



End of Year Reflection: Reinclusion Instead of Refugee Resettlement & Irregular Migration, a New Geneva Convention?

This year, it has been 70 years since the [Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees](#) was signed. The [agreement](#) has helped many and is still very relevant today, particularly its [non-refoulement](#) clause which forbids sending people [back](#) to unsafe countries. However, the convention has become stretched to its limits, as it was originally only designed to address the [aftermath](#) of the Second World War and only with European refugees in mind.

Luckily, not all [84](#) million currently forcibly displaced people worldwide require assistance. But [UNHCR resettlements](#) and [Complementary Pathways](#), the organized relocation options, are presently only able to [address](#) a tiny fraction of the formal [requests](#) made for them. This amount is, to put it into perspective, at present less than the number of babies [projected](#) to be born to Syrian refugees in Turkey alone this year.

This lack of legal options forces many refugees to migrate [irregularly](#) and [numbers](#) are unfortunately not getting any lower. The international community therefore urgently needs to make a shift from treating symptoms, to finding a structural cure.

Functioning Effectively?

Circumstances change, and the question is whether the Geneva Refugee Convention is still future-proof. In my opinion, it is unfortunately not, and it will need a very drastic overhaul of its basis to become effective again.

This is important because policies, such as the [European migration pact proposal](#), assume a properly functioning international refugee system to build upon. Presuming this, allows the EU to put a substantial focus on [border protection](#) and on [return](#) and [readmission](#) of those not considered to be entitled to refugee status according to the convention. However, this assumption of a well functioning system is very [questionable](#). When [4](#) million additional people worldwide are forcibly displaced per year, of which [1](#) million are new refugees on top of the already existing [26](#) million, are we really sufficiently addressing the issues?

Of course we cannot throw our old shoes away before we have new ones and it will be a long process until we can sign an updated convention, but there is no excuse for postponing the development of an alternative. This is why, after working for 6 years on my [Refival](#) refugee initiative, I decided to write this article, expressing my personal opinion on a potential, revised and improved, worldwide refugee framework.

Times they are a-Changin'

Looking at life 70 years ago, things are quite different today. Although in 1967 the geographical scope of the convention was expanded by an [additional protocol](#) beyond European refugees in order to cover refugees worldwide, Turkey, for example, has never signed this agreement. Whilst treating hosted people well, it does not grant official refugee status to its [4](#) million Syrian “non-European” guests, and can therefore theoretically send them back at any time.

Further, although millions of people [lost](#) the roof over their heads in the Second World War and often became *Internally Displaced People (IDPs)*, they could in principle go “home” and make a [new start](#) once the war was over. By 1951 the position of European IDPs was thus a [relatively](#) minor issue to address. However, the group of IDPs nowadays represents [58%](#) of all forcibly displaced people worldwide.

Likewise, the convention does not take the currently [minimally 44 million](#) “[climate refugees](#)” expected by 2050 into account; neither does it have any answers to the [widespread criminality](#) that [surrounds](#) migration. These issues did not really exist when the convention was designed.

Finally, a positive note, while relocating people was very difficult back then, by now, the [expanded](#) civil aviation infrastructure makes such plans technically more feasible and manageable. Looking at all these changing factors, we have to guard against the convention becoming a straitjacket, and unable to adapt.

What is a Refugee?

My analysis starts with an evaluation of the very basis of the convention, namely its [definition](#) of what a refugee is:

A refugee is someone “who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”.

This definition is unfortunately extremely limiting under today’s reality of internal displacement and climate change, I therefore propose to replace it by a much broader, simpler, and more holistic definition. A definition that does not imply crossing borders. But one that includes the incentive to become proactive in relocating people. My definition is:

A refugee is “anyone in acute or foreseeable need of refuge”.

This definition deals with all people who for whatever reason are excluded from their society and as a result of such exclusion are, or who may become forcibly displaced soon. They will have to relocate in order to survive or escape threats or dangers. Nothing is voluntary in these cases.

