



World Refugee Day: Are All Refugees Equal? A Dignity Approach

100 million people are forcibly displaced, a rising number

A growing number of more than [100](#) million people are currently forcibly displaced. Fortunately, not everyone needs our help, but a growing number regrettably do. However, the level of assistance people need to rebuild their lives after their ouster strongly differs from situation to situation. This long-read therefore describes three scenarios and targets to enable a life in [dignity](#) for everyone.

Besides the traditional refugee group escaping conflict, crossing borders, and seeking asylum, there is another group of Internally Displaced People ([IDPs](#)), who do not cross borders, but who are in number [twice](#) as many as the first category. Besides, there are a growing number of [climate refugees](#). In total there are currently [60](#) million IDPs, and according to the World Bank, in 2050 climate refugees are expected to count for somewhere between [44](#) and [216](#) million people. These last two groups are not covered by the [current refugee convention](#).

Therefore, as proposed in my [previous article](#), we urgently need a new definition of what a refugee is. Such revision should lead to a focus on handling proactively via evacuation, instead of passively waiting for people to [irregularly](#) arrive. For me **a refugee is anyone in acute or foreseeable need of refuge** and we simply need a timely solution for all, thus averting dangerous and traumatic journeys in the hands of criminal smugglers to reach safety!

Current narrative: the negative comparison of treatment of refugee groups

At the moment there is a tendency to follow a dangerous narrative; namely to compare and rank the [treatment](#) of different groups of refugees against each other, resulting in [envy](#) and [divergence](#).

However, it does not make any sense to compare culturally relatively similar people like Ukrainian women and children flowing freely into the EU (and hopefully in need for a temporary solution) with other refugee groups, who often possess a culturally very different background, and who are in need for a durable [reinclusion](#) solution.

For the second category, adaptation is much more difficult to achieve because of its permanency and also because of cultural gaps. This is for example the case with most Syrians, Afghans or Africans arriving to Europe. The above does not imply that there should not be a solution available for everyone. It only means that there are different scenarios for dissimilar groups.

Further, many potential solutions cannot be based on the individual choice or freedom to apply for asylum [anywhere](#) one wants. Namely, the main available alternative is that the world starts to act proactively and to collectively offer answers, as this is [partially](#) already the case with offering temporary protection status to certain groups of refugees.

Such a collective approach can potentially also include those who are actually the most vulnerable and are currently internally displaced or who are forced to relocate because of livelihood threatening climate change. These latter groups are very often not able to flee their country and to individually apply for asylum at all.

The trade-off is that these proactive options tend to be less attractive for those refugees who currently manage to reach the best, most advantaged, spots. However, if everyone was able to reach these destinations, they would likely get overburdened and no longer remain as prosperous as they are right now.

A main issue is that under the current refugee [convention](#), refugees can first apply for asylum after they manage to cross a border. For Afghanistan this caused a strong [brain-drain](#) because only the educated or financially stronger were able to escape and manage crossing. Further, whereas the European borders are open to Ukrainians, they are closed for almost all other refugee groups.

Applying for protection becomes this way more like a “survival of the fittest” than of offering assistance to the most vulnerable. For economically motivated migration, this kind of matching of supply and demand may be the right mechanism, but from a perspective of optimizing the number of people who can rebuild their lives after becoming displaced, it is not.

Equal treatment? No! Equal rights? Yes!

Should we thus treat everyone equal in this case? No, I do not think so; different groups and situations require different solutions. However, in my opinion, every human being has an equal right to compassion and to living a [dignified](#) life. In order to achieve this for a worldwide population and optimize the number of people who are able to live the life in dignity they are entitled to, there is no one-size-fits-all approach available.

Instead, there is a variety of parallel and dedicated solutions which each can potentially contribute to reaching this target. However, the previous does not justify any [discrimination](#), neither against people [already](#) at the European borders, nor against minorities like [Roma](#) from Ukraine. Still, applying differentiation can, in my opinion, bring improvement and lift many more people out of indignity to dignity instead of offering relative prosperity to a happy few.

What does it mean to obtain a dignified life?

A fixed or precise universal detailed definition of a [dignified](#) life is impossible to give because its meaning is relative to living standards and to exclusion caused by inequality. If there is for example no electricity, mobile phone network or internet at a location, it is perfectly possible to live a fully dignified, satisfactory and happy social life under such conditions, as this for example has been the case for many generations in the past.

