

L21: It is hoped that the ongoing follow-up process and the High-Level Officials Meeting planned for 2021 will position UNHCR with a clearer identification of gaps and to direct future pledges for the 2023 GRF.

L24: How far can UNHCR better shape the next GRF in order to influence the contribution and focus the expectations of its many stakeholders? The 'being all things to all people' equated to some of the success of the 2019 GRF. It is hoped that resulting analysis of the pledges and progress will lead to greater clarity in how the collective's investment can be directed through the 2023 GRF.

L26: While the 2019 GRF brought new stakeholders to the discussion, it didn't necessarily lead to new discussions or unexpected changes.

L22: There will always be the challenge of over-subscription and the need to compromise and negotiate solutions. In the future, rather than an open application process, UNHCR should take a stronger role in designing and recruiting for its planned formats. For participant numbers, set fixed ceilings and guaranteed levels of representation, maintaining a 10-15% overflow capacity.

L27: Reconsider the timing for 2021 and 2023 events, to avoid conflict with other major events and in organising too close to the Christmas holidays.

Future Considerations

L8: The importance of challenging prevailing perceptions of refugees and framing new narratives remain a priority and theme beyond the GRF of 2019.

L30: If the intent is to make refugees central to the next GRF event and process, there is a logic to further leveraging virtual engagements.

L32: Continue to challenge the underlying assumptions of such events. Successful events can be virtual; member States are not explicitly demanding such events; UNHCR can take the role of driver; bigger is not necessarily better.

L17: With three years to prepare, settle the concept, scale and scope at the start of the planning process for the 2023 GRF. The 20% of time invested will lead and frame 80% of results.

L33: UNHCR should start the discussion around the concept for the next GRF now or as part of the HLM in 2021.

L14: With greater lead time to the 2023 GRF, plan for clearer and earlier milestones in the lead up. The 2019 GRF experience suggests that having less than one year for the planning process means that it may reach momentum too late in the preparations.

L34: Stakeholders expect UNHCR to provide an analysis of progress and gaps by January 2021, in order for them to mobilise their internal stakeholders in preparation for the High-Level Officials Meeting of late 2021.

L20: With more lead time to the next GRF, greater clarity around pledges would be required earlier, allowing the necessary amount of time required by stakeholders to develop their respective pledges with their internal audiences.

L29: If by 2021 there are doubts about holding a physical GRF in 2023, UNHCR should start its investment in the tech required to move the GRF to a virtual/hybrid event.

L35: Re-conceptualise the GRF as a global moment instead of a global physical event. There is an opportunity for the GRF to become a global moment happening simultaneously in several regions and countries, with virtual and hybrid connections between local, regional and global. There would need to be greater clarity of what the GRF space is intended for and then enabling a de-centralized development of these connected elements. Such an approach could ensure greater connections to refugees, local and national realities and in promoting concrete and pragmatic progress towards the GCR objectives.

L36: The location and venue for the 2023 GRF should remain open to discussion. While the Palais is the only suitable Geneva venue to accommodate participation of Heads of States, there could be consideration to host the 2023 in another Capital, and/or favouring a venue that offers spaces better adapted to the multi-stakeholder and participatory formats of the event.

L37: There was broad agreement amongst interviewees that there is currently a need for a further level of engagement between UNHCR and its GRF stakeholders. In its current format, there is a somewhat binary formula and timeline that will take this community from 2020 through to 2023. There would be interest to see, in addition to the quarterly informal briefings already provided, quarterly virtual events, of some 2-4 hours, preferably designed and lead by Regional Bureaux and allowing for a deeper dive into challenges, learning, pledge progress/gaps and potential future themes for GRF II. Such a format would allow a broader range of stakeholders (especially refugees) to participate in more events. It would enable Capitals opportunities to greater engagement. It would democratize participation in that stakeholders could

prioritise their participation by interest and availability, or to access recordings of such events.

