

POLICY AREA:
Forced Migration

G20 policy makers should support wider religious roles in refugee resettlement

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Abstract

Religious entities play significant roles in the current refugee/ forced migration crisis. These roles include innovative and experience based ideas to address broken aspects of the humanitarian system, overall advocacy on behalf of refugees and migrants based on humanitarian and spiritual principles, direct action in refugee camps and communities, action in communities that refugees and migrants flee, and support for refugee integration in host countries, including explicit efforts to promote social cohesion and address trauma. Broadly, however, religious factors and contributions are poorly understood and insufficiently taken into account by policy makers and in think tank analyses of these (among other) issues. In each area of religious engagement measures to harmonize and enhance efforts could increase impact.

This brief focuses on the European and US resettlement challenge, which is linked in multiple ways to the broader crisis of forced migration. The G20 in its approach to the forced migration crisis and specifically to resettlement and reintegration should engage more directly with religious actors as central partners. These actors should be part of policy discussions on issues like criteria for resettlement, engagement with host communities to assure welcome, a sharp focus on the protection of unaccompanied or separated children, special measures to counter risky transit like the humanitarian corridor proposal, and post arrival reintegration including education and trauma healing. Recognition of and support for religious engagement could help to counter the fears and negative responses that affect political responses to refugee resettlement. Closer cooperation with key religious actors could substantively strengthen integration processes.

Challenge

Religious dimensions of the current forced migration crises are significant, often misunderstood, and commonly underappreciated.

UNHCR's 2017 Global Trends report notes that more than 68.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes, the highest number of forcibly displaced populations since the end of World War II. Just under two thirds of these are internally displaced persons (IDPs). About 86 percent of refugees under UNHCR's mandate are in low and middle income countries, including Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Uganda, Chad, and the Sudan. Jordan alone hosts at least 630,000 refugees (UNHCR 2015), ten percent of its total population (unofficial numbers are considerably higher). The multiple causes of forced migration include complex and protracted conflicts and poor governance.

The dimensions of the current refugee and migrant crisis are quite well known and documented, albeit with gaps in knowledge. Substantial international efforts are devoted to addressing practical dimensions of the immediate situation and to exploring long-term policy responses (for example at the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and during UN General Assembly discussions).

A small percentage of forced migrants are resettled in G20 countries, notably in the European Union countries and the United States, with active issues in Australia also. The acceptance and integration process is an immediate topic of concern for G20 members, as are the longer term issues related to the overall humanitarian system.

Perceived and actual links to religion of aspects of the forced migration crisis are complex, involving both distorted narratives (for example associating refugees with specific religious beliefs, perceived versus actual threats to security) and practical issues (addressing cultural/religious differences pertinent for successful integration such as gender roles and application in crisis situations of human rights principles). In some situations religious tensions play a part while religious actors are involved in many dimensions of mediation and peacebuilding. Tensions around perceived religious dimensions stymie successful integration and contribute to political tensions in countries of resettlement.

Many religious institutions, including interreligious and intrafaith bodies (the Catholic Church, World Council of Churches) and faith-inspired organizations (inter alia Caritas Internationalis, Jesuit Refugee Service, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Lutheran World Relief, and World Vision) have active and long-standing programs that involve direct action to support forced migrants and global advocacy calling notably for compassionate and actionable responses to refugees.

The involvement of religious bodies in refugee resettlement issues is dynamic and often responsive both to formal religious leadership and to local community initiatives involving religious actors. Some (for example actions of the International Catholic Migration Commission – ICMC) are formal and transnational while others are more local and informal. Action overall is inspired and shaped by important religious ethical teachings. Many of these teachings – welcoming the stranger, hospitality, compassion for the most vulnerable – are shared among religious communities. Thus interreligious and ecumenical approaches are some of the most inspirational and effective among practical efforts and responses (witness the impact of Pope Francis's and the Patriarch of Constantinople's personal engagement with refugees and migrants).

A practical example of an initiative that combines exemplary and operational intervention is the Sant'Egidio Community's Humanitarian Corridors program. This pilot project, in collaboration with the Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian and Methodist Churches, aims to avoid the boat journeys in the Mediterranean that cause countless deaths, including many children; to avoid human trafficking, to prevent the exploitation of human traffickers who do business with those who

flee from wars, and to grant to people in "vulnerable conditions" (victims of persecution, torture and violence, as well as families with children, elderly people, sick people, persons with disabilities) legal entry to Italian territory with a humanitarian visa, with the possibility to apply for asylum.

The evidence basis for policy planning and implementation on refugee/forced migrant integration overall is fragmented and coordination among different actors – secular and religious and among religious groups – is insufficient. The response and organization of religious support for resettlement of forced migrants varies considerably among G20 member countries and so do the issues involved. There is an urgent need for a rigorous mapping of ongoing efforts and robust communications strategies. This is a responsibility of religious communities. Various centers are undertaking such efforts.