But, if such facilities are generally available and are considered to be part of the basic living standards, then, if certain groups of people are [excluded](#) from access, it can impact people's dignity. Society progress can thus change the circumstantial definition of dignity and it can mean something else at different locations. Further, non-material components such as respect are also a very important part of dignity; they are mostly very difficult to measure though.

Still, a life in dignity has minimum universal standards to be met, which can be partially found in the non-legally binding [United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). They include food security, access to water, housing, education, free choice of employment, and participation in society; all being universal rights for every human being. This includes vulnerable groups like refugees and IDPs.

Temporality versus adaptation and reinclusion elsewhere

People who become forcibly displaced often encounter three stages over time, being the need for: -1- Immediate shelter, -2- Temporary protection or asylum, -3- Adaptation and reinclusion elsewhere.

Immediate shelter

In stage one, there is the need to reach safety and temporary shelter. Such refuge can in principle be offered anywhere and must be seen as "first aid" to somebody wounded. The relationship and expected behavior is one of hosts and well behaving guests. It is almost comparable to the interaction between hosts and ordinary visitors or tourists. The expectation is hospitability and empathy. In case of leaving one's country, besides respecting the basic human norms, there is no cultural adaptation involved and the intention of the refugees is to return home as soon as possible.

If refugees are not able to return relatively soon, there must be burden sharing between hosts, and eventual relocation/division of refugees over multiple destinations. Further, when the need for this type of shelter is foreseeable and people are unable to flee, they will have to be proactively [evacuated](#). The length of the refugees' stay in "first aid" shelters is as temporary as possible and should be minimized.

Temporary protection or asylum

First aid is followed by temporary protection or asylum. For most refugees it is not possible to safely return to their place of origin in the short-term. Unfortunately, in practice, situations of conflict and the impossibility to return last mostly [many years](#). This means that refugees often get to live in insecurity. This is also the consequence of the current asylum approaches, which are almost entirely based on temporality.

At this stage, the role pattern between host and guest should more be compared to that of a student's exchange program; obtaining new skills and contributing one's own capabilities to the "guest-community". Target should be to create a useful or beneficial experience for both guest and host; if possible by preparing refugees for going back and eventually rebuild their home country.

Still, at all times, the guest must be able to return home without much need for reintegration. This expected behavior implies gaining experience without any deeper cultural adaptation to the host country. Living in facilities together with one's compatriots as a parallel society can be fully OK and even useful in this case. However, this type of clustering is clearly meant to be temporary and, independently, proper living conditions should be offered.

Understandably, countries are [reluctant](#) to in general grant citizenship to refugees living in parallel societies within their country, especially if people are non-adapted. But, even in case individual refugees did perfectly adjust to a new local language and the cultural values of the host country, does such effort not yet entitle individuals automatically to citizenship. The refugees' stay is in principle clearly temporary without any rights on permanency. As soon as their home country becomes safe and stable again, people are expected to return.

Adaptation and reinclusion elsewhere

Unfortunately, there are many situations, such as climate change or extended conflicts, where refugees cannot return and where temporality becomes [everlasting](#). In this case there is only one option — namely, to create a permanent solution and to offer refugees a new life via reinclusion at a new location. Of course is it difficult to predict beforehand how long people will stay and whether they can return. However, in many cases it is clear from the beginning that refugees cannot return within a reasonable time, whereas in other cases temporality or permanency is a political choice.

If the refugee's new location is in another culture zone, this implies mostly a long process of adaptation. On average it takes, based on previous experiences with one of the main indicators, being labor participation, at least [5](#) years to adapt. Therefore it makes no sense to try to let refugees reinclude if one estimates people to be able to return home within 5 years.

Forced displacement should further not become economically motivated migration, even if people would like to stay. There are other [mechanisms](#) in place for this. Some qualified refugees are able to immediately use these economic mobility options and will thus need less support. However, many others who are less educated or less skilled and not in direct labor demand will first need adaptation.

Finally, reinclusion is also easier said than done, it can only be achieved where there is capacity to add new people to fully participate in a community and its local economy. Often a strong paradox can be found here.