Table of Contents

Summary + Recommendations	2
Compiled Recommendations	3
Table of Contents	8
1. Introduction + Framing	9
2. Lessons	10
2.1 Design and Concept of the GRF.....	10
2.2 Preparations for the event	13
2.3 Autumn Tipping Point.....	14
2.4 December 2019 GRF	16
2.5 Considerations for the Future	18

1. Introduction + Framing

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) sets out arrangements for ensuring more predictable and sustainable responsibility sharing for refugees. Key amongst these arrangements is a Global Refugee Forum (GRF), convened every four years, whereby States and other stakeholders share good practices and make pledges towards the objectives of the GCR. The first GRF was convened in 2019; and every two years in between each GRF, a High-Level Officials Meeting will take stock of progress towards the objectives of the GCR and implementation of the related pledges from the GRF.

The first GRF was a unique event in the history of the international refugee regime that brought together 3,000 participants, including States and a wide range of other stakeholders (including international organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, cities, sports organizations, faith actors, refugees, and others) who announced more than 1,100 unique pledges and shared more than 340 good practices, which may be found on the [Digital Platform](#) for the GCR.

Preparations for the 2019 GRF included a series of formal preparatory meetings in Geneva, a set of co-convenor and co-sponsorship arrangements, and engagement of governments and key stakeholder groups (set out in the GCR) at the global, regional, and country levels. In addition, a wide network of UNHCR staff from across its Divisions, Regional Bureaux, and Country Offices were engaged in supporting the preparation of pledges, selecting and organizing many of the sessions at the Forum, and securing high-level participation from States and other actors. [from the ToR]

To inform the conceptualization and preparations for both the High-Level Officials meeting in 2021 and the second Global Refugee Forum in 2023, **UNHCR engaged an external consultant to conduct a wide-ranging and independent “lessons learned” review of the design, planning, and delivery of the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.**

The mandate included examination of the following aspects:

- Preparation for the event
- Strategy for the development of pledges
- Format and accessibility of the event
- Reflection on themes and ideas for the future
- Lessons on the organisational arrangements
- Exploration of alternative means for future fora

The methodology for the exercise included a desk study of a range of material, internal and external, provided by UNHCR. More than 120 stakeholders, representing the broad mix of participants, were identified for interviews; a total of more than 75 interviews were ultimately undertaken over a two-month period.

This exercise is not an evaluation measuring the GRF against fixed criteria and objectives. As an exercise to identify and learn lessons, it compiles and **mirrors the breadth of views as provided by the types of participants to the 2019 GRF**. The intent is to shape an objective and critical view of the design, planning, delivery and follow-up of the 2019 GRF and translate these into concrete and accessible recommendations.

2. Lessons

The 2019 GRF was overwhelmingly seen as a success. As it was often described in the planning phase, the GRF was the first brick in a bigger building and that UNHCR should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. **It was credited with having created a unique buzz and energy.** It brought the global refugee stakeholder community together in one place- never before attempted. It included new groups including cities, parliamentarians, academics and faith leaders, while showcasing refugee participation and the private sector. It was perceived as having pushed the GRF beyond being a high-level Geneva and UNHCR HQ event.

The lessons learned exercise as a whole is a **critical examination of the struggle between journey and destination.** The GRF as an event and destination was overwhelmingly successful, against the odds and demanding high levels of engagement and resourcing by UNHCR, the co-host and co-convenors, co-sponsors, States and stakeholders, globally. The journey to- and beyond- the 2019 GRF should not be overlooked as a remarkable *process* that rallied internal and external stakeholders to bring the GCR to life in under a year. Wherever one places the cursor on the journey-destination spectrum, **stakeholders agreed that the journey and destination are inseparable in terms of their respective importance.**

There are **varied views on how transformative this process has been.** The development of the GCR was seen as a highly introverted process, developed between UNHCR and States, with some inputs from other stakeholder groups; the road to the GRF would become a radically extroverted process, engaging a broader range of stakeholders. Interviewees described a chicken-egg problem: taking the GCR from concept to practice would not have happened without the GRF; there would never have been an event of this scale without the GCR. UNHCR took on the roles of catalyst, convenor and facilitator, seen as taking on roles that were outside of its traditional comfort zones. All of these complexities were played out against the backdrop of the ongoing decentralisation of UNHCR HQ.

2.1 Design and Concept of the GRF

The success of the GRF was also based on a large the volume of human resources from UNHCR HQ and globally that need to be invested. While the work of the GRF team and the event itself were funded, the design and preparatory work in the thematic areas of focus were seen by some as being at the expense of existing work plans and priorities in the Divisions. Yet, simultaneously, the GRF preparations became an extension of daily business and pursuit of new opportunities to further protection and solutions strategies by Divisions, Regional Bureaux, and Country Offices.

