

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — ‘Lives in dignity: from aid-dependence to self-reliance’**

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Rapporteur: **Michael McLOUGHLIN**

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| Outcome of vote<br>(for/against/abstentions) | 203/0/1  |

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

### Lives in dignity — Recommendations

1.1. The Committee believes the communication ‘Lives in dignity’ is an ambitious and timely document that follows best practice in development and humanitarian assistance. The EU needs to be conscious of the challenges involved in making it a reality.

1.2. The Committee feels that the defined and clear geographic regions that give rise to forced displacement offer the opportunity to tailor and focus responses and ensure joined-up responses across the European Commission and other institutions.

1.3. The Committee recommends that the European External Action Service, in conjunction with Member States, should develop a high-level political strategy to engage with states and international organisations in connection with the ‘Lives in dignity’ communication, given some of the key geopolitical challenges involved.

1.4. The Committee recommends that dedicated approaches to key issues for women and young people should be developed alongside the communication, and these groups must be consulted and involved in any delivery.

1.5. The Committee believes that while a development-led approach can produce considerable results with current budget, the need for extra resources should not be ruled out.

1.6. The Committee supports the proposal that civil society, end-users, development partners and NGOs should be involved in the delivery and in making the communication operational.

1.7. The Committee recommends that social and civil dialogue structures and processes be enhanced and improved in partner and host countries to assist with the delivery of the communication.

1.8. The Committee recommends economic action in the affected regions to support and develop entrepreneurship as a viable development path for many forcibly displaced people.

1.9. The Committee recommends that actions on health should pay particular attention to mental health and mental illness and be consistent with Article 11 of the UN Convention on People with Disabilities.

1.10. The Committee recommends that education and training responses should be based on a lifelong learning approach, and the possibility of making EU programmes available to forcibly displaced people should be considered where relevant.

1.11. The Committee recommends that the highest standards of accountability and transparency should be applied in moving towards a development approach.

1.12. The Committee calls for parliamentary accountability at EU and national level as well as oversight by other relevant bodies as part of a move towards a development-led approach.

## 2. Background

2.1. The number of forcibly displaced persons (refugees, internally displaced people and asylum-seekers) is one of the key issues for the international community, with unfortunately no end in sight to ongoing conflicts in Syria, parts of Africa and other areas. At the heart of this policy challenge is the emergence of a permanent class of displaced persons who remain in situ for many years after their original displacement.

2.2. This situation presents a number of issues, chief among which is the fact that the responses of the international community may be dominated by an 'emergency' response, when a longer-term, development-based regime is more appropriate. Resolving this dilemma is difficult, as changes may raise many questions for host countries, donors, NGOs and displaced people themselves, depending on the approach.

2.3. Over 65 million people were considered forcibly displaced in 2015, with 21,2 million of these refugees and 40,8 million internally displaced, while 3,2 million were seeking asylum. The countries that produce the vast majority of forcibly displaced persons are Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Neighbouring countries are accommodating the vast bulk of refugees while internally displaced people remain within the borders of these states.

2.4. For refugees, the main neighbouring countries are Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Ethiopia. Turkey is the country with the largest numbers of refugees worldwide. Numbers are also extremely high for many countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, on a per capita basis. For internally displaced people the main countries are Syria (6,6 million), Colombia (3,6 million), Iraq (3,3 million) Sudan (3,2 million), Yemen (2,5 million) and Nigeria (2,1 million).

2.5. The European Union is the main supporter of development assistance and emergency aid in the world today. This fact is one of the hallmarks of the values of the EU and its Member States. The EU has also sought greater coherence and effectiveness in its aid and emergency responses through greater coordination in the countries targeted by Member States' efforts and the EU's approach.

2.6. The EU provided over EUR 1 billion of humanitarian assistance dedicated to forcibly displaced persons in 2015. In April 2016 the European Commission, in association with the EEAS, adopted a development-led approach to forced displacement. The 'Lives in dignity' communication sets out for the first time how the EU views a move towards a new dispensation in the area of supporting forcibly displaced persons.

