



Addressing Human Migration in a Sustainable Manner

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The movement of hundreds of thousands of migrants across the Mediterranean in recent years has brought much-needed attention to the plight of refugees and displaced people. It has also shed light on our countries' inability – unwillingness – to address the issue in a sustainable, effective, and humane manner. The three existing “durable” solutions with regard to the condition of refugees have proved inadequate and unsuccessful. New trends in the human migration system are calling for novel models that encompass both top-down and bottom-up approaches.





With about 65.3 million people uprooted at the end of 2015, the world has been witnessing unprecedented levels of displacement. A third of these people have crossed an international border and are registered as refugees under UNHCR and UNRWA mandates.

While it is true that humans have always been migrating, migration trends have themselves not been linear, but shifting instead over time and across space. Climate change, combined with humans' overuse of natural resources, has already begun to impact migratory patterns around the world, putting those often-marginalized communities at intensified risk of displacement. The nature of conflicts has evolved as well: civil wars nowadays flare up and down and seem to continue perpetually. This reduces the likelihood of refugees ever being able to return home.

Migrations today are long-lasting, global, and complex processes. Many people who choose to migrate do not leave so as to never come back. On the contrary, many migrants often travel back and forth between their country of origin and second, sometimes even third, countries.

It is common for households of migrants to maintain transnational activities and diaspora connections, which can be seen in the flow of remittances back to the country of origin.

These new trends, along with the massive flow of migrants from one country or continent to the other, re-emphasize the need to look for more sustainable approaches with regard to human migration.

It is clear that the current system is failing. It provides neither help nor protection to displaced people. Always unsure of what to do with these "others", it confines them in spaces of liminality – either in camps or in detention centers – or leaves them to drown in the Mediterranean.

This policy brief aims at outlining opportunities and challenges in addressing human migration in a sustainable manner. After examining some of the causes of migration, this paper will explore short-term steps that should be taken and other long-term solutions.

What Causes People to Move

From a macro perspective, what causes people to move, and what prevents them from moving, is directly related to the system of states and the structural inequality engendered by that system. It can be argued that human migration, a consequence of that very system, has turned into an actual crisis because of the states' territorial politics that control borders and the movement of people.

From a micro perspective, the reasons why people migrate are numerous and complex: in search for employment or education, seeking freedom from persecution and violence, in response to armed conflicts, economic hardships, or environmental pressures such as droughts and floods – the list goes on.

Before the 19th century, for example, migrants in Europe tended to be religious minorities: Jews, Muslims, Huguenots, among others. In the 20th and 21st centuries, multiple wars and armed conflicts, some of them still ongoing, have caused massive displacements across the world.

Many of these conflicts are often conducive to sexual violence towards women; some of the most recent cases include the abductions of Nigerian girls by Boko Haram and Yazidi women by ISIL fighters.

Gender-based violence can take many forms – forced marriage, domestic violence, rape, honor killing – and can also take place within homes, compelling many girls and women around the world to migrate. Oftentimes, women flee from states that condone violence against them or that fail to properly protect them.

Existing “Durable” Solutions

The three durable solutions put forth by the UNHCR – voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement – are anything *but* durable. More often than not, refugees have little hope of returning to their country of origin... and going back, for many, doesn't necessarily entail returning “home”. As for countries of first asylum, they are often reluctant to integrate refugees whom they see as burdens overstaying their welcome. The refugees themselves would rather be resettled in a third country which, they hope, would offer them better economic and social opportunities. The odds of this happening, however, are very low – only one percent of the world's refugees who are identified as being in need of resettlement actually get the opportunity to be resettled each year. These three so-called durable solutions have, it seems, only led to protracted displacement: many refugees are left with no choice but to remain in camps for years and sometimes even decades.