L1: Budgeting for the next GRF in 2023 will need to be undertaken in 2021 to ensure that the institutional commitment for the 2023 GRF is reflected.

Looking back at the initial [UNHCR concept note in late 2018](#), it is clear that the **resulting GRF in December 2019 delivered on its intents of the requirements of the GCR.** The early months included an inclusive and fluid dialogue on what the GRF should be, not necessarily understood by stakeholders as what it looked like or where UNHCR wanted it to land. Stakeholders observed that the GRF was conceived as a first small step which evolved into a huge first step. Others underlined that the GRF was a new event, the translation of the GCR into reality: **the size, scale and interest of the GRF were simply underestimated, and grew through the inclusive engagement with stakeholders.** This organic development process was perceived by

external stakeholders in different ways: many felt that that UNHCR was having to 'make it up as it went along', despite the care and preparation of its organisational arrangements, stakeholder engagements and briefings.

The **GRF design and preparations became an iterative process**- a high stakes approach for an initiative of this size and complexity. Even the size of the GRF was a moving target, evolving over time from 800 participants to 1800 to finally 3500. One respondent suggested that this was an approach that suited UNHCR: start small and then grow it if it works. Even by June 2019, the [Structure of the Global Refugee Forum: Information Note](#) illustrates that the first five months had resulted in sketch with broad details of what the event would eventually become.

L2: While an iterative process might have been painful, this organic approach incubated what made the GRF a unique event, generated momentum and genuine ownership. *A challenge for the next GRF in 2023 will be how to leave space for similar creativity, while consolidating on the successes of the first GRF of 2019.*

Stakeholders saw the logic of the roles of co-host (Switzerland) and co-convenors (Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Germany, Pakistan, Turkey), feeling that this arrangement was a contributing factor to the success of the GRF. These roles were defined early in 2019, and it took some six months for those States to internally validate their commitment. As the GRF was a new event, it was important for those States approached to have the time to consider the opportunities, risks and resourcing required to undertake those roles.

There was initially a distinction between the host and convenor roles, though the groups later worked more closely together in the follow-up process. From Summer 2019 onwards, these States were sufficiently equipped with the strategic intent of the GRF and autonomously led their diplomatic efforts regionally and globally. There was the likelihood that States were being lobbied through several vectors simultaneously- Co-host/convenors, UNHCR Geneva via Permanent Missions, Regional Bureaux and Country Offices. **A question remains for how long the current host/convenors will continue in this role and how soon the next cohort can be identified.**

L3: The potential overlap of lobbying and diplomacy was necessary to accelerate momentum for the first GRF; **a mapped and targeted process along with clarity of which co-convenor, co-host, or co-sponsor leads what would be appropriate for the next GRF.**

L4: **Ensure the preparations process for the next GRF start with the early identification and outreach to potential co-host and co-convenors.**

Co-sponsorship groups, and the delegation of organisational and substantive responsibilities to them, played a major role in the success of the forum. Co-sponsorship groups were seen as a means, without having imagined their growth and resourcing demands. There was agreement that interest outstripped the strategy and resourcing required to manage the groups.

L5: **Define resourcing and planning for co-sponsorship/thematic groups from the onset of the preparation for the next GRF.**

That said, levels of resourcing and engagement varied significantly across the six co-sponsorship groups. These groups attracted stakeholders which presented some new engagement opportunities for UNHCR. This diversity was also a challenge: any given meeting could bring a vast range of perspectives. In some groups there was the sense

of storming and norming to try and find common ground. Some groups faced such different expectations and specificity that they were forced to break into sub-groups.

While there were solid levels of satisfaction from participating stakeholders, some found it difficult to engage with the frequency and granularity of the discussions. By the time there was the requisite clarity for stakeholders on the implications of pledging, sponsoring, commitments and funding, some lacked the time to generate substantive contributions. A broad range of external **stakeholders underlined that they require some months to rally their respective internal stakeholders and make pledges and commitments.**

L6: Thematic co-sponsorship groups were the critical building block for the development and delivery of the GRF.

L7: Co-sponsorship groups have to integrate the significant lead-up time required by their stakeholders to generate future contributions to the GRF.