Besides the current refugee group, it also covers IDPs, climate refugees, and those living in [extreme poverty](#) and who are lacking any economic future at their current location. To find refuge means to be no longer excluded, but to have found a new permanent durable inclusion. As mentioned above, luckily, not everyone needs assistance in accomplishing this.

Key is also the word “foreseeable” in my definition: no one should be forced to flee. With around [10](#) trillion passenger kilometers of yearly airplane capacity available, it should be possible to handle crisis proactively in most cases. The target of this is also to reduce the dependence of refuge seeking people on [criminal smugglers](#) by offering legal alternatives to them.

However, my definition clearly does not cover those who are able to currently live a self-sustainable [dignified](#) life, but who nevertheless would [like](#) to voluntarily migrate to improve their opportunities. As such, searching for a better life is a fully legitimate reason to migrate. Still, this does and should not entitle people to depend on welfare systems elsewhere. Such economic motivated movement has therefore to be regulated in a separate framework for global economic mobility.

One of the other current important systemic problems is the very complex and long [asylum procedure](#) to which people mostly only get access after irregularly fleeing to the country of “their choice”. In this country, refugees sometimes [wait](#) for years in uncertainty to receive the outcome of their asylum application. By widening the refugee group covered with IDPs, and by handling proactively, the logical consequence would most likely be to give people the opportunity to apply for asylum before moving and to do this primarily locally.

A further, related, result would be the opportunity to optimize a more equal distribution of people over areas and countries that possess absorption capacity and who volunteer to offer opportunities to refugees to rebuild their lives there. Clustering at a few preferred favorite destinations can be averted this way. Spreading people more evenly will substantially increase the potential volume of refugee acceptance, and at the same time will allow to relieve pressure from the, now often overburdened, most [popular](#) spots.

Temporality

Other than the current convention, which assumes temporality, I propose to be more realistic and consider a refugee’s displacement situation to be permanent in most cases, and make this the rule instead of the exception. Therefore we have to think about offering structural solutions and not “only” temporary ones. Displaced people often stay, being stuck in limbo, deprived for [decades](#) (or permanently) and are frequently not able to reboot their lives during this time. If they can and want to go home, this is actually more of a bonus.

Returning also comes with the complexity of their [reintegration](#), which should not be underestimated, especially in the case that people have meanwhile already adapted to another culture. What I thus propose is to use another, more stable, basis to address displacement type of exclusion, namely reinclusion.

Reinclusion

In the first place, one has to be *preventive*, followed by maximizing *proactiveness* in case displacement cannot be avoided. First at this migration stage people are relocated and there is a need for their reinclusion. The core of reinclusion is to offer durable solutions and to optimize renewed inclusion of these displaced or soon to become displaced people. Still, wherever possible, their relocation is proactive and offers lasting solutions. It means finding or creating a new home and a dignified life for individuals or groups in need of refuge.

However, at this second stage, there is differentiation needed in prioritizing the levels of *emergency*, in managing the eventual *collective aspect* of the displacement, and for addressing relocation according to the *capability* levels of individual people or families to culturally adapt and integrate elsewhere.

Such classification and separation is a necessary instrument to find or optimize solutions. These five factors will therefore be separately discussed now. The target is to no longer have refugees. However, only after successful reinclusion, is a refugee considered no longer in need of refuge.

Prevention of Exclusion

Of course it is better to prevent forced displacement than to cure it. Depending on the type of root-causes, this often starts with diplomacy in order to avoid or mediate in violent conflicts between or inside groups or countries.

Simultaneously, as a fully interdependent globalized civilization, we must take measures to cope with global issues like climate change and pandemics. Instabilities leading to displacement are also very frequently related to [inequalities](#) and [poverty](#), therefore these factors must be urgently addressed as well.

To give a practical example: In order to reduce rural deprivation, I developed an "[inclusion sourcing](#)" framework in which a better division of available jobs between cities and their surrounding countryside is proposed. This framework can be similarly applied between rich and poor countries. It includes the weaker economic areas into the stronger ones and is, with the increased acceptance of remote work due to Covid, more current than ever.

