GLOBAL YOUNG ACADEMY

Global Individual Responsibility:
The Role of the Citizen in Refugee Integration

Conference Report

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Summary

The integration of refugees[1] can present host societies with substantial challenges.[2] With the current scale of global migration – we are witnessing the highest level of displaced persons on record – these challenges are greatly enhanced [1]. While international, supranational and national laws and norms guarantee refugees' human rights in many countries, often informal, individual action plays a key role in refugee integration in host societies. In this and other contexts (e.g., climate change and poverty), individuals are becoming more aware of their direct and indirect roles in global structural inequalities, and are seeking morally appropriate actions in response.

Bringing together 14 international speakers – scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, as well as practitioners and activists – the international symposium, Global Individual Responsibility: The Role of the Citizen in Refugee Integration (Munich, April 2018), discussed concepts of global individual responsibility and shed light on individual action and integration practices in high-income Western countries. This resulting report provides recommendations for individuals and policy makers with the aim of strengthening conditions for individual action and civil society initiatives in relation to refugee integration. Individuals in academia, for example, can support refugee scholars through national and international programs [2]. Policy makers, especially those in leadership positions, are called upon to recognize the value and influence of language and discourse. Underlying all recommendations is the importance of recognizing the agency of refugees, honoring dignity in all contexts, and supporting organic, bottom-up solutions.

Context

The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide is currently at the highest level in modern history: The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) counted 68.4 million forcibly displaced people in 2017, 25.4 million of whom are categorized as refugees, having crossed country borders [3]. Although people are being displaced across the world, certain regions host concentrated numbers: 85% of displaced persons are hosted in low- and middle-income countries. Yet the consequences of displacement have a lasting impact on those forced to flee and on their host communities in all regions of the world.

In light of these developments, refugee and migrant integration has become an increasingly relevant global topic [4]. It has spawned both supportive and reactionary responses to those who have been displaced, at both individual and political levels.

Since World War II, the international community has taken steps to mandate that states protect refugees and their basic human rights, starting with the UNHCR's Geneva Convention of 1951 [5]. The Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol established a definition of refugees and outlined their rights – from legal protection to social rights (including housing and work) – and their obligations (primarily to respect and abide by the laws in their host country).[3]

Regionally, this international law has inspired similar instruments: the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention in Africa, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America, a European Union common asylum system, and the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe [6]. Furthermore, national policies exist to varying degrees to implement these treaties. Individual citizens are under no formal obligation to protect or assist refugees, as this is a duty of the state. Yet in practice, individuals often take on responsibility voluntarily to provide assistance to those in need. In this way, individuals play a significant role in supporting refugee reception and integration at local and/or grassroots levels. The international symposium, Global Individual Responsibility: The Role of the Citizen in Refugee Integration (Munich, April 2018), explored the

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1 The terms 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'migrant' are often used interchangeably, but each has a distinct meaning that carries different international obligations and consequences. The UNHCR (see http://www.unhcr.org/5b27be547) explains these distinctions. We use the term 'refugee' for brevity, indicating a person who has been forcibly displaced from their home due to conflict.

2 Refugee integration is tangent to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goal: UN SDGs 3 (good health and well-being); 4 (quality education); 8 (decent work an economic growth); 10 (reduced inequalities); 11 (sustainable cities and communities); and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/

3 The 1967 Protocol to the Geneva Convention expanded protection from displaced people in European countries in the aftermath of World War II, to apply to displaced people around the world. http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html.

formal and informal roles of citizens and individuals in refugee integration from a range of perspectives beyond national political debates.

With a focus on refugee integration in high-income Western countries, symposium participants addressed how individuals have taken on responsibility in the past (advocating for themselves or for others), considered whether or not individuals have a moral or ethical obligation - as global citizens - to take on such responsibility, and discussed what barriers and facilitators are often confronted when attempting to support newcomer integration in a host society. Researchers and practitioners, including speakers with a personal experience of migration, engaged in an intense, two-day exchange, generating innovative insights across a range of academic disciplines, fields of work and community involvement. Speakers contributed their expertise from disciplines such as history, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, law, and the arts, as well as from the practice of working with refugees to support integration in different countries.