The GRF delivered on the GCR's *proviso* for '**meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth**'. Some 70 refugee representatives participated in the GRF. Those representatives were extremely positive about the opportunity and the responsibility it carried. Stakeholders were genuinely impressed that refugees were represented at all levels in and all formats of the GRF.

The selection of these representatives was not in any way challenged, though interviewees did question who is best qualified to take on this role. It does seem that the refugee representatives were chosen based on existing partnerships and at times personal relationships with UNHCR. This had the advantage that refugee representatives already possessed an understanding of the GCR, the issues, agendas and actors, and could effectively integrate the preparation, co-sponsorship groups and the eventual forum.

Despite refugee representatives being substantively engaged in the GRF at all levels, there were anecdotes that underline that **refugee participation was equally important in terms of re-framing the prevailing narratives and perceptions of refugees.** The representatives faced comments including, '*You don't look what I thought a refugee would be*', suggesting that there are worrying biases even in the informed multi-stakeholder audience drawn to the GRF.

L8: The importance of challenging prevailing perceptions of refugees and framing new narratives remain a priority and theme beyond the GRF of 2019.

The **design and preparation processes were seen as having moved UNHCR into roles as a catalyst, convener and facilitator.** The resulting event, true to its multi-stakeholder ambitions, was seen by some internal stakeholders as challenge to UNHCR culture. It broke away from a history of events heavy in State- protocol and demanded giving a voice to a wide range of non-State actors.

L9: There were **high levels of admiration for UNHCR having assumed a role as catalyst, convener and facilitator**, seen as a willingness to take a back seat to enable the greater good and to promote the sense of multi-stakeholder burden sharing.

2.2 Preparations for the event

The need for a dedicated GRF team was identified early. While requests for staffing started at the end of 2018, and the team started preparations in January, it was not fully staffed until April due to the time required for internal recruitment processes. The team received a great deal of praise for their contribution, seen as an agile team, unburdened by the traditional hierarchy of UNHCR. Early investments in examining similar such events helped inform the design of the GRF. The inclusions of a D2 in the team was overwhelmingly seen as the right decision.

L10: Ensure a D2 position to support the 2023 GRF and GRF Team. This could equally be seen as a role of Special Envoy for the 2023 GRF, serving as a mobilizer and political/diplomatic navigator.

Internally, an inordinate volume of energy was spent mobilising stakeholders, institutionalising the GCR, and identifying and grooming champions. There were a range of tensions that the process exposed. There were some conservatives who didn't find the feel of the evolving GRF design to fit with UNHCR culture and identity. While many engaged early on, it took months of internal engagement in some areas to achieve momentum, until the majority saw the potential scale, scope and results of the event. For some internal stakeholders, there still remained reluctance to give a voice or access to UNHCR's competitors. Despite the breadth of challenges, there was universal recognition that the work and philosophy of the GRF team set the tone and frame for others to take charge and drive their respective agendas.

L11: There is **clearly a need for a dedicated team for an event of this importance and scale.** It should be assumed that the future GRF Team will face lower demands for socialising the GCR/GRF to stakeholders for 2023.

UNHCR lacked event planning capacity for an undertaking of this scale. This was seen by some as leading to being distracted by things that didn't matter, or in reaching too far instead of focusing on the basics of event planning. There was the perception that the many ideas the team generated didn't come together as a consistent whole. The team was ultimately seen as too small for the eventual scale of the GRF. When multiple teams in the organisation are involved in events planning, their respective roles and capacities need to be clarified from the outset.

L12: Ensure the engagement of staff with GRF experience for the 2023 GRF and recruit additional experience externally, as needed. It could be equally suggested to draw further on in-house resources experiences and capacities in event planning at an early stage of preparations.

L13: The **size of the planning team for the next GRF should be seen as a response to the breadth and types of roles it will be given.** Assuming more time and greater clarity at the onset of planning for the next GRF, the team could focus on its strategic and oversight responsibilities, delivering the key substance from pledge follow-up and orchestrating the various internal and external stakeholders, levels and processes.

