

G20 and the Refugee Crisis: Platitudes instead of Promises

Amna Kaleem

Department of Politics, University of Sheffield

G20 Summit – Media Centre. The refugee crisis has dominated international and domestic political concerns for the past two years, therefore it was expected (or rather hoped) that the issue would be addressed when the G20 leaders meet for their annual G20 Summit in Antalya. Representing two-thirds of the world population and almost 90% of the world GDP, the G20 is not only capable of addressing issues of global governance, it is often argued that it is morally and politically obligated to do so.

Under Turkey's presidency a broad agenda was put forward, focussing on human security issues such as gender, inclusive economic growth, youth unemployment, food security, access to energy, and better inclusion of Low-Income Developing Countries within the G20 policy

framework. Prior to the G20 Summit, a number of experts highlighted the deafening silence in which the G20 maintained concerning the refugee crisis. Because of their lacklustre performance, the G20 states were admonished for not taking concrete steps to address the issue, for failing to urge other member states to share the responsibility, and for relegating the crisis as exclusively a national issue - a burden to be shouldered by the individual states hosting the refugees. As a consequence of increasing pressure to act, the refugee crisis gained enough traction as an agenda item and was taken up by both the partner groups and the leaders in a number of the G20 forums associated with the 2015 Antalya Summit. So how did the G20 leaders fare in displaying their commitment to what has been termed the

biggest human tragedy since the Second World War?

In terms of achievement, one can look positively at the fact that the G20 leaders recognised the refugee crisis as a global issue, a distinct move away from the perception of it as a regional or national problem. However, that's also where the failure lies. After two years, over two million refugees, and a series of heart-wrenching tragedies later, all the G20 has managed to do is present a watered-down statement to direct future action. The lack of urgency displayed towards this issue is both alarming and disappointing.

Is the refugee crisis a G20 issue?

The answer to this question would be a resounding yes, and not just because of the political and economic standing of the members states which makes the G20 an extremely influential forum. Given the geo-strategic dynamics of the crisis, the G20 states have found the crisis at their doorstep. Turkey, the holder of this year's G20 Presidency, has been most affected by the refugee crisis since 2011. The role of

Turkey is not just limited to hosting the fleeing refugees. The EU also wants it to act as a barrier to further migrant movement. By offering a multi-billion Euro aid package and a range of political 'sweeteners', the European Commission wants Turkey to stem the flow of refugees heading westward. The EU itself is processing 530,000 asylum applications, the majority of which have been filed in Germany alone. Similarly, Italy has been one of the main ports receiving refugees arriving by sea. Further afield, Canada has already pledged to take in 25,000 refugees by January 2016. As a result, the involvement of almost half the member states makes it a clear G20 issue, even if the mere scope of human tragedy had failed to do so on its own.

Success and failures

It would be unfair to suggest that the G20 completely ignored the refugee crisis. The issue was discussed at a number of forums at the Summit by both the members and partner groups. Following a working dinner dedicated to the refugee crisis and terrorism, the Leaders' communiqué was released, which echoed the sentiments

expressed by different parties over the course of the Summit.

The communiqué recognised the refugee crisis as a ‘global concern with major humanitarian, political, social, and economic consequences.’ This is an extremely positive development, which should help address the lack of action by some G20 members. By terming it a global issue, the G20 leaders have indicated that the burden of responsibility ought to be shouldered by all the member states and not just those who are involved in the crisis.

Furthermore, the call to find a ‘coordinated and comprehensive response’ for a long-term solution signals the understanding that the crisis cannot be resolved with merely stopgap measures and requires a more sustainable solution. However, the communiqué falls short of presenting a comprehensive plan. The discussions resulted in a limited burden-sharing framework, urging states to provide support on humanitarian admission, aid, refugee resettlement, and ‘improved access to services, education and

livelihood opportunities.’ There were suggestions floated on the side-lines that focussed on involving the refugees within the labour market, but there is no evidence to suggest that these recommendations factored in the deliberations.

In the communiqué there is also provision for states to scale up their efforts according to ‘individual capacities’. It would be interesting to see whether this would translate into economically strong members stepping up their currently negligible contributions. However, without any enforcement mechanism or pressure exerted on those states with greatest capacities, this stipulation might have no weight.