Global Individual Responsibility

Individuals are becoming more acutely aware of their own role in directly and indirectly causing, upholding, and/or benefitting from many of the unjust circumstances across the world. Despite the nonexistence of legal obligations associated with global individual responsibility, individuals have exercised and continue to exercise responsibility in the context of global problems (e.g. climate change, poverty, or refugee crises). Symposium participants agreed that such actions can be recognized as morally appropriate responses to the global issues and structural inequalities which become more apparent during times of increased mobility, global trade and idea exchange.

Global individual responsibility was understood by symposium participants not as specific duties, but as encompassing a normative stance, which could lead to a variety of forms of action. In the specific case of integration, the arrival of refugees in a host country creates visible and tangible instances of humanitarian and social need. The symptoms of a global problem are no longer abstract, but felt locally, and citizens are able to react directly.
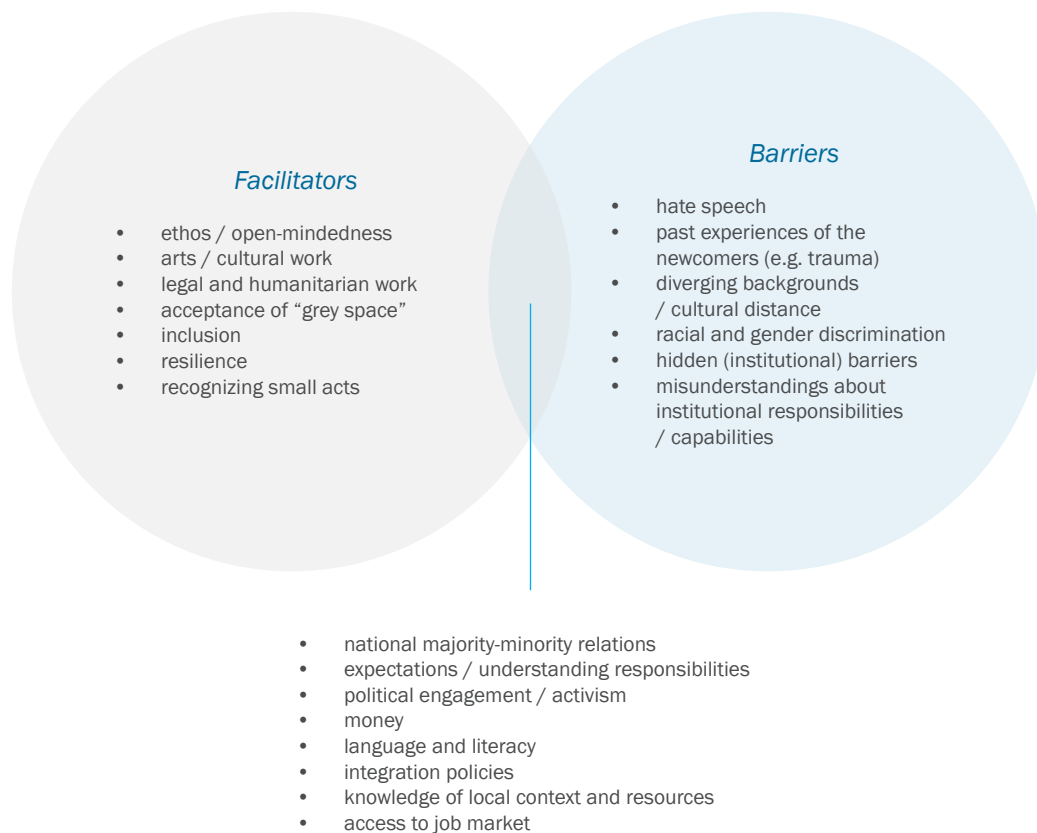
Recommendations for individuals

What actions can individuals undertake in the context of global problems or to promote individual action on the whole? More specifically, how can individuals act responsibly in the context of refugee integration? Taking into account the disparity between the enormous scale of the problems being faced and the relatively small scale of individual capacities, the following recommendations are based on the premise that even small gestures and acts can have meaningful and positive effects.

