

Syrian refugees: five major building blocks to ending the crisis, relieving the burden, and facilitating integration

Geneva, 14 September 2015 - It has taken at least ten years, and more than 20,000 men, women and children from so many countries dying on the way to Europe, for the world to be shaken and awakened by a picture. A three-year-old boy carried by the sea lifeless, and left — in booming silence — on a beach in Europe's backyard. Little Aylan Kurdi is a metaphor for the pain and suffering of millions, and a symbol of drowned innocence.

For the past ten years, refugees and migrants were said to come too close to the outside limits of national borders impinging on solidarity and tolerance. Fences and walls were steadily built, essential sharing of responsibilities and quota systems endlessly discussed but procrastinated, budgets for humanitarian aid inadequately filled: crises were built upon crisis.

With the image of the little boy face-down at water's edge, the true and human scale of the current refugee crisis seems to be grasped at last. People of good will and heart everywhere are rising in invitation, determination and welcome. The xenophobic extreme is given a push back. Again and again — and without exception — the use of military to halt the movement is proving inadequate; and some of the major political actors are fundamentally changing their positions. In striking leadership Germany unilaterally suspended its right to use regular re-allocation procedures, in order to directly welcome Syrian refugees.

Today's core question is no longer if something can be done, but rather how to develop organized and practical responses to the crisis. In that spirit, ICMC identifies five important pillars to ending the current crisis, relieving the burden of host countries in the region and facilitating integration of greater numbers of migrants and refugees.

1. **Dialogue must be intensified** among all governments involved in the politics and conflicts of the Middle East and North Africa, including with those Arab countries that in joint efforts have the power and the means to play a preponderant role in terminating the conflict, reduce the impact of ISIS, rebuild stability in Libya and support humanitarian responses. These nations are key in building peace and in designing the future political and social map of the Middle East. Today's refugee crisis cannot be addressed separately from the various crises in the Middle East and cannot be solved by military intervention.

2. Governments worldwide need to **reconsider their best capacity to contribute to present humanitarian budgets** and establish in a common effort a more sustainable system of fixed contributions to respond to major and protracted crises. Today's 1.7 billion UNHCR budget for the emergency in the Middle East is funded at 35%, and no longer covers basic needs. Comparable budgetary constraints exist for the World Health Organization and the World Food Program; not to mention the impact on the budgets of countries neighboring Syria and on those of first entry into the EU and the Schengen area. With winter approaching, the number of people in dire conditions, left with no other possibility but to move on, will inevitably increase.
3. **The international community as a whole must come together** in a range of building blocks — perhaps like the Comprehensive Plan of Action in the 1970's and 1980's — that provide refugees and migrants with genuine alternatives to risking fatal journeys as their only hope for survival. At the heart of these building blocks, then and now, are **organized mechanisms for safe, legal and orderly migration**, beginning with greatly increased refugee resettlement and other admissions of Syrians from countries neighboring Syria; more fair, consistent and faster asylum procedures within Europe and elsewhere; and significantly widened legal channels for family reunification and labor migration.
4. As a human, practical and far-reaching step, Pope Francis has encouraged every Catholic parish to welcome at least one Syrian family. In corollary, **cities and communities, in Europe and elsewhere, need to be provided with means to allow for more arrivals**, including access to services and integration programs in simplified and fast track procedures. A large number of resettlement and humanitarian welcome programs have proved to be workable and successful. Their practical implementation has been part of the daily responsibilities of local authorities, churches and other civil society organizations who have repeatedly expressed the need for more adequate support. Existing practices need to be enhanced and exchanges via networks of cities and communes incentivized and encouraged. Imposing quotas of refugees without providing corresponding resources, information-sharing and capacity-building merely relocates and prolongs the crisis.
5. Clear, confident choices should be made to **integrate the local population**, resident diaspora and civil society actors of all kinds in the increasing, often spontaneous efforts to host refugees and migrants. Many of today's local initiatives remain uncertain due to residence, working and other permits either not immediately available or not permanently granted to refugees and migrants. Clarity needs to be given; access to the labor market granted; fiscal incentives or other facilities provided to those families found willing to temporarily host a refugee or a family; employers motivated to train and hire refugees and migrants; and civil society organizations adequately supported in their multiple and active accompaniment of the newcomers.

The current crisis — which we believe is also a crisis of confidence and management — is no longer solely about the causes, but further develops in its many consequences. All of these need to converge in responses built on shared human and social responsibilities and developed in a longer term perspective. This perspective definitely includes refugees and migrants, past and present, who call the world, and each one of us, to see inequities that we can address together.

Johan Ketelers,
Secretary General