2.7. 'Lives in dignity' outlines the challenges facing forcibly displaced people. It clearly sets out the argument that the vulnerability of displaced persons should be the primary consideration even ahead of their legal status. The communication draws on a comprehensive approach to development assistance and the EU's approach to resilience in this field, thus eschewing a 'linear approach'. It seeks to move away from the 'silos' approach to policy and bridges the gap between the humanitarian and development worlds, which can sometimes be large.

2.8. The Commission believes that there should be no extra cost involved in this new approach as it is a way of bringing existing funding together. A strong emphasis is placed on host governments and implementing partners. Similarly, early warning systems and the early involvement of all actors are advocated. Examples of already-existing practices relating to joint country planning and strategic programming are cited. Common targets and programming are to be prioritised.

2.9. Two elements of a new policy framework are envisaged with ancillary actions, these being: a stronger humanitarian and development nexus and strategic engagement with partners, including the private sector. There is also a sectoral focus with actions on education, the labour market (including social dialogue) and access to various services such as housing, water, sanitation, etc.

### 3. General comments

#### Geopolitical considerations

3.1. Overall the 'Lives in dignity' communication is a very worthwhile initiative, setting out a bold vision for a strategic adjustment in policy aimed at addressing real issues and focused on the need to change in order to benefit those who need it most. It is in keeping with much of the development of thinking in the sector and those working in the field, making bridges between humanitarian and aid work and focussing on longer terms needs such as health and education. The EU has considerable authority in this area and is an important stakeholder, and together with Member States can make a real impact. We welcome the ambition of the proposals in the communication. The EU and other actors need to be clear on the scale of the task while maintaining its ambitious approach.

3.2. Due regard should be paid to the importance of geopolitics in this area. Indeed, we have seen how the well-intentioned plans relating to the resettlement of much smaller numbers of refugees have unravelled in the EU itself. Displaced people emerge from complex and sensitive conflicts and do not, unfortunately, cease to be subject to these conflicts after becoming displaced. Any change in policy or approach, no matter how well-intentioned or widely supported by donors, may have the potential to have unexpected outcomes or impact in some unexpected way on a conflict itself. This impact may be on surrounding states or regions or on very subtle balances of ethnicity, power or geopolitics. This may particularly be the case if a population which is even nominally 'temporary' comes to be seen as 'permanent'. Already countries like Lebanon and Jordan feel these pressures. Positive examples from the communication such as access to land in Uganda may help in this regard.

3.3. The states that are home to the considerable numbers of forcibly displaced people are often fragile or weak states, making the issue of geopolitical sensitivity all the more real. In other instances, the 'host' state may be an autocratic regime but the sensitivity remains. Inevitably 'neighbours', 'hosts' and parties to the conflict may be difficult to distinguish or quite fluid. Indeed, there will often be connections between the conflict itself and neighbouring countries or subsets of populations in both. A host, neighbour or region may 'gain' or 'lose' from any change in the status of forcibly displaced persons and may react.

3.4. Hearing local voices is a recurring theme in the communication and this is entirely commendable. However, in limited circumstances, these may be partisan or influenced by the conflict or by the broader set of circumstances that brought about the conflict. The challenge of encouraging a desire in many regions for greater permanence of displaced people simply cannot be underestimated. The recent decision to close the Dadaab camp in Kenya, which has existed for 24 years, and the offering of financial incentives to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, illustrate the challenges involved. It is perhaps a sad but unavoidable reality that the sovereignty of the host remains supreme in international law, despite the need to focus on the forcibly displaced.

3.5. As security is consistently seen as the main motivator for people to leave or stay, the concept of early warning as raised in the communication is vital. Many movements are also seen as predictable. This once again reinforces the need for strong political actions and engagement in furthering the aims of the communication.

### Joined-up policies

3.6. The communication rightly cites the need for joined-up policy and thinking, particularly between the worlds of emergency response and development policy. In welcoming this, the EESC encourages even more ambition in this direction. It may be possible to look at an even broader set of policies where the European Union and its Member States could improve the lives of the forcibly displaced. Given the defined set of countries the areas might include trade, aid, arms and human rights. The communication is also very strong on synergies and joined-up thinking; this needs to go beyond the traditional areas of emergency response and development assistance. It would be interesting to hear what other DGs in the Commission, such as Trade, can contribute to this work. The communication does provide some positive examples such as a Joint Humanitarian Development Framework document for malnutrition in northern Nigeria, but it would be important to show that such an approach is systematic, particularly in Brussels.