Nevertheless, also [demographics](#) must not be forgotten as a factor here, if one improves healthcare and the final result is a population growth which is not supported by the locally available resources, birth control is unavoidable to reach any maintainable equilibrium.

Looking towards the future sustainability of communities, and in the perspective of the shifting role of employment and the necessary skills development to fulfill future jobs, application of artificial intelligence and robotization can, on a society level, easily lead to [labor market friction and job insecurity](#). The effect of this destabilizing factor can potentially be reduced by maximizing the personal development of people.

A way to address this and to optimize a person's individual role in society is the provision of "[Universal Basic Employment](#)". [UBE](#) is an approach in which every contribution to society, including raising children and people educating themselves, is considered to be employment. Other than with Universal Basic Income ([UBI](#)), it is this effort that is rewarded with a basic income. The approach was [originally](#) designed for

Referral to facilitate the integration of refugees in European rural communities and is developed to protect refugees against becoming second-class citizens by making their added value to the community visible. Refugees are being employed instead of receiving welfare. UBE can be applied far [beyond](#) refugees though; it can improve inclusion almost anywhere.

Finally, on a general society level, there is a common need to increase the [convergence](#) between people leading to more inclusion, solidarity and consensus. These are actually the main goals of many NGOs. I personally describe a method to achieve convergence in more detail in my "[Samaryana](#)" article on Afghanistan, in which I suggest that aid projects should be judged according to the effect they have on the relationship between rival groups or non-compatible parties. I propose to use convergence criteria as an option to directly support the population of a country in need, without necessarily recognizing its government.

Although all prevention options are very important, most of their processes are quite slow, often taking decades to show any effect. They are thus unable to address current urgent calamities, meaning that exclusion and displacement cannot always be prevented. Therefore four factors to optimize relocation will be elaborated.

Being Proactive

Although prevention is in a way a form of macro proactiveness, in this context I use proactive in a more limited micro sense, namely to resettle people before they become displaced. Looking at the case of Afghanistan, it shows that the international community [is able to evacuate](#) a relatively large amount of people in a short period of time, if required.

Since, most cases of displacement are foreseeable and therefore no direct unexpected emergencies, it should be realistically possible to avoid forced movements and relocate people early enough. Of course, such fundamental change in the way of thinking will need time to implement, and to prepare the destinations to reinstate people is a great challenge.

To be clear, eventual relocation destinations are neither selected or depending on already available diasporas nor on personal wishes, but on the potential to become reintegrated and find a new home. In case people are already displaced and have found shelter elsewhere, there is also no automatic relocation. In that case, first it will have to be researched whether investment in reintegration at their current location could offer an alternative durable solution. This is so to try to prevent that people have to be relocated twice.

Finally, people can theoretically be spread over many (willing to take their international share and thus voluntary welcoming) countries and areas. This approach helps to avoid large groups [clustering](#) at a few destinations, such as it is now mostly the case. Many people currently [want](#) to either reach the US or Europe/Germany and skip all other alternatives.

Regardless of these effects, money would be spent much more properly. Not on smugglers or fighting criminality, but on investing it in the refugees themselves. The pressure on the borders would likely be strongly reduced and, because of the available legal options, one could become even stricter to those who still want to cross illegally. For genuine refugees, there would no longer be any need to do so.

Emergency Levels

Although being proactive can make a huge difference and can avoid displacement in many cases, there will be situations of catastrophes and conflicts that cannot be predicted and which unexpectedly force people to flee to the nearest safe havens. If this occurs, I propose to use a two-step approach, where the first priority is to offer proper shelter to people, followed by eventual relocation if needed. The ultimate goal is to facilitate people's reinclusion, regardless of their final destination, and to thus realize a structural solution. In my vision, such two-step scenario means temporary offering first-aid to people, followed by offering a permanent new home.

