RETHINKING
THE MEDITERRANEAN CRISIS

Advice for policy makers facing a humanitarian catastrophe

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Cover Photo: Irish Naval personnel from the LÉ Eithne rescuing migrants as part of Operation Triton, July 2015. Photo by Irish Defence Forces.

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Advice for policy makers facing a humanitarian catastrophe

Create legal entry points into the EU and start recruiting labour through EU embassies in Africa. But don't forget to take into account the individual aspirations and capabilities of the migrants. Here are some recommendations for policy makers seeking a solution to the Mediterranean crisis.

By Jesper Bjarnesen, Senior Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute

Europe faces a humanitarian catastrophe. Growing numbers of people from Africa and the Middle East are making perilous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, crossings that claim increasing numbers of victims. When more than 100 migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, lost their lives off the coast of Lampedusa two years ago, decision makers across Europe vowed that such a tragedy would never repeat itself. But the death toll has continued to rise and 2015 will be the most tragic year ever recorded in terms of lives lost at sea.

According to UNHCR, approximately 3,500 people perished on the Mediterranean in 2014 and this year more than 2,000 had already lost their lives as of August. The images of fragile vessels filled to the brim with hundreds of people have become so commonplace that they no longer shock. In media coverage as well as in political debates about illegal immigration into the EU, migrants have gradually lost their humanity and have become an anonymous mass, perceived as a threat to European security and prosperity. This dehumanising view of migrants and immigration is not merely a

PHOTO: US Navy, Public Domain

An offshore patrol vessel from Malta in rescue mode. So far in 2015 more than 2,000 migrants and refugees have lost their lives in the Mediterranean.

sign of a lack of empathy towards fellow human beings, but also of ineffective policy.

Efforts to reduce the numbers of migrants and deaths on the Mediterranean Sea are failing because of a lack of financial support and, more fundamentally, because of a lack of understanding of the underlying causes of the increased immigration. Current approaches fail to appreciate the reasons why so many people are willing to risk their lives on the perilous journey. A different view of immigration in to the EU is required, in combination with new interventions that target the causes, rather than the symptoms.

Migrants or refugees?

News reports and political debates often fail to provide a clear picture of the underlying causes of the increased immigration in to the EU. This is largely due to the lack of a clear delimitation of the terms ”migrant” and ”refugee”. The latter may refer to a legal status, implying specific rights in accordance with the Geneva conventions, but the word may also be used to refer to involuntary migration more generally – as the opposite of a voluntary, labour or economic migrant. In references to the Mediterranean crisis, it is often unclear to whom the term refugee is applied. For example, Swedish radio reported – during the peak of the deaths at sea in 2014 – that “many refugees come from the war in Syria or from poor countries in Africa”. In this example, at least two categories of migrants are included in the term refugee: those fleeing civil war in Syria and those trying to escape poverty and unemployment in countries such as Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

International law distinguishes in critical ways between migrants and refugees. These differences are specified by UNHCR, which applies the legal definitions as a point of departure for its humanitarian efforts. The UNHCR website displays this distinction, which has recently been reiterated in reaction to an emerging debate: “Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve the future prospects of themselves and their families. Refugees have to move if they are to save their lives or preserve their freedom”. Although the UNHCR offers initial humanitarian assistance, to the best of its ability, to all who arrive on the EU’s shores, this distinction is crucial for an individual’s prospects in Europe: A refugee may apply for asylum, an economic migrant may apply for a residence and/or work permit.

”No other choice”

UNHCR now uses the term ’mixed migration’ to describe situations in which refugees and migrants use the same routes and the same means of transportation, as is the case of the boats crossing the Mediterranean. Apart from the initial humanitarian interventions, one of the most taxing tasks for the EU, as well as of individual member states, is to determine, in legal terms, which individuals are migrants and which are entitled to refugee status.

In academic research on migration, the distinction between refugees and migrants is less obvious and clear-cut. Many economic migrants see no other options when they leave their homes. As Danish anthropologist Hans Lucht wrote in The New York Times last year: “They know the risks. The tragedy is that they put their lives on the line because they feel they have no other choice”.

In my own research in Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso, there are significant overlaps between refugee and labour migration. During the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire, several hundred thousand Burkinabe labour migrants were forced to return to Burkina Faso. The large proportion of the low-skilled labour migration in the world points to the widespread loss of the freedom to live and work at home.

The civil war in Syria has precipitated an overwhelming number of refugees, thereby creating a series of immediate humanitarian needs and challenges. However, the Mediterranean crisis is not only a refugee crisis. The tendency to apply the label ”refugee” to everyone ”in the mix” in the ongoing crisis, may be understood as recognition of the involuntary nature of labour migration, as well as the risks and suffering that anyone crossing the Mediterranean is exposed to. The fundamental problem with this generalisation, however, is the reduction of the political debate into negotiation of refugee quotas, which is only relevant to about half of those who risk their lives on the journey.