Discussing the communiqué, a senior EU official said that it gives a hook for future action. Yet, it is worrying that only a starting point was the best that this Summit has to offer. Given the depth and breadth of the crisis, while this development maybe a good start, the consensus reached seemingly does not go far enough. Even though the Summit has succeeded in recognising the refugee crisis

as a global issue, it has failed to ensure global action. It is disappointing that the bold action or a game-changing dialogue, which was sorely needed from the forum, has failed to materialise.

This G20 Summit was a good opportunity for Turkey to present its case to its fellow members. As the G20 host, and at the heels of the EU Turkey Joint Action Plan, Turkey could have pushed for a more ambitious agenda. The priorities for this year's summit were based around three 'I's – inclusiveness, implementation, and investment. Turkey should have driven the implementation aspect of its plan to urge other states to increase their participation in proportion to their GDP. However, while our generous host nation discussed the refugee crisis and shed light on its efforts to accommodate more than two million refugees within its territory, this issue was allowed to be overshadowed by the political and economic concerns related to the Paris attacks.

More action on the sidelines

It is disappointing that the urgency of the refugee crisis was echoed more strongly by the G20 partners. The events on the sidelines of the Leaders Summit saw a host of bold ideas, which evaded the final G20 communiqué. The Business 20 (B20) and Labour 20 (L20) joint session brought the issue to the forefront, with Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation and convenor of L20, proposing a 'universal right to work with equal treatment in the workforce' for the refugees. This suggestion was separately reiterated by Fuat Oktay, president of Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Dr Gülden Türktan, president of Women 20 (W20), and Pascale Moreau, the UNHCR representative to Turkey.

In an exclusive interview with this researcher, Moreau said: 'The right to work is a fundamental human right of adults and if an adult is deprived of that right... we get into undignified life, we get into misery and poverty and then we can get into situations where people can get into a lot of trouble.' As explained by Moreau, the precarious financial circumstances refugees find

themselves in is not only a threat to their well-being, but also creates instability which has an overall effect on the wider society. However, the benefits of including refugees in the mainstream workforce are not just limited to their prosperity, but can also profit the wider society. Economic inclusion of refugees has the potential to turn an economic burden into a resource, which could go a long way in reducing the ambivalence towards refugees.

Gülden Türktan from W20 also focussed on the benefits of a sustainable refugee settlement and rehabilitation policy. Speaking on the importance of equipping women with skills at a session on female refugees, Türktan said: 'You can train a man but then you will only be training one individual, when you train a woman, you train a whole family and when you train a family, you train a whole society.' With members of three different agencies supporting this policy, it is regretful that the right to work for refugees was not even discussed at the Sherpa level. The closest the communiqué comes to supporting this policy is 'access to livelihood opportunities' mentioned as part of the humanitarian

assistance states should offer. While the policy suggestion coming from partners speaks of 'rights', the final consensus can offer only an economic lifeline to refugees as a favour, left at the discretion of the host nations.

The way ahead

While the communiqué failed to live up to global expectations, this summit has showcased some positive trends. Both US President Obama and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker urged for concerns about terrorism to refrain from dictating the fate of refugees. This is a potentially powerful normative stance, which should be maintained at a time when momentous policy decisions regarding the fate of millions of refugees are being made in Europe.

The communiqué also made a link between 'political solutions to conflicts' and 'increased cooperation for development'. This should be taken as a guide to devise long-term or perhaps pre-emptive solutions to the refugee crisis and

the issue of displacement, not just in the Middle East, but also in other regions.

Finally, this year's G20 Summit boasted its collaboration with a host of partners. However, while the L20 made some strong suggestions on the sidelines and the W20 highlighted the plight of the most vulnerable sections of the refugee populations, these don't seem to have informed the final policy decisions. Efforts should be made to address the disconnect which has prevented a flow of information from the grassroots level to the decision makers.

Perhaps it is a lot to expect G20 states to reach concrete policy decisions in the space of a day and a half under the full

glare of world media. However, if one of the premier forums in world politics with ownership of nearly 90% of global GDP cannot come up with needed solutions, there is then little hope that those solutions will be generated by the rest of an increasingly overburdened and under resourced global governance infrastructure.

Amna Kaleem is a Researcher in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield.