

European Governments under Pressure to Do More for Refugees

The flood of refugees into Europe in recent years has led to the collapse of the continent's screening and reception process, according to Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva. The conflict in Syria alone has driven nearly 10 million of its citizens to seek refuge abroad. Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon host over 90% of these refugees. Europe urgently needs to play its part – by reinventing how it receives people and how it shares this responsibility among member states. “Europe has no more a concept of shared solidarity,” said Grandi. The refugee crisis has also revealed Europe's weakness in the long-term integration into society of new arrivals.

Grandi's message was echoed by Louise Mushikiwabo, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Rwanda, who called for greater political engagement. “It is easy for us politicians to hide behind the word ‘humanitarian’,” said Mushikiwabo, “but refugees are a consequence of bad politics and we need to tackle that.” She called on Europeans to be patient, take time and deal seriously with the issue. Europe's citizens need to understand why these people are coming to their countries and what can be done to deal with the challenges.

The UNHCR's forthcoming Global Compact on Refugees will emphasize the critical roles to be played by the private sector, civil society, academia and development organizations – as well as governments and humanitarian players – in addressing the crisis. Funding for refugees and host communities remains a thorny issue, admitted Grandi. The system needs more than just short-term humanitarian resources. “We need to look at longer-term funding, investment-type funding, which creates lasting advantages,” he said. This is largely the responsibility of bilateral development donors and multilaterals such as The World Bank, he added.

Connectivity is one key concern for refugees. “The first thing a refugee asks for on arriving at a camp is not water or food, but the password for the Wi-Fi,” said Kaan Terzioğlu, Chief Executive Officer, Turkcell İletişim Hizmetleri, Turkey. A smartphone is not a luxury; it is a basic humanitarian need, he said. It is often the only thing to connect refugees with the people they left behind. Useful

smartphone apps for refugees help them how to claim asylum, find a house or job, learn a new language or find health insurance. However, said Elaine Weidman-Grunewald, Senior Vice-President; Chief Sustainability and Public Affairs Officer, Ericsson, Sweden, “Digitization is more than an app.” The key role for the private sector is to help refugees, host communities, and humanitarian and development organizations transform themselves through digital technologies. The Sustainable Development Goals provide another opportunity for corporates to engage.

Underpinning these transformations, we need a shift in mindsets, argued Sara Pantuliano, Managing Director, Overseas Development Institute, United Kingdom. This means putting people at the centre of choosing what they want to buy, and for what they want to use our aid. “Education and jobs are the two things you hear from refugees,” said Pantuliano – “but what do we give them? Food – but it’s not the priority for them.” Many governments don’t permit refugees to work in the formal economy. Terzioğlu, for one, is mystified: “We try really hard not to lose one customer. I see potential [among refugees] as good taxpayers five to 10 years out. They’d be great building blocks of the future. Why don’t governments see this?”

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