

Conference Report

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2015

sef:

International responsibility in refugee situations: Prevention – regional stability – peace work

Rebekka Hannes

About 1.5 billion people live in countries affected by armed conflict and violence. This is one major reason why there are currently over 56 million refugees worldwide. Many remain inside their own national borders as internally displaced persons (IDPs). The war in Syria has driven more than 7 million people out of their homes within their own country; another 3 million have fled to neighbouring countries. Yet this is not the only region where the situation is precarious. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the countries with the next highest numbers of refugees and IDPs are Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. The international community provides substantial support in refugee crises. Nevertheless, the need for assistance in regions affected by armed conflicts and fragility is still enormous. At the sef: Berlin Summer Dialogue 2015, which took place on 17-18 June, experts from politics, international organisations, civil society

and academia identified and discussed central aspects of international responsibility in refugee situations.

Saving lives, tackling the root causes of displacement, and creating prospects for refugees – in his keynote address, Dr Friedrich Kitschelt, State Secretary in the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), distilled the international responsibility down to these three elements. This triad also represents the Ministry's approach to refugee situations. In order to offer policy solutions that meet the needs of the world's current refugee crises, it is time for a sea change in international cooperation, as Kitschelt pointed out. There must be more alignment between security, domestic and defence policy, in the sense of a holistic "world domestic policy". Development policy has a key role to play in this context, but also the countries themselves and regional organisations, e.g. the African Union (AU), need to assume more responsibility for conflict prevention.

Dr Oliver Knabe, Chief Executive Officer of the Forum Civil Peace Service, added that prevention should be intervention as well. Only long-term partnerships change the quality of political and social processes: "A focus on quick fixes rarely brings the change we want." Instead, conflict prevention requires constant dialogue, training and the challenging of identities. However, he also stressed that responsible humanitarian aid is always anticipatory.



State Secretary Dr Friedrich Kitschelt

Stepping up international support

In his keynote address, Amin Awad, UNHCR's Director of the Bureau for the Middle East and North

Africa and Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Syria and Iraq situation, noted that the international community is facing the worst humanitarian disaster of our times. In total, some 20 million people in the region are affected, with an increasing number of Syrians seeking protection beyond the immediate region. Extraordinary solidarity has been shown by neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

However, international cooperation continues to be key. Greater financial aid, including longer-term development and resilience-based funding, is needed to help ease the burden on neighbouring states. Furthermore, widening access to protection for refugees beyond the immediate region through legal channels, including through the use of humanitarian visas, community-based private sponsorship, scholarships, facilitated access to family reunification as well as labour mobility schemes, need to be explored.

International organisations too big to change?

International organisations (IOs) and their various programmes are, of course, the main actors in preventing and managing refugee crises. Dr Ramy Lakkis from the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST) pointed out that in Lebanon, many people actually blame the UN system – despite its remarkable efforts – for the lack of solidarity in the current refugee crisis. In his view, the international organisations are simply too big to initiate the structural change necessary to address a challenge like the Syrian refugee crisis. The audience also voiced scepticism about international organisations' long-term vision. One participant pointed out that refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia are largely still without future prospects after having been on the move for 35 years in some cases. Michael Kingsley, Director of the Syria Field Office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), freely admitted that there are deficiencies in the UN system, especially a lack of exchange and willingness to move ahead among practitioners. "The UN is in denial about this. We continue to do things we have always done," he conceded.

Continuous funding needed

Another major element of responsibility in refugee situations is the necessary funding. Responsibility and burden-sharing are actually two sides of the same coin. For Tim Eaton, Project Manager for the Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative at Chatham House, however, it seems clear that "so far, there is nothing close to a fair burden-sharing in this crisis". Jason Pronyk, Development Coordinator at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Sub-Regional Response Facility and the 3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, pointed out that the conflict needs continuous pledging and financial support from the international community. However, this should not only come from the humanitarian and development community. Banks, enterprises and other partners have a responsibility in this context and should provide funds as well, as Pronyk reminded participants.