- Recognize that individual action includes communication: speaking up in a conversation; taking a political stance; and offering verbal support to someone who takes a stance – these actions have both symbolic and concrete effects.

- Make efforts to understand the context: where has someone come from; recognize the diversity inherent in national identity.

- Recognize that refugees are often witnesses of injustices. Realize the limits to understanding and empathy and instead consider responsible listening or witnessing.

- Recognize the value of subjective experience as a form of knowledge.

- Recognize that many refugees have experienced trauma through exposure to violence or the threat of violence. These experiences, and other stressors, can affect interactions and integration.

- Recognize and reflect on the potential for conflicts: the barriers to mutual understanding (culture, experience, language); the identity markers used to construct "us" and "them" categories; and the limits of hospitality, constraints on capacity.

- When working with refugees, consider working *together*, recognizing someone's own agency, working in the "grey spaces" (solutions are often flexible), and using creative means (including the arts or food) to build relationships or establish common ground.

- In the academic context, promote the support of refugee scholars within your institution (e.g. through connections to refugee scholar programs or individual university programs).

- On a day-to-day basis, and for the longer term, recognize that exercising individual responsibility in the context of refugee integration will beget as many challenges as facilitators. Recognize and reflect on these:

Facilitators

- ethos / open-mindedness
- arts / cultural work
- legal and humanitarian work
- acceptance of "grey space"
- inclusion
- resilience
- recognizing small acts

Barriers

- hate speech
- past experiences of the newcomers (e.g. trauma)
- diverging backgrounds / cultural distance
- racial and gender discrimination
- hidden (institutional) barriers
- misunderstandings about institutional responsibilities / capabilities

- national majority-minority relations
- expectations / understanding responsibilities
- political engagement / activism
- money
- language and literacy
- integration policies
- knowledge of local context and resources
- access to job market

Recommendations for policy makers

Recent UNESCO international migration work aims to promote respect for the human rights of migrants and to contribute to the peaceful integration of migrants in society. Furthermore, a stronger link between research and policy-making, and increased advocacy and policy dialogue on migration issues, with innovative thinking on migration policies, is encouraged.[4] With the following recommendations, symposium participants support these aims in the context of refugee integration as well, and further emphasize the need for a stronger focus on actively supporting the role of individuals in refugee integration:

Enabling Citizens' Initiatives

- Support local infrastructures and flexible, bottom-up solutions (e.g. incorporating the arts).

- Support general education and a national identity which embrace inclusion and diversity.

- Enact policies that work to enable and support existing individual action and civil society and find ways of promoting it further, particularly through social institutions (e.g. universities, schools, churches, community groups). Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Engaging local authorities to create space for civil society to operate (working groups, platforms): include refugees as participants alongside locals.

  - Stimulating interaction, exchange and dialogue between local residents and refugees to promote positive images of all groups.

  - Communicating and showcasing existing integration initiatives that might inspire other communities.

  - Reducing potential segregation by integrating refugee children in schools, local organizations, etc.

Supporting Refugees' Agency

- Recognize the agency of refugees and adhere to a principle of honoring the dignity of all displaced people.

- Give children and youth a voice in integration policy.
  Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Organising intercultural activities for children and young adults.

  - Creating a more inclusive education system for children from different backgrounds, to enable more successful and integrated futures.

  - Establishing programs which build language skills in supportive, child-friendly environments.

  - Inviting refugee children to participate in children and youth councils, or establishing such councils as a way for children to come together and share their concerns and information about their needs.

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4   https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/ceb_gmg_web.pdf#page=274 International Migration and Development: Contributions and Recommendations of the International System, a publication of the UN Chief Executives Board, produced for the second High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development: "Making Migration Work". (p. 274, 2013)

- Teaching children about the values, culture and history of their new communities in supportive and non-threatening ways, which enable them to also share information about their values, culture and history.

