

Caring for refugees: the crisis now and its impact on future policy

The image of a child smiling as she squeezes under the barbed wire fence at the Hungarian border keeps coming back to me. Breaching that fence marked entry into Europe for her and thousands more; it also exposed the EU's failure to achieve a common asylum policy.

How will this breach and, especially, the way local people responded, affect policy from now on?

One huge and contentious change to policy in Europe: Germany, by extending an open welcome to 800,000, was the first to break the protocol that people seeking asylum in Europe must do so in the first EU country in which they register – this is the so-called Dublin Regulation. This is the basis on which the UK government refuses to allow those in Calais to make a claim in Britain. They have already travelled through other EU countries. For years, Italy has done a land-based form of rescue, via much community support, enabling passage to the countries of northern Europe, replicated at sea when its navy began to carry out its much-praised search and rescue operations (Mare Nostrum).

So what else might the current movement of people change about policy in the future?

1. Forced and voluntary migrants move together. The fact that people seeking asylum and those escaping poverty conditions are travelling together – 'mixed migration' – became evident with those crossing the Mediterranean. Sometimes, an individual can be both: she or he can have moved to another country for work ('voluntary migration') and then, through a change of government, find her/himself fleeing conflict. This is reported from some North African countries; it is also happening to Palestinians in Syria, once settled, now at the mercy of forces especially of Isis. Will 'refugee' need to include more than fleeing conflict?

2. The role of smugglers and the need for legal routes. There are no legal routes for refugees from the country from which they are fleeing to a safe destination country. In the UK, you have to get here somehow and then claim asylum; you can't start at the Embassy or High Commission. In that light, are smugglers, then, all bad? When we hear that the policy of any government is to target the 'smugglers', is that wholly justified by the fact that without them thousands of people could not even hope to leave the country they are escaping? The answer that NGOs such as the Refugee Council are calling for is to provide legal routes, which would prevent the first receiving countries – Hungary, Greece, Italy, Spain – being put in the impossible position that we have seen. This challenges the pronouncements that any form of assistance en route amounts to a 'pull' factor.

3. Individuals and mass movements. Many comparisons, including personal stories, have been made between the mass movement today and those before and after WW2. The 1951 Convention made provision for refugees across Europe, later extended to apply worldwide. The asylum application process (across Europe) admits on a case by case basis: there are instances of family members being split up at the point of application. Given that the causes

of mass movement are forecast to continue for months and years, a question is whether the criteria for granting asylum will become even stricter or more humane.

4. Policy, government and humanitarian responses. At the borders of Hungary, local people started to offer food and clothing to the people on their route. At Keleti station, not only local people but Red Cross and Médecins du Monde were offering assistance. From the UK, people with vans are collecting and going to Calais to take material resources to the families and individuals there. In the tension between calculated government responses and the generosity of people witnessing fellow-humans in distress, can there be a challenge to a policy based on the fear that some media, some myopic groups will resist this core quality of this nation and most others?

France among others is willing to issue a number of 'humanitarian visas' as a means of letting people at least have their case and story heard. I hope Britain's leaders, too, look again at the way it treats people caught in forces of upheaval, knowing that many of its own people take the view that a generous response trumps the language of fear and the 'pull' factor.

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