

# Perspectives

## IN SOLVING REFUGEE ISSUES SOLIDARITY MUST COME FIRST

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**Abstract:** With the number of people displaced globally at record levels, effective solutions to refugee issues – both for refugees and the communities that host them – are vital. A ‘business as usual approach’ will no longer suffice. Instead, collaborative solutions that ensure responsibility sharing and recognise the connection between displacement and development should be the way forward. The international community has made some strides in recognising this. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the New York Declaration in September 2016, world leaders have agreed that refugees must be factored into all development plans. Solidarity with refugees and host states must be prioritised.

**Key Words:** Refugees; Asylum-seekers; Displaced Persons; New York Declaration; Solidarity; Legal Pathways; Responsibility Sharing; International Protection; Sustainable Development Goals; 2030 Agenda; Private Sponsorship; Resettlement; Relocation.

### Introduction

Refugees are arriving to the European Union in comparatively smaller numbers than they were in 2015. Although the numbers crossing the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas to Italy and Greece dropped from a high of one million in 2015 to 360,000 in 2016, the refugee crisis is far from over. People continue to flee in large numbers to other countries as refugees or within their home countries as internally displaced persons. To put it in context, more people fled to Uganda in 2016 than crossed the Mediterranean in the same year. In fact, 86 percent of the world’s 21 million refugees are living in developing countries (UNHCR, 2015a: 2). The situation in Europe is not a refugee or a numbers crisis, but is instead a crisis of solidarity. The one million people who reached Europe by sea in 2015 represent 0.2 percent

of Europe's population of 500 million. That figure that should be manageable for Europe and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has proposed solutions for EU countries to better manage refugee arrivals, ensure better protection in the future and show solidarity with refugees and communities hosting them (UNHCR, 2016).

The number of people displaced globally is at a record high and conditions continue to deteriorate for refugees in countries such as Lebanon, where 71 per cent of Syrian refugees now live below the poverty line, up from 49 per cent in 2014 (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2016: 2). Meanwhile, funding is difficult to secure for crises in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, despite the continued generosity of several donors, including Irish Aid. South Sudan is now Africa's largest refugee crisis, with two million people displaced inside the country and a staggering 1.5 million people forced to cross into neighbouring countries, including Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Wachiaya, 2017). By early February 2017, over two million people were displaced within Yemen and yet only one per cent of the funding needs of UNHCR had been met.

An understanding of the reasons why people flee their homes is fundamental to any process that seeks to find solutions for refugees. The reasons for flight are obvious in situations of violence such as those experienced by thousands of residents in Syria's Aleppo in 2016. However, conflict is by no means the only reason for flight. The Syrian conflict has been ongoing since 2011, and yet it was not until 2015 that the European Union started to feel its effects more fully through increased arrivals. So why has it taken so long for people to make their way further afield and can anything be done to reduce their need to make such treacherous journeys?

This article will consider some of the reasons for onward flight, taking Lebanon as an example to demonstrate the impact of prolonged displacement on refugee communities. This will underscore the need for states to honour the commitments they made under the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development and the New York Declaration to include refugees and displaced persons in development planning. This article will highlight how the Irish-led New York Declaration builds on the inclusive message of the 2030 Agenda and why it focuses on solidarity with refugees and their host communities. It also considers UNHCR's proposals for the EU to better manage refugee arrivals. Finally, it will be seen that it is not just up to states to show solidarity - individuals, civil society and the private sector must play a role in establishing legal pathways, such as private sponsorship, so that refugees can reach safety and rebuild their lives. This article will consider examples of such legal pathways, including Ireland's undertakings to date.

### **Displacement, poverty and onward flight**

Refugees are among the world's most vulnerable people. This does not mean that people must be poor or destitute to be a refugee – poverty is not in the refugee definition, which instead focuses on flight from persecution. Nonetheless, huge proportions of the world's refugees are living in developing countries and it is these countries that carry the lion's share of the burden of caring for them. As a result, some already strained national infrastructural, health and educational systems are put under further pressure by large-scale refugee arrivals. Moreover, opportunities to earn a living or gain an education for some refugee communities are fewer in developing countries than they might be elsewhere. Living in displacement over long periods of time takes its toll and can be a major driver of onward movement.

Consider Lebanon, a country that is about one seventh the size of Ireland but in 2010 had a similar population at 4.3 million (Worldometers, 2017). Lebanon now hosts over one million Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2016a), as well as 450,000 Palestinian refugees and 22,000 refugees from other countries (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2016: 5). UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2015 showed that Lebanon topped the list as hosting the largest number of refugees in relation to its national population, with 183 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2015a: 2). Its neighbour, Jordan, was ranked second in population density as it hosted 87 refugees per 1,000

inhabitants (Ibid). Another Syrian neighbour, Turkey, hosts the highest number of refugees in the world; a total of 2.9 million (UNHCR, 2017).