There was a **challenge to make the GCR/GRF 'real' for regions and country offices.** The GRF was perceived by internal stakeholders as an HQ-driven, Geneva-based event. Language alone was an issue: internal and external stakeholders interpreted pledges, commitments, funding, and contribution in different ways, and more definition and common messaging on key terms would be needed in the future. While the GRF Team's role in coordination was largely applauded by internal and

external stakeholders alike, there were a **multitude of individuals and levels involved in translating and transmitting messages to external stakeholders.**

2.3 Autumn Tipping Point

The **GRF preparations reached their tipping point by September.** The internal engagement efforts succeeded, with UNHCR and external stakeholders sufficiently clear on the opportunity and expectations of the Forum. This was also seen as the start of 'panic mode'. This was characterised by 15-hour days for the GRF team and co-sponsorship groups. This was a period of UNCHR working in sync globally, regionally and nationally. This was aided by significant targeted outreach, regional dialogues and tailored messaging. There was increasing pressure from external stakeholders to fully understand what was expected from them- potentially too late in the process, given the delays related to the summer break in Geneva-based processes. The preparatory meetings were highly appreciated, seen as well managed, clear and inviting stakeholders into the dialogue.

L14: With greater lead time to the 2023 GRF, plan for clearer and earlier milestones in the lead up. The 2019 GRF experience suggests that having less than one year for the planning process means that it may reach momentum too late in the preparations.

September/October was also the point at which UNHCR was seen as becoming a driver for the process. The engagement, convening and facilitation roles that had been the founding philosophy for the preparation had not seen stakeholders taking leading roles in the preparation of the GRF. To ensure delivery, UNHCR prioritised its resources to ensure success at the Forum. This was perceived positively by stakeholders.

This leading role particularly extended to the co-sponsorship groups. In addition to driving their respective groups, the **co-sponsorship group leads also took on all of the events organisation linked to their theme.** This resulted in **entire HQ teams effectively working on the GRF full time for several weeks.** While funding was made available to support these efforts in summer 2019, given the time required for recruitment, this support was too late to support all of the groups that required extra resourcing. The earlier and broader engagement of an events management company in the future to support this aspect of organization could help to ease the burden.

L15: Stakeholders expect a lead role from UNHCR for the next GRF. This should not be seen as at odds with multi-stakeholder dialogue or engagement; rather, **stakeholders count on UNHCR to frame and hold together such a diverse grouping around issues identified as those which bring meaningful change for refugees.**

The layers of UNHCR decision making became a perceived obstacle to efficiency. Stakeholders noted that the final concept note and invitations were published late due to the multiplicity of internal stakeholders and drafts (30+) involved. Stakeholders felt that **elements decided in October should have already been clear in June.** The under-resourced thematic focal points were overwhelmed by the volume of proposals for spotlight session and speakers for the high-level dialogues. More resources to support the focal points early on will enable earlier planning and decision-making.

L16: For the 2023 GRF, co-sponsorship groups should replace the RFP approach to attracting contributors to side events, instead **working with their co-sponsorship groups to develop a fixed number of events, keeping the process lighter and streamlined** within the larger strategy for mobilizing pledges.

L17: With three years to prepare, settle the concept, scale and scope at the start of the planning process for the 2023 GRF. The 20% of time invested will lead and frame 80% of results.

An external events team was hired late and only employed to exercise a portion of its skillset. They were largely used in the provision of printed and communications materials, setting up booths and exhibits, setting up of side event and speakers' corner locations, and setting up the communications wall and help desks in a more expedient manner than would have been possible using UNHCR procurement systems. Working from a loose TOR, the company was challenged to project their offer and expertise beyond the GRF team. Their expertise could have brought in further management support and greater coordination capacity. There were constraints that could not have been foreseen, including that UNOG preferred that all communications with them be channelled through one focal point at UNHCR.

L18: If UNHCR in future chooses to employ an external events company for the 2023 GRF, they should be hired at the start of the process and be engaged to use their skills and service offer more fully, particularly for the organization and coordination of side events and development of the programme schedule.

L19: More substantial outsourcing of GRF roles and responsibilities to an events management firm would require that UNHCR first estimate the costs of diverting its own human resources to have made the GRF a success, and then make an informed comparison through cost-benefit-analysis. At the same time, UNHCR will need to retain the responsibility for the GRF's substantive content development and diplomatic orchestration.

