

Role of human rights in times of crisis

Connect.Reflect.Act Talk by Morten Kjaerum, Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law

Abstract

Refugees have a right to a future too even though some claim they have too many rights. Would those risking their lives, enduring incredible hardship to come to the EU agree, he asked? The refugee crisis is not a numbers issue but one of governance, solidarity and trust between Member States. To improve the refugee situation two decisions need to be taken. The first, is creating legal avenues and better resettlement. The second, is turning our backs on the wave of hate and xenophobic rhetoric that is prevailing across Europe.

Who was Roula?

I want to tell you a story about a 9-year old girl, Roula, from Syria living in Greece, to illustrate the right to a future. After her school was hit, her family had to flee. Now they're finally in Greece. Five years have passed, and throughout this time she has been deprived of the fundamental right to primary school education and the right to a future. 700,000 children are in the same situation as Roula. Roula was on one of those boats. She survived, but we know the Mediterranean today is the bloodiest ocean in the world. 2500 people have died this year. It is unbelievable that some people still claim that refugees have too many rights; that some still claim the human rights system and refugee system is too liberal. Let's not forget that all states have signed the UN's Child Rights Convention. We are two decisions away from moving the refugee agenda forward.

But before going into those decisions I want to clear one thing up. The argument 'We cannot take them all' – we're far from that. Proportionally there are 3 out of every 1000 people in Europe are refugees. We can't talk about a numbers crisis. Lebanon can do that. They have 235 refugees per 1000 inhabitants. That is a challenge.

A toolbox for change

One issue is solidarity and trust between member states. So what do we do? What do we have in our toolbox?

There are some well-tested tools we can use. Raoul Wallenberg, the founder of the institute I now head, issued humanitarian visas to Jews in Budapest during the Second World War. In 1956, 100,000 refugees fleeing Hungary were taken in by neighbouring countries in 10 weeks. Could we do that today? Yes, it's possible. First, refugees moved to neighbouring countries. As a result of continuous decline below the poverty line, they started moving away. States did not listen, and provide necessary assistance to neighbouring states of conflict states soon enough. Hopefully this will improve in the future.

Create legal avenues

The process of moving, though, has become more complex. They couldn't, like the Iranians in the 80s, get on a plane. In the 90s we created mechanisms and boundaries to that procedure. So, the first decision we need to make is = create legal avenues and better resettlement places for refugees in neighbouring countries in need of being moved to a place in safety. In this way we can undermine the business of the smugglers.

Couldn't we just accept the 500,000 refugees? It's not that easy. We have climate change, extremism. They do this because they know it's a good way of harvesting political power. It's no coincidence that the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was therefore the first UN Convention.

Reject hate

The second decision to be made it to turn our back on Islamophobia and anti-refugees and all those who try to capitalise politically on these forces. We need to fight this rhetoric. We owe it to the refugees who are in protection, and we owe it to ourselves.

Then some people say that this is naïve and not possible with the current political climate. No, we need to focus on the other groups. Already we can see some welcoming signs of humanism across the EU.