

15 March 2023

## A perfect storm of crises: Why refugee-hosting countries need more support

by Sharmarke Ahmed

*Low- and middle-income countries hosting refugees are facing unprecedented challenges: A slew of interlocking crises, including regional instability, economic recessions, climate change, and natural disasters, have created a devastating cocktail. Collective action, premised on the principles of solidarity and responsibility sharing, is required to develop new and creative solutions.*

Many refugee-hosting countries, including Türkiye and Pakistan, are facing a perfect storm of crises – regional instability, economic difficulties, climate change, and natural disasters – that are compounding existing challenges. According to UNHCR, the vast majority ([71 per cent](#)) of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries. Yet the costs of multi-year (or even -decade) commitments to hosting refugees are not shared equally, with host countries unable to manage the needs of refugees on their own. International solidarity and cooperation is needed now more than ever to jointly respond to these challenges.

### **Worsening and renewed conflicts next door**

Long-lasting conflicts around the globe have reduced the prospects for refugees to return to their countries of origin. Protracted refugee stays, typically in neighbouring countries to conflicts, can persist over lengthy periods, with durable solutions often proving elusive. A lack of third-country solutions, such as resettlement and true local integration, has left many refugees in limbo, rendering them largely dependent on humanitarian assistance as they have little to no access to formal labour markets and livelihood opportunities in many low- and middle-income host countries. Furthermore, international support for these hosting states has shrunk over time: As new conflicts have cropped up, [resources and attention have been, to some extent, diverted away from protracted displacement situations](#). The decline in external support for host countries is also linked to [donor fatigue](#) triggered by the proliferation of conflicts and humanitarian crises around the world. Consequently, host countries, without adequate external resources, have struggled to attain the considerable funding needed to host refugees, which has made the provision of social services, infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, housing, and other essential services to refugees and host communities challenging.

Türkiye remains the world's largest refugee-hosting country with over [3.6 million refugees](#), primarily Syrians who have fled a lengthy conflict. Pakistan, similarly, has faced intense and persistent migratory pressures – in this case for more than four decades, stemming from conflict and instability in neighbouring Afghanistan. The August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan compelled roughly 300,000 Afghans to flee to Pakistan, the latest episode in a long series of displacements, adding to the 3 million Afghans already in Pakistan, the majority of whom live in precarious socioeconomic conditions.

The economic and social costs of hosting refugees, coupled with unabated and renewed conflicts and political instability in neighbouring countries, have influenced the refugee policy approaches of these host countries considerably. The Turkish government has adopted a policy that leans broadly towards the provision of temporary protection for Syrians and their [repatriation](#), despite [concerns over their safe return](#). In the face of new refugee arrivals, meanwhile, Pakistan has significantly restricted the protection regime for incoming Afghans, [refusing to recognise them as refugees](#), with authorities stating that [support from the international community has significantly dwindled](#). A trend of increasingly restrictive policies and measures targeting refugees has gathered pace among low- and middle-income refugee-hosting states as a response to limited international solidarity and a [shrinking funding landscape](#), particularly for protracted displacement situations that persist for years. Restrictive measures are also being spurred by increasing perceptions that refugee movements are a threat to national security and a source of instability that could potentially spill over to the host state.

## **Economic fallout of COVID-19 compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine**

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted a devastating socio-economic impact on economies across the board. It has profoundly affected refugee populations and vulnerable segments of host communities, deepening poverty, worsening food insecurity, and stripping away livelihoods. Türkiye is facing a socio-economic downturn, partly due to the pandemic, in addition to a [financial recession and soaring inflation](#). Pakistan, for its part, is attempting to recover from the [socio-economic impact](#) of COVID-19, deep political instability that brought the country to the brink of an economic crisis, and floods that have adversely affected agricultural production and reduced demand from its export markets.

With no respite in sight, the economic fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also hit these countries hard. This aggression has disrupted energy and food markets and catapulted the price of food and energy higher. Türkiye's economy has been [severely impacted](#) by Russia's actions in Ukraine, as the country is highly dependent on Russia for its energy supply and relies on both Russia and Ukraine for its wheat imports. Pakistan has faced a wheat supply crisis of its own, on top of [steep inflation](#), plunging many parts of the country into food insecurity and poverty.

## The twin threats of climate change and natural disasters

Though they account only for a small share of carbon emissions, low- and middle-income countries are bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change. It is widely recognised that climate change may increase the frequency, [intensity, and severity of extreme weather events and natural disasters](#), interacting with other socio-economic drivers of migration and displacement. Vulnerability is [heightened](#) in low- and middle-income countries by rapid population growth, high poverty rates, weak governance, limited resources, and a diminished capacity to respond to either sudden or slow-onset natural disasters and adapt to climate change.

Pakistan is a primary example of a host country hit hard by climate change, with the [disastrous floods in the country](#) in the summer of 2022 causing a humanitarian crisis that impacted around 1 in 7 people (approximately 33 million) and destroyed livelihoods and property. The disaster also internally displaced 7.9 million Pakistanis and many Afghan refugees. [More than 420,000 Afghans](#) live in the most-affected Pakistani districts, illustrating that such disasters can displace refugees multiple times, alongside members of host communities.

