Global social redistribution in the context of the refugee crisis

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Since 2015, European countries have been facing the biggest inflow of asylum seekers in recent history. In the first phase at the national level, the focus has been on how to register refugees, how to facilitate smooth asylum-seeking procedures, and 'emergency (social policy) measures' such as the provision of health care, basic means for living, and other practical issues. Medium-term discussions focus on language and literacy, schooling, inclusion into higher education institutions, and labor market integration. Their inclusion into national systems of social protection and questions of the portability of benefits will be another important issue in the years to come. While issues concerning the migrants' social inclusion confront national governments, they are not limited to the national scale. They also point to *global* social problems, *global* inequality, *global* justice, and needs of *global* redistribution.

Nevertheless, instead of a clear commitment by high-income countries and world-regions to the protection of refugees and the inclusion of those migrating because of conflict as well as highly unequal living conditions across the world, national and European public discourse has shifted in the opposite direction. In several European Union (EU) countries, the 'refugee crisis' has led to de-legitimation of the practice of providing social assistance benefits to EU migrants, and many countries have looked for ways to close their borders and keep the number of refugees staying within their territory to a minimum. The EU is unable to arrive at a common approach toward the protection of refugees, which has put the union at greater risk than the global economic and financial crisis in 2008. This tendency has been strengthened by the results of the United Kingdom's Brexit vote. Accordingly, the sense of responsibility and solidarity among European states and toward migrants is even weaker.

At the same time, in the context of development cooperation, the past few years have witnessed important acknowledgements of rising global inequality, generated by the

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works of Milanovic (2016), Piketty (2014), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) contributions on inequality, among others. The OECD (2016), for example, reports for 2015 an increase of 6.9% in Official Development Aid (ODA), 'the highest level ever achieved for ODA'. However, these data include 'in-donor refugee costs'. If those costs are deducted, the ODA increase is reduced to 1.7%. At the same time, only a small number of countries meet the 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) target to development aid (namely Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) (OECD, 2016). Even in public political debates, however, a link is occasionally made between poverty and poor living conditions and the flow of refugees.

Meanwhile, the number of refugees in European countries remains high. In the report 'Global Trends', the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2016) notes that 'while the rate of increase has slowed compared with the particularly sharp rises of the past couple of years, the current number of displaced globally is nonetheless the highest since the aftermath of World War II' (p. 5). Many, but not all, of the migrants are fleeing from conflict, war, and violence. This indicates that development aid or other forms of global redistribution are neither sufficient nor necessarily appropriate for dealing with global inequalities. Recent studies continue to report highly unequal distribution of wealth, income, and access to resources. In his latest book, 'Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization', Branko Milanovic (2016) re-emphasizes the trend of rising inequality within and declining inequality between countries. Even if the decline in inequality between countries might suggest that things are improving, a closer look at the situation generates a different picture. The situation has improved for very specific groups of populations, namely the middle and upper classes in relatively poor Asian countries and the global top 1% but not for the rest (Milanovic, 2016). Life chances and life perspectives at a global scale are still highly uneven as a consequence.

In such a context, commentators like Michael Stürmer claim that we need to acknowledge the severe inequalities between those living in affluent countries and those living with poverty. The challenge goes far beyond an internal (EU) division of the 'burden'. We need to develop social policy at a global scale.[1] Even if the current refugee crisis is seen as unprecedented in extent and scope, the process of the increasing globalization of economies, societies, and communications has already led to a considerable shift in social policies at multiple, transnational levels. Social policy ideas and discourses as well as the regulation and formation of social rights are increasingly subject to transnational developments and institutions (compare Deacon, 2007).

If not fairer trade conditions, decent work, and other structural improvements, development aid may still stand in place of some more advanced mechanisms of global redistribution. Or, as Ooms et al. (2015) put it,

> while the persistence of inequalities among countries can, at least in part, be blamed on unfair regulation of the global market (rich countries setting the rules), the lack of a redistributive mechanism at an international level is also a factor. (p. 716)

The solution, they suggest, is funds for global social support to underpin the Social Development Goals (SDGs) with 'the winning countries in the international trade system

[. . .] put in a portion of their winnings (a tax) each year, while the losing countries would have a sustainable, domestic-welfare-like system of social support' (Ooms et al., 2015: 716–717). Similarly, in an International Health Policies (IHP) article, Jean-Paul Dossou (2015) demands a 'New Global Social Contract', explaining that it cannot stop at national social contracts and security systems:

> Perhaps the time has come to start a real debate on a borderless social insurance scheme? Could it be that the social contract based on territory and national identity is reaching its limits, now that the world is moving at an incredible speed [. . .]?

Meanwhile, there are significant social questions that also extend to the global (re)distribution of responsibilities. Critically linked with, and responding to, multi-scalar challenges of redistribution, we will soon be faced with complex questions of social protection within and between the home and host countries of current refugees. Therefore, as an alternative redistributive system, the case of the Turkish 'Gastarbeiter' provides an interesting historical example of German social policy adjustment to the social realities and needs of a significant group of migrant inhabitants gaining social rights within their host country. In the absence of a common supranational legal framework, the German insurance system was adjusted to facilitate the portability of benefits for retirees. Thus, one way of caring for refugees and host society needs could include new pathways into labor market integration and social protection. This would take into account the sustainability of European welfare states, as well as the resources of returning migrants, in post-conflict countries in the future to build infrastructure and develop life perspectives within their countries of origin. Such a rights-based social security approach could provide a way to address the shortcomings of traditional ODA, emergency aid, charity, and other forms of development aid. Without creating a 'global welfare state', such models would combine development policies with key principles of redistributive and rights-based social policy. This is what could, as a minimum, be learned from the historical experience of European welfare states: concepts of solidarity, not charity, should be guiding relationships between advantaged and disadvantaged people, countries, and regions. Ideally, such mechanisms would even be accompanied by development toward more just structures of global economy and labor.

Note

1. 'Globale Sozialpolitik gegen die Völkerwanderung' Die Welt, 26.09.2015, http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article146780434/Globale-Sozialpolitik-gegen-die-Voelkerwanderung.html

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