

A G20 Interfaith Forum Brief
POLICY AREA: Peace

Resettlement of Refugees and Forced Migrants: Religious Dimensions

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Abstract

Challenges faced by refugees and migrants, as well as by the societies that host them, are pressing issues on the global agenda. The G20 Osaka Summit offers an opportunity to look boldly at these challenges and consider pathways forward. Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, negotiated and introduced as a framework for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to achieve more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, changes parts of the policy landscape, for example heightening the focus on active involvement of local communities. The various religious dimensions (both positive and less positive) involved in the resettlement and integration of forcibly displaced persons are significant, but often misunderstood or underappreciated. Ethical and practical leadership by religious entities can contribute in many ways, drawing on their wide and varied experience in working with affected populations. Of note is the religious experience of refugees and migrants themselves and the role of faith and religious entities in meeting their physical and spiritual needs. Religious actors are also at the forefront of advocacy for refugees and migrants, direct action in refugee camps and communities that host affected populations, and support for refugee and migrant integration where they settle or during return.

This brief urges the G20 leaders to engage more directly with religious actors as central partners in finding new and expanded ways to serve and integrate refugees and forcibly displaced persons. On issues like criteria for resettlement, engagement with host communities to assure welcome, protection of unaccompanied or separated children, special measures to counter risky transit, and post-arrival reintegration including education and trauma healing, the expertise of religious actors can substantively strengthen policy and humanitarian efforts. Overall, recognition and closer cooperation with religious actors can help to counter negative responses to resettlement and ensure smooth integration processes.

The Challenge

A record-high number of people are displaced, and that number is expected to grow.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports 68.5 million people forcibly displaced as of the end of 2017.¹ Nearly two-thirds are internally displaced persons (IDPs),² often unprotected by policies and actions that address refugees and forced migrants. Among nearly 25.4 million refugees, over half are

¹ “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017,” UNHCR, 2017, <https://www.unhcr.org/5b27be547.pdf>.

² Ibid.

children,³ representing an especially vulnerable population that demands high priority action. Some 85 percent of refugees under UNHCR's mandate are in low and middle-income countries, with the least developed countries currently hosting one-third of the global total.⁴ Lebanon has the largest number of refugees relative to its national population, Turkey the largest total number of refugees.⁵ The numbers of people who have been forced to flee their homes to date represent the highest levels of displacement on record, and current trends suggest the number will continue to grow. The multiple causes of forced migration include complex and protracted conflicts, poor governance, economic shocks, and natural disasters including those caused by climate change. Existing response strategies are inadequate to address the magnitude of the crisis.

Implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees presents challenges.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. Its primary objective is to facilitate durable solutions for refugees with a focus on 1) easing pressures on host countries; 2) enhancing refugee self-reliance; 3) expanding access to third country solutions; and 4) supporting conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.⁶ The GCR highlights several refugee needs that require particular support: access to education, jobs and livelihoods, health, food security and the special needs of vulnerable groups including children. To ensure success the GCR must be supported by adequate resources and strong partnerships among a diverse group of actors. Religious actors can be key partners in this effort, not only in the areas of conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding as noted in the GCR, but also in larger efforts to plan and deliver assistance to refugees and host communities, shape public opinion and galvanize action. The GCR does not fully acknowledge these efforts, and thus misses activities across its areas of interest for which there is substantial evidence of local faith actor involvement.⁷

Poor coordination between key stakeholders and limited engagement on issues of religion and humanitarianism means missed opportunities to leverage existing coping mechanisms and systems of support.

Religious beliefs and institutions play central roles in the everyday lives of people across the world, leading both to forces that generate conflict and to rich potential sources of motivation, strength, and resilience. Trends of religious fortification have been noted among many displaced populations.⁸ There are many practical and psycho-social benefits

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.

⁷ This policy brief demonstrates areas of local faith actor engagement in refugee response as aligned with each section of the GCR:

“Faith Actors and the Implementation of The Global Compact on Refugees,” Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2018, <https://jlfic.com/resources/policy-brief-faith-actors-and-the-implementation-of-the-global-compact-on-refugees/>

⁸ J. B. Saunders, et al., *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at the Global Crossroads* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

that a religious or faith-based connection may provide for forced migrants and refugees, including access to services, information, advocacy on their behalf, a social support network, a sense of stability, and to rely on as a coping mechanism in responding to traumatic experiences. For many forced migrants, faith is central to a sense of agency and resilience in situations of protracted displacement, and is thus crucial to refugees' and IDPs' wellbeing. Religious actors are involved in providing practical support to migrants to ease 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). More systematic engagement with religious actors and cooperation with religious organizations, which are doing important if sometimes disarticulated and unrecognized work on the ground, would increase the efficacy and impact of actions taken by G20 countries.

Actual or distorted perceptions of religious tensions can impede successful integration.

Perceived and actual links to religion of aspects of the forced migration crisis are complex. Religious beliefs and actors can play important roles in easing the integration process of migrants and refugees by establishing a common connection across nationalities and ethnicities. Religiosity, particularly among second-generation youth, has been linked with higher educational achievements, better mastery of language, as well as reduced risk behaviors,⁹ which can help ease integration into a new society. Conversely, religious links can impede the resettlement process by emphasizing in-group mentalities and highlighting qualities of difference from host societies. They can involve both distorted narratives (for example associating refugees with specific religious beliefs, and perceived versus actual threats to security) and practical issues (addressing cultural/religious differences pertinent for successful integration, such as gender roles and application of human rights principles). Tensions around perceived religious dimensions can hinder successful integration and contribute to political tensions in countries of resettlement. **The negative impact of distorted narratives involving religious beliefs and complex linkages among the multiple pressures that force migration and insecurity are therefore central topics of concern for religious leaders and communities and for G20 leaders.**

Resettlement and integration processes are an immediate topic of concern for G20 members and for religious actors.

