An Agenda for the G20 to Reset Global Trade Cooperation

by Güven Sak

IAI x G20

The UN Convention on the Status of Refugees was adopted on 20 June 1951 in the wake of the displacement caused by the Second World War. As a result, 20 June is celebrated annually as World Refugee Day.

On that day in 2020, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 1 per cent of humanity had experienced forcible displacement. In 2019, there were a total of 79.5 million forcibly displaced around the world, 45.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs), 20.4 million refugees and 4.2 million asylum seekers.[1] During the seventy years from the signing of the UN convention, violence leading to

displacement has repeatedly surfaced in different parts of the world.

Forced displacement is a transnational issue requiring global action. In principle, no other platform is be better suited to address this problem than the G20. However the G20 lacks a comprehensive strategy to deal with the multifaceted migration challenges.

The issue of refugees was first mentioned during Turkey's G20 presidency at the 2015 Antalya summit. Since then, the importance of the issue has been repeatedly mentioned but no coherent strategy and policy framework have been developed. This is despite the fact that the issue of forced migration and IDPs is widely recognised as one of the foremost problems of our age.

---

[1] United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2019*, Copenhagen, UNHCR, 2020, p. 2, https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019.

Güven Sak is Managing Director of the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Ankara. This paper was prepared in the framework of the Strategic Partnership between IAI and the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation.

A three-dimension tragedy

On 24 November 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR called on the world to support humanitarian initiatives to protect thousands of Ethiopians fleeing to Sudan in the wake of military hostilities in Tigray, Ethiopia. The chief of UNHCR, Filippo Grandi, reiterated such appeal to the global community during a field visit to meet refugees at the Hamdayet Border Reception Centre in Eastern Sudan.[2]

The conflict in Tigray increased the number of forcibly displaced across the globe. When the Ethiopian army began its manoeuvres in the Tigray National Regional State, around 2.2 million people fled, either within the region or to neighbouring countries.[3]

There was a similar conflict-based tragedy back in 2017. At the onset of mass persecution in Myanmar, 750,000 individuals from the Rohingya ethnic minority fled to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh is now in an ongoing process of transporting the Rohingya people to a flood-prone island off the coast of Bengal.[4] While raising concerns about whether the relocation plan is consent-based or not, some 2,600 people have already been moved to Bhasan Char Island.[5]

Adding to the number of the forcibly displaced around the world, this modus operandi is a reoccurring theme whenever there is such a tragedy. Since the conflict in Syria, the number of forcibly displaced has reached record levels – surpassing the figures of WWII. Today, these numbers are only growing further.

As the examples of Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Yemen show, major domestic issues remain unresolved, periodically leading to ethnic based violence on top of foreign meddling and interventionism. In the absence of proper governance and representation, ethnic and sectarian divides can turn into militarised conflict, forcing ordinary individuals to flee.

The displacement can be internal or external, towards neighbouring countries, in most cases another developing state. Indeed, 86 per cent of forcibly displaced people are hosted by neighbouring developing countries.[6] As a result, the problem, originally local, becomes regional, in turn requiring global action.

Here begins the second dimension of the problem. On the one hand, the issue is the effective integration of refugees into the labour market of the host

---

[2] UN News, *UN Refugee Agency Appeals for $147 Million to Support Thousands of Ethiopians Fleeing to Sudan*, 30 November 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1078822.

[3] "Over 2 Million People Displaced by Conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray Region – Local Official", in *Reuters*, 6 January 2021, https://reut.rs/3hLtT4y.

[4] Akbar Hossain, "Rohingya Relocated to Remote Island Against Their Will, Rights Groups Say", in *BBC News*, 4 December 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55177688.

[5] Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh Set to Move Second Batch of Rohingya Refugees to Remote Island – Officials", in *Reuters*, 27 December 2020, https://reut.rs/37RqbmU.

[6] UNHCR website: *Refugee Data Finder*, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics.

country, which is troublesome given the rising tensions due to domestic unemployment. On the other, the issue is about managing makeshift camps for IDPs in origin countries.

The COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated both sides of the problem, given the impossibility of ensuring adequate prevention and sanitation in these settings.

A third challenge arises when the forcibly displaced in a neighbouring country view the host country as a temporary transit, wishing instead to progress to other locations. It is only then that the issue becomes a problem for the more developed countries that migrants seek to reach. Only 14 per cent of forcibly displaced migrants live in those countries. It is in this context that the nativist discourse about "us vs. them" and disputes over birth rights and human rights emerge.

A relative example would be Trump's executive order to build a wall on the US southern border to prevent the inflow of Mexicans and other immigrants from South America.[7] Similarly, but across the Atlantic, in 2016, Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party at the time, stood before the infamous "breaking point" billboard showing a long line of migrants. Farage used the image to inject fear among Britons while campaigning for Brexit.[8]

Now, the European Union consists of 27 instead of 28 member states.

The nativist debate is not exclusive to more developed countries. Yet, the basic reality can be summarised under three crucial points. First, the vast majority of the 2.7 million Afghans, 1.1 million Rohingya, 2.2 South Sudanese, 5.6 million Syrians and 4.5 million Venezuelans that have fled their countries are today located in neighbouring developing countries.[9]

Second, despite the rising nativist rhetoric in developed countries, forced migration is more of a challenge for developing nations. As the pandemic constricts growth and job creation, developing countries hosting forcibly displaced migrants face an exponentially heavier burden. Unfortunately, under pandemic conditions, turning transit countries into destination countries and integrating migrants into the labour markets of developing countries has become increasingly difficult.

Third, migration is mostly an urban problem. Urban centres offer greater job opportunities and therefore naturally attract the bulk of migrants. The already overcrowded cities in developing countries are not only the frontlines for social unrest between locals and immigrants, but have also become less manageable due to the pandemic. In such a challenging environment local leadership and actions – not so much new laws or regulations – play a more

---

[7] Jeremy Diamond, "Trump Orders Construction of Border Wall, Boosts Deportation Force", in *CNN*, 26 January 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/25/politics/donald-trump-build-wall-immigration-executive-orders.

[8] Heather Stewart and Rowena Mason, "Nigel Farage's Anti-Migrant Poster Reported to

Police", in *The Guardian*, 16 June 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/p/4ydmk.

[9] UNHCR Philippines website: *Figures at a Glance*, https://www.unhcr.org/ph/?p=10117.

critical role.

Europe's flawed migration response

In its "New Pact on Migration and Asylum" the European Commission has proposed "an integrated approach at the EU level that is effectively translated into national asylum and migration policies." However, the EU has so far failed to develop a consistent and effective strategy.

The case of the roughly 4 million forcibly displaced migrants in Turkey highlights the unpleasant arithmetic of the problem at hand.[10] On the opposite side of the Aegean, there are 120,000 in Greece.[11] This is thanks to the EU-Turkey migration deal.

By the end of 2020, in the aftermath of the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, Ankara had received a total of 4 billion euro of EU financial aid.[12] Greece on the other hand, received 2.97 billion euro to deal with the same problem.[13] This means that the amount of EU money designated per refugee jumps

more than 24-fold when such a person crosses the Maritsa River or the Aegean Sea. If the forcibly displaced migrants remain in Turkey, the EU pays around 1,000 euro per person for their care whereas if they cross over to Greece this figure jumps to 24,750 euro.

Post-pandemic migration challenges for 2021

In 2021, during Italy's presidency of the G20 and at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of forcibly displaced people has gained additional urgency for three reasons.

First, there is the issue of inadequate global vaccine production and distribution. Thankfully there will eventually be enough vaccine production capacity for the world's 7.5 billion people. David Malpass of the World Bank confirmed that vaccinations may be completed anywhere from the second half of 2021 up into 2022.[14] Nevertheless, despite all the discussion about equitable distribution, the vast majority of those who have been so far vaccinated are located in high-income countries.

Vaccine nationalism could become fiercer in developing countries that host forcibly displaced migrants. It is welcome news that President Biden has returned the US to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and pledged its support to COVAX, a programme designed to support vaccination in developing countries with 2 billion

---

[10] UNHCR, *Turkey Operational Update August 2020*, 2 October 2020, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/79337.

[11] UNHCR, *Greece Fact Sheet November 2020*, 21 December 2020, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/83847.

[12] European Commission, *Factsheet: The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey*, January 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/frit_factsheet.pdf.

[13] European Commission, *Factsheet: Managing Migration. EU Financial Support to Greece*, December 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/202012_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-greece_en.pdf.

[14] Ian Bremmer interview with David Malpass, "When Will the Developing World Get the Vaccine?" (video), in *GZERO World*, 14 January 2021, https://youtu.be/hiJzqHXv8Mg.

doses. Yet the implementation of the programme is likely to face many hurdles as the developed countries are concentrating on meeting their own needs.

Second, the rapid rise in food prices in 2020 has raised concerns regarding forcibly displaced. Global food prices reached a six-year high in December 2020 and are likely to keep rising into 2021 according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.[15] Climate change and the pandemic are widely cited as key reasons for the 18-per cent hike in food prices.

Third, the negative impact of the pandemic was felt by the most vulnerable individuals in developing countries, namely, refugees and women. The already weak social safety nets in numerous countries will exacerbate the hunger problem faced by billions of people, especially during rising food prices.

While designing a policy research programme for the Think20 (T20) during Italy's presidency, the three aforementioned issues should come to the fore. These issues will remain important even in 2022, when Indonesia takes the G20's helm from Italy.

One of Italy's priorities during its G20 presidency is "People".[16] This should include a concerted effort to ensure rapid vaccine production and just distribution.

Another priority of the Italian G20 agenda is "Prosperity". Yet, rising food prices and declining employment opportunities may cause major economic problems. Efforts to protect the human rights of migrants meet with strong resistance, and so do plans to integrate them into the labour market and social protection systems. Equally important is migrant entrepreneurship that needs to be encouraged. Migrant entrepreneurs often employ other migrants and both contribute with their remittances to hard currency earning efforts in their host countries.

A role for the T20

T20, the engagement group of G20 that brings together leading think tanks working on global governance issues and the G20 role, can significantly contribute to the advancement of the G20 migration agenda. The T20 task forces are well-equipped to conduct relevant policy research and offer incisive policy proposals. It is all about foresight. This is, after all, the purpose of think tanks. In this respect, the T20 should position itself as the "think and do tank" of the G20.

The T20 is not about academic research on a variety of relevant global themes. It is about turning readily available research into actionable policy proposals in line with the G20's official agenda. After all, policy research is not about explaining events, but rather

[15] Agnieszka de Sousa and Megan Durisin, "Global Food Prices at Six-Year High Are Set to Keep on Climbing", in *Bloomberg*, 7 January 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-07/global-food-prices-at-six-year-high-are-set-to-keep-on-climbing.

[16] G20 website: *Priorities*, https://www.g20.org/ italian-g20-presidency/priorities.html.

about effectively leading to action. Well-placed words in summit communiques have the potential to foster world-wide change. The T20 should focus on helping identify those words.

Regarding the tensions we are seeing due to migration, James Baldwin's words come to mind, "Forays, frontiers, and flags are useless. Nobody can go home anymore."[17] Much of this policy is not about finding a home for migrants. It is about realising that the homes we all had are disappearing. If we want to go home again, we must build a new, just and sustainable home and do this together with migrants.

7 March 2021

---

[17] Bill V. Mullen, "The Anti-Colonial Vision of James Baldwin's Last Two Unfinished Works", in *Literary Hub*, 4 October 2019, https://lithub.com/the-anti-colonial-vision-of-james-baldwins-last-two-unfinished-works.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
Tel. +39 066976831
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)