



“The increasing numbers of refugees are not an aberration, they are likely to be the new norm”

Interview with refugee expert
Prof. Alexander Betts, University of Oxford

The “refugee crisis” continues to make headlines in Germany and Europe. *ad hoc international* talked to Alexander Betts, Leopold Muller Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs at the Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford, about the European Union’s crisis management and what opportunities the crisis offers for rethinking international refugee protection.

ad hoc: *EU refugee and asylum policy is characterised by a lack of responsibility sharing. A plethora of initiatives to distribute responsibilities among member states have failed, such as the EU refugee quota system. You have studied the conditions under which responsibility sharing between states takes place. Which of these do you see met in the EU and what is still missing?*

Betts: The starting point for thinking about the failure of responsibility sharing needs to be an understanding of the nature of refugee politics. Globally and also at the European level, a power asymmetry exists between states: just ten countries host almost two thirds of the world’s refugees. In Europe, frontline states like Italy and Greece bear the greatest responsibility; those more distant, like the United Kingdom, can hide behind territory or water and skirt around that responsibility by engaging in beggar-thy-neighbour policies. Looking at Germany, another factor becomes apparent: how attractive a destination country is.

The problem today is the breakdown of the current system in Europe. We have a higher number of people arriving as asylum seekers. The Dublin model of responsibility sharing has been poorly adapted to that. What needs to happen is to avoid border closing as the only form of responsibility sharing. Governments need to recognise that they are better off acting collectively than in isolation, and they need to get to a point where they have reciprocal commitments within and beyond the refugee area. What needs to happen is to avoid border closing as the only form of responsibility sharing. Governments need to recognize that they are better off acting collectively than in isolation.

ad hoc: *The EU-Turkey deal has received a volley of harsh criticism. What do you think are the consequences of such an agreement on the international refugee regime?*

Betts: The EU-Turkey deal is a disaster for the global refugee regime. It is illegal, unworkable, and politically unsustainable. The “one-in, one-out” deal relies upon the idea that we can return Syrian refugees to Turkey, to what the EU has suggested is a safe third country. But Turkey does not fulfil these criteria. It is politically inexplicable how the EU can provide visas to 75 million Turks, predominantly Muslims, and yet not be prepared to allow access to one million Syrians with vastly greater humanitarian needs and claims. The deal is really challenging, and I expect it to gradually unravel. The problem, of course, is that both the EU and Turkey have committed so much political capital to it that they will fight to adapt it and make it workable.

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ad hoc: *The EU and individual members have gone to great lengths to secure borders to prevent people from entering the EU. Beyond the tragic humanitarian consequences, can such a policy ever be effective?*

Betts: In the context of globalisation, there are massive limitations in terms of what closing borders can achieve, because we live in an age of migration. There are around 250 million migrants in the world. We also have two dual forces transforming the world, one of which is state fragility. People may not necessarily face individualised persecution by the government in countries like Somalia or the Democratic Republic of Congo, but it is very hard for them to sustain the minimum conditions of survival. These people often are forced to leave their country as a last

resort. The second force is mobility, an increasing awareness of opportunities in other countries. Combined fragility and mobility mean that desperate and vulnerable people will move across borders. The increasing numbers are not an aberration, they are likely to be the new norm. We have to adapt to that reality rather than assume we can simply close the door.

ad hoc: *There is an emerging consensus that any effective policy response should include tackling the root causes of flight. Do current approaches succeed in addressing the causes of displacement?*

Betts: This area of refugee policy has historically been neglected because it is very difficult. The only way we can prevent cross-border displacement is by addressing the conflicts that lead to displacement. This requires political will and a functioning UN Security Council, but those factors are not present. This brings us to the second best solution: providing people with sanctuary and humanitarian response once they have left their countries of origin.

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ad hoc: *Too often politicians portray aiding refugees as a zero sum game whereby benefiting refugees imposes costs on citizens. How can we break away from that thought pattern?*

Betts: We need to reframe how we think about refugees, to recognise their skills, talents and aspirations. We need better data and human stories, but also a new language to shape the politics of refuge. You can be a refugee and still contribute economically to a host society. We have collected significant data in East Africa focusing on the economic lives of refugees in

Uganda because, unlike many countries in the world, it provides refugees with the right to work and freedom of movement. We found that when we empower refugees to be able to work, they not only help themselves, but they also contribute to their host societies. In Kampala, 21% of refugees run businesses that employ other people; 40% of their employees are Ugandan nationals. In other words, refugees are creating jobs for citizens. And we are increasingly seeing similar data substantiating this point.

ad hoc: *As director of the “Humanitarian Innovation Project”, you study the role of technology, innovation and the private sector in refugee assistance. Can you share examples that illustrate the resourcefulness of refugee communities?*

Betts: In a recent report called “Refugee Innovation”, we looked at examples of refugees’ own innovations from Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Jordan and the United States. We found examples of Somali refugees running the main transportation system that connects the refugee camps to the capital city. In Jordan, in the Za’atari refugee camp, characterised by restrictions on economic life, we see examples of containers and tents provided by the UN being adapted to provide furniture, to build shop fronts. So whenever things are provided institutionally, they are adapted and changed by the refugees to suit their needs in terms of the architecture of communities, changing residential into business structures. These examples should inspire us to recognize the creative capacities and contributions of refugees, and they should change our refugee assistance model from one of institutional delivery to one of refugee empowerment.

ad hoc: *Thank you very much for sharing your inspiring insights with us, Professor Betts. ←*

Interview: Marcia C. Schenck

↓ *Refugees arrive in a boat on the Greek island of Lesbos.*