Since 2013, UNHCR, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have conducted an annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2016: i). The 2016 VASyR report was published in December 2016. It collates data gathered through assessments conducted with 4,596 Syrian refugee households who were randomly selected from 26 districts across Lebanon. The assessments measured a broad range of issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including monthly rental costs, primary and secondary school attendance, special needs, food consumption, monthly earnings and use of cash assistance.

As already noted, the report revealed that 71 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon now live below the poverty line, up from 49 per cent in 2014 (Ibid: 43). This clearly demonstrates that conditions are deteriorating and provides some insight into why refugees undertake life-endangering onward journeys such as those across the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. The report provides many concerning insights, including that 93 per cent of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon was estimated to live in some degree of food insecurity, while 30 per cent of working-age men reported a lack of employment in the month prior to the survey. For those who did find some work, underemployment due to insufficient hours was widespread. With regard to sanitary facilities, 23 per cent of Syrian refugees who were surveyed reported having no access to bathrooms, compared to 10 per cent in 2015, and 4 per cent of households share a bathroom with 15 people or more.<sup>1</sup> Access to education is very limited for many children with almost half (48 per cent) of the surveyed children of primary school age (6 to 14

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of VASyR report, bathroom refers to a room with a water source for washing (shower/ bathtub), while toilet refers to the receptacle for urination and defecation (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2016: 25).

years) not attending school. Statistics are even more worrying for secondary school aged children (15 to 17 years) of whom 84 per cent are out of school. Describing the many barriers to education for children, respondents included issues such as child labour, child marriage, the cost of education, no space in schools, and lack of legal residence (Ibid).

While Lebanon is shouldering a huge proportion of the Syrian refugee population, limits have been in place for some time for Syrian refugees with regard to accessing employment and securing legal residency. Until February 2017, Syrian refugees in Lebanon had to renew their legal residency every six months and pay an annual renewal fee of USD \$200 per person in the household older than 15 years. This changed in February 2017 when the General Security of Lebanon announced that payment of the residency fee for Syrian refugees who had registered with UNHCR before 2015 would no longer be required (Dubin and Marsi, 2017). While this is certainly a positive move that may ease financial pressures on some refugees, it does not apply to all, in particular those who are not registered with UNHCR. Syrians are also restricted employment-wise in Lebanon and are only permitted to work in the agricultural, construction, and environmental fields. Informal working situations and difficulties in renewing legal residency, for example, due to a lack of means to pay the renewal fee, mean that Syrians in Lebanon have been at an increased risk of being exploited in the workplace, working longer hours in more hazardous conditions for lower pay (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2017: 103).

With the Syrian conflict in its seventh year, families living in protracted displacement are feeling its severe impact. While the situation is by no means limited to Lebanon and can apply equally to the many families and individuals in Jordan, Turkey and beyond, the *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020* describes the situation well:

“The combination of lack of legal residency, limited self-support opportunities, compounded by depletion of resources including savings and assets has led to households resorting to negative coping

strategies including instances of begging, protracted debt, engagement of children in worst forms of child labour, and foregoing educational opportunities” (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2017: 117-118).

This points to a host community under pressure, and a refugee community for whom prospects are very slim. It goes some way to explaining why so many Syrians, in particular, have fled to Europe in search of a real chance to rebuild their lives. Between April 2011 and January 2015, just over 230,000 applications for asylum were made by Syrians in 37 European countries. In the two years since, over 650,000 Syrians have made applications for asylum in Europe (UNHCR, 2016b).

Since 2012, Ireland has provided over €70 million toward people affected by the Syrian conflict, the state’s largest ever response to any humanitarian crisis (Irish Aid, 2017). Ireland must be commended for its contributions, but always encouraged to think about what more can be done. But it is in the Irish-led UN Agreement on a global approach to helping refugees, which culminated in the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* of September 2016, that Ireland showed how its support for multilateral solutions to the world’s problems can achieve significant results.

Adopted by 193 states, the New York Declaration (NY Declaration) connects development assistance with refugee issues, recognising the push factors that cause people to move, as well as the impact of displacement on host communities. However, it also highlights the necessity for states to provide more legal pathways for displaced people to reach safety. Legal pathways such as resettlement, visas and private sponsorship schemes are vital sources of life-saving assistance that bring refugees to safety and simultaneously ease the pressure on host states. Most importantly, the NY Declaration lays the groundwork for a Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, where states will have an opportunity to establish concrete measures to share the responsibility of hosting refugees more equitably.

