Are All Refugees Equal? A Life in Dignity Approach! (Short Version)

100 million people are forcibly displaced, a rising number

A growing number of more than 100 million people are currently forcibly displaced. Therefore, as proposed in my previous article, we urgently need a new definition of what a refugee is. Instead of passively waiting for people to irregularly arrive, such revision should lead to a focus on handling proactively via evacuation. ***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!

Dangerous 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 permanent reinclusion solution. This does not imply that there is no need for refuge for both; it only means that there are different scenarios for dissimilar groups.

Many potential solutions cannot be based on the current approach of individual choice or freedom to apply for asylum anywhere one wants. The main available alternative is, namely, that the world starts to act proactively and to collectively offer answers. Such an 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.

Applying for protection is at the moment more like a "survival of the fittest" than of offering assistance to the most vulnerable. For economically motivated migration beyond escaping inhuman conditions, this kind of matching of supply and demand may be the right mechanism. However, 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 the entire worldwide population and to 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 above 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. Further, non-material components such as respect are also a very important part of dignity; these are mostly very difficult to define and 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.

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 the 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.

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 rather 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.

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. It is, of course, 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 has a fundamentally different culture, 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.

Refugee inclusion or integration at the most prosperous spots?

The most prosperous economic 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 circumventing selection and the threshold for labor participation is high.

As such this is fair, social mobility should remain equally open to everyone who qualifies. Refugees with deficits, such as a lack of education, are thus 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 in practice that those places which 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 in 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. Other, less specialized, less competitive, locations may thus be able to offer better reinclusion chances to people.

Creating false expectations

Treating people well and helping them financially to avoid such segregation also has another side. It can easily 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.

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 as this over time 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 such situation is to reinclude refugees and to offer people a new life. However, the optimal spots for reinclusion may, as 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.

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.

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. A different approach, in which one first invests in refugees' often lacking education, may be a better alternative for adaptation.

Notwithstanding, 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.

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. 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, 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.

Yet, there are often no permanent solutions available regionally. 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. Still, 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 the most prosperous destinations elsewhere nor the regional options offer sufficient chances 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 frequently 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.

Unlike 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 retire or 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 exploit their potential via economic mobility, something that would likely be almost impossible without [remote incubation](#). For people only facing limited gaps, this process will be even faster.

This "[Refival](#)" concept is based on such 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.

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. The 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 shelter can be offered, the better. Depending on whether refugees are estimated to be able to return home within 5 years or this 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 people's stay of less than 5 years before returning home. In this case there is little advantage in letting refugees 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 the refugee's will to return. Their situation must therefore be kept clearly temporary without any expectation of being able to stay longer. 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 urban areas. If these locations are similar in culture, it is a plus.

The third scenario is for those who will have to permanently continue their life at another location, and who will remain displaced for 5 years of longer. This group is in need of lasting reinclusion which includes cultural adaptation to their new environment. 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 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.