

The Global Refugee Crisis: Humanity's Last Call for a Culture of Sharing and Cooperation

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Razor-wire fences, detention centres, xenophobic rhetoric and political disarray; nothing illustrates the tendency of governments to aggressively pursue nationalistic interests more starkly than their inhumane response to refugees fleeing conflict and war. With record numbers of asylum seekers predicted to reach Europe this year and a morally acceptable humanitarian response nowhere in sight, the immediate problem is more apparent than ever: the abject failure of the international community to share the responsibility, burden and resources needed to safeguard the basic rights of asylum seekers in accordance with international law.

Of immediate concern across the European Union, however, is the mounting pressure that policymakers are under from the far-right and anti-immigration groups, whose influence is skewing the public debate on the divisive issue of how governments should deal with refugees and immigrants. With racial intolerance steadily growing among citizens, the traditionally liberal attitude of European states is fast diminishing and governments are increasingly adopting a cynical interpretation of international refugee law that lacks any sense of justice or compassion.

The 1951 Refugee Convention, which was implemented in response to Europe's last major refugee crisis during World War II, states that governments need only safeguard the human rights of asylum seekers when they are inside their territory. In violation of the spirit of this landmark human rights legislation, the response from most European governments has been to prevent rather than facilitate the arrival of refugees in order to minimise their legal responsibility towards them. In order to achieve their aim, the EU has even gone so far as making a flawed and legally questionable deal with President Erdogan to intercept migrant families crossing the Aegean Sea and return them to Turkey against their will.

Instead of providing 'safe and legal routes' to refugees, a growing number of countries on the migration path from Greece to Western Europe are adopting the **Donald Trump** solution of building walls, militarising borders and constructing barbed wire barriers to stop people entering their country. Undocumented refugees (a majority of them women and children) who are trying to pass through Europe's no-longer borderless Schengen area are at times subjected to humiliation and violence or are detained in rudimentary camps with minimal access to the essentials they need to survive. Unable to travel to their desired destination, tens of thousands of refugees have been bottlenecked in Greece which has become a warehouse for abandoned souls in a country on the brink of its own humanitarian crisis.

Ostensibly, the extreme reaction of many EU member states to those risking their lives to escape armed conflict is tantamount to officially sanctioned racial discrimination. Unsurprisingly, this unwarranted government response has been welcomed by nationalist parties who are now polling favourably among voters in the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Poland. The same is true in Hungary, where the government has even agreed Nazi-era demands to confiscate cash and jewellery from refugees to fund their anti-humanitarian efforts.

There can be little doubt that the European response to refugees has been discriminatory, morally objectionable and politically dangerous. It's also self-defeating since curtailing civil liberties and discarding long-held social values has the potential to destabilise Europe far more than simply providing the assistance guaranteed to refugees under the UN convention. Albeit unwittingly, the reactionary attitude of governments also plays directly into the hands of Islamic State and other jihadi groups whose broader intentions include inciting Islamophobia, provoking instability and conflict within western countries, and recruiting support for terrorism in the Middle East and across Europe.

Dispelling nationalist myths of the far-right

With the public increasingly divided about how governments should respond to the influx of people escaping violent conflict, it's crucial that the pervasive myths peddled by right-wing extremists are exposed for what they are: bigotry, hyperbole and outright lies designed to exacerbate fear and discord within society.

Forced migration is a global phenomenon and, compared with other continents, Europe is not being subjected to the 'invasion of refugees' widely portrayed in the mainstream media. Of the world's 60 million refugees, nine out of ten are not seeking asylum in the EU, and the vast majority remain displaced within their own countries. Most of those that do settle in Europe will return to their country of origin when they are no longer at risk (as happened at the end of the Balkan Wars of the 1990s when 70% of refugees who had fled to Germany returned to Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Albania and Slovenia).

The real emergency is taking place outside of Europe, where there is a desperate need for more assistance from the international community. For example, Turkey is now home to over 3 million refugees; Jordan hosts 2.7 million refugees – a staggering 41 percent of its population; and Lebanon has 1.5 million Syrian refugees who make up a third of its population. Unsurprisingly, social and economic systems are under severe strain in these and the other countries that host the majority of global refugees – especially since they are mainly based in developing countries with soaring unemployment rates, inadequate welfare systems and high levels of social unrest. In stark comparison (and with the notable exception of Germany), the 28 relatively prosperous EU member states have collectively pledged to resettle a mere 160,000 of the one million refugees that entered Europe in 2015. Not only does this amount to less than 0.25% of their combined population, governments have only relocated a few hundred have so far.