The GRF enjoyed a high volume of some 1,100 pledges. There was consensus that pledges were made late, typically as they were not universally understood, or that States wanted to announce their pledges at the GRF itself. This made impossible the intent to match or streamline pledges. The spirit of pledging was different across States and stakeholders. There were some that were visionary and ambitious. But there were others made without a real anchor. Still others where States were perceived as pledging to undertake what they are required by law to do. It was difficult to distinguish between old recycled pledges and new and additional pledges. Several stakeholders felt that pledges were more about quantity rather than quality, rather than being pledges made against gaps identified in the field or the attempt to match ambitions and resourcing.

L20: With more lead time to the next GRF, greater clarity around pledges would be required earlier, allowing the necessary amount of time required by stakeholders to develop their respective pledges with their internal audiences.

L21: It is hoped that the ongoing follow-up process and the High-Level Officials Meeting planned for 2021 will position UNHCR with a clearer identification of gaps and to direct future pledges for the 2023 GRF.

In the final weeks of preparation, there were what could have been expected challenges. Given the massive interest in the Forum, there was over-subscription from stakeholders wanting exposure for their participating leaders and to showcase their contributions. A process of negotiation and compromise followed, ultimately requiring a limit on non-State participants, and to prioritise and merge proposals for the range of event formats available. Stakeholders grudgingly accepted these conditions, understanding of the complexity facing UNHCR. There were no stakeholders

interviewed that felt they were not given a forum to participate or profile their representatives and initiatives.

L22: **There will always be the challenge of over-subscription and the need to compromise and negotiate solutions.** In the future, rather than an open application process, UNHCR should take a stronger role in designing and recruiting for its planned formats. For participant numbers, set fixed ceilings and guaranteed levels of representation, maintaining a 10-15% overflow capacity.

2.4 December 2019 GRF

This first GRF was seen as setting the tone, to make the GCR a game-changer. The event set a clear baseline. The Forum was about building a base, with UNHCR opening up the space for multi-stakeholder dialogue and engagement. It was about building excitement and momentum. On all of these counts, the event was a success. There was recognition of UNHCR using its authority as a convenor to bring together such a group for the sake of refugees. It was perceived as UNHCR recognizing that solutions for refugees will require engagement and investment by a broad range of stakeholders. These all were loyal to the initial concept for the GRF of late 2018.

The GRF was an enormous event. Despite the attempt to consolidate and limit the number of side events in the face of an overwhelming number of proposals from participants, the number of side events was still very high and difficult for smaller delegations to cover. The programme for three days of GRF was 30+ pages long. Some stakeholders noted that it was difficult to have a full sense of the forum, it was just so large.

L23: **Could the 2023 GRF achieve stronger outcomes with a smaller number of events?**

It was the energy, the bringing together of the rich mix of stakeholders that impressed interviewees. This was also transformed into a caution: by doing so many things at once it was a means of being all things to all stakeholders with the associated risks.

Each segment of the multi-stakeholder grouping was left to judge the GRF against their specific expectations rather than against a singular strategic intent of UNHCR. Some interviewees suggested that the GRF attracted a mixed group of stakeholders to present what they would have done regardless of the Forum.

L24: **How far can UNHCR better shape the next GRF in order to influence the contribution and focus the expectations of its many stakeholders?** The 'being all things to all people' equated to some of the success of the 2019 GRF. It is hoped that resulting analysis of the pledges and progress will lead to greater clarity in how the collective's investment can be directed through the 2023 GRF.

L25: **While interviewees expressed satisfaction with their participation in the GRF, this should not be equated with a guarantee of repeat participation, at the same scale.** Scale of event and thematic focus should be seen as directly proportional: the broader the themes, the bigger the audience attracted and vice-versa.

The scale, multi-format nature and venue of the event suffered from a range of issues:

- There were **serious access problems at the gates of the Palais**, outside of the control of UNHCR, amplified by the size of the GRF.
- Following the opening speeches and major pledges, the remainder of the plenary was a succession of statements from the floor, a format that was requested by

many stakeholders to ensure their delegation could make a formal intervention. Interest quickly waned and people dispersed to other events.