A far too simplistic image

By speaking simply of a “refugee crisis”, the legal and empathetic uses of the term refugee are conflated, and the considerable group of aspiring labour migrants are excluded from the conversation. Most of these labour migrants have travelled from sub-Saharan Africa. We might say that the perilous and illegal journey across the sea transforms them into new refugees in need of humanitarian assistance. Their illegal status creates administrative costs and problems, for example in

identifying people who do not wish to disclose their citizenship for fear of deportation.

According to UNHCR, 322,500 persons were registered as arrivals in the EU from across the Mediterranean between January and August 2015. Among these, the largest group by far, approximately 50 per cent, originates from Syria, but citizens from Sub-Saharan Africa constitute the second-largest group. Nationals from countries such as Nigeria, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire top the list in this category, but the largest group is "non-specified nationalities from Sub-Saharan Africa" – a designation that illustrates how African migrants prefer to conceal their identity to avoid deportation. Frontex, the EU agency that manages the cooperation among national border agencies, reports that this category accounted for approximately 13 per cent of total arrivals during the first five months of 2015. According to *The Economist*, one-third of all registered arrivals in 2014 originated in Sub-Saharan Africa and an additional 25 per cent from Somalia and Eritrea.

Another problem is the implicit perception of refugees as helpless, passive victims who should be interned in camps until they can be sent back. This is a far too simplistic view of the needs and intentions of the refugees – including the Syrian refugees – upon their arrival in Europe. The perception of refugees as passive and without a will of their own is reflected in news reporting, in which the opinions and expectations of refugees are rare compared to the voices of politicians, aid workers, and the inhabitants in Europe's coastal regions. This perception is comfortable from a European perspective because it enables us to make decisions and form opinions without heeding the voices of the refugees themselves.

The images of anonymous masses, huddled together in overcrowded boats, or tramping down highways, affect public opinion as well as the nature of the political and humanitarian interventions. *Al Jazeera English* recently announced that it would avoid the term 'migrant' in its reporting because it "has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative".

In Scandinavia, paradoxically, the term "refugee" has more often been used to that effect. The dehumanising tendencies do not derive from the meaning of the words themselves, but rather about the views they evoke. And these views are of consequence in EU responses to the Mediterranean crisis, as well as in domestic debates on immigration.

Campaigns hostile to immigration

"No matter who you are or where you come from, you will not make Australia home". This sentence concludes the "No Way" campaign message of the Australian government. The campaign is targeted at illegal immigrants and it has been translated into 17 languages. The Australian campaign may be an extreme example, but it captures the tone of immigration debates across Europe over the past decade: immigration is fundamentally perceived as a problem, threatening to destabilise European economies and exhaust social services. Immigrants and refugees are portrayed as an invading force.

Denmark's Minister of Integration, Inger Støjberg, recently launched a similar campaign in international newspapers. A criminalising view on migration was also evident in the controversial "Sorry about the mess" campaign by Sverigedemokraterna, Sweden's anti-immigration political party.

General Angus Campbell, today Chief of Army, was previously the commander of Operation Sovereign aiming to stop boat refugees and migrants without visas. He was also the face of the 'No Way' campaign initiated by the Australian Government to deter illegal immigrants from trying to reach Australian shores.

Banners bearing the message "Sorry about the mess" were hung in the Stockholm Metro in August 2015. This controversial and strongly criticised campaign, primarily targeted at Roma people and street beggars, but also at illegal immigrants in general, was commissioned by Sverigedemokraterna, Sweden's anti-immigration party.

Two imbalances within the EU

There are specific structural reasons for Sweden's views on immigration possibly becoming more hostile. According to UNHCR, two fundamental internal imbalances have arisen within the EU in relation to the Mediterranean crisis. The first lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of refugees and migrants arrive in Italy and Greece, creating an urgent humanitarian crisis along the EU's southern coastline. This imbalance is obviously difficult to address geographically, but it is important to recognise that these countries require concerted European support. The other imbalance relates to asylum seekers. In 2014, Sweden and Germany received 43 per cent of the EU's total number of asylum applications. This imbalance poses administrative challenges for the Swedish authorities, challenges that contribute to the negative views on immigration in public debates. These structural imbalances require solutions at the highest levels of the EU.

In the current political climate on immigration, it is not surprising that the EU Commission has failed to agree on long-term and sustainable solutions for the Mediterranean crisis.

