



Migrants and Humanitarian Action

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

All Core Responsibilities of the Agenda for Humanity



“Migrants want to contribute with dignity to society, and global response to this large-scale migration phenomenon must harness these responsibilities and aspirations.”

**H.E. Mr. Joe McHugh,
Minister of State for the
Diaspora and
International
Development, Ireland**

I. Overview

The world is witnessing complex humanitarian emergencies that are taking place during a time of unprecedented human mobility. To this end, as highlighted in the [Secretary General's Agenda for Humanity](#), the specific vulnerabilities of migrants must be considered in humanitarian response. The past few years have been marked by many tragic cases where large numbers of migrants have lost their lives at sea, in deserts and on many other migratory routes.

They have been subjected to hunger, abuse, trafficking and some have been stranded in areas of conflicts. In the lead-up to the UN General Assembly's September 2016 Summit to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants ([“19 September Summit”](#)), this Special Session on Migrants and Humanitarian Action focused on ways in which the humanitarian community can better address the protection and assistance needs of vulnerable migrants.

II. Key outcomes/themes

This Special Session called for action to address the crisis of values in addressing the humanitarian needs of migrants. Participants highlighted common themes relating to the global challenges around migration and humanitarian response and expressed support for the 19 September Summit.



Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that migrants are integrated in humanitarian response and planning, noting that – unlike refugees or IDPs—they are often overlooked because they fall out of the purview of the humanitarian architecture. And yet they have a right to humanitarian assistance. While there are legal distinctions between refugees and migrants, when mixed flows occur there are common needs which must be addressed systematically. Diverse responses are needed to respond to complex patterns of movement. In addition to national responses, regional and international responses are needed to protect and assist migrants in transit, including respecting the longstanding international principle of rescuing all migrants at sea.

Concern over migrant vulnerabilities was raised in two contexts: (i) that migrants might become vulnerable during their migratory journey, and (ii) that existing vulnerabilities of the migrant may be exacerbated during the migratory journey. In this regard, many called for building on existing initiatives such as the Migrants in Countries in Crisis and Nansen, (now called the Platform on Disaster Displacement) Initiatives to meet the needs of those in particularly vulnerable situations.

Too often migrants face overwhelming challenges including abuse, exploitation, lack of access to basic needs and even loss of life because of a lack of safe, orderly and legal pathways. The limited support for migrants in countries of origin, transit, and destination exacerbates their vulnerability to smugglers and traffickers. There is an urgent need for increased support for capacity building programs to ensure that the rights of all migrants are upheld. Participants highlighted the particular needs of migrants in transit, especially those who were stranded, unable either to move onward or to return. Information regarding risks must be conveyed to migrants in order to protect them.

Speakers emphasized States' obligations to respect human rights law and a duty of humanity to ensure protection and security for migrants and to do no harm. Participants also stressed the need to better implement the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence which is needed to ensure unrestricted humanitarian access to those in need. Discussed was an imperative to ensure borders are better managed so as not to have adverse effect and force people into the hands of smugglers and traffickers, causing them to risk their lives or be separated from their families.

Participants stressed that migration is a central component of the new global landscape and is here to stay and that we need to look at the historical evidence of the benefits and economic growth that have resulted from migration. Migrants were referred to as the original agents of development, and participants affirmed that a focus on migration can address the gap between humanitarian and development approaches. The numbers of migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) will most likely grow as a natural consequence of globalization and climate change. In addition, modern advances in technology have transformed our world, creating both incentives and enhanced possibilities for more migration.



There was considerable discussion about the need to change the present discourse surrounding migration so that it reflects the realities of the overwhelmingly positive contributions of migrants to economic growth and development. Furthermore, panellists agreed that the toxic and xenophobic narrative must be changed to one that is historically correct – that migrants contribute to development - and that we must learn to manage diversity, recognizing that social, cultural and religious diversity is already happening. Panellists emphasized the important role migrants play in economic growth and how welcoming migrants is not just a humanitarian and legal obligation, but is also an investment that can yield many economic dividends.

Finally, there was a recognition of the need for international cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement. This includes leadership at the national level as well as the engagement of host communities. Many declared support for a global compact for international migration governance that aims to ensure safe, orderly, and regular migration, and which includes a humanitarian dimension.

III. Way Forward

In order to move forward, there needs to be a better understanding that migration is not a problem to be solved but a growing reality that we must manage and of which the positive aspects must be harnessed. It is through this acceptance that an effective way forward can be fully determined and realized. The 19 September Summit provides an opportunity to take these issues forward and to begin the process of developing a global compact for safe, orderly, and regular migration. Next steps include:

- Linking the elements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the challenges of human trafficking and forced migration and crisis (with this including disasters, conflicts and extreme violence), in order to drive a more coordinated response.
- Support for the UN Secretary General’s call for voluntary guidelines on vulnerable migrants as recommended in his report *In Safety and Dignity*.
- Recognition of the regional dynamics of migratory movements including needed regional humanitarian responses; this could include bringing in other partners and their expertise to provide immediate humanitarian assistance, for example on rescue at sea.
- Combating the toxic narrative against migrants and migration, by encouraging a fact-based discourse with national and local leaders, host communities, the media and migrants themselves. This could include participating in the Secretary-General’s initiative on combating xenophobia
- The implementation of the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence in the provision of unrestricted humanitarian access to help those in need;



- A comprehensive approach to addressing the drivers of forced migration including through providing support and capacity building for origin, transit, and destination countries; this could help bridge the humanitarian and development gap.

VI. Speakers

Moderator:

- Mr. Imran Garda, Senior Presenter and Producer, Al-Jazeera+

Speakers:

- Mr. Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations
- Ms. Karen AbuZayd, Special Adviser on the Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, United Nations
- Mr. Md. Shahidul Haque, Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh
- Ambassador Beate Grzeski, Commissioner on Refugees and Migration, Germany
- Hon. Karina Gould, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development, Canada
- Mr. Mark Goldring, Chief Executive Officer, Oxfam
- Mr. William Lacy Swing, Director General, International Organization for Migration
- Presbítero Scalabriniano Juan Luis Carbajal, Under-Secretary, Pastoral Group on Human Mobility