

Refugees, facts and better policies

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Over 65 million people, or one person in 113, were displaced from their homes by conflict or persecution in 2015. This troubling statistic comes from UNHCR– also known as the UN Refugee Agency– and was a higher number than at any time in the agency’s history. UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the OECD in June 2016 to increase collaboration between the two organisations in addressing the problems that arise from such forced displacement, both for the people themselves and the communities that host and shelter them.

We asked Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, to explain the motives and aims behind this latest MoU.

OECD Observer: How significant is this new initiative between UNHCR and the OECD?

Our new collaboration holds a great deal of potential for us. We’ve already seen successful co-operation with the OECD in the past, in areas such as pathways to protection and solutions, in engaging businesses in employing refugees, in areas like mixed migration, and in how to approach development assistance in a context of forced displacement, to list just a few. But today there’s a growing call for more evidence demonstrating how the presence of refugees affects host communities, including public services and the local economy. People want to get beyond heated debates and get to know about the real challenges and

opportunities this represents. The OECD’s analytical capacity and role as a policy advisor to its member countries complements UNHCR’s role on the ground—our protecting and supervising efforts—and it helps us in our accountability to refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons as well. By pooling our expertise, we hope to be able to provide a strong evidence base for decision makers and opinion leaders to go beyond the minimum and to support measures that really help these people and their host communities to realise their potential.

Turning to the refugee crisis itself, what progress do you see and what concerns do you have for the future?

Our greatest challenge at the moment is how to fulfil our mandate in the face of unprecedented numbers of forcibly displaced people, which has been made all the harder by the length of time this is likely to go on taking. Moreover, the weakening commitments to the institution of asylum in some quarters does not help either. Xenophobia and isolationist tendencies appear to be on the rise in several countries, including in some that helped to create the international protection system in the first place. Another major challenge we face is that many refugees are currently hosted by relatively less well-off countries where their presence risks becoming a burden and where support is urgently needed for both refugees and their host communities. Of course, providing peace, security and a future for refugees is a massive challenge when faced with such sudden movements and in such large numbers. We recognise this and are working around the clock with the affected countries to develop new ways of providing protection and facilitating admission. Part of our effort involves countries assisting each other in their respective roles, and working with NGOs, employers and workers’ associations, which are now playing a very substantial and constructive role. New approaches are being tried out, and together we are exploring how these positive forces of collaboration can be harnessed in welcoming and integrating new-comers. It is particularly pleasing to see how much civil society has actively engaged in this process, and our NGO consultations have produced some really promising initiatives, on how young people can help with integration for instance.

How do you think UNHCR and OECD can work together to address these issues?

As I mentioned earlier, I think the most important area for collaboration will be establishing a strong base of evidence in support of progressive policy development for forcibly displaced persons. Refugee communities have an enormous amount of economic potential, and our organisations will be instrumental in helping its OECD countries harness that potential. We also need to send out a strong message against xenophobia, to underline that it is ultimately damaging to everyone. We need to develop more tailored guidance for our members on refugee issues, including examples of best practices and new pathways for admission. We can also encourage more policy harmonisation among our countries, particularly with regard to development assistance where it

is needed most. Together, we must continue to foster dialogue among all stakeholders so that the guidance we develop can address as wide a range of perspectives as possible. That way, we can make real progress together on these human issues that are so vital for the future of our world.

UNHCR (2016), “Global forced displacement hits record high”, by Adrian Edwards, June, see www.unhcr.org

See the UNHCR-OECD MoU here: <http://oe.cd/1CC>

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