

Viewing the movement of populations in the larger context of humanity's collective life

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The movement of populations has, over the centuries, allowed civilisations to come into contact with insights and advances made elsewhere, and enabled entire societies to emerge. Today, it is one of the means by which the bonds between peoples of diverse backgrounds are continuously strengthened and is a key catalyst in the emergence of a world community. In its current form, however, the movement of populations, often prompted solely by the desperate need of individuals to seek a viable future elsewhere, is shedding light on the urgent necessity to revisit the way in which humanity is organised.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration dated 11 July 2018 highlights the need to “Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin” (Objective 2). In this light, one cannot overemphasise the importance of viewing the movement of populations in the larger context of humanity's collective life and as yet another symptom of much deeper and far-reaching concerns.

Unprecedented numbers of people around the world have been displaced from their homes, fleeing war, violence and persecution, and a growing number of migrants see themselves with no choice but to leave fragile states, economic deprivation and environmental degradation to search for better lives elsewhere. At the receiving end, these movements have put an enormous strain on some countries who, themselves fragile, are bearing, however ill equipped, the largest share of those displaced. Other countries have also been put under social and political stress, giving way to discourses of fear and prejudice. Governments, swept up in the immediacy of the challenges, feel forced to respond by adopting restrictive policies or by showing leadership through rapid and mostly short-lived responses.

What is becoming increasingly apparent is that those forms of mobility, which are caused by despair and the need to survive, cannot merely be the object of an expedient political or humanitarian solution, nor can they fundamentally be addressed by the adoption of one or the other form of migration policy. The need for a long-term approach, which addresses the underlying causes that give rise to and perpetuate movements, has never been more keenly felt.

Such a long-term approach calls for a far-reaching, multi-dimensional, dispassionate and informed conversation around the issue of migration. That conversation cannot fall short of examining social, political and economic structures, systems and attitudes that underpin and perpetuate the current order. It needs to include a genuine reflection on how this order can be

redesigned to ensure an adequate response to the needs of masses of the world's population living in situations of war, poverty and oppression. Most importantly, it needs to be based on the understanding of the indisputable interconnectedness of our societies, and the reality that humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours.

The implications of the above are extensive and the reasons compelling millions of people to move are manifold and complex. Take poverty for example, just to name one of the drivers of displacement. Any framework claiming to address movements caused by the lack of hope in a viable future, cannot shy away from looking at the continuously widening economic disparity existing at the global scale, the generation, distribution and utilisation of wealth, the organisation of the world's raw materials, or the coordination of markets. After all, it would not be reasonable to expect to minimise the drivers of migration while neglecting to reconsider economic processes that leave some countries with little chance to prosper.

The state of affairs described above is not just reinforcing global inequality, but also fueling many of the contemporary conflicts that result in millions of refugees and displaced people. One can only imagine the depth and intricacy required of any conversation that would attempt to disentangle the various contributors to war, terrorism, and violence perpetrated in the name of religion. However insuperable this may seem, no serious and responsible attempt to address the situation of refugees can be dissociated from the broader question of how to stem and overcome conflict.

Although these challenges must be addressed collectively by all, the precise nature of the questions facing the different regions of the world will naturally vary. Some must reflect on the inadvertent effect of their policies, whether foreign, trade, investment or environmental, on the socio-economic conditions in the countries of origin. Others must explore how they can eradicate, within their own countries, those habits and patterns which feed conflict, deepen impoverishment, and leave their citizens deprived and prone to negative influences.

As insurmountable and unrealistic as the task of re-examining some of the foundations of our current order might appear to be, if not given due consideration, there is no reason to expect that the undesired aspects of the movement of populations will not take further impetus and become untenable for all regions in the world. The proposition that regions can in one way or another remain unaffected by the arrival of those from elsewhere is an illusion.

The global conversation to which the Global Compact has given rise, and the collective consciousness it is fostering, highlights the nascent ability of the international community to avoid succumbing to the uncritical assertion that the current order cannot be revisited. It provides a promising juncture to look at the movement of populations as intimately connected to the needs of an increasingly interwoven world, and to open the space for a broader consultation on the requirements of a humanity which is inevitably moving towards the next stage of its collective life.