The most prosperous locations are in general more specialized and select the people they need on the basis of their knowledge and skills in a highly competitive manner; they only recruit the best in their fields. Besides, these spots mostly face high living cost; many people want to live in these developed areas. Unfortunately, being a refugee is no reason for priority over others or for circumventing selection.

Social mobility should also remain fair and equally open to everyone who qualifies. Refugees with deficits, such as a lack of education, are often facing disadvantages in achieving economic independence. Their unstable background, mental traumas, language barriers or cultural gaps put people in a vulnerable position and frequently cause an inability to compete.

It means that those places that can afford to offer developed social facilities and to host the largest number of welfare dependent people, are frequently not the locations where reinclusion can be achieved the easiest way.

Instead, barriers often result in refugees becoming permanently part of an excluded, low-end, second class, labor segment of “unskilled” migrants. This reinforces parallel societies by tolerating the existence of segregated neighborhoods or ghettos, a way to have more affordable housing available to people.

Lastly, locations often fail to achieve dignity and offer only lower level jobs chances to [qualified](#) refugees. Therefore, other, less specialized, environments may be able to offer better reinclusion chances to people.

Creating false expectations

Treating people well and helping them financially has also another side, it easily can become the new normal for refugees and can raise expectations beyond temporality. [Downgrading](#) can be difficult to accept and can easily feel like becoming disrespected. It is much easier to upgrade from a tent to a hotel than to downgrade in the other direction. However, welfare systems are mostly not designed for [permanent](#) support or dependency.

Also [sponsorship fatigue](#) will mostly occur over time, especially if at a large scale refugees are forced to stay and cannot return, while at the same time they are not reincluded and do not [participate](#), thus being forced to rely on others' assistance indefinitely.

If a host country on top of this faces economic problems itself, as this is for example the [situation](#) with [3.7](#) million Syrian refugees in [Turkey](#) and over time it can easily become the case with the [3.2](#) million Ukrainian refugees in Poland, this inevitably leads to tensions and [conflicts of interest](#).

The only way out in that situation is to reinclude refugees and to offer people a new life. However, the optimal spots for reinclusion may, like said before, not be the same as for temporary protection. Locations may be too poor and lacking sufficient potential, or they may be too rich and specialized to connect.

However, organized relocation to less prosperous places where often more synergy, and different requirements for people's adaptation can be found, may nevertheless still be perceived as a downgrade from the more developed areas, where refugees currently live in dependency. In reality, there is no downgrade, it is actually a door to a stable and permanent future for both host and guest; as long as relocation is designed as a path to mobility.

Reinclusion offers [education](#) or upskilling and participation chances. Relocation to less prosperous areas does therefore not have to be a dead-end street or a way to cheaply dump people. Starting to climb lower on the career or society ladder may get one much further as not being able to climb at all. The EU is in [need](#) of [many](#) economic migrants per year, and skilling oneself via reinclusion can be a strong catalyst or motor for social mobility.

If permanency is foreseeable, like with climate change based migration or in respect to people originating from decades old conflict zones, it is, in my opinion, better to consequently relocate refugees immediately and proactively to places where there is sufficient potential for their reinclusion. The above mentioned path of progress by social mobility can be followed from there.

Chosen clustering by refugees or organized spreading by hosts?

A consequence of the current [individual freedom](#)-based temporality approach of the [Geneva refugee convention](#) is that, understandably, refugees choose to cluster at those destinations which they perceive as offering them most economic or welfare advantage.

Although personal freedom is an important human right, the resulting clustering behavior very frequently leads to [overburdening](#) of some locations while many other destinations, which equally could offer solutions, are not attracting any refugees at all. Thus major capacity remains unused in establishing dignified futures for forcibly displaced people in need. To increase permanent reinclusion, organized relocation may therefore be unavoidable.

Rethinking economic benefits for the host county

At the moment, many countries measure the success of refugee integration in labor force participation. Although this is of course a good sign of involvement, it is rather an indicator of individual success and reciprocal benefits between refugee and host country than of compassion and unconditionally helping people to reestablish a dignified life.

Actually, it is not really what offering refuge is about. Labor participation may be a criterion for allowing or stimulating economic migration, but it contributes little to addressing the issue of maximizing the number of people being able to live a dignified life. Dignity namely also depends on whether people are able to exploit their potential. The target of “any type of employment as fast as possible” may therefore not serve such goal and require rethinking. A different approach, in which one first invests in the refugees’ often lacking education, may be a better alternative for adaptation. This should preferably take place at spread worldwide locations where reinclusion has most chances of success and for reestablishing the refugee’s social connection.