- **Different stakeholders observed different ROI for the elements of the Forum, that required significant resources to organise.** The football match was seen as a nice-to-have, the marketplace was little frequented, and the multimedia and augmented reality exhibit also had limited traffic.
- There was some concern that **co-sponsor group supporters put so much energy into side events that it potentially took away from pledges and contributions.**
- **Even though less than half of the proposals for side events were accepted or merged, late in the Forum some side events were presenting to empty rooms.**

Interviewees presented assumptions about the value of such physical meetings: that diplomacy only takes place in person, the importance of bilateral meetings and the potential for fortuitous connections to be made. Bilaterals did take place, and the GRF was a moment in the refugee stakeholder community where 'everyone was in town'. That said, there **were only a handful of examples of fortuitous meetings that led to a new initiative and/or in matching gaps with capacities or resources, and much of this happened only after the Forum.** With such a charged schedule and a massive volume of participants, some interviewees admitted that there was little space for substantive dialogue. Ultimately, the GRF seemed to serve a strong element of awareness-raising, where a lot of different types of participants could get a brief on who-is-doing-what-and-where for refugees.

L26: While the 2019 GRF brought new stakeholders to the discussion, it didn't necessarily lead to new discussions or unexpected changes.

L27: Side events of GRF 2023 could be tied more directly to the strategy for pledge development in a manner whereby those events are effectively prioritized for developing and showcasing pledges.

There were comments that the **GRF needs increase its focus on broadening the base.** Many felt that there was a core group of governments and stakeholders that were very active, rather than seeing the engagement of the full spectrum of member States. That said, some States underlined the fact that the GRF did not include a negotiated statement was actually quite appealing for their participation.

There were **issues with the scheduling of the GRF.** The GCR dictated that it would take place in 2019, and UNHCR logically chose a date that gave them the longest possible lead-up time during the period when the High Commissioner's Dialogue is normally held. Having the UNHCR pledging conference two weeks before the GRF was slightly confusing and left Geneva Missions somewhat overwhelmed. The 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was held the week before and demanded some of the stakeholders as the GRF. Following the Christmas break, the WEF was the next major event in January 2020.

L27: Reconsider the timing for 2021 and 2023 events, to avoid conflict with other major events and in organising too close to the Christmas holidays.

There was the perception that there were **only sketches of what the post-GRF period was meant to look like.**

L28: Ensure that the design of the process goes beyond the GRF as an event or an end in itself. A more detailed design of the post-GRF process communicated early on would have positive influence on future follow-up.

2.5 Considerations for the Future

*The first Global Refugee Forum is not an end point in itself; rather, it is the first key milestone in the process of implementing the Global Compact on Refugees and transforming the way in which the international community responds to forced displacement. The international community has made ground-breaking commitments to facilitate this transformation; they must now be translated into concrete outcomes. We encourage States and other stakeholders to continue to explore opportunities to make individual and joint contributions in a spirit of partnership and cooperation. The mechanism that UNHCR has developed to track the implementation of pledges and contributions and the mid-term review meeting in 2021 will be important tools to assess progress and maintain momentum in advance of the second Global Refugee Forum four years from now, where **we will aim again to redouble our efforts.** [\[Summary of the first Global Refugee Forum by the co-convenors, emphasis added\]](#)*

All contributors to the exercise were asked to suggest ideas for the future of the GRF, its objective, design and potential alternative formats. There were no easy answers: given the hard-earned success of the 2019 GRF, any alternatives can be seen as risky.

i. There is no clarity on the impact of COVID restrictions over time. Even if there are significant improvements in the management of the pandemic, there has been an inevitable shift towards virtual and hybrid events (examples such as UNGA of 2020 or [analysis of IPCC meeting](#)), which will challenge the rationale for a large-scale physical event such as the GRF. Beyond the savings in carbon, there is the **potential that virtual events are attracting increased levels of participation, as the barriers (language, time, travel, visas, number of attendees) are lower for Ministers and refugees alike.**

L29: If by 2021 there are doubts about holding a physical GRF in 2023, **UNHCR should start its investment in the tech required to move the GRF to a virtual/hybrid event.**

L30: **If the intent is to make refugees central to the next GRF event and process, there is a logic to further leveraging virtual engagements.**

ii. There is the seduction to consider GRF 2019 as *the* hard-earned blueprint for the next GRF and beyond. This was unpacked by stakeholders in different ways:

- The GRF as an event achieved a level of mobilisation that could not have occurred through regional bureaus, structures and standalone themes or initiatives alone.
- UNHCR embraced a scale and formats of event that took it out of its comfort zone, incubating a unique global gathering of refugee-focused stakeholders.
- There is a not negligible prestige to an event such as the GRF.
- The Palais itself presents a number of constraints in terms of access, organization and suitability of available spaces for interactive formats; it is equally the only appropriate venue in terms of security considerations for an event that attracts Heads of State.

