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Religious roles in refugee resettlement: pertinent experience and insights, addressed to G20 members

Katherine Marshall, Shaun Casey, Attalah Fitzgibbon, Azza Karam, Majbritt Lyck-Bowen, Ulrich Nitschke, Mark Owen, Isabel Phiri, Alberto Quattrucci, Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, Msgr. Robert Vitillo, and Erin Wilson

Abstract

Religious entities play significant roles in the current forced migration crisis. These roles include innovative and experience based ideas to address flawed 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. Further, assumptions about religion and the religious identity of refugees and migrants play an influential role in societal and policy debates surrounding the crisis, particularly in relation to security and violent extremism. 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 measures to increase religious engagement, including understanding, harmonization and coordination of efforts, and support, could increase impact. G20 agendas and gatherings, as well as those of think tanks, can benefit from purposeful attention to these often neglected dimensions of a central global challenge.

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As people of faith, our action is founded on a deep concern for the needs of refugees and migrants throughout the world. Our many responses are based on the values and principles of our respective faith teachings and traditions. Yet our success rests squarely on our ability to partner with others – governments, civil society, local communities, and refugee families. ICMC Secretary General, Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo

The Challenge

Religious dimensions of the current forced migration crises are significant, often misunderstood (or seen only through the myopic prisms of ‘causing problems’), and have yet to be strategically considered by policy makers.

This brief focuses on the Western European and US resettlement challenge, which is linked in multiple ways to the broader crisis of forced migration (Mavelli and Wildon 2016; Marshall and Corman 2016). The G20 leaders in their approach to the refugee and migration crises and specifically to resettlement and integration in host countries should engage more directly with religious actors as central partners. These actors, which include many faith-inspired organizations, religious communities, and individual religious leaders, should be part of policy discussions 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 (for example elaborating the humanitarian corridor proposal), and post arrival reintegration, including education and efforts to address the trauma experienced by refugees and forced migrants. G20 leadership should also encourage more nuanced public discussion of religious identities and affiliations of refugees and migrants in media and politics. 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 in some situations. Multi-religious projects offer the promise of helping to overcome some of the barriers to integration previously identified, notably in the European context. More purposeful exploration and recognition of concerns of various religious actors could help to counter negative messages and actions.

UNHCR’s 2016 Global Trends report notes that more than 65 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 84 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; Bangladesh now houses a large refugee population, coming from Myanmar. Jordan alone hosts at least 685,000 refugees (UNHCR 2017), 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 (for example, how many people die crossing the Mediterranean, the impact of trauma on refugee and host community interactions). Likewise ethical dimensions are the topic of considerable reflection (Hollenbach 2016). 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 in 2016 and 2017).

A small percentage of forced migrants are resettled in G20 countries, notably in the European Union countries and the United States and Canada. Australia also resettles some refugees and migrants. 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.

The perceived and actual links between religious attitudes and institutions and 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 of human rights principles in crisis situations) (Karam 2016). In some instances, religious tensions play a part in the conflicts that prompt people to flee (concerns about the Muslim faith of Myanmar's Rohingya community in a majority Buddhist nation are an overt factor in the complex tensions that led to the massive 2017 exodus to Bangladesh). That said, the religious causes of conflicts are always complex, interwoven with other factors such as ethnicity and economic and political competition. Tensions around perceived religious dimensions stymie successful integration and contribute to political tensions in countries of resettlement. In contrast, religious actors are involved in many dimensions of mediation and peacebuilding, in different regions and in forms that range from direct involvement in negotiations to broad-based efforts at community, national, and transnational levels (Appleby et al. 2005).

The situation is further complicated where countries that have ratified and acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and the accompanying protocols ignore treaty obligations. Some of those countries are blocking asylum claims by diverting the potential claimants to other countries, e.g., Australia with Manus Island and Nauru; others are sending those who may have legitimate claims en bloc to other countries (e.g., EU countries with Turkey and Italy engaging Libya to block passage to Italy). The United States administration in 2017 and 2018 has sought to block whole groups of refugees coming from a number of countries (refugees who have already been recognized by UNHCR and vetted by the US Department of Homeland Security) from entering the United States to be resettled there.

Many religious institutions, including interreligious, multifaith, and intrafaith bodies (specific Christian denominations, Religions for Peace, and the World Council of Churches are examples along a wide spectrum) and faith-inspired development and humanitarian organizations (inter alia Caritas Internationalis, Jesuit Refugee Service, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Lutheran World Relief, and World Vision) have long-standing programs that involve direct action to support migrants (including those who were forced and/or trafficked). Many of these entities are involved in global advocacy, calling notably for compassionate and actionable responses to refugees.

The involvement of religious entities in refugee resettlement issues is dynamic and can often be responsive to formal religious leadership and/or to local community initiatives prompted by or involving religious actors (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2018; Mavelli and Wilson 2016). Some (for example actions of the International Catholic Migration Commission – ICMC) are formal and

transnational while others are more local and may have a less institutional or formal character. Action is often inspired and shaped by religious ethical teachings. Many of these teachings – welcoming the stranger, hospitality, compassion for the most vulnerable – are shared across many religious communities. Thus interreligious and ecumenical approaches can be 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). Furthermore, collaboration between religious communities can help refugees bridge ethnic and social divides, which have in the past led to refugees becoming embedded within minority communities and prevented comprehensive integration into host communities.

