

Friday 19 February 2021

YMCA Europe conference: YMCA work with Refugees and Migrants
Carlos Sanvee, World YMCA Secretary General



SESSION 1. 15.15 - 15.50

“The European and global context and the role of Youth organisations”

Moderator: Ed Eggink (Chair of the YMCA Europe Working Group on Refugees).

- Mr. Margaritis Schinas - Vice-President of the European Commission, responsible for the co-ordination of the European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum (September 2020)
 - Mr. Antonio Vitorino - Director General IOM (International Organisation for Migration of the United Nations).
 - Mr. Carlos Sanvee - Secretary General of the World YMCA
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Thank you Emma, Ed, and especially Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the European Commission, and Antonio Vitorino, Director General at the IOM: I'm proud to share a platform with you, and I thank both of your organisations for the great work you do on behalf of the displaced.

I also thank all my YMCA Europe colleagues for putting together this high-quality event, and I thank YMCAs from all over the world for taking part and bringing their commitment, ideas and practical testimony.

And having thanked you all, I challenge you: wouldn't it have been doubly powerful - instead of meeting from the comfort of our own homes - to have met in Lampedusa or Lesbos, and seen up close what we're talking about?

But Covid forbids this, and it's great that we can at least come together this way.

'Refugees' and 'Migrants' are of course different things, but now isn't the time to unpack definitions. A refugee is forced to flee, largely for political reasons, while a migrant may be forced to flee or he may go of his volition - normally, he goes to try and make a better economic life. More often than not, a migrant feels compelled to flee too.

I myself am a form of refugee: as a young man I was on the wrong side of the government in my native Togo, and was not safe in my own country. I am a form of migrant too: I sought to make a difference for myself and for the world by working elsewhere. I have lived in Kenya and Switzerland, in both of which I have sometimes felt welcome, and sometimes felt unwelcome.

But I am of course one of the very lucky ones. There are almost 70 million people worldwide forcibly displaced - two thirds of them, the IDPs, are displaced inside their own countries. The numbers of migrants are multiplied to the nth degree.

Whatever the definitions, two things are clear.

First, that the majority of refugees and migrants are young people, in the 15-29 age bracket that automatically makes them the particular concern of YMCAs.

And second, that they are the concern of YMCAs because - whatever their age - YMCA's duty is to help them because we believe in inclusion. The essence of that belief is a world in which every single human being is of equal value and potential, and we want to give them the dignity and the space to be that.

That means the young but also the old, the person of any or no faith, and of any background. The person who has been in a community all his life, and the person who has just arrived. The person who is welcomed, and especially the one who isn't.

Some might ask why YMCA organises a conference on migrants and refugees when others - like IOM, like UNHCR or other regional or global multilateral organisations - are specifically tasked to support them ...?

It's a very simple answer, that YMCA is an organisation which cares for anyone who needs care. We have always cared for refugees and migrants, and we always will.

Not many know that Henri Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross, was a member of YMCA Geneva - even though we must come clean and say that YMCA didn't immediately embrace his vision of voluntary and neutral support in time of war, and the Geneva Conventions, the rules of war.

But in the end no organisation, other than the Red Cross, paid more visits and distributed more necessities in prisoner of war camps on every continent during both World Wars than the World YMCA, based as it was in neutral Geneva. Its loose international federation and presence in 90 countries at the time was unique, and gave it access all over the world.

Read our YMCA history, and you'll find us coordinating assistance to persecuted Jews seeking to migrate, and turning wartime help for prisoners of war into post-war help for refugees. We have helped refugees in a litany of unhappy places: the words 'Saigon', 'Guatemala', 'the Mekong', 'Ethiopia', 'Uganda', 'Burundi' are all part of our YMCA history, and we have a Nobel prize to show for it: our first international President John Mott, an American, in 1946.