Nevertheless, has such a strategy of “investment in people” huge economic benefits. Forced migration is converted in an educated voluntary economic migration reserve. The investment in people’s reinclusion generates the optimization of their skills and potential, which through economic mobility, on demand, can be afterward used anywhere.

It also reduces the current brain-drain issues of attracting skilled migrants from underdeveloped countries because the international community would financially invest, rather than the country of reinclusion itself. Rich countries, attracting many skilled people, could this way indirectly finance the education of their future workforce, while the country of reinclusion would also benefit.

Minimizing cultural adaptation, maximizing the number of dignified lives

Ideally, shelter, protection and reinclusion can be found near to the place of people’s origin, without any need for cultural adaptation. It would mean to move (although involuntary) to very similar communities and to continue life as usual. Unfortunately, reality looks very different and many regions where livelihoods are threatened by climate change or which are areas of sustained conflict are at the same time widely underdeveloped regions, unable to economically reinclude any newcomers and coping with their own problems.

A good example is Turkey where [3.7](#) million Syrians arrived. Although there are many religious and cultural similarities compared with other potential destinations like Europe, the country has not been able to reinclude Syrian refugees.

With [limited](#) financial assistance of others such as the EU, refugees in Turkey are still “temporarily” [supported](#) for over a decade now. Large scale relocation to permanent reinclusion destinations is thus urgently required to restore these refugees’ dignity.

The current Turkish plan to establish [new settlements](#) in Northern Syria deserves thus to be reviewed properly on its potential to create new, economically independent, self-supporting sustainable communities. However, this may turn out to be very difficult, in which case alternative permanent answers must be found elsewhere.

Nevertheless, primarily attempting to find regional solutions is as such a good approach for all situations considered to be foreseeably temporary. It causes less hardship of required cultural adaptation and better reintegration chances upon returning home. It is in my opinion therefore the preferred way for both shelter and temporary protection. To make this also [feasible](#), the financial burden can and has to be shared by the international community. This is true for Syrians in Turkey, Ukrainians in Poland and Afghans in Pakistan and Iran etc.

Yet, there are regionally often no permanent solutions available. People in need of reinclusion will thus inevitably have to be relocated to destinations that are ruled by other cultural norms and adapt to them. However, there are more tints of gray as it seems at first sight. For example, looking at Europe, Finnish and Italian people are very dissimilar, but there is room for such differences and tolerance. Notwithstanding, there is also a level of agreement over shared basic cultural norms and values perceived as being European.

If people from outside of a cultural zone therefore want to reinclude and become part, they will have to subscribe to these norms; which is not easy. Participation and [belonging](#) require interaction and thorough understanding of each other. For example, in Europe there is no space for a [Taliban-like](#) set of norms and values considering women. Not respecting these cultural principles creates tensions, parallel societies, and exclusion.

If neither underdeveloped regional nor very competitive developed destinations offer proper conditions for reinclusion and reestablishing dignity of refugees, where can such capacity be found?

Reception in depopulating or deprived areas

Most prosperous developed areas are urban and tend to become densely populated and a magnet for economic migration. This is a slow process where the build-up of higher quality facilities than their competing cities or villages attracts young people to study or work there. The availability of an educated young workforce in turn attracts companies and a circle of development can be found as a result. Being part of such community is often rewarding and keeps the local economy growing and prevents people to move back to where they were born or came from.

In the opposite, there are the areas which were left by these people. Due to a lack of remaining young and educated people, economic development is becoming slower there. Although this is mostly balanced by lower living cost and wages, the end-balance is often negative and causes a continuous [decline](#) and graying of the population.

Often, this process is related to insufficient opportunities for economic diversification. Whereas for example agriculture [declined](#) in importance from [20%](#) to [2%](#) of GDP over a period of 70 years in many countries, most rural areas have not been able to replace such a reduction of activities by other ones. However, this would have been needed to preserve their economic attractiveness.

In these declining areas there is ample space to reinclude new people such as refugees, and living cost is generally substantially lower than in the more attractive cities. The challenge is thus to develop new diversified livelihoods at deprived locations; this is where most communities have failed up till now.

However, other than a decade ago, new technology comes in today. With remote working becoming generally [accepted](#) and with [satellite](#) networks providing the needed communication bandwidth anywhere, barriers are disappearing. The upcoming use of augmented and virtual reality will further increase the potential to educate people and execute tasks from any location. What primarily is still lacking is a younger and properly educated or skilled workforce to replace those who left in the past.

Here is where the synergy is found. By [educating](#) people and by (re)inclusion, refugees can, due to competitively lower living cost, step-up the society ladder at a level which is achievable. Despite their original handicaps, they can thus bridge their gaps, establish a dignified life and start climbing up from there. Once climbing, they can via economic mobility exploit their potential, something that without remote incubation would likely be almost impossible. For people only facing limited gaps, this process will even be faster.

Another advantage of most depopulating areas, especially the rural ones, is that they possess strong communities and personal relationships. There is mostly a higher level of personal interdependency found as in more prosperous cities, where everything is readily available to every individual. Such social [cohesion](#) can enable a more smooth cultural adaptation, if the community and the refugees understand their [synergy](#).

This "[Refival](#)" concept is based on existing infrastructure. The scenario means to invest in people in order to revitalize one's own economy and in exploiting the available synergy by doing so. However, it requires cultural adaptation and reinclusion of outsiders, who have to be turned over time into insiders. An advantage of this path is that there are [existing](#) external budgets available for the revitalization of deprived areas, these are necessary, also because the small communities themselves mostly do not possess funds.

One last remark; some similarities can be found with an alternative approach, namely to establish entirely new cultural and economic communities or zones from ground-up instead, as this is being proposed by [SDZ alliance](#). An important advantage of this point of view is that there is in principle no need for cultural adaptation in this scenario. However, a disadvantage may be a lack of sufficient immediate synergy as well as an initial lack of connection to existing structures. These factors may hinder social mobility and make it difficult to attract the required external investors in the beginning.

Proposed scenarios

To summarize, looking at the rapidly growing number of forcibly displaced people worldwide there is an urgent need for solutions. Unfortunately, the current individual asylum system fails to address the issues of internally displaced people (IDPs) and climate refugees. To change this, I propose a new definition of what a refugee is and three proactive solutions. Target is to maximize the number of people who are enabled to reestablish a dignified life. These three scenarios relate to three stages most refugees will encounter over time.

The first scenario is one of immediate shelter. At this stage any solution is welcome, including [evacuation](#) if required. In principle, the closer to home the better. However, a lack of reception capacity can force people elsewhere. Financially, the cost burden must be shared by the international community, this way enabling regional facilities. Depending on whether refugees are estimated to be able to return home within 5 years or the period is expected to be longer, people will have to be assisted with [relocation](#) to their final destination. Their stay in a “first aid” type of shelter must be minimized.

The second scenario is one of a foreseeable duration of their stay of less than 5 years before returning home. In this case there is little advantage in letting people culturally fully adapt to their new environment since the average process of doing so takes 5 years. This mostly would only hinder their reintegration upon going home and may also influence their will to return. Their situation must therefore be kept clearly temporary without any expectation of being able to stay longer.

Of course there is some adjustment required, but the refugee’s situation is more or less comparable with a student’s exchange program, learning and contributing elsewhere, not settling. This segment of refugees can be best hosted where there is most capacity to do so, which likely will be in the more developed cities. These urban areas possess on average more suitable structures or facilities for welfare type of social support and for temporary participation in education and labor, offering refugees the kind of experiences which can be used afterward upon returning home.

The third scenario is for those who will have to continue their life at another location, and who will remain displaced for 5 years or longer. This group is in need of permanent reinclusion elsewhere and capacity must be found to offer this. Unlike the second group, their situation is considered to be unending and cultural adaptation to their new environment is required with priority.

The relocation destination for this group should be based on their integration chances, interaction potential and chances to bridge knowledge and language gaps. Refugees will often be better-off in less developed areas, where due to depopulation there is a demand for new people and, due to recent technological developments, there are chances to revitalize the local economy by diversification.

The above three solutions are treating refugees very unequally. However, all scenarios target the identical goal of offering a life in dignity to everyone, regardless of whether this target is achieved by reinclusion at home, or cultural adaptation and reinclusion elsewhere.