3.7. Some humanitarian NGOs have expressed doubt as to whether these tasks are suited for humanitarians and if the distinctiveness of humanitarian assistance will be maintained in such a move. The London-based ODI believes that the system of humanitarian assistance is in need of a radical shake-up given the changed circumstance it finds itself in and the preponderance of a limited number of donors and recipients.

While the Commission communication states there should not be any new cost in delivering on 'Lives in dignity', the ability to attract new finance or put in place greater synergies should not be ruled out.

### EU policies on refugees and asylum-seekers

3.8. 'Lives in dignity' addresses separate and distinct issues from the EU's own policies on refugees and asylum. However, there is some connection, particularly in relation to having a tangible and ongoing resettlement policy for a certain number of forcibly displaced persons. Moreover, the moral authority of the EU in this field may be diminished after the arrangements entered into with Turkey, as indeed may that of certain Member States. This makes the adherence to the highest standards of international law and best practice all the more important in delivering on this communication. The involvement of end-users in policy delivery is important. Social and civil dialogue offers great potential here. Integration policies in the EU also need to be improved and are relevant to forcible displacement, as the resettlement of many forcibly displaced people will need to be an option. These include the right to work, language support and anti-discrimination measures. The recent development of pilot 'humanitarian corridors', particularly by the Italian Government but also in other EU countries, Switzerland, Canada and the U.S., has much to recommend itself in terms of resettlement.

### Monitoring, oversight and accountability

3.9. The need for the highest standards of accountability and transparency for all humanitarian and development funding is clear. Any move towards a new approach for forcibly displaced people must satisfy the highest standards of accountability. All spending should be subject to the oversight of The European Parliament, the European Court of Auditors, OLAF and the European Ombudsman and equivalent national bodies where relevant.

## **4. Specific comments**

4.1. While the communication focusses on forgotten conflicts and areas with large numbers of forcibly displaced people, those with the greatest numbers of long-term displaced peoples are highlighted. Notwithstanding the political sensitivities of particular situations, some conflicts may merit specific attention due to their extremely protracted nature. The cases of Western Sahara and the Palestinians seem relevant. The situation of Ukraine also deserves special attention, as the country lies in the EU's immediate neighbourhood.

4.2. The communication admirably states that the legal status of forcibly displaced people should not matter with regard to humanitarian assistance and longer term development aid; this is welcome. However, in some circumstances there may be an advantage where a legal status confers some security and utility on a displaced person, for example when they satisfy the criteria under the 1951 Convention, when they hold citizenship of the host country or a third country, when their children have such citizenship or when they themselves are minors, or other relevant situations. This for example would be particularly apposite for unaccompanied minors.

4.3. The approach of the communication may benefit from some outside or independent verification and academic rigour from the worlds of the social sciences or psychology. Examples of these approaches might include Maslow's hierarchy of needs or asset-based community development. There are, of course, numerous examples of these, but a focus on enhanced human needs beyond mere existence is required.

4.4. The communication's principal approach to demonstrating the operational dimension of the change envisaged is by way of current examples. These are very valuable. While the operational dimension may be for the future, it would be valuable to clarify and develop this. In other words, what will it look like, what are the actual instruments, will it be driven by just aid? These are important questions for many stakeholders such as Member States, NGOs, aid workers and of course displaced people themselves. Any process of change can give rise to fear. Regardless of the dysfunctionality of any regime, the alternative usually has losers and winners and early establishment of the operational aspects can assist in dealing with this.

4.5. Similarly, it would be important to set out the envisaged delivery and transmission of a new approach, particularly in relation to the relevant multilateral agencies, non-EU states and NGOs. While the EU is an important player and indeed considered to be a leader in this field, it is not the only one. There can be other different and competing priorities with these stakeholders. Given the mixing of funds and efforts involved in most operations, a shared agenda is critical.

4.6. Democracy and good governance are essential if aid is to be worthwhile and actually reach its intended beneficiaries. The rule of law is of fundamental importance here, as are effective anti-corruption measures. In the past it has been estimated that up to 40 % of funding has been sidelined either for the purchase of arms or the personal enrichment of leading politicians. The rule of law is also essential to ensure that civil society can have an effective voice and play an important monitoring role, without the fear of subsequent intimidation or even imprisonment.