Collective Displacement

Up till now all narratives are focused on temporality and on the return of refugees to their home country; this approach justifies an individual approach because the ultimate goal is return. Still, minorities like for example [Yazidis](#) and others are often collectively displaced and spreading them individually over various destinations can endanger their culture and heritage altogether.

Looking at this and at the expected climate change refugees (where there is mostly no return possible) we will have to consider collective relocation in order to preserve ethnic cultural communities and not only limit ourselves to offering individual reinclusion. The [Amish migration to Belize](#), although relatively extreme in its cultural isolation, illustrates that this is possible in a peaceful manner.

There are or have been important initiatives by [SDZalliance](#) and [Naguib Sawaris](#) in this collective direction. But, beyond refugee camps that are becoming centers of economic activity and [evolve](#) into permanent settlements, very little is actually done.

With vast [depopulating](#) regions available worldwide, it should be possible to create space for collective relocation of refugees and revitalize such areas. However, preserving one's culture in a globalized world should not be based on disconnection. This would embed the risk to create tensions and misunderstanding with one's neighbors and should thus be avoided. Cultural [convergence](#) will therefore be needed to make these solutions feasible and work.

Adaptability of People

The ability to adapt to another culture in order to participate in economic activities by finding labor is strongly dependent on one's education and one's already available skills. Since most forced displacements take place in areas of relative poverty and underdevelopment, very often there is a substantial gap between supply and demand for displaced people's skills after their resettlement. To optimize reintegration success, it therefore makes sense to separate three groups here.

Group -1- Educated Refugees

The first group is the one of educated refugees. Here the skills gap is relatively small. By learning a new language and receiving some professional [upskilling](#) and help in bridging cultural differences, this group can in principle reintegrate in any place where there is demand for their skills.

Some refugees directly find work as economic migrants, and connect this way. For those needing more help with adaptation, their relocation could be supported by private sector sponsors, for instance in cooperation with the [Tent Partnership](#).

Still, the destination of relocation should, in my opinion, primarily be driven by the demand for skills and not by the economic motives of the individuals. As a safeguard, people should get the proper opportunity for upward mobility after their initial relocation. But, they are in that case in contest with all other candidates, following the logic of economic migrants. However, it is to be clearly avoided that they get stuck and do not get the chance to develop their potential.

For example, a Syrian doctor can initially be relocated to Africa or Eastern Europe and from there, in open job competition with others, strive for upward mobility by moving to somewhere else if he/she wants to move on. This principle is driven by fairness, where everyone should have an equal chance to obtain a better paid or more advanced position. The selection process should be entirely driven by qualification and suitability of the candidates in this case, and no longer based on the initial reinclusion criteria.

The other issue with this educated group is that in the current system, they often receive most attention because they are the easiest group to reinclude due to an already existing economic demand for their skills. At the same time, it is actually the group that needs the least assistance to find a sustainable future. Highly educated refugees require, in principle and if [professional recognition issues](#) are addressed, a relatively short period of time to adapt and upgrade their professional skills (estimate: on average, 1-2 years), including learning a new language.

Group -2- Refugees without any Education

The second group are illiterate or lacking basic education. This impacts their ability to adapt to a new culture and learn for example a new language, hindering them to find work and integrate. This segment is therefore much more difficult to include in societies or cultures that are more distant to their own.

If there is sufficient potential to educate this group and connect them to a fulfilling labor market future elsewhere, they actually belong to the third category of people with education deficits.

Where offering education in order to help them to adapt is not realistic, the only thing that can be offered instead is shelter until people can hopefully return home. Such shelter is mostly better provided in neighboring areas or neighboring countries, which also culturally tend to be much closer.

Nevertheless, [solidarity is required](#), since bordering regions mostly receive and host disproportionate numbers of refugees. Financial contribution from all UN member states is needed to reduce the often substantial economic burden on these areas and host countries.