## **A new global approach to displacement**

People who have fled conflict and persecution will often flee again from the poverty they may find themselves trapped in as displaced persons. While development organisations have been at the forefront of refugee and displacement crises for decades, it is highly significant that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development now explicitly refers to refugees and internally displaced persons in the 2030 Declaration (United Nations, 2015: para.23). Additionally, it is stated many times throughout the 2030 Agenda that the Sustainable Development Goals were drafted to ensure that ‘no one is left behind’ (Ibid: para.4). This underscores the fact that refugees and forcibly displaced people must be accounted for in states’ national development plans.

The NY Declaration represents the international community’s recognition that responsibility for displaced persons must be shared more equitably. Better development planning, targeted assistance and the provision of legal pathways are core means by which states can share the burden and offer greater opportunities to the displaced. Adopted by 193 state leaders through a UN General Assembly Resolution, the NY Declaration ‘marks a political commitment of unprecedented force and resonance ... It fills what has been a perennial gap in the international protection system – that of truly sharing responsibility for refugees’ (Grandi, 2016).

The NY Declaration sees states reaffirm the commitments already made under the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and it explicitly recognises the needs of refugees and migrants (NY Declaration 2016: paras.5 and 16). It refers to the vulnerabilities of refugees, of the need to protect them, to find safe legal pathways so as to save lives, and to protect people from exploitation. The NY Declaration acknowledges the necessity to address the root causes of refugee movements and the drivers that exacerbate movement (Ibid: para. 42). It also highlights the long-term repercussions of protracted refugee situations on host communities (Ibid: para.7).

The NY Declaration represents the first time that states have come together on such a large scale to reaffirm the rights of refugees and migrants.

In adopting the Declaration, states also agreed to work towards adopting a global compact on refugees and a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration in 2018. The number of people who have been forced to flee their homes and the consequences of their flight are too serious to continue as before. Solidarity and responsibility-sharing are the core themes of the Declaration.

### **What can the EU do?**

At the regional level, UNHCR drew on the commitments that states made in adopting the 2030 Agenda and the NY Declaration when it proposed four ways in which the EU could better protect refugees and tackle global displacement crises. In December 2016, UNHCR released its paper *Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally: UNHCR's proposals to rebuild trust through better management, partnership and solidarity*. The UN Refugee Agency presents four proposals for the EU to better manage the refugee situation and better protect refugees; they involve engagement by the EU beyond its borders, preparedness for arrivals, improved protection systems within member states, and better integration of refugees in the EU. The first of those actions, engagement by the EU beyond its borders, recommends that the EU expand and improve upon its development efforts, particularly in countries hosting large numbers of refugees. The goal of such engagement would be to improve conditions in host countries, thereby reducing the need for perilous onward journeys by refugees.

The UNHCR proposals are in line with the need for a new, integrated approach to development that is inclusive of displaced people, as enshrined in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the NY Declaration. The proposals point to key ways in which EU states could alleviate refugee crises beyond its borders, for instance, by ensuring that any funding allocated towards humanitarian operations is targeted at assessment-based needs (UNHCR, 2016: para 1.2). Funding should be predictable, flexible and multi-year, as well as being delivered in close consultation with host countries. Easing earmarking of contributions and lifting some of the



cumbersome reporting requirements related to funding could also increase the efficacy of such funding (Ibid: para.1.2).

Noteworthy is the proposal to ‘integrate refugees into development planning and national service provision by host communities’ (Ibid: para.1.2). The aim of this approach would be to enable refugees to rebuild and get on with their lives, to reduce any reliance they have on aid and to lead them towards longer term solutions, beyond mere survival. Again, this builds on the 2030 Agenda’s demand that ‘no one is left behind’. Solidarity is a vital component of the NY Declaration and the UNHCR proposals to the EU. By incorporating refugee crises and their impact on host communities within national development plans, states can improve the living situation of refugee and host communities alike. This, in turn, may help to reduce dangerous onward movement.