4.7. Considerable emphasis is rightly placed on planning in the document; however, events may move rapidly in this area and time may be of the essence. Any approaches or operational plans should be capable of rapid deployment.

4.8. As in all fields there can be language and terminology specific to this area in the communication and elsewhere. The development of policy should, as far as possible, avoid jargon. Considerable attention is also paid to ideas such as synergies, strategies, plans and joined-up thinking. More concrete approaches or directions might be employed in these areas.

4.9. The provisions on social dialogue in the communication are welcome and should be recognised across all of its relevant provisions. The education and labour market elements of the proposed actions should consider greater emphasis on self-employment and entrepreneurship. Such activity is often very visible in camps for displaced people and creativity may be an inevitable outcome of the situation people find themselves in. This is supported in the World Bank report on forced displacement.

4.10. It is reasonable to ask what approach will be taken in the future. As with all policy changes there will be a transition. Will there be a backlog or a two-tier system? 25,1 million people are currently seen as being protractedly displaced. How will a different environment be managed if this situation continues?

4.11. The involvement of civil society, locally as well as end-users (displaced people), is an important concern. Consultative structures generally exist in camps as it stands, but what of host countries? This may provide a considerable challenge but should nonetheless be part of any policy change. It is not hard to envisage how difficult this might be for internally displaced people in many conflicts.

4.12. As with any major shift in policy and particularly given the need for transparency, oversight measures for the new approach should be ensured including relevant civil society actors and NGOs. The example of civil society monitoring mechanisms covering the 'Trade and sustainable development' (TSD) chapters in existing EU trade agreements may be helpful here.

4.13. Economic regeneration of regions will be needed if the forcibly displaced people residing within them are to benefit. The regions where forced displacement is concentrated are, however, some of the poorest in the world and also provide a poor environment for business and social protection. Again, the geographically focused nature of forced displacement should offer solutions here, such as regional investment plans, tax policies and development of infrastructure. Greater support for entrepreneurship should also figure in any approach to economic development. Dignity in employment and quality jobs must also be prioritised along with the involvement of the social partners.

4.14. Many of the regions and countries hosting forcibly displaced people score poorly on most economic indicators and can be seen as difficult for businesses to operate in. The need for quality data is also flagged by the World Bank and others. Economic opportunity must be at the centre of a development-led response to forced displacement and this furthers the need for other actors in the EU to actively support the communication.

4.15. Employment by local civil society organisations and in camps, and in the general responses to displacement, is currently common and considered best practice. This should be an important and clear aspect of the actions on employment.

4.16. Actions on health should pay particular attention to mental health and mental illness — an extremely important and often neglected area for forcibly displaced people. The vast majority of forcibly displaced people suffer from PTSD and other mental disorders due to stressful transitions. The systematic and long-term care for their mental health in the host countries is hindered by a shortage of skilled healthcare workers. This shortage could be compensated by involving forcibly displaced people with mental disorders in the public services for psychological support and by assisting civil society initiatives providing psychological consultancy services to displaced people locally.

4.17. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and in particular Article 11, should be the determining document in addressing provisions for forcibly displaced peoples with disabilities.

4.18. The impact of forced displacement on women and girls is particularly pronounced. Although more information is needed, key issues are an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence and indeed trafficking. Furthermore, gender sensitivity in service provision, for example with regard to issues like privacy, should be respected. Higher risks of complications in pregnancy have also been observed.

4.19. Provision of education is obviously a key response. Any move towards a longer-term, more effective approach should be evident in the type, level and volume of support in education. A lifelong learning approach may assist in this regard to recognise the diversity of needs. Given the importance and volume of children and young people amongst the forcibly displaced, consideration should be given to an extension of EU programmes to include forcibly displaced young people, for example Erasmus+ or other relevant programmes.

4.20. Forced displacement is increasingly an urban issue rather than being restricted to camps. There is a need to change the perception of the public and donors in this regard. Clearly, the policy mix involved in moving to a development-led approach needs to reflect this in terms of planning and issues such as housing, transport, health and education.

Brussels, 14 December 2016.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Georges DASSIS

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