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. The aims are to avoid human trafficking, to curtail exploitation by 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. In Italy, the Community works closely with local Muslim and Christian communities to enhance the integration process and the experience for refugees. These efforts are now in the process of replication in France.

In most parts of Europe, individual religious communities and leaders as well as interreligious and multi-religious groups (both established institutions and spontaneous local responses) undertake 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 is a prominent example. 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 out of nine long established refugee resettlement agencies that support the US government in addressing refugee needs have religious ties. Thus there is a lengthy experience to draw on. These groups could have a distinctive positive impact on social awareness and social cohesion as well as public policy. Learning from the unique and often comprehensive approaches of religious organizations towards resettlement experiences 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.

A major link and area of focus is the role of private citizens, whose action is often organized through and supported by religious communities. A two-day conference in Brussels in September, 2017, organized by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe in cooperation with Caritas Internationalis in Belgium and the Churches’ Commission in Europe, focused on the roles of churches and Christian organizations in community-based

sponsorship programs for refugees in Europe. A central theme was the benefits of sponsorship in engaging local communities, churches and faith-based actors at the grassroots level. As resettlement needs among refugees continue to grow, sponsorship programs are proving beneficial for long-term integration and their ability to provide more safe pathways to host countries in Europe and other parts of the world. Commitment to integration involves private citizens making a difference and ultimately contributing to global response.

The evidence basis for policy planning and implementation of integration efforts for refugees is fragmented, and coordination among different actors – secular and religious on the one hand, and among religious groups on the other– is insufficient. The response and organization of religious support for resettlement of forced migrants varies considerably among G20 member countries, as do the issues involved. There is an urgent need for a rigorous mapping of ongoing efforts and robust communications strategies. While various academic centers and think tanks undertake some of this mapping, it behooves some of the religious organizations to contribute more systematically towards these efforts. Moreover, there remains a need to identify a relatively more centralized locus for the information and communication.

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 joint commitments (The Charter for Faith-Based Humanitarian Action) and recommendations for action featured during the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. However, more systematic engagement with religious actors and cooperation with religious actors (including the large body of faith-inspired organizations), which are doing important work on the ground, is needed. G20 focus and discussion can play a crucial role by devoting explicit attention to the topic.

While religious institutions and communities are actively involved in the current global crisis (at global, national, and local levels), there is a clear and shared appreciation (among religious actors) that they could do far more to be engaged and positive partners to governments in addressing rising xenophobia and nationalism in G20 states. 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.

Sharper identification and recognition of religious roles (positive and less so) in both resettlement and integration efforts must be at the foundation of active engagement by G20 countries. Such efforts are also foundational for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broader 2030 agenda, as the disruptions involved in the forced migration crises add to the existing financial, political and socio-cultural challenges. Religious communities with their dense local and transnational networks and long-standing and resilient local presence are well positioned to see these linkages and to appreciate the challenges and needs required. That is why the forced migration issue is of special concern and focus for most religious institutions as well as interreligious and faith-inspired organizations. The negative

impact of distorted views of religion, especially Islam - that religion/Islam is intrinsically violent, reactionary, and conservative - in public discussions on migration is a cause for concern of many religious leaders. These views contribute to linking forced migration with terrorism. This in turn contributes to justifying a security approach to migration, rather than a framework more motivated by humanitarian principles and values. Efforts should be made by all G20 leadership to address these narrow and erroneous assumptions in the public discussions in their own countries, recognizing the complexity of religious belief, practice, and identity. They can play important roles in acknowledging and acting specifically upon the positive contribution of religious communities and their motivated leaders.

Areas of suggested focus are harnessing the authority that influential religious leaders have to promote tolerance and peace and defend humanitarian and human rights values, thus offering alternative narratives both to marginalization as well as subsequent radicalization. Local religious actors (including formal clerics as well as women leaders within faith communities) can contribute towards community cohesion and provide insights built on working with diverse sectors, genders and ages. Interreligious and multi-religious initiatives can help refugees develop wide societal networks and contacts, and support and enhance social, economic and political integration.

Proposals

Given the critical importance of the forced migration issue, the T20 could and should work collaboratively to identify and link networks and institutions of religious and academic actors, to seek to centralize and disseminate evidence-based information. These networks can also advocate on behalf of the needs of refugees and forced migrants more systematically, 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.

The G20 members should consider providing more targeted financial support to the UN system entities dealing with refugees and migration – including facilitating a special focus on forced migration and human trafficking. These efforts should deliberately seek to better understand and include the work undertaken by religious entities. Moreover, inclusion of Muslim engagement (Muslim majority nations and Muslim religious leaders) through more deliberate engagement with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is vital to such efforts.

The need for reforms in global approaches and institutional mechanisms to respond to refugee and forced migration issues is well recognized. The issues belong on the continuing G20 agenda. In the approaches and processes, both religious leaders and of religious-inspired organizations active in the field of protection and resettlement of refugees should participate.

The G20 should consider supporting 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, the role of religion and multi-religious cooperation in enhancing integration processes, the dissemination of lessons learned across all governments involved in refugee resettlement, and strategies for promoting greater understanding of different religious and cultural backgrounds of refugees amongst populations in resettlement countries.

G20 Summits should acknowledge religious engagement in the resettlement process specifically in European Union countries and in the US and Canada, and commit to drawing on these experiences to inform national policies and to advise intergovernmental entities.

Resources:

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