

## Understanding Solidarity amid Refugee Crises: concept note

*'The refugee crisis is not just a crisis of numbers; it is also a crisis of solidarity' (Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary-General)*

Claims of 'crises' in responses to refugees are fairly common. Hence we encounter reports of the 'European Refugee Crisis', of the situation for Syrian refugees in the Middle East having reached a 'crisis' point, and of the EU's responses to dangerous crossings of migrants in the Mediterranean being in 'crisis'. Globally, there are around 23 million people who are refugees, and a further 40 million more who are internally displaced. These figures alone suggest that we are facing a crisis.

Against this backdrop, we also find many professions of 'solidarity with refugees', both in practical terms via the actions of NGOs and local groups offering sanctuary and assistance, and less concretely in hashtags trending during refugee week.

What does it mean when people talk of 'solidarity' with refugees? Solidarity is distinct from charity, empathy, and compassion. These types of relation are unidirectional and suggest a degree of hierarchy. In contrast, to speak of solidarity is to affirm a sense of standing with someone, rather than standing apart from them. It is arguably more than simply an attitude – one might feel welcoming or open but without making some kind of action it would be hard to describe an attitude alone as expressive of solidarity. Actions might be local and informal – like hosting a 'tea with refugees' meeting in a local civic centre', or they might formal state actions like a specific policy of welcome and positive assistance to resettled refugees on the part of a national or regional government.

The paradigmatic solidaristic relation is one that has equality at its heart, and that entails at least the possibility of mutual engagement and understanding. For many, the archetypal solidaristic relationship is to be found in trade union movements, where a collective of equals stand together to pursue a common goal. Participants in a solidaristic relationship are clearly agents in their own lives, capable of, indeed, committed to, taking action for themselves and their fellows.

Clearly, this is not quite the situation in which receiving states and their citizens find themselves in relation to refugees. There are obvious disparities of power between refugees, the states to which they apply for asylum, and the citizens of those states. The ways in which refugees are received are expressive of the kinds of community that receiving states hope to create and maintain. This may differ across different domains, e.g., national state policy, local government policy, community groups, national NGOs like the Refugee Council, movements like Citizens for Sanctuary and Solidarity with Refugees. In other words, responses to refugees on the part of receiving states and their citizens may well be reflective of wider processes of contestation and negotiation about the kind of politics that a state is trying to achieve.

Refugees are people who have taken action, certainly, but as refugees they often do so in circumstances where their options for agency are severely circumscribed. State governments and their citizens have the option to respond to refugees in solidaristic ways, or not. Refugees are in principle equally free to reach out to host communities or to avoid such interactions, but in reality refugees will most likely require some support, and will suffer in the face of hostility from host communities. That disparity of power might well shape the ways in which actions intended to be

solidaristic are received. And actions intended to be solidaristic could misfire, have unintended consequences, or simply fail.

A test for solidaristic relations will be the extent to which such actions are shaped by dialogue and mutual understanding. Some actions undertaken (e.g., by local activists and by larger scale NGOs) are based on dialogue with persons who are refugees, are shaped and directed by refugees themselves, and are therefore expressive of relations of equality and respect for agency. Much is made of the value of refugees telling and sharing their stories. This is held to have an educative function and to serve as a means of fostering greater solidarity amongst the publics in receiving states. But this invites some questions about the purpose and reception of these stories. Are receiving publics to do more than merely listen to them? Is it in fact reasonable to ask refugees and asylum seekers to tell their stories, over and over, sometimes to officials who may (seem to) be intimidating, sometimes with concern about the risks this might pose to friends, colleagues, family members, who remain at risk in the refugee's country of origin.

There are also questions to be asked about the kind of understanding that is fostered (or perhaps even required) in a solidaristic relationship. For example, do those who have a personal connection to refugees, through family histories or personal experience, have a greater capacity for a meaningful sense of solidarity with refugees than others might, or can 'mere humanity' serve as a bedrock of connection? The lived experience of some refugees seems to refute the assumption that a degree of shared history, language, or religion, would ease the process of resettlement and make for a more welcoming context. On the other hand, the experience of culture shock in resettling in communities that are very different from a refugee's country of origin undoubtedly adds to the traumas that will already have been experienced, and can add to the profound stress experienced by asylum seekers.

If Ban Ki Moon is right to say that the refugee crisis is in part a crisis of solidarity, then it is worth understanding more clearly what solidarity means, what kinds of actions it entails, which actors it obliges, what kind(s) of community a failure of solidarity indicts, and what vision(s) of solidarity one would need to promote in order to rectify this.