

Open Letter to the Delegates of the High Level Officials Meeting from members of the Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge

14 December 2021

Recognizing both the value of a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach to refugee response and **the essential role that the law plays in achieving rights, solutions and justice for those forcibly displaced**, over 80 legal and refugee rights actors came together at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) to make a joint Pledge to work together to address the unmet legal needs of refugees.

On this, the first day of the High Level Officials Meeting, members of the Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge, wish to draw attention to the delegates of the need to recommit to a 'whole of society approach' that underpins both the Pledge and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and **encourage greater engagement of the global and local legal community in refugee response ahead of the next GRF.**

Despite the impressive commitments made by States and other actors at the GRF, since the Forum, we have witnessed State governments increasingly pursue a range of **externalization programs, border restrictions and push-backs, and other measures that limit access to fair asylum procedures**, restrict access to state-funded legal aid, and deny access to rights, justice and solutions for refugees and other forcibly displaced people. At the same time, we are concerned that some efforts to operationalize the GCR have not incorporated the principle of a 'whole of society approach', or reflected the reality that refugee protection is always operationalized on the ground, by a diverse group of collaborating stakeholders, beyond governments or UNHCR, and **often led by refugees and local communities themselves.**

This is particularly true for legal service provision, which is profoundly embedded in the affected communities that it's intended to serve. More than simply being situated in particular jurisdictions, it depends upon committed community advocates, who are well-aware of legal needs. Yet, far too often, these **local actors are excluded from international programming, lack sufficient resourcing, and are overlooked by international agencies and asylum capacity development initiatives.**

Today, we reaffirm our Pledge and **jointly commit to ongoing dialogue and collective action to enable forcibly displaced people to access rights, justice and solutions**, so that those displaced, international institutions, and States alike can all move on with their lives. We encourage all delegates to take a collaborative and inclusive approach to refugee response.

We, members of the GRF Legal Community Pledge, expressly call on the delegates of the HLOM to make and support Pledges at the next GRF, and otherwise take actions that:

1. Recognize **legal assistance** - including access to information, counseling, and representation - as key to asylum capacity development and an essential component of a comprehensive response to forced displacement and an area that **needs further support** by states, donors, the private sector, development actors, I/NGOs, and others.
2. **Increase resources for legal aid provision** and **legal empowerment programming** that support forcibly displaced people to secure legal information and assistance and to access rights, justice and solutions.
3. **Remove barriers** that restrict asylum-seekers and other forcibly displaced people from accessing legal aid, such as documentation requirements, administrative and policy limitations and language barriers.
4. **Allocate resources to bolster local, community-based legal initiatives**, particularly initiatives that create opportunities for people with experiences of displacement to be meaningfully involved in decision-making and resource-allocation.
5. Support initiatives that seek to strengthen the **legal communities' ability to partner with forcibly displaced** people to identify and address their legal needs and support them to meaningfully participate in decision-making, planning, and resource allocation (e.g. by providing legal assistance for the registration of refugee-led initiatives).



The Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge seeks to mobilize, connect, and support the global legal community, in partnership with displaced communities, to identify and address the unmet legal needs of refugees and others forcibly displaced. Over 100 legal and refugee rights actors have now joined the Pledge, which is coordinated by **PILnet**. This letter was jointly drafted by the above actors involved in the Pledge but does not purport to represent the view of all Pledge signatories. To learn more about the Pledge and its implementation since the GRF please read the latest **GRF Legal Community Pledge - 2020-20Progress Update**.