

## **Oral Report 2017 - Annual Meeting of the Council, the Danish Refugee Council, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

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### Introduction

2016/2017 - Once again, I have the privilege of reporting on the year that has passed. We generally look at the 2016 calendar year – this is the case for the written report that has been distributed and this is also the case when looking at the figures, to which we will return later. But I think that in the oral presentation, it is natural to mix things up a bit and also look at some of the events that have happened in 2017.

As usual, we can look back at a mixed picture. In overall terms, the global refugee situation is deeply troubling. There are now some 65 million refugees, with nothing to indicate that this figure will be reduced in the years to come. The conflicts continue unabated, year after year. At the same time, the ability of international bodies and other political forums to handle refugees is not improving – quite the contrary, unfortunately. The tone of the political debate is growing ever sharper – pushing the boundaries of what can be said. In this connection, it hardly gives cause for celebration that Denmark has a new political party – The New Right - who have criticised the Danish People's Party's attitude to foreigners as being too lenient.

In my presentation of this report, I generally act on behalf of the Executive Committee which has a total of seven members. We are tasked with managing this large organisation; a task we perform with great pleasure. As in the preceding years, it is natural to give a brief presentation of the members of the executive committee.

I will not attempt to give a complete overview of the great diversity of the Danish Refugee Council, but I do hope to give a small glimpse of our large, common and well-functioning organisation by touching on some specific subjects. I will also offer my views on some of the challenges and risks that lie ahead.

### Conflicts set the agenda

The war in Syria has been raging for going on six years now, and the usual multicoloured map – presented by the media in their attempts to show who is dominating and controlling the various regions and areas – is now almost locked in place. Unfortunately, the motley map is a dismal memorial to the sufferings of the Syrian population, more than 5 million of whom have now sought refuge outside the country's borders – and even more have been internally displaced. We provide massive aid in Syria and the surrounding areas – Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

In Iraq, a neighbouring country, the Refugee Council is also involved in a large-scale operation to support the many civilians fleeing the fighting against ISIS in Mosul and other locations.

Not far from Syria and Iraq, we have Yemen which in many ways has been forgotten and swept aside, even though the situation in this country is catastrophic. Due to the country's internal conflict that unfortunately coincides with a drought, seven million of the nation's inhabitants are in a situation where they don't know

how to get their next meal. Two million children are acutely malnourished, and one child dies every ten minutes from preventable causes.

The conditions in the surrounding African countries of Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya are almost as bad, and we have launched a campaign to raise funds for this very purpose.

### Refugees and the debate

As usual, refugees top the agenda – both in Denmark and abroad – and it is difficult to stick to one's principles and moral standards, particularly when things go really wrong.

Last summer, Germany suffered two terrorist attacks – one on a train in Würzburg and another outside a music festival. Both were committed by asylum seekers. On this occasion, Angela Merkel said the following about the perpetrators: "They mock the country that took them in. They mock the volunteers and the employees who work with and for refugees. And they mock the many other refugees who have sought help and protection from war and violence with us." She went on to say: "For this reason, the state must live up to its task of restoring the greatest possible trust. And that's what we are working to do. Because we cannot let fear guide our political decisions."

These statements illustrate the difficulty of navigating when our society is truly being challenged but also in this situation, Ms Merkel did not lose control, but asserted that fear should not guide the political decisions that have to be made. Regrettably, not everyone managed to stay calmly on top of things.

Fortunately, many people in Denmark, regardless of political affiliation, stick to their principles. Søren Pind said the following about extremism, for instance: "I'm happy that a clear majority in Denmark does not believe that we are at war with Islam. There are no winners of such a war. Morally. Actually. But it will set the scene for a conflict that will last for centuries. However, we can win the war against extremism. By means of Western solidarity and alliances – we must safeguard our international collaboration to a higher degree than previously."

With a measure of good will, we can also see the outcome of the French presidential election – and perhaps the general elections in Austria and the Netherlands – as an indicator of conviction among the European people that it is true when Ms Merkel says that we cannot let fear guide our political decision-making and when Mr Pind says that we should safeguard our international collaboration.

### The Danish Refugee Council as an advocate

Over the past year, the Danish Refugee Council has been a distinct and strong voice in the debate in which Angela Merkel and Søren Pind have also voiced their opinions. We have been present in the debate in many contexts and pushed to secure a continued, sufficient focus on local aid and promote better terms for refugees and other foreigners residing in Denmark. In almost all areas related to refugees and foreigners, we need to try to enhance our knowledge with facts and expertise, regardless of whether this concerns conditions for repatriated Somalis or the challenges of having to live and work in Denmark with posttraumatic stress disorders.

