

Opportunities amidst the migration crisis

Huffington Post, 17 September 2015

Gibril Faal, Interim Executive Director of the Africa-Europe Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT)

In August 2015, there were about two million Syrian refugees in Turkey and they make up about 25% of the population of Lebanon. Even with the highest estimates, potential refugee numbers in the European Union account for less than 0.2% of the population. On the other hand, the UK is rightly proud of providing financial assistance of £1bn. This is almost the same as the total given by all the EU countries put together. Compare it to Turkey's funding of £3.5bn. UK's economy is about 3.5 times larger than that of Turkey. For UK to be as generous as Turkey, it will have to provide support of over £12bn, being its entire budget for international development.

Is Europe overwhelmed by logistical problems which render it unable to cope with a relatively minor migration crisis? Or is it consumed by cultural fear of mass influx of non-white and non-Christian peoples? Europe does not lack compassion. It has a long history of receiving the huddled masses of migrants and refugees. Angela Merkel's Germany has reinforced this noble tradition. In the UK, David Cameron had worryingly prevaricated and hesitated on the matter. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán had questioned and impeded this moral imperative. Yet everywhere, we see ordinary citizens demand that Europe show due kindness and humanity to people displaced from troubled home countries.

Every country can be generous in times of plenty and bliss. The character of civilised nations is best demonstrated in times of need and turmoil. This migration crisis is a chance for Europe to look inward, to redefine and reaffirm what its character is in a more globalised and connected twenty first-century. Although perceived as crisis, mass migration into Europe is also an opportunity which is real, relevant and required.

Strategic focus on migration and development

Amazingly, European governments get totally discombobulated at the whiff of a crisis. They react as if there is no normative narrative or pre-existing coherent policy framework. Urgent short term needs are made to undermine strategic goals and long term plans. This is not a sign of responsible responsiveness. It demonstrates weak leadership and short-sightedness. In 2013, Europe joined the rest of the world to adopt a United Nations eight-point plan on enhancing the nexus between migration and development, asserting that countries "should mainstream migration into national development plans". At the historic 70th session of the UN General Assembly this September, the new Sustainable Development Goals will be adopted. The new SDG 10 is a commitment to "reduce inequality within and among countries" and one of the targets of this goal is to "facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies".

There is no need to deviate from the strategic and legitimate focus of linking migration to development. The curse of short-termist overreaction is illustrated by the current UK migration policy scenario. In response to migrants trying to cross the English Channel from Calais, the government has embarked on a process of criminalisation. It proposes to criminalise the act of working for a living – with a penalty to imprison irregular migrants who work. It further proposes to criminalise the act of renting residential dwelling – with the goal of

making irregular migrants homeless. No immigration laws should cross the line into seeking to pauperise and dehumanise. These proposals are bizarre, reactionary and against the Conservative principles of self development. The person targeted by the force of the UK state and law is firstly human before she became a migrant. Why sully the country's human rights credentials? A refugee or economic migrant wanting to work is a progressive and productive person who contributes to development for herself and her community.

Migrants and refugees are resourceful contributors

Historically, human rights agencies and advocates were worried of a moral hazard that if refugees are considered active development actors, their protection under international law may be compromised. This mindset is changing. In 2014, Solutions Alliance was launched, "to promote and enable the transition for displaced persons away from dependency towards increased resilience, sustainable self-reliance and development". This project is co-chaired by UN High Commission for Refugees and funded by the Danish Refugee Council.

The plight of the refugee may be one of desperation and destitution, but the person of the refugee is neither hopeless nor helpless. They demonstrate strong will and courage, and invest funds, time and effort to secure a safe and better future. Stopped from boarding trains, they laid their heads on the pavements of Bucharest and stole a little rest. Then they stood up on their tired limbs and started to trek from Hungary to Austria – man, woman and child. Witness the indomitable spirit of the migrant.

Many come with ready skills and competencies. Most come with huge potential for personal development. All come with a positive attitude and believe in progression. Some may yet return to rebuild their battered countries. Many will live and work in their new homes. Today's grateful refugee will be tomorrow's productive new citizen, who enhances national economic output and pays the pension benefits of aged Europeans. Refugees should be assessed for what they need and what they can give – and be assisted in both, for the benefit of all.

By accepting the fact that refugees can be significant contributors to development, some of the absurd blanket restrictions should be rescinded. Refugees who can take up paid work should be allowed to do so. It is also eminently sensible for Europe to help refugees settle in countries that gives them a higher chance of returning to a normal life. This may be a country where they have access to a social and support network or higher prospects of getting a job. We must remember that protection and provision of safe abode is not the end goal of a refugee. Such refuge is merely for them to restart a normal life. Their end goal is to live productive lives for the betterment of self, family, community and country

Africa-Europe Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT)

<http://adept-platform.org>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/gibril-faal/opportunities-amidst-the- b 8153004.html>