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## LESSONS FROM A MIGRATION POLICY CRISIS

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**The surge in the number of refugees and migrants making their way to Europe in 2015 brought the weaknesses of the fragile European migration and protection system to the forefront and indeed led to a virtual collapse of some of its key components, such as the Dublin Regulation. This triggered a policy and political crisis within the European Union as Member States and European Commission found themselves in disagreement over how to effectively handle the situation.**

Inadequate intra-state coordination and a series of unilateral responses led to an uncontrollable situation, for migrants, refugees and states alike. The drowning of thousands of people along the Mediterranean coasts, the erection of fences, as well as the temporary reintroduction of border controls are all telling examples of the failure to develop a European set of policies ensuring adequate protection for refugees and a sustainable comprehensive migration system ready for the future migration realities.

While the EU could have been expected to have the capacity to protect and integrate arriving migrants and refugees accounting for 0.1% of its population, the events in 2015 showed that the existing migration and protection system left countries unprepared to cope with the dramatic increase in the number of people transiting along the Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes, while placing an unequal level of responsibility on a few final destination countries as well as several states along the EU's outer borders. The necessary reform of the European migration and protection system started to a certain extent already in 2015, and will definitely continue in 2016. ICMPD will lend its active support to this process, by contributing to and commenting on the various proposals being made.

While the migratory flows to Europe are diverse and heterogeneous, the spike in refugee numbers is first and foremost a result of conflict rather than economic precarity. Whether it's the war in Syria and parts of Iraq, the violent instability in Afghanistan and Libya, or indefinite military conscription in Eritrea – forced migration accounted for a large portion of the overall migratory flows.

The current critical situation, however, is not only linked to the spike in the number of people displaced by conflict, but also reveals what happens when migration policies are not aligned

with the economic, demographic, and social realities of today's world. The lack of legal migration avenues, for example, pushed economic migrants to overburden the European protection system with asylum claims in order to be able to stay. With the spike in the arrival of refugees in 2015, the existing migration structures broke down, unable to handle a critical situation they were not designed to withstand.

People smugglers profited immensely from the dramatic developments in 2015, taking advantage of the absence of legal and regular migration channels to put migrants and refugees at risk. Combatting smuggling has therefore been high on EU's migration agenda, particularly after the tragic death of seventy-one persons in an abandoned lorry in Austria. As is shown in this report, smuggling is facilitated by a network of 'specialised service providers', which demands a very targeted and differentiated law enforcement approach. At the same time, we should recognise that smugglers profit from the lack of alternative safe routes to protection, as well as from ever tighter border controls. Providing safe and legal migration pathways to Europe is therefore essential to prevent smuggling.

Both delivering protection to those who need it and fighting irregular migration hinge on European unity and interregional co-operation. Coming up with a European-level solution is essential in order to regain control over migratory movements to Europe that would protect refugees, manage migration in an orderly manner, and safeguard freedom of movement within the Schengen zone. However, a strengthened European approach alone will not be sufficient. Targeted bi-lateral and multilateral co-operation as well as migration dialogues are essential tools to achieve better international migration governance.

### **Strengthening International Solidarity**

The deepening political crisis within the EU has at times overshadowed the immense responsibility carried by transit countries along the current migration routes to Europe. While the EU asylum system may be under strain, Syria's neighbouring countries have, since the beginning of the conflict, welcomed far larger numbers of refugees with 4.5 million refugees spread out across Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. These countries have been confronted with the Syrian refugee crisis to a much greater extent, over a longer period of time, and with more limited resources and humanitarian capacities. For transit countries most affected by the on-going influx of refugees, the crisis did not start in 2015. Europe's neighbours in the Mediterranean and the Middle East have been bearing the brunt of conflict-induced displacement for a number of years with limited assistance and insufficient opportunities for the displaced population.

It is becoming increasingly clear that stepping up international assistance to countries hosting migrants and refugees in the region is a key part of the solution to the current situation. Guiding principle, in this regard should be that the eventual mid to long-term return of the displaced population forced out of their homes while offering humane and decent living opportunities is as important as taking the concerns of the host-communities seriously. Therefore, European migration policies need to take a truly regional and comprehensive approach. This is why ICMPD is working with all countries along key migration routes. Due to our active and close co-operation with countries of origin, transit, and destination, ICMPD acts as a bridge and knowledge broker between Europe, its southern and eastern neighbours, and beyond, in developing interregional migration policies based on good existing practices.