Religious beliefs and institutions play central roles in the everyday lives of the majority of people around the world, leading both to forces that generate conflict and to a rich potential source of motivation, strength, and resilience in the face of crises such as the forced migration and reintegration challenge. Religious roles in humanitarian agendas have received considerable recent attention, including action proposals featured during the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. However, more systematic engagement with religious actors and cooperation with religious organizations and actors (including the large body of faith-inspired organizations), which are doing important work on the ground, is needed. The G20 can play a crucial role by devoting explicit attention to the topic.

Sharper identification and recognition of religious roles (positive and less positive) in resettlement must be at the foundation of active G20 engagement on the resettlement issues. This effort is also foundational for the broader 2030 agenda as the disruptions involved in the forced migration crises deflect energy, attention, and financial resources from pursuit of broader global goals. Religious communities with their dense local networks and long-standing and resilient local presence as well as their rich transnational networks are well positioned to see these linkages and to appreciate the challenges involved. That is why the forced migration issue is of special concern and focus for religious bodies, interreligious institutions, and faith-inspired institutions. The negative impact of distorted narratives involving religious beliefs and complex linkages among the multiple pressures that force migration and insecurity are central topics of concern for religious leaders and communities and for G20 leaders. Their positive potential should be explicitly acknowledged and acted upon.

In Europe, individual religious communities and leaders as well as interreligious groups (both established institutions and spontaneous local responses) support a wide variety of initiatives to support refugees and to facilitate their integration into the communities of resettlement. Some actions are quite well known: the leadership of Pope Francis in urging a welcome. Others have received limited attention. The Winchester Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace at Winchester University has undertaken research on responses in several European countries, identifying a range of positive efforts and indicative narratives suggesting positive impact where religious groups support refugee resettlement.

In the United States, six of nine long established refugee resettlement agencies that support the US government refugee program have religious ties. Thus there is a lengthy experience to draw on. These groups could have a distinctive positive impact on advocacy. Learning from the resettlement experience and particularly its religious dimensions could provide pertinent knowledge to guide future policy on refugee and migrant resettlement. This could link to efforts to address popular concerns about refugee impact by linking experience to shared and individual religious community teachings.

While religious institutions and communities are actively involved in the crisis, there is a clear and shared appreciation (among religious actors) that they could do far more. Religious actors for example

provide practical support to migrants in integration into new societies (e.g. financial support by host congregations, legal or housing assistance, befriending or accompaniment services, language training, educational or employment support) National support mechanisms could draw more systematically on these resources in G20 states. Religious actors can be engaged and positive partners in addressing rising xenophobia and nationalism in G20 states.

Areas of suggested focus are the authority that influential leaders can use to promote tolerance and peace, defend humanitarian values, and offer alternative narratives to radicalization. Likewise local religious actors (including formal clerics but also women religious actors) can contribute action and insights.

Proposal

Given the critical importance of the forced migration issue, the G20 should establish an informal network of religious actors and communities to centralize and disseminate evidence based information. The network can also advocate on behalf of the needs of refugees and forced migrants and identify critical areas where intervention is needed and appropriate.

Religious actors, because of their broad transnational links and direct operational experience, should have G20 recognition as central partners in addressing the overall forced migration crisis and in any reforms to the refugee system. Actions should focus both on the broad forced migration crisis and specific resettlement programs.

G20 members should recommend the establishment of a commission to redesign the UNHCR system to make it a truly global system. This would include religious participation. Muslim engagement (Muslim majority nations and Muslim religious leaders) is vital to efforts to address the system. Among the three Muslim majority countries among the G20, only Turkey is a party to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

The G20 should establish a global refugee and religion research fund to support research into the complex role religion plays in the global refugee crisis. Research topics would include, but not be limited to, religion as a driver of refugee displacement, treatment of religious minorities in refugee camps, best practices in treatment of diverse religious communities in host countries and by host governments, religion as a source of resentment of refugees, religion as a resource in the treatment of refugee trauma, and the dissemination of lessons learned across all governments involved in refugee resettlement.

The G20 Summit should acknowledge religious engagement in the resettlement process specifically in European Union countries and in the US and commit to drawing on this experience: for example ICMC's Resettlement Support Centre – covering the Middle East and Turkey – based in Istanbul and with an outreach office in Beirut, facilitates application, screening and processing of refugees (already given refugee status by UNHCR and referred by UNHCR for possible resettlement to USA) and the Humanitarian Corridors project.

Specifically, the G20 gathering can support these efforts by:

- (a) Identifying a standing interreligious advisory group to advise the G20 leaders and advisors on religious dimensions of the forced migration crisis and specifically resettlement issues and approaches. This could be the basis for explicit discussion during the 2018 and 2019 G20 meetings
 - (b) Enhance systematic mechanisms to assure cooperation and joint advocacy among religiously active communities and public authorities, at G20 level as well as EU and national government.
 - (c) Support programs of religious organizations and actors that strengthen the resilience of displaced communities. Safe space exchanges between people of different religious and social groups, including migrants and host communities, could help identify innovative approaches and solutions.
 - (d) Acknowledge religious organizations and actors as key stakeholders in refugee response during negotiations and formulation of the Global Compact on Refugees, which is expected to be finalized in 2018.
 - (e) Acknowledge the important support that religious actors can provide in psycho-social interventions and overcoming trauma.
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