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Angelo Martelli

In Search of Security: The Migration Conundrum and the Need for a Global Response

When Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, made his statement in front of the Security Council in November 2017, he asked its members a question of apparent striking simplicity but enormous significance: *“Have we become unable to broker peace?”* These words must have powerfully resounded in the ambassadors’ ears, whose main mission is to deliver peace and security by preventing, containing, and resolving conflicts. Grandi’s intention was to expose how the growing weaknesses in the international cooperation system and the prevalence of short-term interests over long-term collective stability were actually major causes behind the sharp rise in the number of people forcibly displaced worldwide, from 42 million in 2009 to 122.6 million today – a 192 percent increase in fifteen years.

I find it remarkable how nowadays *security* is at the same time the foremost concern for citizens in destination countries, who feel threatened by migrants and refugees and urge their leaders to take back control by building walls and closing borders, and simultaneously the source of migratory flows: *“When I meet refugees, their first question is not about food or shelter, but about peace and security – because it is security, and peace, that will convince them to return home,”* said the High Commissioner. This is, I think, the conundrum that lies at the heart of our inability to move from a crisis management situation to a sustainable global governance of migration. Political leaders and policymakers are faced with the daunting task of balancing the necessary solidaristic response toward migrants and refugees with reassuring citizens that their safety is not being compromised. This is clearly visible in the apparently schizophrenic behavior in the European responses to migration. The deals with Türkiye in 2016 and later with Libya were the consequence of a difficult choice by even the most enlightened leaders to tighten their open border policy and complement humanitarian action with stricter return measures. In this challenging scenario, it soon became obvious how the fringes holding the most radical positions continue to prevail on the electorate and how any migration debate becomes poisoned with pernicious myths that are very hard to debunk.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Security is simultaneously the foremost concern for citizens in destination countries, who feel threatened by migrants and refugees and call on their leaders to regain control by erecting barriers and closing borders, and also the driving force behind migratory flows**
- **There is a protracted inability to move from a crisis management situation to a sustainable global governance of migration**
- **Is the EU’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum a historic agreement or a broken deal?**
- **There is a need to go beyond the lump of labor fallacy and emphasize the net contribution of migration through enhanced integration and social cohesion**
- **A successful migration strategy must be multifaceted, targeting both the root causes of displacement and its effects on displaced individuals and host communities**

FROM MIGRATION MANAGEMENT TO MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

It therefore remains our duty to counter these worrying nationalistic tendencies with a decisive European and global policy response. The most important attempt in this direction started in September 2016 with the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants, which was convened thanks to the unwavering efforts and dedication of, among others, the late Peter Sutherland. The *New York Declaration* launched a *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. Through the shepherding work of the UN Special Representative for Migration, Louise Arbour, a series of thematic consultations were held with a zero-draft *Making Migration Work for All* presented by UN Secretary General Guterres in early January 2018. It was a very promising report that aimed to recognize and highlight the benefits of migration, often superseded by a biased public discourse. Moreover, it encouraged governments to establish legal pathways for migration, for instance through mutually beneficial skills partnerships, but also reminded them to fulfill their basic obligations by safeguarding the lives and human rights of refugees and migrants with particular

attention to the most vulnerable groups. The US withdrawal from the Global Compact for Migration under the Trump administration and the failed ratification in key member states, the intergovernmental negotiations with the co-facilitation of Switzerland and Mexico, highlighted the complexity of dealing with migration issues. Contrary to the Geneva Conventions or the highly contested Dublin Regulation, this was not a formal treaty and did not seek to impose binding obligations on states, but the negotiation of such an overarching international agreement was certainly unprecedented. It further underlined the cruciality of political will to finding feasible solutions.

EUROPE'S APPROACH

After the successful application in 2022 of the temporary protection directive for refugees from Ukraine, which saw the backing of member states in an unparalleled fashion, 2024 represented a pivotal year at the European level. A *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* was finally adopted, an effort four years in the making, which will start to be implemented from 2026. What does it truly change, and is it a historic agreement or a broken deal? (Martelli 2024) The newly introduced pact makes modest improvements but raises several critical issues. It was designed to supersede the Dublin system, which placed disproportionate responsibility on frontline states by prioritizing first-country-of-entry criteria. However, the revised framework continues to require asylum seekers to lodge their applications in their initial country of entry. This perpetuates dependence on these countries' administrative capacity and shifts protection responsibilities to so-called "safe" third countries. Without significant enhancements in reception facilities and processing systems, the new measures are unlikely to effectively manage incoming migrants or reduce the existing backlog of asylum cases. Consequently, thousands of migrants risk being left in prolonged limbo. One positive development is the creation of a biometric migration database, but its applications must be carefully restricted to avoid misuse beyond security purposes.

Additionally, fostering robust resettlement and integration programs remains critical for offering legal and safe pathways to protection within the EU. The pact's Solidarity Pool, intended as an alternative to mandatory relocation, is limited to responding to crises and exceptional circumstances. This conditional approach continues to frame migration as an emergency rather than embracing a long-term governance model. The issue of returns will prove critical, with only an extremely small frac-

tion currently being successfully carried out. After the failures so far of the UK-Rwanda and Italy-Albania arrangements, efforts by individual countries to externalize the problem (at a very high cost for taxpayers) will be dwarfed by the complexity of the migration phenomenon, which necessarily requires a multidimensional response.

