

Investing in communities that display solidarity

Speech at final gathering of the NGIZ 70th Anniversary

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

When NGIZ chairman Jan Rood invited me to speak here, I was delighted and honoured. Since I learned about your work while I was a student, I have come to appreciate it greatly. And NGIZ professors Koen Koch, Bart Tromp and Ko Colijn were very important mentors for me.

I am also delighted to have the opportunity to speak about an issue that is close to my heart and on which I have recently been working intensively: that is the refugee crisis, from a European perspective.

This is not a crisis, it is a structural problem

What I would like to talk about in my speech is a number of normative starting points for looking at this problem. To try and find some common ground in a question that is apparently causing such great divisions in both Europe and the Netherlands. For I believe that such common ground exists.

I would like to start from what I feel is an important statement of fact: this is *not* a crisis, but a structural problem. We will have to formulate our normative starting points from the given fact that Europe is surrounded by a world of disorder and that we can expect that to remain the case in the decades to come.

The most far-reaching consequences at this moment are from the war raging in Syria since 2011, which has displaced 11 million people, almost 5 million of whom have fled the country. But the war in Syria is not an isolated event. There have been tectonic shifts throughout the whole Arab region since the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Since the emergence of IS, more and more Iraqis have also been displaced, with numbers rising to some four million people.

Five years after the start of the uprisings in the Arab region, most people are still suffering under an authoritarian regime, corruption and unemployment. Tunisia is currently the only country where the political transition from a repressive past is moving forward in an atmosphere of relatively peace and consensus. Although democracy is fast loosing support there.

Many people further to the south and west in Africa also wish to leave their countries. They are driven by the persistence of widespread poverty, a very alarming population explosion in underdeveloped countries like Nigeria, human rights violations, climate change, and a general lack of prospects.

And by a new mindset described very aptly by Dutch journalist Hubert Smeets as ‘if you can’t change your country, change countries’.

Normative starting points

In the light of the exodus that has gathered momentum and the heated political discussion it has generated in Europe, I would like to propose three normative starting points in the search for common ground.

1. Protecting refugees

First of all, it is important to distinguish between migrants and refugees, no matter how difficult that actually is. A mass migration of the people of Africa to Europe cannot be the answer to the problems of underdevelopment and failed states. Our long tradition of international solidarity entails working closely with people to help them change their countries, rather than to exchange their countries for elsewhere.

But people who fear persecution in their home countries because of their race, religion, nationality, political convictions or sexual preference, or who run a real risk of ‘serious harm’, need to be protected.

In the conversations that I have had with people in the Netherlands, in other European countries, and in countries in the region that are taking in refugees, I have been struck by the fact that the great majority are in favour of providing refugees with protection. That is clear from the enormous numbers of refugees that have been taking in, in countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

And it struck me in Greece which, after the EU-Turkey deal and the closure of the Macedonian border, suddenly changed from a transit country to a country of destination. And it also strikes me in my own city of The Hague, where more people have registered to help supporting refugees, than refugees have been settled in the city this year.

Protecting refugees means giving them the possibility of applying for – and being granted – asylum, and preventing them from being sent back to a situation in which they are in danger. But protection also means offering them the prospect of building a new future by giving them access to work and education.

Under the Refugee Convention, protection can be provided here, in Europe, but also in the region.

If we take this as the first normative starting point, it means that European policy cannot be one-sidedly focused on closing Europe's doors. It means that we share the responsibility of the international community and must offer some of the refugees protection in Europe.

Unfortunately, the EU-Turkey deal seems to lay the emphasis largely on closing the doors.

There are very few signs of a large-scale resettlement programme for refugees. The safe airlift (proposed as an alternative to the dangerous sea crossing) with orderly departure, arrival and reception, has not materialised. Since the deal came into force in March of this year, only 711 people have been resettled in the EU from Turkey.

We should realise that in this way we are not only denying people protection, but are setting a bad international example with far-reaching consequences. And that we are also losing our right to call on other countries to fulfil their responsibilities and take in refugees. We see Turkey keeping its border with Syria closed now, and the same applies to Lebanon and Jordan. And Kenya has announced its intention to close the Dadaab camp, which houses more than 300 thousand refugees.

On 19 September, the United Nations is meeting to discuss the refugee crisis. The European Commission wishes to see a worldwide resettlement programme supported by the United Nations. It is important to take credible steps in that direction in the run-up to this UN migration summit.

2. Migration policy in function of asylum policy

A second starting point is that the great responsibilities that flow from a correct asylum policy imply that, in the coming period, migration policy should be conceived in function of asylum policy.

If we want to do justice to the responsibilities embodied in the Refugee Convention, they will most probably apply to considerably large numbers of refugees in the coming years.

If we wish to respect the important international normative framework of asylum law as much as possible, maximise the possibilities for refugees to fully integrate in Europe, and preserve support for this policy, migration policy will have to be conceived in function of asylum policy. With the exception of limited migration for study, circular migration and seasonal work.

Depending on the obligations that flow from asylum policy, quota immigrants can be admitted or limitations imposed in immigration.