Moving beyond these reasons, others found reasons to suggest a deeper and ongoing reflection on what the GRF (process, event, follow-up) could and should be:

- **There were calls to right size the next GRF.** The first GRF did not necessarily lead to many new relationships, alliances or conversations that wouldn't have happened otherwise. There is a lot going on in the refugee space and UNHCR

needs to be the magnet at the centre, to keep the process and events strategic, connected, relevant and delivering towards the objectives of the GCR.

- **Being all things to all stakeholders:** The strategy to broaden the base of support and build ownership across a wider group of stakeholders, while possibly a necessary first step, was also seen as a process where everyone was overly engaged in the positive feel and more in the quantity than in the quality of the potential outcomes. This led some stakeholders to make the call to transform the Forum from an industry to a more strategic approach with clearer problem statements and concrete, positive and pragmatic results.
- There is the sense that **UNHCR needs to think differently**. The GRF needs to be more than event, pledges and dashboards. Stakeholders want opportunities for substantive dialogue. There are challenges around new directions, linking humanitarian to development, and bigger picture issues. It's about interpreting the GCR and bringing it to life. The GRF has made steps in the right directions- but it needs to be further unpacked, for internal and external audiences. **UNHCR needs to articulate what is expected from States and all stakeholders for the future.**

Whatever the considerations, there is agreement that the 2019 GRF set the bar high, and expectations and attendance demands will have to be managed for 2021 and 2023.

L31: While the GRF was seen as fit for purpose as the first such event, the strategic goal, impact or outcomes could (and should) be different or more specific for 2023.

L32: Continue to challenge the underlying assumptions of such events. Successful events can be virtual; member States are not explicitly demanding such events; UNHCR can take the role of driver; bigger is not necessarily better.

L33: UNHCR should start the discussion around the concept for the next GRF now or as part of the HLM in 2021.

L34: Stakeholders expect UNHCR to provide an analysis of progress and gaps by January 2021, in order for them to mobilise their internal stakeholders in preparation for the High-Level Officials Meeting of late 2021.

L35: Re-conceptualise the GRF as a global moment instead of a global physical event. There is an opportunity for the GRF to become a global moment happening simultaneously in several regions and countries, with virtual and hybrid connections between local, regional and global. There would need to be greater clarity of what the GRF space is intended for and then enabling a de-centralized development of these connected elements. Such an approach could ensure greater connections to refugees, local and national realities and in promoting concrete and pragmatic progress towards the GCR objectives.

L36: The location and venue for the 2023 GRF should remain open to discussion. While the Palais is the only suitable Geneva venue to accommodate participation of Heads of States, there could be consideration to host the 2023 in another Capital, and/or favouring a venue that offers spaces better adapted to the multi-stakeholder and participatory formats of the event.

The new Covid reality has become a challenge for maintaining engagement with GRF stakeholders. UNHCR has made efforts to maintain its engagement with GRF stakeholders- globally, regionally, through co-sponsorship groups and through bilateral consultations. The challenge is **that some stakeholders lack sufficient bandwidth to dedicate continued focus on what is perceived as mid-term process.**

L37: There was broad agreement amongst interviewees that there is currently a need for a further level of engagement between UNHCR and its GRF stakeholders. In its current format, there is a somewhat binary formula and timeline that will take this community from 2020 through to 2023. There would be interest to see, in addition to the quarterly informal briefings already provided, **quarterly virtual events, of some 2-4 hours, preferably designed and lead by Regional Bureaux and allowing for a deeper dive into challenges, learning, pledge progress/gaps and potential future themes for GRF II.** Such a format would allow a broader range of stakeholders (especially refugees) to participate in more events. It would enable Capitals opportunities to greater engagement. It would democratize participation in that stakeholders could prioritise their participation by interest and availability, or to access recordings of such events.