

WMU Symposium on Migration by Sea 26-27 April 2016

Concluding Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, I now have the task of trying to summarise and synthesise something of what we have seen and heard since 1300 yesterday. Let me begin by congratulating WMU and the University of Genoa in tackling this topic. It has been for me a privilege to have been here and I'm sure we have all gained a great deal from what we might describe as an objective, non-political and rational discussion of an issue that it seems is rarely discussed in such a fashion.

Because we are considering a major world event, very much more complex than the headline writers would ever suggest, and very much one of the defining issues of our times. Shipping has often been described (for all sorts of reasons) as a "frontier activity" with so much of its action taking place over the horizon and far from everyday public perception. Its humanitarian role in the crisis surrounding migration by sea brings shipping into the public arena, but perfectly places the industry and the government rescuers very much at this frontier, whether they would wish to be in such a role or not. They have no choice!

The refugee crises and migration by sea may be global phenomena in 2016, but as far back as we can trace in history, people have moved en masse across continents and oceans alike, responding to the pressures of persecution or poverty, conflict or the wish for a better life. We can look for precedents and useful hints from our history books and we can argue about the differences between the current crises and those earlier movements of people. We might discover some relevant lessons!

We can perhaps look at some of the warning signs, at the causes of conflict that persuade people to flee their homelands, the widening gap between the richest nations and those at the bottom of the pile. One of the warnings, of which I am constantly reminded, is the stark message that was contained in the Brandt Report, which was issued by a group of prominent politicians, that gave rise to a lot of serious public discussion and international soul searching when it was published in 1980.

There were many important lessons contained in this work, but the one that I always recall is the simple statement about the "North-South" divide, which said that unless we in the wealthiest parts of the world can do more to better the lives of those, who do not have their advantages, the pull factor of the North will be unremitting and inexorable. In so many respects, this message was conveniently forgotten, or left in the "too-hard" basket and now, 36 years on, we are seeing the advertised consequences, boosted, of course, by the horrors of war.

Are there differences in the forced migrations of today and other, earlier, movements of peoples across frontiers, seas and oceans? With our modern communications, we are certainly better informed, for good or ill, about migration than we would have been even last century. As regards migration by sea, we are surely more advanced in our SAR techniques and it is certain more people would have died, unseen, without the advances of surveillance, radar,

and the ability to vector in assistance . So we can do more practically, although we are still influenced by politics and issues of sovereignty, as we seek to prevent people setting out to sea in dangerous craft and to curb the activities of the people smugglers.

Communications also means that everyone is more aware of the human price of those who are risking their lives and so frequently dying, as their rickety craft sink around them. Awful scenes of suffering and death give us a constant reminder of the suffering human condition and the fact that these are fellow human beings in such extremis.

Our response to the suffering of displaced or vulnerable people and our treatment of them in 2016, marks our humanity. We have heard about responsibilities and obligations laid down by international conventions, which may not have been the case with earlier migrations. The concept of “human rights”, which is really not that long established , is now omnipresent and inescapable .

But there are other more modern imponderables that threaten the effectiveness of our response. While migration by land is, by no means, risk-free, as people cross hostile territory, like the Sahara, or flee through conflict zones, an escape by sea produces distinctive maritime risks. There is justifiable concern about the ability of a merchant ship with a small crew to rescue possibly hundreds of people at a time and we have had this illustrated brilliantly.

There is a not unreasonable worry about exactly who the rescuers might be picking up, with people embarking from a place where the rule of terror prevails. Are there terrorists busily intruding themselves into the migrant flow? There is an overarching, if often unspoken, question that cuts across rights and obligations and which asks whether, in the provision of efficient rescue services, there is a direct and increased encouragement to people to attempt the crossing. That is an uncomfortable and possibly political issue! And how does that sit with our obligations to assist?

We are not politicians here today, but mostly practical people, many of whom have a deep understanding of the sea and its inherent hazards. We want to help, but are very conscious of the scale of the problem and the limitations of those aboard ships to make a difference. Nobody, in any merchant navy, has been trained to deal with some of the emergency situations they have been catapulted into , with a sinking migrant vessel alongside and people drowning in the water. Their efforts have been astonishing, largely unsung and this needs to be acknowledged. Many have seen appalling sights that they certainly never signed up for when they took up a sea career. It would be good to think that somebody was monitoring their mental welfare and we have been reminded of the need to more effectively support possibly traumatised seafarers.

Difficult issues have been confronted at this useful and topical symposium. We learned, for instance, of the need to improve reception facilities in the places migrants are landed and of the need to remind ourselves that we are dealing with sentient human beings – not numbers. These are people driven by desperation, who depend on our kindness, sensitivity and awareness of human rights.

