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More duty than choice: Supporting refugees in a globalised world

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More duty than choice: Supporting refugees in a globalised world

Bonn, 20.06.2017. At a time of increasing nationalism and increasing number of forcibly displaced persons, the World Refugee Day is a reminder that the world should develop inclusively, "with refugees".

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Refugee Convention in 2001, the United Nations General Assembly designated June 20 as World Refugee Day. To this day, World Refugee Day continues to be relevant in the wake of armed conflict, political instability, and environmental change. Unfortunately, it seems that it has been reduced to being a token commemoration of the multi-faceted refugee crises that prevail in many parts of the world today. Refugees seem to be doubly persecuted, as safe countries either shun them or they become pawns in the game of human trafficking and smuggling.

SDGs' role in addressing the global refugee crisis

The World Refugee Day's campaign "with refugees" calls for the inclusion of refugees in landmark global initiatives such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the 2030 Agenda has not explicitly designated a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for refugees, its other goals can be instrumental in finding a solution to the global refugee crisis. Foremost is Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which aims for peace, justice and strong institutions. In its preamble, governments proclaimed a determination "to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence." They also asserted that "there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development."

While the SDGs are not legally binding, many countries have expressed their aspiration to attain them. However, reality is often far from rhetoric. Hungary, whose citizens UNHCR helped during the 1956 Hungarian uprising and which proudly flaunts its engagement with the SDGs, choose to shun Syrian refugees and even went as far as to attack refugee sympathizers in the guise of education regulation. On the other hand, in the current armed conflict in the Philippines where militants professing links to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attacked an iconic city called Marawi, we can see how rhetoric may inspire violent reality and cause the internal displacement of almost 200,000 innocent civilians. There have often been talks about the

trade-offs between the SDGs, but interlinkages should also be highlighted in the sense that failure to attain one SDG may impact on others. Violence and internal displacement have impacts on poverty eradication (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), decent economic growth (SDG 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and life on land (SDG 15). Meanwhile, failure to eradicate hunger can also lead to displacement. East Africa is facing its third year of low rainfall and people may have no choice but to move to survive the famine.

Seeing refugees as assets, not liabilities

In the short-term, refugees usually need support from receiving countries especially if they are not allowed to work. However, refugees also provide receiving countries with an opportunity, if they know how to take advantage of it. Governments should ensure that the basic needs of refugees are fulfilled (in relation to SDG 2), in addition to providing quality education (SDG 4) to develop their potential. In the long run, this may lead to decent economic growth (SDG 8) when the refugees are finally allowed or are old enough to join the workforce. The government must supply accurate and timely information to the public about its programmes for refugees, including how public money is being used. The public supports refugees through public money that is paid as benefits to refugees, but allocation is dictated by government policies. This is also consistent with one of the targets of SDG 16, which is to "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels." The public can further support refugees through their own integration activities that can promote peace and inclusivity as required by SDG 16.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Protocol, which allowed the 1951 Refugee Convention to be extended to refugees outside of Europe. As an international obligation often mistaken as a simple altruistic engagement, welcoming refugees is everyone's business. More than being a symbol, the World Refugee Day is a reminder to all of us that welcoming refugees is not only a legal and moral obligation, but can also benefit receiving societies if they sustainably develop together "with refugees".