- Facilitate sharing of responsibility by refugees and the host society. Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Expanding opportunities for stewardship or ownership of self-organized groups.

  - Enabling refugees to develop self-supporting mechanisms in camps or detention centers (schools, learning pods, cultural understanding exchanges)

  - Supporting refugees in trainer or facilitator roles for other refugee persons.

  - Providing more effective access to information about local laws and values (gender equality, for example).

  - Supporting language diversity as part of state programs, among NGO activities and within the private sector.

  - Providing volunteer opportunities for jobless refugees to enhance their self-worth and value.

  - Facilitating the entrepreneurial spirit many refugees possess through microcredits and/or micro loans.

- Consider the intellectual capital of refugees: support projects, symposia, and conferences aimed at addressing post-conflict issues and/or issues related to integration in the host society. Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Starting with a clear idea of the problem or issue that needs to be resolved.

  - Establishing a budget and considering the audience. Various stakeholders have different perspectives, expectations and fears.

  - Ensuring common language – enable access to the local language in non-threatening ways.

  - An event might be focused on:

    - identifying the needs and skills of refugees and helping them to access more training/ shared practice opportunities.

    - clarifying strategies that relate to refugees: including evidence and experience sharing.

    - improving cultural understanding of a refugee group or the host society.

Institutional Measures

- Recognize the value and influence of language and discourse, especially when coming from people in leadership positions.

- Establish indicators to measure successful (and poor) integration immediately and in the long term.

- Recognize that refugees do not arrive ready-made for an employment market. Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Developing an orientation program (pre-requisite) which supports language acquisition in non-threatening ways; creates understandings of local laws and

regulations; builds awareness of practical knowledge for prospering in new society; shares success stories to inspire each other; provides opportunities for integration through social activities; explains healthcare provision and assesses people's physical and mental needs.

- Undertaking screening and training which establishes criteria designed to assess current skills and willingness/desire/need for further skills development; translates foreign degrees and qualifications; provides incentives for strong results in training/education programs; builds a database for employers to identify possible employees from within the newcomer communities; develops incentives for companies to employ newcomers through internships and apprenticeships.

- Recognize that refugees' traumatic experiences may necessitate more medical and social support than assumed. Specifically, policy makers may consider:

  - Developing peer-to-peer mental health guides and training.

  - Providing more language interpreters to work in official capacities to assess people's needs.

  - Increasing awareness-raising about mental health issues, in a culturally appropriate way, as a way of reducing or eliminating taboos.

- Recognize the institutional complexity of host countries, and the need that many refugees have for more information and guidance in navigating institutional processes. Specifically, policy makers may consider: :

  - Establishing a mentorship program (including well-trained migrants) to help refugees navigate the administrative process for settlement and integration.

  - Identifying language capabilities immediately and providing support where needed. For example, a steering group which includes migrants with teaching experience, could provide valuable advice on how best to communicate the skills needed to learn a new language.

  - Increasing cultural sensitivity in the advice process, to facilitate understanding of the new institutional processes.

  - Developing technology which supports the faster dissemination of information (apps, Facebook and Twitter accounts; YouTube channels)

  - Employing people who speak multiple languages to ensure that those meant to receive the information can understand it (women can access information on their own and not through a male relative, for example).

  - Providing opportunities for the diaspora to become involved (if they wish) as mediators.

Hyperlinks

[1] http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html

[2] https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/; https://www.cara.ngo/; https://www.iie.org/Programs/Scholar-Rescue-Fund; https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/philipp-schwartz-initiative-en.html

[3] http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494.html

[4] https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila_EGM_2018.pdf; http://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work.html

[5] http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html

[6] http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html; https://www.coe.int/en/web/turin-european-social-charter

[7] https://globalyoungacademy.net/activities/global-migration-and-human-rights/

Acknowledgements

Annex: Speakers and Delivery Team

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