The spurious claim that there are insufficient resources available to share with those seeking asylum in the EU or that asylum seekers will 'take our homes, our jobs and our welfare services' is little more than a justification for racial discrimination. Aside from the overriding moral and legal obligation for states to provide emergency assistance to anyone fleeing war or persecution, the economic rationale for resettling asylum seekers throughout Europe (and globally) is sound: in countries experiencing declining birth rates and ageing

populations – as is the case across the EU as a whole – migration levels need to be significantly increased in order to continue financing systems of state welfare.

The facts are incontrovertible: evidence from OECD countries demonstrates that immigrant households contribute \$2,800 more to the economy in taxes alone than they receive in public provision. In the UK, non-European immigrants contributed £5 billion (\$7.15 billion) in taxes between 2000 and 2011. They are also less likely to receive state benefits than the rest of the population, more likely to start businesses, and less likely to commit serious crimes than natives. Overall, economists at the European Commission calculate that the influx of people from conflict zones will have a positive effect on employment rates and long-term public finances in the most affected countries.

A common agenda to end austerity

If migrant families contribute significantly to society and many European countries with low birth rates actually need them in greater numbers, why are governments and a growing sector of the population so reluctant to honour international commitments and assist refugees in need? The widely held belief that public resources are too scarce to share with asylum seekers is most likely born of fear and insecurity in an age of economic austerity, when many European citizens are struggling to make ends meet.

Just as the number of people forcibly displaced from developing countries begins to surge, economic conditions in most European countries have made it politically unfeasible to provide incoming refugees with shelter and basic welfare. Voluntary and compulsory austerity measures adopted by governments after spending trillions of dollars bailing out the banks in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis have resulted in deep spending cuts to essential public services such as healthcare, education and pensions schemes. The resulting economic crisis has led to rising unemployment, social discontent, growing levels of inequality and public services that are being stretched to breaking point.

The same neoliberal ideology that underpins austerity in Europe is also responsible for creating widespread economic insecurity across the Global South and facilitating an exodus of so-called ‘economic migrants’, many of who are also making their way to Europe. Economic austerity has been central to the ‘development’ policies foisted onto low-income countries for decades by the IMF and World Bank in exchange for loans and international aid. They constitute a modern form of economic colonialism that in many cases has decimated essential public services, thwarted poverty reduction programmes and increased the likelihood of social unrest, sectarian violence and civil war. By prioritising international loan repayments over the basic welfare of citizens, these neoliberal policies are directly responsible for creating a steady flow of ‘refugees from globalisation’ who are in search of basic economic security in an increasingly unequal world.

Instead of pointing the finger of blame at governments for mismanaging the economy, public anger across Europe is being wrongly directed at a far easier target: refugees from foreign lands who have become society’s collective scapegoats at a time of grinding austerity. It’s high time that people in both ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ countries recognise that their hardship stems from a parallel set of neoliberal policies that have prioritised market forces above social needs. By emphasising this mutual cause and promoting solidarity between people and nations, citizens can begin overturning prejudiced attitudes and supporting progressive agendas geared towards safeguarding the common good of all humanity.

From a culture of war to conflict resolution

It's also clear that any significant change in the substance and direction of economic policy must go hand-in-hand with a dramatic shift away from aggressive foreign policy agendas that are overtly based on securing national interests at all costs – such as appropriating the planet's increasingly scarce natural resources. Indeed, it will remain impossible to address the root causes of the refugee crisis until the UK, US, France and other NATO countries fully accept that their misguided foreign policies are largely responsible for the current predicament.

Not only are many western powers responsible for selling arms to abusive regimes in the Middle East, their wider foreign policy objectives and military ambitions have displaced large swathes of the world's population, particularly as a consequence of the illegal occupation of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and the ill-conceived invasion of Libya. The connection between the military interventions of recent years, the perpetuation of terrorism and the plight of refugees across the Middle East and North Africa has been succinctly explained by Professor Noam Chomsky:

“the US-UK invasion of Iraq ... dealt a nearly lethal blow to a country that had already been devastated by a massive military attack twenty years earlier followed by virtually genocidal US-UK sanctions. The invasion displaced millions of people, many of whom fled and were absorbed in the neighboring countries, poor countries that are left to deal somehow with the detritus of our crimes. One outgrowth of the invasion is the ISIS/Daesh monstrosity, which is contributing to the horrifying Syrian catastrophe. Again, the neighboring countries have been absorbing the flow of refugees. The second sledgehammer blow destroyed Libya, now a chaos of warring groups, an ISIS base, a rich source of jihadis and weapons from West Africa to the Middle East, and a funnel for flow of refugees from Africa.”