ICMPD has been at the forefront of providing evidence-based support to countries in the region, for example through our close co-operation with Turkish migration authorities in elaborating a development-sensitive and coherent migration policy. More broadly, ICMPD has engaged with countries along major migration routes through a series of dialogues and partnerships based on information exchange throughout the Mediterranean, West and East Africa, as well as the Middle East. As part of our efforts to understand the long-reaching effects of the Syria conflict and the resulting flight from the country, we completed a ground-breaking research project on the impact of the Syrian crisis on trafficking in persons across the entire region. With these and other projects, ICMPD strives to demonstrate the importance of close co-operation with transit countries in addressing the full spectrum of issues related to displacement, mobility, and vulnerability.

### **Regional Dialogues for Better Migration**

Beyond providing assistance in coping with the immediate effects of the current crisis, it is also imperative to simultaneously develop coherent policies for the long term as part of a new common migration regime tailored for the future. Past policy failures clearly show a need for more cohesion and dialogue on an intra-governmental level between source, transit, and destination countries. In addition to our existing role in supporting cross-regional migration dialogues dealing with migration issues such as the Prague, Budapest, Rabat, and Khartoum Processes and the Euromed project, ICMPD reasserted itself as a facilitator between Africa and the EU at the 2015 Valetta Summit, taking on the task of translating policy into practice through a variety of projects in the region. ICMPD's work in the region focuses on promoting mobility within and between Africa and Europe, fighting smuggling and trafficking in human beings and helping migration act as a catalyst for socio-economic development through diaspora engagement.

While taking into account the humanitarian needs of transit countries and the EU's push for orderly migration, expanding access to legal migration channels remains an important issue for source countries who face youth unemployment and poor living conditions. In the long run, any successful migration policy needs to prevent irregular migration and strengthen alternatives allowing for safe, legal and voluntary migration.

Fruitful co-operation with transit countries and countries of origin can only be based on mutual trust and a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to migration. This involves taking into consideration the needs of source countries that have a vested interest in moving towards a sustainable migration regime that utilises migration as an instrument for development while fighting against different forms of irregular migration and organised crime. Such an approach requires looking at migration as being part of a wider developmental process that fits into a larger global trend and should be aligned with the UN's sustainable development target of providing for orderly and well-managed migration.

### **Anticipating Migration Challenges of the Future**

In order to effectively manage migration today, it is crucial to understand how orderly migration can have a positive impact on both sending and receiving societies in the future. At ICMPD we are firmly dedicated to providing countries and societies with the knowledge and tools to adequately integrate migration into their long-term economic, social, and demographic strategies. This is a particularly urgent task given the projected regional demographic, economic, and social changes, including a sharp decline in Europe's working age population in the decades to come. Given the increased availability of both information and resources for a large number of ambitious young people in regions bordering Europe, states need to prepare both their migrations systems and their populations by designing comprehensive migration policies and practices adapted for the future. This is the only viable alternative to having the smugglers decide who gets to come.

It is important to keep in mind that migration is part and parcel of a megatrend of global mobility that is not confined to a specific geographical area. Identifying complementarities between the needs of source, transit, and destination countries is the key to a successful future-oriented migration policy. When properly managed, migration can be mutually beneficial for countries facing a myriad of challenges ranging from youth unemployment and labour mismatch to aging populations and welfare systems under stress. As an organisation, ICMPD places particular emphasis on preparing countries and societies for mid to long-term changes related to migration with a broad set of tools, experience, and knowledge at our disposal.

Most importantly, out of the migration policy crisis in 2015 comes a reinvigorated European and global understanding of the urgent need for a holistic approach to migration based on evidence-based policies and close partnerships bolstered by a sense of shared responsibility. Addressing the immediate concerns of refugees and asylum seekers seeking safety must go hand in hand with developing a more comprehensive future-oriented legal migration regime. Migration does not need to be ‘a problem’, but rather represents a series of opportunities and challenges that need to be effectively managed on an international level.

*This is an excerpt of the **ICMPD Annual Report 2015**. [Read more](#) policy briefs, speeches and interviews or [download](#) the annual report in its entirety.*

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