Our possibilities of having an effect and exerting influence are far from given and we must fight for space and room for manoeuvre on a daily basis. Unfortunately, we lost our right to recommend members to the

Danish Refugee Appeals Board on 1 January 2017. This is a pity, because it was a strength for the Board that it had a broader base with high technical expertise. However, we are attempting to expand our margin of manoeuvre in other places, and the Danish Refugee Council has played a significant role at the annual People's Meeting on Bornholm in recent years.

The role as an advocate will be clearer and even more necessary in the years to come. There is a need for a strong, credible voice that champions refugee rights. Unfortunately, the election of Donald Trump to the world's most powerful office emphatically embodies the trends confronting the world's refugees and impoverished.

### People have always been on the move

Jeanette Varberg, curator at Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, has written a short book entitled "People have always migrated." She draws the lines all the way back to the exodus of human beings from Africa 1.7 million years ago. As she dryly notes, humans are the most invasive species on the globe beyond comparison, closely followed by rats, rabbits, ants and perhaps Iberian slugs.

She goes on to write that we are the same people as we were hundreds of thousands of years ago, biologically. Our reactions are surprisingly similar when we are confronted with inhuman conditions such as hunger, climate change and war. We take flight and start to migrate to a place where there is still hope for a future for our children. Human beings have always migrated to survive. The climate determines whether herds of animals migrate and whether the rain never comes and crops wilt in the fields. Humans follow along. The changing climate has always been a matter of life and death to people living in marginal areas.

Today, climate change is also having a massive impact on us. Those living on the margin are under pressure by hunger, wars and conflicts, precisely as we are now witnessing in Somalia and Yemen where it has failed to rain and where there is also conflict.

The curator goes on to write that an inevitable consequence of migration is that societies, cultures and demographics will change. It is simply part of the dynamics of history that no society remains unchanged and static and if it does, it is at great risk of becoming extinct, isolated from other people.

This is the reality that Donald Trump and Europe's leaders must consider. The narrow-minded, short-term answers are to build a wall or stop receiving quota refugees. I think that the Refugee Council is doing a good job of emphasising that major common challenges are best resolved through agreements in large communities and that notably massive aid in local areas is one of many necessary initiatives.

### 60th anniversary and Liberia

In 2016, the Danish Refugee Council turned 60. It has been 60 years since Denmark received about 1,400 of the 200,000 Hungarians who had fled to Austria. The Danish Refugee Council was supposed to be a temporary measure but one refugee crisis followed on the footsteps of another. Since then, the Refugee Council has worked with integration, language classes, volunteers and international aid. We have been able to make a difference – and therefore we have continued.

Bent Melchior, our only honorary member, was interviewed by Kristeligt Dagblad, the daily newspaper, in March and the article was headlined: "The meaning of life is to repair the world." In the article, Bent

elaborates on this view by saying that it remains within the reach of everyone to make the world a little bit better, and thus repair it. This is also the intention of the Refugee Council's activities. And the world does not appear to be readily fixable so we have quite a bit of repairs to make going forward, which means that we will continue to exist for some time yet.

The West-African nation of Liberia is one of the places that has required extensive repairs. A brutal, long-drawn-out civil war left the country in ruins and most of the population was surviving at subsistence level. The Danish Refugee Council has been working in Liberia and other neighbouring West African countries for going on 20 years, but this is now over. There are no more vast swathes of women and children with bundles on their back, perhaps pulling a wagon, who are forced away from their villages and have had to seek protection in the neighbouring country. The number of internally displaced persons has also declined. So it makes good sense for us as a refugee organisation to pack our bags and concentrate our efforts in other countries that need our refugee know-how.

In 2010, I co-sponsored an initiative for the Danish Refugee Council to team up with Viborg Municipality to launch a major project aimed at aiding approximately 10,000 people in four villages in north-east Liberia. At the time, more than DKK 1 million was raised. The money secured the establishment of 20 wells and three schools, because the major challenges were diseases caused by residents having to drink water directly from the river, and going to school was not an option.

It was a tremendous satisfaction to return in 2017, seven years later, to see that the wells and schools were still in use and the level of health and education had improved. At the same time, life in the villages had taken a turn for the better so that women and young girls now were more aware of equality and rights. And these developments took place despite Liberia being the country that suffered the worst from the Ebola virus in 2014 and 2015.