But it is easy to criticise agencies or inadequate facilities for their treatment of migrants, but maybe should remember their response is dealing with huge numbers and increased pressures from people who might be inclined to “write new policies with their feet”. They are also hampered by local, national or regional problems in devising coherent policies and the fact that we shouldn’t ignore security threats and the intervention of organised criminality – in the “big business” of people smuggling.

We have been told a great deal about regulatory frameworks and the various rules of law that should obtain, but we have to recognise that governments and agencies are dealing with emergency and often chaotic situations, where pre-planned procedures sometimes get forgotten about in the heat of the moment. It is also easy to blame the media for encouraging xenophobia or social tensions and emphasising security issues, but I would argue that media tends to reflect social attitudes rather than to dictate or influence them. It is difficult to ignore prevailing economic backgrounds in those countries doing the heavy lifting.

You might agree that a certain humility is called for when we consider just what those countries in the region are doing, looking after such vast numbers within their borders. (3 million in Turkey – 1 in six in the Lebanon are refugees). They do not get sufficient praise or international recognition for their work.

There has been a great deal in this symposium to make us think. No doubt – it is the worst crisis in modern times. But we are perhaps encouraged to look beyond the headlines at the positive things being done which demonstrate a great deal of humanity.

It is a good thing that there are so many stout defenders of human rights in the field and who are prepared to challenge those who would constrain the needs of migrants.

But there are so many challenges that remain and we have been reminded of some of them. The inherent unfairness of a few coastal states which appeal in vain for others to share their considerable burdens. The fact that there is no respite even remotely in sight, in those places exerting the “push” factors, driving people to flee in such numbers.

We have challenges in updating and making more relevant asylum policies in the face of what was called “a perfect storm”. More rational resettlement and relocation is so badly needed. And throughout all this focus on regulation and policy, we were reminded of the importance of “moral issues” – we are considering fellow human beings!

Practical devise practical solutions and while there is no sense that the crisis will die down any time soon, and may get worse in the Mediterranean, information sharing and communication at an operational level clearly works. The Mediterranean can perhaps learn from SE Asia and the Caribbean – and vice versa.

I tend to be governed by lists and I have made one today , which is probably very inadequate, but might remind us of some of the priorities which have emerged from this symposium. They are “needs” rather than solutions or even conclusions – you might dispute them – but it is the best I can offer – there are 10 of them.

1. A need to maintain pressure on the UN to look again at safe refuges for migrants before they embark, to convey asylum seekers and the most vulnerable to safety in proper craft – ie ferries – thus removing them from the hands of traffickers and people smugglers.
2. A need to recognise the welfare of seafarers who may be traumatised by horrific rescue missions.
3. A need to better resource reception facilities, not leaving coastal states to cope with the burdens on their own.
4. A need for more practical and pragmatic asylum policies.
5. A need to look more closely at push factors – to stop being so squeamish and politically correct about often appallingly bad governance and corruption in countries driving their people away.
6. A need to learn from each other and to see the value of bilateral and interagency co-operation at an operational level.
7. A need for capacity building , technology transfer and helping the less capable around the world with what is being learned at sea and ashore in the current crisis.
8. A need for regular briefing –more transparency to dispel rumours which can travel so fast in an era of instant communications and can affect migrant reactions.
9. A need for better liaison between Government agencies and shipping companies (as is done by the IFC in Singapore), which is clearly useful and might be transferred elsewhere with advantage.
10. A need for masters of ships to be provided with the maximum amount of support in their rescue missions, from all interests , so that they need have no fears or doubts about their need to intervene.

Finally, and it is an inadequate comparison, what we have been considering these past two days reminded me of the aftermath of a marine accident. Our speakers and discussants have been the investigators , peeling back the various layers of information and data.

What they have revealed is not unlike such an investigation in that picture is invariably more complex than it first appeared – much more than the easy conclusion of “human error”! They have looked at the root causes and drilled down into the various components that contribute to one of the great tragedies of our times.

Our speakers in these various sessions have left us infinitely better informed and we are hugely grateful to them all. But as the President said yesterday when she opened our proceedings –“the tragedy continues”.

So that is enough from me, but I must, on your behalf, thank the organising team in WMU and the University of Genoa for devising and organising this stimulating programme on such a timely topic. Thank you to all the people who labour behind the scenes, to keep things running smoothly and to all our speakers and discussants for their thought-provoking interventions and to our excellent team of chairmen.

Coming to WMU is never lost time and I hope you will agree with me that this symposium has been very, very useful. So I hope you will leave here with a greater understanding , and travel safely home.