

Foreword on migrants in crisis

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The carnage of asylum seekers and migrants making the perilous journey to a better life makes frequent headlines; thousands die every year in the Mediterranean alone. Far too little is done to mitigate the risks such migrants face. Poverty, vulnerability and war are rife in our times, but compassion is in short supply.

It is self-evident that we lack the political will, and perhaps the capacity, to develop a robust system to protect asylum seekers and migrants seeking to cross international borders. We fear this will encourage yet more migration, that it might compromise our security, and that we do not have sufficient resources to provide assistance and protection. Nonetheless, we must persevere.

One approach is to disaggregate the protection challenge into more manageable constituent elements. Three years ago, for instance, I called on states and stakeholders to address the plight of international migrants affected by acute-onset crises such as the conflicts in Libya and Syria, Hurricane Sandy in the US, and the tsunami and nuclear catastrophe in Japan. Last year, the US and the Philippines committed to lead an effort to develop a framework for doing so; they now have been joined by several other countries. This initiative is a proving ground for our commitment to helping the world's most vulnerable populations.

Migrants in such crisis situations are affected by the absence or inadequate implementation of norms, obligations and standards, notably those relating to human rights and humanitarian law. Operational gaps – or lack of coherence and resources – compound the negative effects of crises on migrants. Efforts by governments, international organisations and NGOs to redress these shortcomings are far too limited.

Yet when it comes to protecting migrants' well-being and rights, smart practices abound. There are many practices that can and should become global standards. The International Organization for Migration and UNHCR, for example, were imaginative in going beyond

their mandates to protect migrants at risk in Libya in 2012, as were many NGOs, while the World Bank acted quickly to provide funds to evacuate Bangladeshi nationals. With the number of international migrants set nearly to double in the foreseeable future, such practices must become reference points for action.

But international organisations alone cannot solve the problems. We need to clarify the critical roles that all key actors – including countries of origin and destination, neighbouring states, businesses and civil society – should play.

It should be self-evident that we need to help all migrants in distress – not only those affected by conflicts and disasters but also those abandoned by smugglers, countless more left in limbo for years in transit countries, and the millions working in slave-like conditions. The principles and plans that we put in place to protect migrants in life-threatening situations eventually could – and should – be extended in order to protect a much broader array of vulnerable migrants.

We need not be overwhelmed by the dizzying array of problems plaguing migrants. Disaggregated into its component elements, an issue like migration resolves itself into choices which are fundamentally moral in character, and not simply the preserve of specialists, economists or sociologists, much though we have to learn from their research and guidance. With small groups of states, experts, international organisations and civil society working together with the necessary resolve to pilot solutions that might become global practices – a model that could also be applied to other international problems – we can address the challenges facing migrants one by one. By building small and nimble coalitions of committed stakeholders we can make fast, effective progress on a range of critical issues. We are not helpless.

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