The dimensions of the current refugee and migrant crisis are largely well known and documented. Issues are necessarily particular to each displaced population and host state, but chief among global challenges is establishing a more equitable system of responsible burden sharing. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are overburdened. Only a small percentage of forced migrants are currently resettled in G20 countries. As the number of refugees continues to increase, equitable acceptance and integration processes are an immediate concern, as are longer-term issues related to the overall humanitarian system.

⁹ Ibid.

The disruptions involved in the forced migration crises deflect energy, attention, and financial resources from the broader global goals of the 2030 agenda. The G20 can play a crucial role by devoting explicit attention to the topic and recognizing religious actors as central partners. Religious communities with their long-standing and resilient local presence as well as their rich transnational networks are well positioned to identify linkages with broader goals and to appreciate the challenges involved.

Pathways Forward

Substantial groundwork on religious roles and recommended action provide a foundation for continued dialogue and action.

Religious communities including the Catholic and Anglican churches and major faith-inspired organizations including World Vision, Caritas, and Islamic Relief Worldwide have engaged on refugee issues notably during the Istanbul Global Assembly and throughout negotiations for the Global Compacts.¹⁰ Implementing the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 presents crucial opportunities for leadership and partnership. Action is needed to build capacities to mitigate real and perceived lack of compliance of faith actors with international humanitarian standards

G20 agendas should give high priority to actions to meet the needs of global refugee and migrant populations, taking well into account the practical experience and ethical leadership of leading religious communities.

Many religious institutions, including interreligious and intrafaith bodies and faith-inspired organizations (inter alia the Catholic Church, World Council of Churches, Caritas Internationalis, Jesuit Refugee Service, Islamic Relief Worldwide, HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), Lutheran World Relief, and World Vision) have active and longstanding programs that involve direct action to support forced migrants and global advocacy, calling notably for compassionate and actionable responses to refugees. Faith motivates many volunteers taking part in visitations and other activities within immigrant detention and deportation centers. Religious beliefs and practices often play an important role in migrants' experiences of displacement and integration into a new environment. Spiritual and psychological support is often needed and welcome.

Priority, urgent attention is needed to refugee and displaced children and alliances with religious institutions offer a practical way forward

A global coalition of faith focused on the particular challenges experienced by Children on the Move¹¹ had committed collectively to a call to action¹² to provide spiritual support, address child protection issues, and counter xenophobia.

¹⁰ See "Joint Recommendations on the Role of Local Faith Communities in Refugee Response," Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2018, <https://jliflc.com/resources/joint-recommendation-on-draft-of-the-global-compact-on-refugees-programme-of-action/>,

¹¹ See three Children on the Move briefs on: Spiritual Support (<https://jliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-spiritual-support/>), Child Protection (<https://jliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-continuum-of-protection->

Build on the dynamism of involvement of religious bodies in refugee resettlement issues, in responding both to formal religious leadership and to local community initiatives involving religious actors.

Some responses (for example actions of the International Catholic Migration Commission – ICMC) are formal and transnational while others are more local and informal. In the United States, six of nine long established refugee resettlement agencies that support the US government refugee program have religious ties. In Europe, individual religious communities and leaders as well as interreligious groups (both established institutions and spontaneous local responses) support widely varied initiatives to support refugees and to facilitate their integration into the communities of resettlement. As a model of success, more than 2,500 refugees have arrived safely in Europe via the Humanitarian Corridors for Refugees, an initiative of the Community of Sant’Egidio with the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy and the Tavola Valdese.¹³

Draw on action by faith communities and actors that is inspired and shaped by important religious ethical teachings.

Many teachings – welcoming the stranger, hospitality, and 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. The influential leadership of religious actors can promote tolerance and peace, defend humanitarian values, and offer alternative narratives to radicalization. Recognizing the negative impacts of some religious voices, they can also have a distinctive positive impact on advocacy for the agency and self-sufficiency of migrants, and can be engaged and positive partners in combating distorted narratives and addressing rising xenophobia and nationalism.

Enhance systematic mechanisms to assure cooperation and joint advocacy among religiously active communities and public authorities.

Systematic support for programs of religious organizations and actors that strengthen the resilience of displaced communities is critical to ensuring intervention success. Facilitated dialogical exchanges and increased cooperation between people of different religious and social groups, including between religious actors and governments, between religious actors and secular humanitarian actors, and between migrants and host communities, could help identify innovative approaches and solutions. Specific actions and engagements with religious actors can focus both on the broad forced migration crisis and specific resettlement programs.

[for-children/](#)), and Countering Xenophobia (<https://jliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-the-role-of-faith-in-building-peaceful-societies-and-combating-xenophobia/>),

¹² “Faith Action for Children on the Move Action Plan,” Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2018, <https://evac.jliflc.com/resources/faith-action-for-children-on-the-move-action-plan/>

¹³ “Humanitarian Corridors for Refugee,” Sant’Egidio, 2019, <https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/30112/langID/en/Humanitarian-Corridors.html>

A G20 refugee and religion research fund could explore ways to enhance partnerships for action on the global refugee crisis.

Better data and evidence are critically needed to inform interventions; it must be collected and used in meaningful ways. Learning from resettlement experience and particularly its religious dimensions could provide pertinent knowledge to guide future policy on refugee and migrant resettlement and integration. Research topics could include, inter alia 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.

A standing interreligious advisory group could advise the G20 leaders and advisors on religious dimensions of the forced migration crisis and specifically resettlement issues and approaches.

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.

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