In an effort to reduce the number of people crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece and also combat human-trafficking in the Aegean Sea, the Member States of the EU and Turkey published the joint EU-Turkey statement on 18 March 2016. It comprised various measures to manage the number of people taking to the sea to reach the EU, including the return to Turkey of people who crossed to the Greek islands after 20 March 2016 and did not claim asylum there. Additionally, for every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled from Turkey to the EU in line with the UN Vulnerability Criteria (EU-Turkey Statement, 2016). The deal has been met with much criticism. UNHCR was clear at the time that safeguards must be in place in any such deal to ensure nobody is returned to where they could face harm and that asylum-seekers must have access to procedures and individual assessments (UNHCR, 2016c). The deal appears to have achieved one of its primary goals as the number of people travelling from Turkey to Greece by sea dropped from 151,000 in the first quarter of 2016, to 18,000 between 1 April and 31 October 2016. Almost a year since it was first implemented, 3,565 Syrians have been resettled from Turkey to EU countries and the European Commission stated on 2 March 2017 that Member States ‘have indicated they

plan to admit a further 34,000 Syrians from Turkey' (European Commission, 2017).

However, it is essential that legal pathways remain a route to safety and are not circumvented with the primary purpose of controlling migration. Conditions in Turkey and the availability of opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives there will remain decisive in whether people continue to take to the sea or not. Critics of the EU-Turkey deal might consider what more can be done to address the situations that are leading so many refugees and migrants to continue to attempt the Aegean Sea crossing. It must be recalled that Turkey alone hosts 2.9 million refugees. Increased resettlement places both for Turkey and neighbouring countries are a vital way of sharing responsibility and removing the need for some people to make the dangerous sea crossing. Resettlement remains a durable solution for vulnerable refugees and more resettlement places are needed worldwide.

From the point of view of people choosing dangerous onward journeys, knowledge is vital in the decision-making process. Anyone considering land and sea crossings to Europe or elsewhere should be able to make an informed decision about what lies ahead. To highlight the dangers of sea crossings, in particular to Italy, UNHCR has created an online platform specifically for Somali and Eritrean communities in an effort to inform young people of what could face them in transit to Europe. Many people make the journey but often do not share their trauma with family and friends at home. The UNHCR resource, *Telling the Real Story* (2015b), records people's harrowing accounts of their journeys to Europe so that others at home can at least make informed decisions about attempting the journey. Their stories can also help the international community to understand those dangers and to underscore the importance of providing legal pathways.

### **Legal pathways – benefits for refugees and host countries**

It must be noted that, while often used in relation to refugees, the term 'burden' can be incorrectly or unfairly applied. Refugees can bring great

offerings to host countries – consider the contribution of refugees such as Albert Einstein. While studies have yet to come to a definitive answer, many point towards the potential long-term benefits that refugees can bring to host communities, not only through the humanitarian aid that is directed towards them but also through the labour and purchasing power they bring (International Rescue Committee, 2016). The NY Declaration acknowledges that ‘[d]iversity enriches every society and contributes to social cohesion’ (NY declaration: para. 14).

One of the most meaningful ways in which states can share responsibility for refugees and gain from their presence is by providing safe, legal pathways for them to reach the state and restart their lives. Countries neighbouring conflict and crises should not be the only ones assisting the displaced, for example, Uganda or Ethiopia in relation to South Sudan. As has been all too apparent in recent years, refugees will take enormous risks to reach safety and opportunity elsewhere, whether they do so by crossing from the Horn of Africa to the coast of Libya and on to Italy by boat, from Turkey to Greece and through the Balkans to Sweden, or by taking to boats in the Bay of Bengal to reach Malaysia and beyond.

Ireland has resettled over 760 Syrian and Iraqi refugees from Lebanon and Jordan since 2014 (Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, 2017). Resettlement is a UNHCR-led programme whereby states agree to admit refugees from another host country, generally granting them permanent residence. Ireland joined the UNHCR programme in 1998. The Irish government’s commitment of September 2015 to admit up to 4,000 people in need of protection includes 1,040 resettled refugees from Lebanon, over 600 of whom have already arrived in Ireland. All of the refugees who are resettled are deemed to be refugees by UNHCR and are among the most vulnerable according to specific criteria, for example female-headed households, survivors of violence and torture or medical cases. The number of people in need of resettlement, estimated at 1.2 million globally by UNHCR, far outstrips the number of places available (UNHCR, 2016d: 13).

The 4,000 people to be admitted to Ireland will also include asylum-seekers, the majority of whom are Syrian and currently in Greece. There is an allocation of places for asylum-seekers in Italy, but agreements on security screening are causing difficulties in getting the scheme underway (Stanton, 2016). These asylum-seeker arrivals fall under what is known as the Relocation programme, which is an effort by EU Member States to ease pressure on and show solidarity with Greece and Italy (European Commission, 2017a). Additionally, Ireland committed to host up to 200 unaccompanied children from France after the closure of the so-called Jungle Camp in Calais.