The concise, succinct narrative about a fine piece of successful repair work is important. Because it symbolises the successes of many other projects, large and small, in which the Danish Refugee Council is involved. When we despair about the millions who are on the run or the seemingly never-ending conflicts, it is important for us to remember that we make a decisive difference to many: every year we help an estimated 3 million refugees.

#### Risks for refugees, employees and the Danish Refugee Council

Fleeing means risking your life. It may mean that the refugees experience events during their flight that are so tragic and defining that life will never be the same, but it may also mean that they or their loved ones perish. The tragic bill of miserable fates is most obvious when calculating the number of people who drowned crossing the Mediterranean at the end of the year or a month. But the death toll is far greater for the less spectacular routes of flight in South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and other places, unfortunately.

Obviously, the staff of the Danish Refugee Council also literally live in the danger zone. Working with vulnerable and sometimes desperate people in a hazard zone is a risk in itself. It is a risk of which we are aware, and we do everything we can to protect our employees. But we are also aware that whatever we do, we are at an increased risk of attack, kidnapping and injury.

We also encounter other risks during our work that are less serious, fortunately. We provide aid to some three million refugees a year and therefore handle a great deal of money in often chaotic situations in fragile states. This gives rise to a risk of fraud and corruption. We attempt to prevent this as well, but it would be naive to imagine that it does not happen once in a while. We have not yet suffered a major scandal, but it is a risk that we must live with, while we do everything in our power to control and contain the risk.

More dangers lurk on the horizon. We have to work with many different currencies – and they do not all develop at the same rate, so this is also an area where we risk losing money very quickly.

A final dangerous area is our collaboration with local authorities. We work as guests in the individual countries and must observe laws and custom in the relevant country, of course. Still, it may pose a particular challenge to follow local instructions in relation to work permits, tax payments and residence permits – the instructions are not always crystal clear in advance. This inevitably brings the Danish Aliens Act to mind, as this is not exactly the most transparent regulation. At any rate, it is an area that makes our work increasingly difficult.

### Organisational challenges

As you can see from the revenue figures for the Refugee Council, we have undergone an explosive development with a drastic increase in both national and international aid. This has only been possible because we have highly skilled and committed employees with the willpower and abilities to expand and develop this aid. This means that we can help more people in a better way. I am deeply grateful for this effort on behalf of the refugees.

Of course, growing at this rate poses challenges as well. All our support functions – finances, IT, HR – are under pressure to keep up. Therefore, we will allocate additional resources to this area this year and going forward.

We are also under pressure on other fronts. Our structure and statutes need to be scrutinised. To put it briefly, Kenya is nudging us because the Kenyan authorities require us to be locally organised. This may herald a development that we are likely to see in other countries in which we operate.

At the same time, Danish authorities require us to be organised in a certain manner to accommodate various requirements for a number of reasons. We will return to one of these requirements when we decide on the proposed changes to the statutes.

A particular challenge in the coming period is that Secretary General Andreas Kamm will be leaving us in the autumn. Andreas is a uniquely distinctive and credible representative of refugees and for the Danish Refugee Council and it will be an enormous challenge for the Executive Committee to find a replacement who can follow in his very big footsteps. And when I say big footsteps, I'm not referring to Andreas' shoe size. Fortunately, the Refugee Council is first and foremost characterised by having a fantastic team of skilled employees, so I'm sure we will succeed in this as well. At a later occasion, we will have an opportunity to say farewell and thanks to Andreas. Not surprisingly, Andreas prefers to stay focused and continue to make a giant effort every day to keep the organisation together and keep the politicians' plates full.

## Conclusion

I have refrained from presenting all the activities of the Danish Refugee Council and refer instead to the written report and our website. There you will see that the Refugee Council is a diverse organisation and that there is often a strong cohesion between our work in Denmark and internationally. Our particular strength is the know-how and expertise and the relations we have forged across the organisation. Notably our large, well-functioning international work makes us strong and credible advocates in the asylum area. The international work rests robustly on the shoulders of our national activities – not least financially, the great professional work in the language schools and with integration has created the foundation for our expansion. Finally, the effort of our many thousands of volunteers also lay the groundwork for an outstanding integration effort. And this all creates strong cohesion across the board.

On behalf of those in need of our help, I would like to express my gratitude for a fantastically dedicated effort from our employees and volunteers. I am proud to be the chairman of precisely the Danish Refugee Council.

I invite comments and questions – directed either to me or the Executive Committee or the Secretary General or other staff members. Questions and comments are welcome here at the meeting, but also on other occasions later on.