GOING BEYOND THE LUMP OF LABOR FALLACY

Viewing migration solely as a challenge neglects the significant opportunities it can bring to European economies and societies. While receiving countries understandably seek security, this must not come at the expense of migrants' safety and protection. In the months ahead, ensuring equitable responsibility-sharing and advancing integration and inclusion efforts will be essential for building a truly cohesive and sustainable migration system. Several migration economists (see e. g., Dustmann and Frattini 2014) have highlighted that the net fiscal impact of migrants is positive, especially considering that host countries did not bear the cost of their pre-arrival education, which is particularly beneficial for skilled migrants.

In a policy brief coauthored with Hangartner and Malaeb (2021) titled *Human Mobility: Towards Enhanced Integration and Social Cohesion*, there are a number of initiatives that can be taken to improve the effectiveness of a new common migration policy. This starts with the use of technology to match labor market supply and demand for refugees. For resettled refugees, successful labor market integration begins with placing individuals in locations where they are most likely to thrive. However, this process faces challenges, including (1) a lack of information about both refugees and labor market characteristics and (2) limited state capacity to find the best matches. Academic research has developed data-driven matching mechanisms to improve labor market integration. It is crucial to incorporate these mechanisms into host countries' policies.

It will also be crucial to implement comprehensive active labor market programs for refugees. Refugees encounter three primary barriers when entering the labor market: proficiency in the host country's language; understanding of the labor market; and a lack of qualifications. Additionally, they face institutional barriers that restrict their legal access to the labor market, such as limited occupations or difficulties in obtaining work permits. Refugees may also experience discrimination in hiring, leading them to accept lower-paid and informal jobs. Therefore, the sooner refugees gain access to the labor market and active labor market programs, the quicker their economic integration will be.

It is fundamental to revamp the asylum process with an emphasis on integration. Successful labor market integration is closely linked to refugees' migration experiences. In addition to fleeing violence,



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refugees often face deprivation, gender-based exploitation, and life-threatening conditions in camps or placements. Prolonged exposure to violence and traumatic events can have lasting effects on their physical and mental health, making social integration more challenging.

THE NEED FOR A GLOBAL RESPONSE

Addressing forced displacement and enhancing human mobility outcomes is a complex policy challenge. A successful investment strategy must be multifaceted, targeting both the root causes of displacement and its effects on displaced individuals and host communities. The recent emphasis on integrating humanitarian and development aid, with contributions from leading academics and international financial institutions, is promising. However, more evidence is needed to ensure this approach works sustainably and without negative impacts – real or perceived – on host communities.

We must recognize that the real “crisis” is occurring in frontline states, where high numbers of arrivals and the resulting economic strain threaten already fragile social cohesion. The data provided by UNCHR¹ show how nearly two-thirds of all refugees and other people in need of international protection come from just four countries: the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. At the same time, Colombia, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye, and Uganda host almost one-third of the world’s refugees and other people in need of international protection. These are striking figures showing how it is essential to overhaul “deals” and enhance the UN Compacts.

We need to support government policies that create employment and livelihood opportunities for refugees; that channel investment to countries of origin, transit, and destination to align with emerging academic evidence on best practices; and, finally, that harness the private sector to improve the effectiveness of investments to support refugees, migrants, and host communities.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

As George Borjas of Harvard underlined in his book *We Wanted Workers* (2016), the migration debate must avoid repeating the mistake we made with globalization where we insisted on purporting only a positive narrative around the gains from trade and are now discussing how to compensate the losers from it. Migrants represent an extraordinary opportunity for destination countries (Amodio et al. 2018), both in labor markets facing major demographic changes and in terms of contributions to the welfare systems

(Kostakis and Martelli 2024). Nonetheless, the short-term pressures they generate, for instance in housing and local services, cannot be ignored. It is thus necessary for discussions around migration issues to extend beyond the practitioners’ circles and involve other key stakeholders, for instance considering universities as social mediators for such deliberations, and let high-quality, globally connected, yet locally informed research feed policymaking. There is an urgent need for an improved understanding of the full spectrum of migration dynamics. It is important to directly engage with global policymakers in the context of the G7, G20, and the UN, providing evidence-based recommendations and developing public monitoring and reporting mechanisms to hold governments and other stakeholders accountable to their commitment to global burden sharing arrangements.

Heart-wrenching documentaries such as *Fire at Sea* and *Human Flow*, Io Capitano or stories from the eye of the storm such as *Exit West* have shown the broader public how migration is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon taking place at a global scale. When taking into account all the above political-economy implications, the search for the right policy solution becomes overwhelming, but one must never forget the dignity of human life. I visited CARA Mineo (Sicily) – one of the largest asylum seekers centers in Europe – together with Peter Sutherland, who was at the time UN Special Representative for International Migration. After talking to the staff, from doctors to teachers, as well as to the migrants and refugees hosted in the camp, my attention was drawn to a letter hanging on the wall of one of the dormitories, which cited Goethe: “*Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.*” It is fundamental to find legal pathways for migration, but we must not ignore the fact that migrants are also individuals who often share our same dreams, and we cannot deprive them of imagining a plausible, desirable future for themselves.

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