After this series of blundered invasions by the US and NATO forces, which continue to destabilise an entire region, one might think that militarily powerful nations would finally accept the need for a very different foreign policy framework. No longer can governments ignore the imperative to engender trust between nations and replace the prevailing culture of war with one of peace and nonviolent means of conflict resolution. In the immediate future, the priority for states must be to deescalate emerging cold war tensions and diffuse what is essentially a proxy war in the Middle East being played out in Syria. Yet this remains a huge challenge at a time when military intervention is still favoured over compromise and diplomacy, even when common sense and experience tells us that this outdated approach only exacerbates violent conflict and causes further geopolitical instability.

Sharing the burden, responsibility and resources

Given the deplorably inadequate response from most EU governments to the global exodus of refugees thus far, the stage is set for a rapid escalation of the crisis in 2016 and beyond. Some ten million refugees are expected to make their way to Europe in 2016 alone, and this figure is likely to rise substantially with population growth in developing countries over the coming decades. But it's climate change that will bring the real emergency, with far higher migration levels accompanied by floods, droughts and sudden hikes in global food prices.

Although largely overlooked by politicians and the mainstream media, the number of people fleeing conflict is already dwarfed by 'environmental refugees' displaced by severe

ecological conditions – whose numbers could rise to 200 million by 2050. It's clear that unless nations collectively pursue a radically different approach to managing forced displacement, international discord and social tensions will continue to mount and millions of additional refugees will be condemned to oversized and inhumane camps on the outer edges of civilisation.

The fundamentals of an effective and morally acceptable response to the crisis are already articulated in the Refugee Convention, which sets out the core responsibilities that states have towards those seeking asylum – even though governments have interpreted the treaty erroneously and failed to implement it effectively. In the short term, it's evident that governments must mobilise the resources needed to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to those escaping war, regardless of where in the world they have been displaced. Like the Marshall Plan that was initiated after the Second World War, a globally coordinated emergency response to the refugee crisis will require a significant redistribution of finance from the world's richest countries to those most in need – which should be provided on the basis of 'enlightened self-interest' if not from a genuine sense of compassion and altruism.

Immediate humanitarian interventions would have to be accompanied by a new and more effective system for administering the protection of refugees in a way that is commensurate with international refugee law. In simple terms, such a mechanism could be coordinated by a reformed and revitalised UN Refugee Agency (the UNHCR) which would ensure that both the responsibility and resources needed to protect refugees is shared fairly among nations. A mechanism for sharing global responsibility would also mean that states only provide assistance in accordance with their individual capacity and circumstances, which would prevent less developed nations from shouldering the greatest burden of refugees as is currently the case.

Even though the UN's refugee convention has already been agreed by 145 nations, policymakers in the EU seem incapable and unwilling to demonstrate any real leadership in tackling this or indeed any other pressing transnational issue. Not only does the resulting refugee fiasco demonstrate the extent to which self-interest dominates the political status quo across the European Union, it confirms the suspicion that the union as a whole is increasingly devoid of social conscience and in urgent need of reform.

Thankfully, ordinary citizens are leading the way on this critical issue and putting elected representatives to shame by providing urgent support to refugee families in immediate need of help. In their thousands, volunteers stationed along Europe's borders have been welcoming asylum seekers by providing much needed food, shelter and clothing, and have even provided search and rescue services for those who have risked their lives being trafficked into Europe in rubber dinghies. Nowhere is this spirit of compassion and generosity more apparent than on Lesbos and other Greek islands, where residents have been collectively nominated for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for their humanitarian efforts.

The selfless actions of these dedicated volunteers should remind the world that people have a responsibility and a natural inclination to serve one another in times of need – regardless of differences in race, religion and nationality. Instead of building militarised borders and ignoring popular calls for a just and humanitarian response to the refugee crisis, governments should take the lead from these people of goodwill and prioritise the needs of the world's most vulnerable above all other concerns. For European leaders and policymakers in all countries, it's this instinctively humane response to the refugee crisis –

which is based firmly on the principle of sharing – that holds the key to addressing the whole spectrum of interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges in the critical period ahead.

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