Insights from the 2018 Paris Peace Forum Debate Sessions

The Migration Challenge: Towards a Comprehensive Approach?

Is it possible to craft a more comprehensive and durable approach toward the global migration challenge? National governments struggle to move beyond ad-hoc, emergency responses. By its nature, this issue calls for collective action, but global initiatives languish.

Session name: The Long Road towards a Comprehensive Approach to International Migration

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The Paris Peace Forum hosted a debate on these issues at its inaugural session in November 2018 and panelists proposed concrete ideas such as enhancing on-the-ground programs through “whole of government” strategies and actively constructing a common evidence base at the international level. New global initiatives like the Global Compact for Migration were applauded. But without a doubt, panelists agreed that until we see greater solidarity from national governments, we cannot reach the tipping point.

What’s Going Wrong

The world is experiencing unprecedented migrant flows. Year after year we see headlines of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean, refugee camps overflowing around Syria’s borders, barbed wire and walls going up in Hungary, Greece, and the United States. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warns that the worldwide number of forcibly displaced persons is higher than at any time since World War II. And the global migration crisis is even broader still. Think of the many that are driven by economic necessity, labor opportunity, disaster or other instability. Migration pressures have become a continuous humanitarian crisis and a hot-button issue for political leaders. States feel the strain, especially with integration capacity. A cycle of political uproar is unleashed. Just at the time when regional and multilateral efforts need to step up and do more, political leaders feel pressed to go into lockdown.

Managing migration flows would seem to be a natural issue for international collaboration. Unfortunately, global governance in this arena has seemed almost unattainable. A patchwork of applicable international law exists (including covering the right to refuge), and there are humanitarian mechanisms to assist with the
Be Smart

Even if most states are adamant that migration decisions remain a national determination, they are also aware that some type of new approach — nationally or internationally — is overdue. Flows are not stabilizing. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are thriving, along with the criminality that goes with it. Emergency rescue regimes struggle to keep ahead of the problem. Processing systems are slow to keep up with the pressure of intake. The economic forces driving emigration seem unlikely to diminish anytime soon. And refugee communities are ever-more frequently turning into permanent realities. Short-term fixes aren’t enough.

There is some fresh momentum. Out of necessity, states are slowly finding new ways to cooperate bilaterally and regionally on migration management, but the gaps still outnumber the solutions. Look to the struggling efforts of the European Union when faced with the 2015 crisis, for example. Within the UN framework, multi-state commitments are starting to emerge. But national interests still tend to outrank international solidarity on this issue, by far.

When it comes to the global governance architecture on migration, advances are moving at a glacial pace. The new Global Compact for Migration recently approved by the UN General Assembly provides cause for optimism — even if the populist backlash in some countries was strong. Elsewhere, regional and ad-hoc coalitions are leaning towards more collaborative solutions. But implementation remains spotty and unsure. The experienced practitioners at the Forum’s 2018 migration debate know these shortcomings well. While encouraging multinational initiatives, most panelists gravitated towards using concrete project work to advance change.

At the End of the Tunnel

Humanitarian and development agencies have been working to address refugee and migration challenges for decades. But it was clear from the panel of experts that a more comprehensive approach is urgently needed. It’s time to attack the problem from a variety of angles. For example, policy overhauls should engage with all levels of governance. Clearly defined global norms would be invaluable. The Vice President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emphasized that the fight for a normative architecture firmly anchored in human rights should continue, as should the pressure on states to adhere to existing international law.

In the meantime, there is also valuable work to be done at the national level. Significant capacity gaps are often overlooked, with many national governments welcoming assistance to improve their functional management and migration governance. Some panelists drilled down even further and urged a focus on the
local level, identifying the improvement of integration in host-communities and strengthening their resilience as the most pressing need. Christoph Beier, Vice-Chair of the Board of the German development agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) pointed to their new initiatives in this vein, such as the Qudra project. The Executive Director of the UN Human Settlements Program explained that cities are an opportune insertion point to create more holistic and sustainable solutions for integration — think of assisting with employment, infrastructure, housing, and finance needs for example.

“There is a global unwillingness to unpack the issues, so everything is lumped together into one big great problem. As long as we continue to project the migrant as the problem, we will not be able to get to solutions.”

- Ahunna Eziakonwa, UN Development Program

Likewise, if we want more durable results from migration policies, they need to be full-spectrum. Policymakers need to be thinking of how to address the pressures at both the point of origin and the point of arrival as well as all along the route. For international organizations and development aid agencies, “whole of government” responses at the program level are a growing trend. According to the panel, this is a step in the right direction even if over-hyped. Such approaches involve, for example, building a policy that takes on the longer-term security and capacity-building needs along with the traditional humanitarian urgencies. Christoph Beier from the GIZ spoke about working with interior ministries as well as border control authorities to improve identification and processing, protection, detention and security practices. These types of training and assistance programs become an indirect avenue to bolster human rights and humanitarian standards toward migrants.