One of my favourite historical artefacts - and I have it here - dates from before the first World War. It's a print advertisement placed by the organisation I am proud to serve, the World YMCA. It's entitled 'To emigrants going to America'. 'When you arrive in America', it says, 'we counsel you to address yourself to the Young Men's Christian Associations. The YMCA is to be found in every American city and gives good advice, free of charge, to all young men without exception who apply to them'.

In recent years I've been humbled and privileged to see up close YMCA work with refugees and migrants, especially in Greece, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Cameroon.

And this work continues, and others will talk about it today. We don't just mark 20 June and 18 December as Refugees Day and Migrants Day. *Every* day of the year, we help Refugees and Migrants, whom we feel have a right to belong.

So we have history and we have an active present. In looking to the future, let me say a very few quick words about the global YMCA response to refugees and migrants, before ending with a specific plea, not so much about the YMCA response in Europe but about the wider societal response to refugees and migrants here on this continent.

As a global Movement, we are gradually going up gears in our support to refugees and migrants.

In 2018, at the YMCA World Council 2018 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, we implemented a Resolution to support refugees and migrants, which was presented by YMCA Germany.

In 2019, we met as a global organisation at a conference in Baltimore, in part to put that 2018 Resolution into practice.

We established working groups and platforms in each of our four areas - Europe, Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean - to coordinate this. And no one has done more than YMCA Europe, which developed a European database of YMCA refugee projects which was launched at our 175th anniversary celebrations in 2019, and which now contains 57 projects across 15 European National Movements.

In early 2020, we established a worldwide so-called 'Community of Impact' on Refugees and Migrants, aiming to establish a shared vision statement, common objectives and working structures to advance global coordination, communications, programme and advocacy work on behalf of refugees, migrants, and new immigrant populations across the globe.

Members range from Managers to National Chairs, representing 11 countries and 6 National Movements. The Community of Impact is coordinated by YMCA of New York. I know that its inspiring leader Rachael Rinaldo will tell you more today.

I believe that this global initiative is one of the defining features and platforms of our global YMCA journey in the 21st Century.

It's part of our continued process of 'reimagination' - in a world turned upside by Covid - where change is not a threat but an opportunity. We have to go where young people are, and not wait for them to come to us. If young people are in refugee camps, we must continue to go there, and be relevant to their needs.

So colleagues, I would like to end with a heartfelt plea to the continent of Europe, which has a tiny fraction of the world's refugees and migrants. Countries like Turkey and Uganda have millions and millions more. A third of the population of Lebanon, a country with so many problems of its own, are refugees and migrants. That, my friends, is generosity of spirit.

And yet 'Fortress Europe' is still one of the least welcoming parts of the world for a refugee or migrant. We live in a fairly toxic political environment where many want even *fewer* arrivals from other, less fortunate, countries.

When Europeans colonised the rest of the world, they didn't have to ask for visas or asylum, and the societies they occupied did not send them back home.

I am proud of what YMCA does in Europe to counteract hostility towards the refugee and the migrant. But I use this platform to call on all Europeans to respect the dignity and humanity of those who try and seek a better life on this continent.

Right now, we have a Covid emergency - for young and old alike. But I ask you - are the migrants and refugees within our midst in Europe seen as part of this emergency? Do they merit getting a vaccine?

Let me briefly mention three refugee friends known to me from my church in Switzerland. They are Somalis and Kurds - who are good and hard-working people who have fled persecution in their own countries, known unimaginable hardship and antagonism in making the journey to Europe, and who after 5 years were rejected - I don't know why - as asylum seekers in Switzerland. They fled to England, where they were held in the Napier disused barracks in Kent and - almost inevitably - were among the 400 people there who contracted Covid.

Most of the world has suffered the inconvenience of lockdown for a year now. For many migrants and refugees, 'lockdown' is their fate for years on end.

So today I pledge that YMCA in Europe and the world over will continue to do all we can for refugees and migrants, and for young and often vulnerable people on the move. And I ask all Europeans - in fact all citizens of the world - to do the same.

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