Feda Gharaibeh, Director of the Humanitarian Relief Coordination Unit at the Ministry of Planning & International Cooperation in Jordan, also pointed out that the international community urgently needs to consider the timeframe issue connected to funding. Development agencies, she reported, are rarely able to provide funding for more than one year but the development needs in the field are obviously likely to last much longer. Johannes Luchner from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) also conceded that the EU is not doing enough to meet its responsibility in the current refugee crisis. At the same time, he voiced his scepticism regarding the actual capacities of "traditional" donors: "The Western club of donors will not resolve the world's humanitarian problems," he said.

Neighbouring states' needs and expectations

A further element of international responsibility that needs scaling up is the assistance provided for host communities in neighbouring states. To Awad, these countries provide a global public good that is greatly underestimated by the rest of the international community. Dr Eltje Aderhold, Director for Humanitarian Aid in the German Federal Foreign Office's Directorate-General for Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, agreed that donors must increase their support for neighbouring countries, even though they are mostly middle income countries which are traditionally not included on the OECD Development Assistance Committee's list of recipients. She stressed that in the current refugee crisis, all actors need to think outside their silos.

At the Berlin Summer Dialogue, the expectations and needs of neighbouring states and host communities were voiced by several representatives of receiving states and local NGOs. One characteristic of the situation in Syria's neighbours is that about 85% of refugees actually live in host communities. With the national and international support that the refugees receive, such as access to health care and education, local people often feel that they are being left behind or treated unjustly. Lakkis gave a first-hand insight into the tensions in Lebanon, where refugees make up 20% of the population. As a consequence, Syrian refugees "are blamed for all sorts of incidents happening in communities," as he pointed out. However,

Lakkis stressed that the tensions among the population groups are not only due to the sheer influx of refugees. Personally, he also blames the interventions and processes that have been agreed upon at a political level: “The host communities are tired. People have opened their houses and shared their resources but they cannot go on like this,” he said. In his view, the humanitarian crisis has turned into a political crisis that needs to be addressed by the international community and the Lebanese state itself. Irem Somer of the Turkish NGO Mülteci-Der added that the crisis is a legal and social one as well. She called for money not just to be invested in humanitarian and development assistance but also in targeting rights violations and addressing gaps in the legal frameworks applicable to national authorities in receiving states, as these gaps put refugees at risk. Lakkis suggested that both national and international interventions should not look at the situation in terms of host communities vs. refugee communities but that a redefinition towards ‘mixed communities’ sharing resources needs to take place.

Resilience – a new development community catchword?

Recognising the needs of local communities and strengthening their resilience are key elements of the UN 3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015-2016 (3RP), which represents an integrated humanitarian and development response to the Syrian crisis at a regional level. As Jason Pronyk explained, the 3RP is a comprehensive programme involving more than 200 partners in the five most affected countries in the region around Syria. Its central aims are to



Panel III with Jason Pronyk, Feda Gharaibeh, Kathrin Lorenz (Chair), Tim Eaton und Irem Somer (f.l.t.r)

maintain social cohesion and promote local government models that ensure inclusion and diversity, thus increasing overall trust in local authorities.

Lakkis, however, criticised the implementation of the 3RP on the grounds that although the UN partners with local NGOs and communities, their true assets are still not taken into account. Local players should

not simply spend international organisations’ money and implement their plans; instead, they should plan and initiate projects themselves: “They cost less, are more strategic and implement processes more effectively because they know what is going in the communities.” In his view, resilience seems to be a new catchword that the development community can use to justify fundraising. Gharaibeh, as a representative of the state of Jordan, remarked that it is not always easy for governments to make sure that the right NGOs are targeted.

Both Lakkis and Gharaibeh also criticised the UN’s regional approach. To Lakkis, regional planning does not take into account the complex political dynamics in any subregion, and Gharaibeh argued that the planning has not been followed by genuine regional cooperation. This makes the 3RP look like a paper tiger.

Resettlement – a matter of picking and choosing?

