

Geneva, 18 June 2015

World Refugee Day: a starting block for better pooled governance in refugee protection and migration

The Syrian conflict is in its fifth year and has uprooted 11.5 million people, which corresponds to half of the Syrian population. Political solutions seem farther away than ever, the humanitarian response is weakening in efficiency by the day and international debates focus more on the individual capacity of the nations to host people rather than on the urgent need to develop together adequate support and end the conflict.

The current mix of security concerns, defensive mechanisms, demographics and economic protection measures in the debates and agenda-setting leads away from core humanitarian principles and raises important governance, societal and moral questions. Too much of today's responses and burden-sharing decisions are *ad hoc*, insufficiently proactive and inspired by fear rather than by practical sense and mercy. It is repeatedly suggested that refugee and migrant movements can be halted and that the world can somehow prolong existing disjunctions. This attitude ignores major changes that are important to all of us today, and to our future.

In the Mediterranean region, a significant piece of the European Commission's new Migration Agenda suggests that military intervention of some kind will stop people moving, sink the boats and arrest smugglers/traffickers. Military reflexes are also increasingly common in the Asia-Pacific and other regions of the world. It would be simplistic to consider that people desperate for better protection and safety can be countered that easily. Present reality as well as long history show that when certain migration methods or routes are blocked, others open up. Already, most traffickers and smugglers treat their boats (and the human beings in them) as fully expendable. When needed they find new ones without difficulty – and without concern to the seaworthiness of the boats either. In parallel, different routes – for example through Serbia – are found to be safer, even if more expensive than the crossing of the Mediterranean.

Militarized responses of enforcement also reinforce the image that refugees and migrants are enemies to be halted. They increase the controversy of armed forces operating in the humanitarian field, dilute the refugee protection status and further blind us to basic values of life and human dignity.

Desperation is not stopped by a lack of boats. In particular, people forced to leave their countries by persecution or war – like the Syrians – will leave, to save their lives and to save and keep their families together. Governments agreed long ago, in multiple international conventions, that this was their right. On World Refugee Day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) reminds us that this is common ground for action.

Indeed it is a starting block for better protection of uprooted and vulnerable people anywhere.

Fear generates the wrong focal points and the wrong solutions. For example, the fear that Islamic State activists are blending in among refugees and migrants is made pivotal to serve exclusive and defensive policies. This means that we are asked to accept in our democracies that a majority of people can be ignored on the grounds of a possible risk constituted by a tiny minority.

In truth, much of today's fear and doubt is rooted in a lack of effective guidance and in the absence of practical solutions. Refugee protection and migration are political responsibilities: of governments, but also of communities. Performing those responsibilities requires a moral starting point (centered on life, human dignity and the common good), solid managerial principles, open-mindedness and effective integration efforts. Promises to invest in and with countries of departure to combat the causes of forced migration need to be more concrete and urgent at both political and community levels. UNHCR's decision to focus its High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection at the end of this year specifically on the subject of root causes is a solid step in this direction.

Too many of today's decisions, especially by governments, reflect short-lived patience and misunderstandings of social factions. They ignore the wider community of individuals and collective initiatives, stepping up locally – by the thousands – which successfully manage to receive, accompany, and host refugees and migrants. Working closely with UNHCR in a range of resettlement activities, but also directly with cities and citizens across 15 countries of Europe, ICMC welcomes and asks support for the multiplication of these efforts. There is the world to gain in bringing people in despair together with people of hope.

International collaboration is clearly the way forward, but can no longer be based only on old formulas. Like the efforts made after the Second World War to establish international common ground in the protection of refugees, today's reality calls for increased coherence, realignment and pooling of governance structures to better address the mix of refugee and migration challenges. This affects but does not put an end to the principle of sovereignty. Well on the contrary, pooled governance actually reflects a conscious, voluntary exercise of sovereignty: countries structure cooperation with other authorities and actors – even outside the borders – as one of the essential means to pursue their responsibilities on issues that go beyond their own power alone, like trade, and migration.

This is not controversial: pooled governance is complementary governance. And history – past and present – demonstrates with clear examples how misunderstood and exaggerated notions of sovereignty can lead straight line to conflict and chaos.

Realigning existing structures and pooling authorities and actors is about a new, 21st-century global agenda-setting to provide better responses not only to global health issues, international trade, security, human rights and labor markets, but also to needs and realities of refugees and migrants wherever they are.

Realigning and pooling governance is an opportunity to redistribute responsibilities among actors in ways that more closely match their particular social roles and capacities: corporate structures, civil society, local authorities, universities, private and public services, and communities need to be mobilized in developing new interactions and relationships that will respond to societal challenges locally and internationally.

Such complementary governance approaches offer an additional potential to balance, if not to overcome, the present electoral domination of short-term political thinking.

Migration, integration of refugees and migrants, and the building of plural societies are then no longer the sole competence of the national governments, but a task which involves international bodies as much as local authorities, civil society, local communities, migrants and refugees.

Realigning and pooling the governance of migration is essential: for peace and stability in societies that are increasingly multicultural worldwide, to address economic and labor market needs for skilled and unskilled workers everywhere, and to respond to birth and ageing phenomena that are changing societies in almost existential ways.

Within and across borders, realigned and better pooled governance of migration is key: to make real the human right to decent work and social protection – for everyone, whether refugee, migrant or native-born; to reform recruitment and employment practices that enslave and abuse millions of refugee and migrant men, women and children in domestic work, factories and farms all over the world; and to combat human trafficking of desperate refugees and migrants trying to live.

Rather than just another annual day of remembrance or another awareness-raising day, we wish to see this year's World Refugee Day and the solid international common ground established in UNHCR and the protection of refugees as a starting block for broader and better pooling in the governance of migration.

Johan Ketelers
Secretary General

ICMC launched conversations on global governance of migration in 2010 identifying common ground for better governance in migration. Involving 54 Ambassadors and other senior government officials from developed and developing countries, together with another 84 leaders in the field of migration, the conversations showed how important it is to develop collaboration at international levels beyond the present state of affairs.

ICMC coordinates and leads global civil society efforts in the field of Migration and Development. Together with "Eurocities", ICMC also coordinates a network of European regional and local authorities and their civil society partners involved in refugee resettlement, protection and integration. ICMC published a manual on resettlement and actively promotes resettlement in the European Union.

Every year, ICMC interviews over 40.000 refugees for resettlement purposes and helps thousand of them resettle to the United States, offering them new ways forward and durable protection.