

Europe and the future of international refugee policy

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There is new thinking – that European leaders should embrace – on how to promote long-term responses to the Syrian refugee crisis that protect and uphold human dignity, and that constitute more sustainable and beneficial solutions in refugee-receiving states in the West Asia-North Africa region.

The European Union (EU) has long prided itself on being a beacon of regionalism but its paralysis over the question of a common asylum system may represent the most severe failure in the project's history. So far this year more than 800,000 refugees and migrants have arrived to the continent by sea and this figure is expected to exceed one million by early 2016.¹ The EU is struggling to respond to the situation effectively but while the numbers may seem overwhelming, the EU is more than capable of managing the crisis effectively and in a manner that protects the well-being and upholds the dignity of those fleeing conflict and persecution, if the crisis were approached proactively and mechanisms put in place to share the collective responsibility across the 28 Member States of the EU.

This situation pales when compared with the responses of host states in the countries of origin, particularly those neighbouring Syria where the figures dwarf even the largest of quotas that individual European states would receive under a sharing system and yet Europe remains preoccupied with disagreements between Member States over resettlement and border closures. Between 2007 and 2013 the EU allocated almost 2 billion Euros to the security of its external borders; it has also spent significant sums of money on migration-related initiatives, such as reception and detention centres, in non-EU countries to pre-empt as many would-be immigrants as possible. By contrast, only 17% (or 700 million Euros) of spending over the same period was used in relation to the resettlement and integration of refugees. But simply bolting the doors shut will not mean that there is any decrease in the number of refugees journeying to

Europe. The most effective policies that the EU can pursue will need to focus on the underlying causes of migration to its shores and then addressing those causes in the refugees' countries of origin.

Drivers of onward migration

One of the principal reasons that refugees are willing to take on the severe risks associated with making the journey to Europe is the lack of adequate support being provided by the international community in locations of displacement. As the Syrian refugee crisis illustrates, the more protracted the situation becomes, the less support there is available, leaving host states and refugees to struggle on alone. In my country, the Jordan Response Plan has received approximately 34% of its requested funding, while only 20% of UNHCR's US\$289 million 2015 appeal has been met. The result is that the hardships that many refugees face in their daily lives are worsening and this is the incentive for them to look for better options in Europe and elsewhere.

The EU represents one of the most generous sources of support to the Syrian refugee crisis and the humanitarian emergency within Syria.² However, much of this assistance is devoted to emergency relief; and the cuts in World Food Programme assistance in regional host states and the dire impact these have had on families are an indication of inherent unsustainability. If Europe is serious about dealing with its current crisis effectively and in a manner that upholds the core values of the Union, it must be willing to take bold and innovative approaches in the ways in which it provides assistance to refugees and host states away from its own borders.

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The chance for an enhanced European response

Strategies are needed to move beyond the dominant, top-down models of refugee assistance and towards assistance that encourages autonomy and self-sufficiency for refugees. In this regard, the EU could play a pioneering role in pushing international refugee policy forward and enhancing its relevance for the 21st century. With leadership from the European Commission, new partnerships could be created between international donors, refugees, host states and the private sector. Research conducted by the West Asia-North Africa Institute details at length what such new partnerships might look like, taking Jordan as a model with high potential for success.³

In brief, a more sensible policy stance at the EU level would be to divert some of the spending on 'hard' security (such as border enforcement) to support innovative and more sustainable forms of refugee assistance within host states in the region of origin. One policy measure with enormous potential is to encourage large-scale investment in manufacturing and industrial sectors in the host state, employing both refugee and host community labour at pre-established ratios, creating clear advantages for both communities. This would require support from the EU beyond mere financial assistance – including but not limited to trade concessions and tax exemptions as incentives to investment from existing manufacturing companies in-country. Such initiatives would work in complementarity with, as opposed to instead of, resettlement quotas and continued emergency relief.

In order for this model to work, there would need to be Association Agreements between regional host states and the EU. Alongside such agreements, a legal framework that facilitates capital flows and protects all parties involved would be put in place to minimise risks. Importantly, the EU's Rules of Origin requirement needs to be reconsidered in order to allow for refugee labour in production and for exports to be allowed to reach European markets. While the EU's Rules of Origin are global and have been



UNHCR/Christopher Herwig
Long walk for groceries for Syrian refugees at Azraq Camp, Jordan, June 2015.

in place for a long time, such a concession could be made on a bilateral basis with host states with other conditions in place to ensure the quality of the final product. For example, an Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of industrial products would enable products manufactured by Syrian refugees to enter the EU market without additional technical controls. This type of partnership would represent a commitment by the EU to pursuing more sustainable solutions to the challenges of refugee crises and be a way of beginning to address the policy failures vis-à-vis the current spillover into Europe at the source of the problem.

This type of initiative would also correspond to the imperatives laid out in the European Commission's own recent communication *Elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as Da'esh threat*.⁴ In this document the Commission articulates the need for approaches that "cater to displaced persons' longer-term development needs" and "strengthen local resilience capacities in Syria, Iraq and the affected neighbouring countries".

Conclusion

While the spotlight is likely to be on Europe for some time, much of the attention to the refugee crisis at Europe's borders continues to emphasise issues around relocation, border enforcement and procedural aspects of EU asylum policy. Although important, these are not the main areas that Europe needs to address to deal with the current

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crisis effectively. New types of partnership with host states in so-called refugee-producing regions could begin to address phenomena such as aid dependency and host state fatigue, and steer international refugee policy towards more sustainable and mutually beneficial initiatives. This is the best chance that Europe has of reducing the number of new refugee arrivals on its shores and the loss of life incurred in the process. More importantly, it would represent a transition towards international refugee policies that deliver opportunities for host communities and refugees alike, whilst upholding human dignity.

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1. UNHCR *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean* <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>
2. Up until September 2015, the European Commission and its Member States provided over 4.2 billion Euros in assistance, with more having been promised. European Commission (2015) *Syria crisis ECHO Factsheet* <http://tinyurl.com/ECHO-Syria2015>
3. WANA Institute (2015) *Forging New Strategies in Protracted Refugee Crises: Syrian Refugees and the Host State Economy* <http://tinyurl.com/WANA-2015-new-strategies>
4. http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/news/20150206_JOIN_en.pdf