Adaptation and assistance programs are plentiful. But it is imperative that migration policy discussions also consider how to address the long-term trend. Unraveling stereotypes and changing the narrative will be essential, but that is no easy task. One idea frequently-cited at the Forum is to invest in building an “evidence-based approach” to global migration. It may seem elementary, but it would be worthwhile. As the UN Development Program’s Assistant Administrator warned at the Forum: “until we start operating from the same data, on the same page, we won’t be able to address these issues comprehensively.”

The experts at the Forum argued that if it helps combat our blind spots and create a validated international data pool of what’s happening the initiative can deliver real impact. By strengthening our shared knowledge and analysis of “the who, why, and how” of migration flows, policymakers and practitioners will be able to craft smarter strategies. Shared data can help to identify common problems and vulnerabilities, thereby triggering more international cooperation. Building a common understanding with objective, evidence-based information about the challenges of migration can provide greater awareness for migrants themselves about their rights — and also the risks. In turn, this fosters safer and more orderly flows.
“The smallest part of migration that is happening is the one coming to Europe. We tend to forget that the much, much larger part is South-South migration... There is a huge potential for economic development for the countries if we foster South-South migration.”

- Christoph Beier, Deutsche für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

And one of the panelists at the Forum optimistically identified another by-product: If the initiative succeeds to build a common set of solid and credible facts, national leaders would be armed with another asset to push back against misleading narratives at home. Facts are what’s needed to push back politicized fears. Expecting that we can change the motivations of vote-seeking politicians is unrealistic. The 152 states that approved the Global Compact in December 2018 have committed to creating such an evidence-gathering mechanism at the UN level. For the idea to work, however, governments and stakeholders will need to make genuine and consistent data contributions.

Who’s on the Hot Seat

National leaders are still the pivotal actors in migration policy. One after another, the seasoned experts at the Forum’s session on migration insisted that until national governments step up their political will, it will be impossible to break the crisis response cycle and meaningfully rethink international efforts. There are plenty of ways for leaders to step up and address the issue with more commitment and consistency. The Global Compact offers a roadmap, and its 23 practical commitments are a good place to start.

The Forum’s debate sparked other ideas as well. UNDP Assistant Administrator Ahunna Eziakonwa called on nation states to get at the source of migration pressures. In order to resolve some of the economic inequality that drives emigration, implement the Sustainable Development Goals. Former Italian Prime Minister Letta (and Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs) noted that nation states should at the least be concretely collaborating in areas already defined by international law, such as rescue missions obliged under the Law of the Sea. The most far-reaching recommendation came from Gilles Carbonnier, the Vice President of the ICRC, who simply said, “I wish that all nation-states would implement the Global Compact on Migration.”

Other actors can contribute. Optimists argue that the ground initiatives of humanitarian and development organizations can incrementally advance a more comprehensive approach. Pessimists question whether these bottom-up approaches can make more than a dent when the system is still built on national interests controlling the spigot. At the least, bottom-up initiatives can change some realities on the ground in terms of better practices and behaviors. And ideally, integration programs can help to lower the political temperature around migrants. Ultimately, there is no reason that top-down multinational initiatives and bottom-up projects can’t both be prioritized. There is undoubtedly enough urgency.
What’s Next

At the international level, over 190 states have now signed onto the Global Pact for Migration, an outline of some common principles to guide safe, secure, and responsible policies towards migration worldwide. (The Compact has been in negotiation for some time and was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, just a few weeks after the Paris Peace Forum. It is the culmination of a new momentum at the UN which slowly developed over the last decade or so, cracking open a discussion of the sensitive global migration topic and slowly putting non-binding pledges on paper.)

The Compact, and its companion document the 2016 New York Agreement on Refugees and Migration, not only provide a framework of principles but also contain concrete commitments where willing states can collaborate to create systemic change. Now it is up to states to do so. Let’s hope that the work begins heartily and fast. If recent years have taught us anything, it is sure that another migration crisis is just around the corner.

Panel Participants

The Forum thanks panel participants: Christoph Beier, Vice Chair of the Board, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit; Gilles Carbonnier, Vice President, International Committee of the Red Cross; Aunna Eziasokwa, Assistant Administrator, UN Development Program; Enrico Letta, Dean, Sciences Po; Maimunah Modh Sharif, Executive Director, UN Human Settlements Programme.

The panel was moderated by: Rouba Mhaissen, Founder and Director, Sawa Foundation.

This is a publication of the Paris Peace Forum reflecting the debates at the Forum’s inaugural session in November 2018. It does not necessarily represent the conclusions of each individual participant.

About the Paris Peace Forum The Paris Peace Forum is a unique platform for global governance solutions. It focuses on improving the organization of our world, in order to address its most pressing challenges in the areas of peace & security, development, environment, new technologies, inclusive economy, and culture & education.

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