The rise and fall of Mare Nostrum

After the fatal capsizing of a boat off the coast of Lampedusa in 2013, the EU member states agreed on a comprehensive humanitarian and preventive programme called Mare Nostrum, which proved effective in saving lives at sea but too expensive to sustain. A recurring point of criticism of Mare Nostrum was that its humanitarian search and rescue operations were sending out the wrong signals to potential migrants, thereby encouraging larger numbers of arrivals. With limited EU funding, the Italian authorities were unable to continue on the same scale and Mare Nostrum was shut down at the end of 2014. According to Laura Boldrini, the former spokesperson of UNHCR, the costs of Mare Nostrum were approximately 5,500 SEK per life saved at sea. Operation Triton, EU's programme replacing Mare Nostrum, has operated on a third of Mare Nostrum's budget and has focused mainly on border patrols – a priority reflecting the "No Way" campaign's view of immigration as a foreign invasion.

Following the first disastrous accidents at sea in 2015, EU leaders agreed on a ten-point plan to cope with the Mediterranean crisis and prevent future catastrophe. Although the meeting resulted in increased funding for Operation Triton, bringing it up to Mare Nostrum standards, the 10-point plan emphasised interventions against smuggling networks; increased patrolling along the EU coastline; more efficient repatriation mechanisms; and a more coordinated asylum procedure at the EU level along with other administrative amendments.

The EU response thereby continues to focus on the criminalising aspects of migration across the Mediterranean and on measures to make the journey more difficult and, thus, even more perilous. The overall message is that illegal, or irregular, immigration into the EU must be prevented by more determined means and suggestions have been made to destroy smuggler vessels along the North African coast with fighter jets.

Lack of legal entry points

In national and EU-level debates and negotiations regarding interventions in connection with the Mediterranean Sea, we may distinguish two basic priorities. On one hand, there is an emphasis on saving lives, while on the other, there are efforts to prevent new or increased flows of refugees. The emphasis on saving lives is based on a short-term perspective, prioritising the

humanitarian efforts of saving, evacuating, and caring for refugees and migrants, regardless of their legal status. The emphasis on preventing new or increased flows tends to result in combatting of human traffickers and increased patrolling. But why should long-term efforts to prevent future arrivals emphasise these particular measures? This approach resembles the Australian campaign which criminalises migrants and militarises the response to immigration.

It is evident that a considerable number of those arriving as refugees begin their journeys as aspiring labour migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most labour migrants travel from Africa to Europe by air and possess enough resources to settle. Those who cross the sea generally have fewer options, but it is not the poorest or least educated who leave home. A known labour migration strategy consists of a family or a group of families pooling their resources to finance one person, who is selected on the premise that he or she has the best capabilities for succeeding. Illegal migration routes are not just dangerous, they are also expensive, often much more so than the migrant expects at the outset. It might be more efficient, financially as well as in a humanitarian sense, to consider long-term interventions to discourage this dynamic, rather than to focus on its symptoms.

Away from the criminalising view

If a person from Sub-Saharan Africa had legal options for entering the EU, the flows across the Mediterranean would be reduced significantly. The criminalising view of immigration in Europe makes such an option difficult to envision. Why would the EU invest in bringing people in by legal means? It's difficult to estimate the size and significance of Europe's informal sector, but research clearly demonstrates that undocumented migrants are an essential part of the workforce in many EU countries, despite the unregulated working conditions they experience. Regulating this workforce would entail better working conditions for labourers and be a step towards regulating immigration into the EU. More specifically, EU embassies in Africa could be involved in recruiting workers for national labour markets.

These measures could also include persons with legal refugee status. Attention to the aspirations and capabilities of refugees themselves would enable refugees to contribute financially to a larger extent. Regardless of whether the legalisation and regulation of immigration is directed towards refugees or labour migrants, these specific measures imply a humanising view of those who arrive. What is needed is first of all to move away from a criminalising view of immigration and interventions that focus on symptoms rather than the causes of the current forms and number of arrivals. The current approaches offer no sustainable solution to the Mediterranean crisis.

Recommendations

- The significant proportion of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa must be taken into account when seeking solution to the Mediterranean crisis
- Interventions should prioritise long-term solutions that take the aspirations and capabilities of migrants and refugees into account
- Creation of legal entry points into the EU should be a central priority, in order to remove the incentive for future migrants to risk their lives at sea
- Active recruitment of labour through EU embassies in Africa would further reduce the incentive to pursue illegal means of entering Europe.

Migrants in Hungary near the Serbian border. Images like this, portraying the migrants as an anonymous mass rather than individual human beings, have been spread by news media to such an extent that they risk dehumanising the view of the migrants.

About the Author

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