The scope for migration will also vary per country, depending on factors like demographic development and unemployment. The population of the Netherlands, for example, is expected to grow until 2060, while that of Germany will fall by a tenth. There are also substantial differences between countries in the level of unemployment.

3. Investing in communities that display solidarity

A third normative starting point is focusing on *communities* that make freedom, livelihood security and well-being possible. That is, communities that show international solidarity with others, according to their means.

a. Our own community

That applies to our community: refugees and migrants come here in search of security, livelihood security, well-being, freedom and the possibility to participate in decision-making. Or they come because of our model of society: a constitutional state, a democratic state, a wealthy state, a welfare state, a secular state. Clearly, we wish to preserve this attractive model.

It is important for people here to regain a feeling of control over the integrity of their communities. Not by closing Europe's external borders, but by regulating them. Our community must be like a house of which we can open the doors to welcome people we feel are entitled to join us. In this light, the plans adopted for a European coastguard are of crucial importance.

Even small European countries can easily accommodate several ten thousands refugees a year and, with some effort, integrate them. A consistent policy aimed at regulating borders, safe routes for refugees, and combating illegal immigration can convince people that refugee flows are not overwhelming us, that we are not powerless to respond to them, but that we can invite these people and make them feel welcome in a way that is compatible with our values.

That implies effective border controls and a clear and legally correct distinction between refugees and other migrants – no matter how difficult that can be in practice; see the discussion on refugees fleeing climate change. It means sending back those who do not qualify for asylum, and taking steps to stop the increase in illegal immigrants and the further expansion of an underclass.

And it means investing in the integration of refugees as well as investing in the communities they become part of. In the final decades of the previous century, the international solidarity of

the Netherlands' community – in the form of development cooperation and the reception of refugees – peaked because many people felt that we in the Netherlands ourselves made up a community based on solidarity. With a strong welfare state, livelihood security and good quality of life for almost everyone. With that communal strength as a base, it was easier to show solidarity with others.

If we are to count on solidarity, it is important that the arrival of refugees is not seen as a zero-sum game in terms of public services and jobs. On the contrary, their arrival must be seen as an opportunity to identify vulnerable areas in our public sector; and to invest in them for the benefit of both refugees and host communities. Amsterdam, for example, where housing for refugees clashes with a shortage of social housing, is now creating housing for students and refugees at the same time.

b. Communities in the region

Intensive involvement with communities also applies to the countries in the region that take in large numbers of refugees. Many refugees wish, certainly at first, to stay in the region. Because they then stay close to the families they have left behind, their country and their homes, feel a cultural affinity with their hosts and often speak the same language.

Our policy should make it clearer that refugee flows are not focused primarily on Europe, that the countries in the region are making an enormous effort, and that they need substantial support to do that, based on international solidarity and enlightened self-interest.

If, in pursuing its aim of protecting refugees, the international community exerts great pressure on countries in the region to open up their labour markets to refugees, we should realise that by doing so, we are also placing a heavy burden on their communities – which are already struggling with high unemployment – if we do not help them to create new jobs.

We can do this by, for example, opening up European markets further to their exports, or by investing in development cooperation aimed at raising their productivity.

Involvement in communities in the region also means that we should realise that conflicts in the region are increasingly sectarian. This means that countries like Jordan and Lebanon – which already have large refugee populations from earlier conflicts and are now taking in even more – will be seriously affected.

These countries require support to prevent the emergence of an underclass that is receptive to radicalisation. And they need help in preserving their people's support for taking in refugees.

That calls for heavy investment in economic development zones and commercial activity, in education and society-building and in good governance.

c. Communities of origin

Human compassion and, certainly active involvement in communities imply a policy focusing on the causes of flight and migration. Migration and asylum policy bring us unavoidably to the core questions and challenges of internationalism: fair international trade, better regulated international financial markets, combating tax evasion, reducing inequality, giving people the chance to change their countries, and helping them efficiently and effectively.

A sound asylum policy – and a migration policy based upon it – is part of the answer. But it is clear that, in the coming years, European policy, foreign policy, foreign trade, diplomacy, development cooperation and defence will all have to be tailored much more and much more effectively to the question: how can we help people to build up a society that gives them security, livelihood security, well-being, freedom and participation in decision-making?

We are now very much aware how difficult it is to change repressive regimes, stop wars with sectarian, criminal, regional and geopolitical dimensions, and make the current international political and economic basic structure more fair and just.

But small steps in that direction can make a great difference. A ceasefire in the whole of Syrian territory not under IS control is such a step. Russia, the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all have a crucial role to play in achieving this.

That would stop the all-destructive bombing of civilian targets, allow humanitarian aid to besieged towns and cities to resume, and keep alive some hope of a political process and talks on ending the conflict.

Conclusion

Fulfilling our responsibilities to protect refugees, a migration policy conceived in function of asylum policy, and a focus on communities – host communities here and in the region, and communities in the region of origin.

These are the normative starting points for which I think and hope that broad support can be gained.

Thank you.