Group -3- The Group in the Middle with Education Deficits

The third and last major group of people is the group in the middle: people with education gaps which can be bridged. These are refugees who currently do not have any economic opportunities in their host country's location or anywhere else, but who after skilling or reskilling would be able to achieve participation and reinclusion.

Yet, one has to also take into account that refugees are currently often housed in dense camps in isolated areas, which strongly hinders their inclusion in the population of the host county. In this case one can still, regardless of such circumstances, supply local jobs through "[inclusion sourcing](#)" but one may face severe geographical and [social barriers](#) to establish a permanent local reinclusion solution; also because many host countries themselves are poor and underdeveloped.

Alternatively, one can focus on demand for people and can relocate people to areas where such demand is found and skill or reskill refugees accordingly. This is what I [propose](#) with my [Refival](#) initiative, where I try to fill and match the demand for people in [depopulating](#) rural areas in Europe through refugee reinclusion, and where I see this as an investment in people and communities.

Although refugees can be partially educationally prepared at their eventual temporary shelter location, interaction and social embedding are of course required to achieve proper reinclusion; therefore I envision most education and adaptation at the new location instead.

With Refival, I target [revitalization](#) of rural areas which, due to the reduced importance of agriculture as a share of GDP, implies a need for economic diversification by generating modern type of (mostly Internet based) jobs. For these jobs another skill-set is required to that which can be found in the, predominantly elderly, current rural population.

Educating refugees is in general very challenging though. Lacking homogeneity, having different cultural and very unequal individual education backgrounds, and often facing psychological [traumas](#) that hinder them, a traditional “one size fits all” grade approach does not work. It will very likely [result](#) in a very low level common denominator outcome.

To address this and to simultaneously also manage the lack of pupils to fill grade based classes in small rural schools, I developed a new educational approach named [IKNAL](#). It consists of a fully individualized, multi-lingual, internet based [adaptive learning](#) component, combined with social community interaction and development of respect for society, taught in wider age-range classes. Such an IKNAL school can locally cover education levels from kindergarten up to university and can likely be made economically feasible from about 100 students upwards.

Nevertheless, reinclusion takes time and the process is expected to require [4-5 years](#) on average. However, this is well worth the investment if one can revitalize local economies and simultaneously offer forcibly displaced people a new future.

How to move Forward?

First, we must achieve agreement on the basic definitions and modernize the Geneva Refugee Convention. Next, we have to change the migration system for forcibly displaced people from insufficient resettlement and legal pathways (automatically leading to irregular migration and criminality) to a foundation of proactively relocating and reintegrating entitled people. Then, we can start to put a focus on border control and returns.

To be successful in this, we must at the same time develop a more open global legal migration approach to economic mobility, entirely based on supply and demand. If we do so, there will be much less pressure to opt for illegal, dangerous and expensive [migration routes](#).

In case the definition of the word refugee is changed and broadened in meaning, many [current](#) irregular migrants will become genuine refugees by definition (what they actually are), for which a system of durable solutions would be in place, with policies or measures that could be practically executed to achieve the goal of converting displacement into reinclusion of people.

Epilogue

Without attracting external funding I will unfortunately no longer be able to continue in 2022. After more than 6 years of working full-time on Refival, without receiving any financial backing, I am defeated by the shift in sentiment from “[wir schaffen das](#)” to [fortress](#) Europe’s border protection and [pushbacks](#).

The current migration agenda unfortunately blocks the practical testing and implementation of my visions and finding out what works. My potential solutions simply need all stakeholders to cooperate and without sufficient political will, this is not possible.

However, I am leaving the ring with my head held high and I am unchanged in my conviction that my [frameworks](#) have not been developed in vain and will in the end be part of a fundamental solution. The needs of displaced people are growing every year and our current policies just lead to getting further away from reaching any structural goals.

I look back on having produced many “[business development logic](#)” based propositions. These strategies are future proof and will not become outdated soon.

What rests is to wish you all a happy holiday season and a prosperous, healthy and mindful 2022.

Kind Regards,

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