These are all positive initiatives, but UNHCR urges a focus on the most vulnerable cases, in particular children. The EU Relocation programme from Greece and Italy is restricted to people of nationalities that are most likely to need international protection, for example Syrians and Yemenis. At present, that means that young Afghan, Pakistani, Gambian, Egyptian, Nigerian and other asylum-seekers, in particular children who are alone and outside of France, cannot avail of any of these schemes to safely reach Ireland or other countries. UNHCR continuously reminds states of the needs of these vulnerable children, many of whom have experienced or are at risk of horrendous abuse, including forced prostitution, *en route* to and in Europe (UNICEF, 2017).

Other legal pathways exist beyond resettlement and relocation for states to consider. In Portugal, for example, the Global Platform for Syrian Students is a non-profit, multi-stakeholder organisation that is supported by the Portuguese government. It allows Syrian students to study in Portugal through an integrated 'higher education care' services package (Global Platform for Syrian Students). This provides a safe and legal route for a number of Syrian students to reach Portugal and resume their third level studies there. Not only does this student scholarship scheme provide them with opportunities to rebuild their lives, but if they are one day in a position to return home safely, they will do so with qualifications and skills to be used and shared.

Canada provides what is probably the best-known example of a private sponsorship scheme, which has been operating since the late 1970s. UNHCR estimates that 1.2 million refugees around the world are in need of resettlement because they do not have durable solutions in their country of asylum (UNHCR, 2016d). Private sponsorship schemes, along with government-supported resettlement, have huge potential to increase places available for vulnerable refugees and their families. Although there are numerous schemes across the country, taking various forms, the general structure of a scheme sees individuals, groups, faith-based organisations, community associations, educational institutions and others working independently or banding together to sponsor a refugee family. They commit to supporting the family for a period of about 12 months by covering rent, food, clothing, utility and other general costs, and assisting with integration into local services and communities, including linking the family with educational, health and employment services (Government of Canada, 2016). This is one of the primary examples of private citizens, NGOs and the private sector working together and with governments to find solutions for refugees and show solidarity with them as well as the countries that have been hosting them.

Just over 40,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada since November 2015 through a variety of programmes, including 14,000 who were privately sponsored (Government of Canada, 2017). There is no set structure for such a scheme. Ireland ran a limited sponsorship scheme, the Syrian Humanitarian Admission Programme in 2014, through which 119 Syrians were granted permission to enter and temporarily reside in Ireland (Fitzgerald, 2016). The Canadian schemes see communities and the private sector joining together to alleviate pressure on host states and to give refugees greater opportunities and safety on a large scale. It is one example that NGOs and communities in Ireland could examine when looking for solutions for refugees.

Resettlement, family reunification, work or study visas and private sponsorship schemes are examples of legal pathways that are essential to

support refugees. They can reduce the burden on host countries by actively moving people out, decreasing pressure on strained resources and easing conditions for both the local and displaced communities that remain. Legal pathways are also a key way of reducing refugees' reliance on treacherous journeys across land and sea.

## **Conclusion**

Refugees must be central to development discussions and planning. The NY Declaration is clear on this, and the 2030 Agenda demands that 'no one is left behind'. If conditions in host countries are improved, refugees should have the opportunity to contribute even more to the local community and may be less likely to undertake dangerous onward movement. Mere survival is not enough; everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive. While hosting large refugee populations may be a strain on some national systems, inclusive development planning and responsibility sharing will reduce that strain. Refugees must have the opportunity to use their many skills and abilities and to contribute equally to society while rebuilding their lives.

If states take on a more equitable share of the displaced population, which they have committed to do in the NY Declaration, it will reduce pressure on the developing countries that are hosting the largest displaced populations. Burden sharing through legal pathways not only has the potential to benefit host countries, but offers refugees the chance to safely reach protection elsewhere. Countries like Ireland are doing a lot but can always do more, including by looking at student scholarship schemes and private sponsorship. The private sector, community groups and educational institutions have a chance to contribute significantly and to create places and homes for refugees, enriching society as they do so.

Many refugees express a desire to eventually return home. They do not flee by choice, but out of necessity. The resurgence of old conflict and the failure to resolve new ones means that the numbers returning home in recent years are low. That means it is vital that the international community fulfils the commitments it made in the 2030 Agenda and the NY Declaration

by assisting host communities and giving refugees more than survival prospects.

Consider the situations that people are facing to conclude that putting their lives in the hands of smugglers, cramped in trucks or in flimsy boats, is a better option than to remain where they are. The more that is done now, the better the future holds for both developed and developing host communities and refugees. And if, one day, refugees are able to safely return home, they may be able to use the skills and experience they had the opportunity to gain, sharing and using them to help rebuild homes and communities.

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\*Any views expressed are the author's own.