Another area in which international cooperation was criticised as being totally inadequate was the resettlement of refugees, an aspect highlighted by Tim Eaton. It is a simple fact that most Syrian refugees will not be able to return. However, in the current situation, this issue has been left to the neighbouring states; less than 2% of the refugees have been resettled outside Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey. On the one hand, the presence of such large numbers of refugees has exacerbated existing tensions and economic challenges. On the other hand, Syrian refugees have little access to legal means of earning a living in these states, which will make them more vulnerable in the long run. In countries not directly affected by the refugee influx, resettlement is, however, “not a good selling point for elections,” as Eaton pointed out. Gharaibeh therefore argued in favour of a fair formula for burden sharing, which should be oriented towards resettling refugees in third countries and ensuring that the international community helps to meet host countries’ funding needs.

Several participants warned that Western countries should not remain in a position where they can pick refugees according to their CVs and qualifications. Instead, refugees should be taken in according to their vulnerability. Somer added that the EU also finally needs to agree on an internal formula for the resettlement of refugees, as the current system puts the greatest pressure on countries on the EU’s borders.

Positively transforming refugees’ resources

A related element of international responsibility, which is rarely covered by the media, is the positive contribution that refugees and returnees can make to

local communities and host states. In this regard, Dr Amanda Coffie, Research Fellow at the University of Ghana's Legon Center for International Affairs and Diplomacy, gave an insight into how Liberian refugees transformed their resources they had acquired in Ghana into peacebuilding after having returned to their home communities. In contrast to the mostly negative impacts highlighted in the literature, Coffie reported from her research that returnees promote



Dr Amanda Coffie

peace on a constant basis, which positively influences people around them. They regularly become facilitators of peacebuilding education, having gone through programmes in camps or host communities themselves, and apply this knowledge to communities which were unable to leave the country during the war. Returnees also give validity to elections as part of a peacebuilding process by volunteering, funding NGOs and putting pressure on the government. Coffie was convinced that “asylum states should appreciate the experience of refugees as well”. Host governments and governments welcoming returnees should be provided with more information about positive impacts of refugees and asylum seekers, she added.

Endorsing this, Gudrun Kramer, Project Coordinator for the Regional Social and Cultural Fund for Palestinian Refugees and Gaza Population at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, added that refugees should be regarded more as active subjects rather than victims – after all, they are going to be the ones reconstructing their home countries. She added that refugees have not only material but also non-material basic needs: they need to achieve control over their lives. If this is not given, it provides room for radicalisation. On

the positive side, the provision of non-material basic needs creates space for more social integration.

In this context, State Secretary Kitschelt pointed out that refugees who have made it to Germany are usually highly mobile, motivated and prepared to take risks – attributes that sound like job postings for management positions. Receiving states should therefore create more incentives to utilise the potential of refugees in education, training and the job market by building their skills, which can in the long run be fed back into their countries of origin. Eaton reminded participants that the right to work should be considered a key aspect in the engagement of refugees.

Participants agreed that there is immense potential in refugee camps, which agencies can work with. However, for the UN it is, as Kingsley pointed out, sometimes difficult to select who to work with in camps, as those who do want to cooperate with the UN are not necessarily the best contacts.

How to escape the system?

Even though most participants at the Berlin Summer Dialogue were part of the humanitarian or development system, many of them criticised the huge dependency on external assistance for refugees. On the one hand, communities dependent on outside assistance are easy to manipulate because they have no control over their lives. On the other hand, as Gharaibeh pointed out, “humanitarian aid is a pull factor that makes refugees want to maintain their status.” Dr Ulrike von Pilar, Head of the Humanitarian Issues Team at Médecins sans Frontières Germany, reminded participants that a needs-based approach must remain the core principle of humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, “the international humanitarian system does not work for the most vulnerable and never has,” said von Pilar.

To what extent will the international community be able to change its approach and increase its effectiveness in tackling the root causes of conflict and displacement, providing adequate support to refugees and host communities while engaging refugees and returnees in peacebuilding processes? This question had to be left open at the Berlin Summer Dialogue. Although many positive developments and potentialities for change were highlighted during the two days, change always depends on the necessary political will. “At the end of the day, protection is politics,” was Awad’s summary.

Imprint

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