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Short-Term Steps to Take

Reconfiguring the legal framework that decides who qualifies as a refugee and who deserves protection is probably one of the first major steps that needs taken. Because they are fleeing persecution, war, or violence, refugees are recognized as forced migrants. This recognition grants them basic rights enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol. However, this classification of migrants into forced or voluntary has become obsolete. It denies to many so-called "voluntary" migrants the protection they deserve, even when they are escaping corrupt and dysfunctional governments, environmental catastrophes, poverty and economic hardships.

The necessity to improve the access of displaced people, women and girls especially, to legal and social protections cannot be emphasized enough. During flight and displacement, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking. The implementation of stronger laws, along with the training of field staff and the provision of better gender-sensitive services to women and girls in displacement could have a considerably positive impact on their condition. Legal protections should also be extended to them while they are still in their home country. Indeed, the journey to cross an international border often exposes them to additional dangers.

While migrants are often portrayed as "speechless emissaries", they are not. Listening to the stories behind the numbers is crucial in understanding their desires and needs and providing them with the adequate assistance. Giving them cash, rather than ration cards, would allow for agentive consumption and a regain of dignity and control over their lives. Many also aspire to live in cities and get an education. Migrants are not bare lives. They are *human* lives that deserve not only physical care, but psychosocial care as well.

The camp, a prison-like space made to contain and control people, forces the displaced to depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Its only purpose is to maintain an illusion of emergency and temporariness. Opposing this "containment model of asylum", the Ugandan government implements a self-reliance strategy which encourages Congolese and Burundian refugees to start their business or to participate in subsistence agriculture. Refugees are allowed to work legally and move freely – to a certain extent.

While this model has been praised by many, refugees in Uganda still find themselves in precarious situations. Considered as second-class citizens, they are unable to build a secure future for themselves. Implementing the rights that are already granted to them in the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to their status, such as the right to work and move freely, would constitute a significant step towards providing them with durable support.

Rather than spending billions on keeping migrants away, increasing their mobility and access to local labor markets and recognizing them as equal citizens – in short, making good use of their human capital – will prove more sustainable and cost-effective for host countries.

The very system of nation-states, our dominant manner of organizing ourselves, is structured in a way that keeps and will keep migrants, minorities, and stateless people vulnerable. The nation-state is a space that includes and excludes people, which implies that it also decides who gets to live and die. We cannot think outside of that state system, yet there are many people who exist outside of it – some prominent cases include the Roma, Jews, Kurds, and Palestinians.

As a complete change of paradigm is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, so-called sustainable solutions to the migration crisis will present inherent limitations. While resettlement and possible naturalization of refugees can be considered as the best solution to their situation, it is not exactly durable in the sense that it fails to address the root causes that forced them to migrate in the first place. Would the international community keep advocating for a two-state solution if all Palestinian refugees got resettled and acquired new citizenship?

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As human migration mainly stems from the state's failure to protect its people and to build capacity for them, it becomes clear that the most sustainable approach to address the issue should start by improving the economic, social, political, and environmental conditions of refugee-sending countries. This calls for systemic change through inclusive political reforms and national reconciliation processes in post-conflict countries, in addition to societal change through investment in human capital, education, leadership development, and civil society.

The most effective responses to human migration that we have seen so far in host countries have been tied to local grassroots community organizing and civil society associations: a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. When the people in power risk facing domestic unpopularity, their responsibility to protect becomes secondary. Many average citizens and local businesses, however, will make it their mission to support newcomers with spontaneous acts of humanity and solidarity. Diaspora communities and migrant institutions also play a vital role in welcoming and integrating new migrants and in rebuilding strong community ties.





Conclusion

The durability and complexity of the migration trends we are experiencing today are calling for solutions that are themselves sustainable and global. Such solutions necessitate the involvement of the international community in improving the conditions of migrant-producing countries and the implementation of the many commitments they made in 2016 at several humanitarian summits.

This top-down approach, nevertheless, will only be effective if combined with the work initiated by local communities in host countries. Their engagement to welcome migrants has played, and will keep playing, a significant role not only in providing migrants with safe and inclusive environments, but in influencing policy making as well.



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