The recent and devastating [earthquakes hitting Türkiye and Syria](#) are also a clear demonstration of how a sudden-onset natural disaster can wreak devastation on persons displaced inside and outside of their origin country, along with local populations. The earthquakes have resulted in large-scale casualties, the destruction of property, and widespread displacement – additionally uprooting refugees living in affected areas. In particular, the earthquake-affected areas of Türkiye, such as Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Kilis, and Hatay, host sizable Syrian refugee populations. These localities already faced enormous challenges meeting the needs of Syrian refugees and their own constituencies and are now confronted with vast humanitarian needs caused by the earthquakes.

Natural disasters do not differentiate between refugees and host communities. At the same time, they inflict [more severe consequences](#) on those who are most vulnerable, such as those living in poor quality housing or exposed areas of a city. The catastrophes in Türkiye and Pakistan, moreover, are likely to exacerbate rural-to-urban movement as households seek to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. This dynamic will place further pressure on strained urban public services – as these areas already tend to host significant refugee populations.

The disasters in Türkiye and Pakistan drastically underscore how natural disasters and climate change complicate the ability of refugee-hosting countries to ensure adequate standards of protection for refugee populations alongside their own socio-economically vulnerable communities. These response gaps may compound existing tensions between different groups of people, a point that was echoed by Amir Saeed, Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, at [VMC2022](#). He noted that “the public tends to be selfish in times of difficulty,” with “kindness in short supply” and the “patience and willingness to be generous towards strangers” negatively impacted. The outpouring of [public](#)

[support](#) that followed the flood events in Pakistan and the [organisation](#) of ad hoc aid operations by ordinary citizens and volunteer groups in Türkiye in the aftermath of the recent earthquakes, however, provide some cause for optimism.

### **What can be done to support host countries?**

The challenges of Türkiye and Pakistan are emblematic of the problems faced by major refugee-hosting countries more broadly. Both have had their already thin resources stretched to the limit, constraining the ability of authorities to respond effectively to the myriad of crises they face at present. This backdrop has hindered their ability to provide basic social services and ensure an adequate safety net for refugee and domestic populations alike – pointing to the need to strengthen regional and international cooperation. Greater international assistance is crucial to ensuring that the needs of refugees are met.

Cooperation means working towards developing new, resilient, and adaptive solutions to the consequences of climate change. Refugees are more vulnerable and less resilient in the face of climate change and natural disasters, as they already confront precarious conditions and have limited access to services. In this regard, recovery and reconstruction responses to natural disasters such as the floods in Pakistan and earthquakes in Türkiye should [include tailored support to affected communities, inclusive of refugees](#). While the agreement to establish [a loss and damage fund at COP27](#) was a step in the right direction, in the context of refugee-hosting countries, safeguards should be put in place to ensure that resources reach both vulnerable host communities and refugees. To ameliorate the situation of refugees living in low- and middle-income countries and to avoid pushing refugees and vulnerable segments of the host population into further precarity, a surge in financing, possibly in the form of [energy subsidies and targeted cash transfers](#) to refugee and vulnerable host community households, is needed to cushion the blow and support recovery.

While traditional durable solutions to cross-border displacement need to be reinvigorated, they alone are not silver bullets for host states, refugees, and host communities. The need for alternative, creative solutions cannot be understated if these states are to weather the perfect storm of interconnected crises. New ideas and approaches will be needed that address the following questions: How can we mitigate the negative ripple effects of crises like the Russian invasion of Ukraine? How can we incorporate the needs of refugee host states, refugee populations, and host communities facing heightened climatic risks into COP thinking and decision-making? How can the needs and capabilities of refugees be factored into the disaster risk reduction policies and strategies as well as emergency responses of host states? These are just some of the questions that need to be answered if low- and middle-income host countries are to navigate the multi-faceted challenges facing them.

Though the plight of Ukrainian refugees has now garnered the global spotlight, it is important that older displacement crises and the [continued efforts](#) of host states in this regard remain in view, too. There needs to be a renewed impetus towards ensuring that the responsibility

for hosting refugees is fairly distributed and shared by the international community. Refugee-hosting [countries](#) can be bolstered in responding to ‘the perfect storm’ they are facing if all states recognise their interdependence and pursue policies that emphasise solidarity and cooperation aimed at managing interconnected crises.

*This commentary was inspired by discussions during Vienna Migration Conference 2022. You can find the full VMC2022 programme [here](#) and watch all video recordings [here](#).*

*Sharmarke Ahmed is a Project Officer for the EU-funded Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), implemented by ICMPD. Sharmarke oversees a portfolio of migration partnership projects funded by the MPF.*

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### Contact Information

For more information please contact:

#### Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)  
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor  
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: [Policy\\_Unit@icmpd.org](mailto:Policy_Unit@icmpd.org)

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