

Africa Up Close

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SOUTHERN VOICES: Global Migration and its Discontents

By Olivia K. Lwabukuna // Friday, March 18, 2016



Two women enter a tent at the Mentao refugee camp in Burkina Faso in 2012, a camp formed from people leaving the conflict in Mali. Many African countries host far more refugees and migrants than Europe, and the fates of refugees and migrants are linked to both European and African policies.

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The migrants and refugees streaming into Europe from Africa and the Middle East have presented European leaders and policymakers with their greatest challenge since the Eurozone crisis. The conflict in Syria continues to be the biggest driver of migration, but other factors, including instability and lack of proper governance in Libya, terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the usual mixed migration patterns from South Asian and African countries, also continue to influence migration patterns to Europe. The European Union's collective response to this migrant influx and its policy have been ad-hoc, inconsistent, and focused more on national interests and securing the bloc's borders than on protecting the rights of migrants and refugees.

International news has been filled with images of migrant and refugee families squeezed in small plastic boats offloading on the European coast, mostly on the Greek islands. Others trekking overland are observed trying to jump fences to get into closed-

off Macedonia and other European countries. Most are stuck at the border with Turkey, or other borders within Europe. At the same time we have observed constant meetings, extraordinary summits, and at times a flash of cash to African countries and other developing countries to support implementation of in-country 'containment.' Nationalist parties are springing up all over Europe and elsewhere in the world, garnering huge support with anti-immigrant slogans and platforms. The few European countries, particularly Germany, that have tried to deal with the burden on a humanitarian level have eventually tired and are facing popular backlash from within the countries themselves. Germany's efforts have increasingly been met with internal political pressure.

The United Kingdom and the smaller European countries have not been as supportive during this tumultuous time. The scale of the refugee crisis leads to paralysis; these are vast numbers of people, increasing every day as the war in Syria wages on. Instability in places like Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa (specifically Libya), and the rest of the Maghreb region have also contributed to the soaring numbers of people on the move. The new terrorism and unconventional violence that the world is facing, including non-state control of major parts of fragile countries, have resulted in the world's greatest human security crisis and mass displacement as conflicts push people out of their homes. We must not forget that in northern Nigeria, Libya, Somalia, Mali, Iraq and Syria, and some parts of Afghanistan and other regions of the world, it is these groups and their violent actions that have led to large human displacements.

Roots of a Crisis

We should also ask ourselves—how did this instability come into existence, what caused it, and how did Libya, an oil-rich country now struggling with entrenched rebel groups, become a gateway for entrance into Europe? What has contributed to the crisis in Syria and Iraq? What about Afghanistan? How did we get there? The contributing factors to the global crisis of displacement cannot be divorced from the approach to resolving it, both internationally and internally within countries. In addressing the issue of refugees and migrants stuck at borders in Europe, the world cannot divorce their plight from the political decisions that have contributed to their situation. In setting up quotas for Syrians, who are currently considered the only 'legitimate' refugees by many, the world and Europe should not forget that the fate of Syrian refugees is closely tied to that of refugees of Iraqi, Afghan, and Libyan origin, and that all these groups' fates are tied to political decisions made in European capitals.

In responding to this plight, the world must also note that migration is an inevitable human phenomenon. When people find themselves under humanitarian, social, economic, or political pressure, they move to regions or areas where they assume they will be better off. Migration cannot be stopped; it can only be managed. If the migration crisis facing us is not addressed adequately, it could lead to further instability, crisis, and discontent within Europe, within countries of origin, and within transit countries. Most importantly, the failure to address this crisis humanely chips away at our humanity and the need to co-exist as humans. As the Sustainable Development Goals kick off, this crisis is a way of testing the implementation of these promising policies. The world and Europe should take action, while recognizing that decisions made in one part of the world will be felt globally, just as political decisions in the countries from which many refugees come are being felt in Europe today.

Most importantly, we must also be cognizant that while migration to Europe dominates international news, it is not the only migration crisis taking place globally. In fact it might not even be the most severe. In East Africa, countries like Kenya have hosted

hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Horn of Africa for years and continue to do so. The on-and-off crises in the Great Lakes Region have produced one of the largest human movements known to man, with the current crises in Burundi, CAR, and the protracted issues in DRC adding to the number. It is the countries within the region that must host most of these refugees and migrants, and their citizens that must bear the brunt of the displaced. At the height of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, Tanzania's hosted one of the largest populations of refugees in East Africa in camps in its Ngara district. At the peak of these crises, host countries had the support of the international community and donors, but even in times without the necessary support, they have hosted and continue to host large numbers of people. The guiding principle for a better refugee and migrant policy must be that humanity's fate is intertwined. At the end of the day, political decisions taken in countries of origin, including addressing the crises driving migration, are the only option to resolving the issue of forced migration that the world is facing.

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