



Commentary: From the primacy of safe passage for refugees to a global social policy

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In a commentary on Europe's refugee crisis published in this issue of the *International Journal of Public Health*, James D. Smith rightly criticizes the international community for failing to adequately deal with humanitarian needs of people in transit (Smith 2016). We agree. But we wish to extend Smith's argument: providing better access to appropriate health care during the process of migration will not suffice. The European Union (EU) radically fails with regard to three other fundamental obligations: Firstly, ensuring safe passage for refugees; secondly, implementing liberal laws regulating immigration to EU countries; and thirdly, putting their global health strategies into practice along with developing broader global social policies.

The "right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution", enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, implies that people seeking shelter are traveling under often excruciating conditions (Razum and Bozorgmehr 2015). Abandoning refugees in these conditions contradicts the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Gilbert 2015). Many EU countries such as Germany have instigated global health policies which stress the commitment

to humanitarian aid and to strengthening UN bodies. It appears, however, that this commitment is interpreted as primarily related to development aid to poor and middle-income countries, instead of focussing at any place where need arises. Humanitarian emergencies have predictably developed again this winter on the Mediterranean Sea when refugees—now more frequently women and children—continue trying to reach Western Europe, often with fatal consequences: 410 deaths have been reported in the first 6 weeks of 2016 (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int>). To provide safe passageways on these routes is vital—merely offering basic medical care seems insufficient in view of the harsh physical conditions refugees face. EU must fulfill commitments based on international refugee law (Gilbert 2015) and support UN bodies in accomplishing their mandate. This should become a priority over internal disputes on right to asylum and strict refugee quota, which anyhow will be difficult to implement in a fair way (Bozorgmehr et al. 2016).

At the same time, people seeking shelter or tolerable living conditions need predictable opportunities for migration based on liberal EU immigration laws. In their absence, migration processes will continue to be chaotic, and people will continue taking life-threatening routes to Europe because they worry that borders will be closed for good. Attempts to stop them physically are unlikely to succeed: social networks facilitate international migration in various ways (Dekker and Engbersen 2012)—even providing up-to-date insider knowledge on how to circumvent fences and border controls.

The refugee crisis is a consequence of massive inequalities between countries and of an increasingly complex and conflict-ridden geopolitical situation. In 2014, 40 armed conflicts, of which 11 reached the intensity level of war, were active worldwide—the highest number

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reported since 1999. Although 39 conflicts were fought within states, one-third—the highest proportion recorded since World War II—were internationalized, i.e., one or more external actors were involved in the internal conflict and contributed troops to the conflicting parties. The main external warring parties were the United States, Russia, Jordan, and the EU members United Kingdom, Belgium and France (Pettersson and Wallenstein 2015). This, in turn, seems to be merely a symptom of a world with a weakening international order and no shared vision of how a new one could look like.

The EU has political clout as well as expertise to help developing alternatives. But so far, EU foreign and economic policies not only fail to effectively tackle underlying reasons for ill-health, conflict and poverty world-wide; instead, they contribute to their worsening by overriding the interests of the affected populations. This is supported by solid scientific evidence. For example, in a well-designed study published in *Science*, Brashares et al. (2004) demonstrated the association between increasing EU-subsidized commercial fish harvesting in West African waters and dwindling fish supplies. In response, local people resorted to hunting “bushmeat” as a protein source, thus depleting wildlife biomass. In the longer run, this will almost inevitably increase the risk of poverty and thereby the impetus for migration.

Besides a reform of the global economic order, a truly global social policy is needed. It not only includes realizing the human rights to health, but also to social protection (Deacon 2007). The idea of a political community with social aims, sometimes referred to as ‘European Social Model’, intended to protect people against social hardships, needs to be extended towards granting universal social protection. One of the outcomes of the global economic and financial crisis (from 2007/08 onwards) was the approval of the ILO’s Recommendation No. 202 on social protection floors, which lists among the essential guarantees “income security” for children, the elderly and the unemployed. Adequate social health protection could help to reduce the pressure to migrate. It could also alleviate the consequences of violent conflict and prevent violence for political ends, thereby stabilizing countries and directly as well as indirectly improving public health (Piachaud 2008).

EU countries will regain control of a refugee crisis that is complex but at least partly avoidable only if they fulfil the positive obligations arising from the UDHR and the ECHR (Gilbert 2015) and take their Global Health policies seriously. EU populations need to acknowledge just how strong the interdependence of people and their well-being across national borders has become (Frenk et al. 2014). They could (and should) take leadership in developing global social policies. Here we again fully agree with Smith: we cannot shed these responsibilities by setting up barbed-wire fences.

Compliance with ethical standards

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