

Refugee Scientists: Transnational Resources

Recommendations from a workshop

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REFUGEE SCIENTISTS: TRANSNATIONAL RESOURCES

People around the world are leaving their homes in record numbers¹. Wars, civil conflict and political instability are to blame for many of these movements. Figures released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reveal that, at the end of 2015, more than 65 million people globally had been displaced, with 21.3 million of them registered refugees and 3.2 million asylum seekers. Of the total, 40.8 million people have been displaced within their own countries.

In other cases, slowly unfolding environmental disasters such as prolonged droughts, land degradation and food scarcity, caused or exacerbated by climate change, are also causing people to move in search of better lives.

The humanitarian aspect is an element common to both cases. This document, however, will focus on those at immediate risk from war, civil strife or political unrest, whether still in their home country, already abroad, or with official refugee status [hereafter referred to as “affected scientists”].

The situation is currently particularly acute in the wider Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region, with refugees exiting such countries as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen, among others.

This ongoing historic event has created considerable political and social unrest in many countries along the main migration routes and especially in the preferred destination countries such as Germany, Sweden and the UK. In many places, there is a groundswell of public opinion – or at least a vociferous sector of society – that speaks out against accepting migrants and refugees into their communities.

But wars and civil strife do not only affect poorly educated, low-skilled people. Indeed, among those currently seeking refuge far from their home countries are many highly qualified individuals. Even taking into account the typical low level of investment in science and technology in countries affected by conflict, there are many qualified scientists, medical personnel, engineers and other technically trained people among the displaced people. [To give just one rough estimate, Iraq has 426 researchers per million population². Given that there are some 4 million Iraqi refugees around the world, this projects to more than 1,600 displaced scientists].

This statement and the related recommendations are the product of a workshop, “Refugee Scientists: Transnational Resources”, held from 13-17 March 2017 in Trieste, Italy.

The workshop was attended by more than 50 participants from 19 nations, including representatives of national and international organizations, scholars, government bodies, funding agencies, agencies working with and for refugees and refugees themselves. The workshop was hosted by The World Academy of Sciences [TWAS], the Istituto Nazionale di Oceanografia e di Geofisica Sperimentale [OGS], and the Euro-Mediterranean University [EMUNI]. Support was provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [Sida].

To learn more about the workshop, visit <https://twas.org/node/12145/>

¹ See, for example, ‘The year Europe buckled under the biggest refugee crisis since World War 2’: news.vice.com/article/the-year-europe-buckled-under-the-biggest-refugee-crisis-since-world-war-ii, and ‘Migration’ Are more people on the move than ever before?: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-32912867>.

² UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030 [2015]. http://en.unesco.org/unesco_science_report

Indeed, there exists a diaspora of scientists, medical personnel and engineers – plus others training in such fields – often with few opportunities to earn a decent living.

Appropriate occupation is crucial for the effective inclusion of highly qualified affected scientists as it allows for economic and social participation as well as personal fulfilment. Many affected scientists experience high levels of unemployment and their skills are significantly underutilized. They are often under-employed in low-skilled and temporary or low-paying jobs. Thus, their chances of returning to professional careers often diminish the longer they are jobless in the new country of residence as they become de-skilled and lose self-esteem.

Such affected scientists with scientific, medical or other professional training can be a valuable resource if identified and provided with support for integration into the research/academic environment in their new countries. They are able to contribute to society, including research output, in the country where they reside. They typically also retain links with their home countries, becoming connected with like-minded individuals in a diaspora.

They are often also keen to return home once conditions improve. In this case, having been integrated into the scientific community of the host country means that they will have maintained and enhanced their scientific learning and skills. In addition, it is likely that they will have built a network of contacts that can lead to international research collaborations once they return that can be used to help build strong partnerships between host and home countries – for the benefit of both – and especially those countries hosting expatriate think-tanks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many benefits to assisting qualified displaced scientists, engineers and medical personnel integrate into universities, research institutions, teaching hospitals and other placements – both in the short term in the host country, but also in the long term as they return to their home countries.

However, the current wave of refugees and migrants has meant that any initiatives that have tried to help refugee scientists and other scholars at risk have been swamped, and host country governments have been slow to respond to this need. In order to improve the situation, workshop participants propose a number of recommendations targeted towards different communities:

Target community: refugee scientists, scientists displaced by war, civil strife or political unrest, and scientists at risk from such events but still in their home country [“affected scientists”]

- Inform yourself about the challenges likely to be encountered in the receiving country.
- Inform yourself about the immigration policies, employment prospects and scientific and refugee support programmes [run by governments, NGOs and/or scientific institutions themselves] available in the receiving country;
- If possible, carry diplomas, degree certificates, and medical records [e.g. vaccination certificates] and other such documents with you, or upload digital copies to the cloud before leaving home;
- Make yourself – and your qualifications – known to the authorities in the receiving country;
- Investigate and take advantage of existing instruments such as fellowships, visiting scientist and other exchange programmes, as well as any support programmes dedicated to refugee scientists and at-risk scholars;
- Establish contacts with existing scientific and diaspora networks to share information.

Target community: the diaspora [including faith-based organizations]

- Establish relations with refugee processing centres, preferably coordinated at city or region level;
- Establish a network designed to assist other affected scientists, e.g. by creating online sources of information, social media sites for providing information and responding to queries;
- Establish mentoring mechanisms;
- Help others to establish networking mechanisms and access information.

Target community: the scientific community [including universities, research institutions, teaching hospitals, scientific societies, think-tanks and others]

- Establish relations with refugee-processing centres, preferably coordinated at city or region level;
- Provide voluntary, short-term job opportunities in various fields of specialization and encourage affected scientists to engage in these opportunities. This will help to identify qualified persons and discover the benefits that can be realised with available talents and skills;

- If full employment of affected scientists is impossible [e.g. while they are waiting for the administrative clearances], develop ways to support affected scientists that will allow them to advance their careers as well as to benefit the relevant organization;
- Accelerate the process of reviewing degree certificates, for example by establishing national standards for degree equivalence between universities in the origin countries and universities in destination countries;
- Provide opportunities to affected scientists to continue pursuing their education from where they had left off in their home country;
- Consider establishing a fund to allow affected scientists to integrate as soon as practical [e.g. a permanent 'emergency fund'];
- Establish fellowships for affected scientists;
- Encourage academies of science, medicine and engineering to reserve membership slots for affected scientists and engage such new members on academy committees and in other academy proceedings;
- Establish connections between universities and research centres in the displaced scientists' host country with similar institutions in their countries of origin;
- Engage in outreach to affected scientists and offer targeted grant and scholarship support to expedite the continuation of their research/teaching;
- Publicise openings and actively recruit from among members of the scientific diaspora;
- Develop a communications strategy utilising institutional websites and social networks, targeting the traditional media and leveraging social/digital media. Such a strategy should be aimed at disseminating successful case studies and highlighting positive human-interest stories. Track and analyse mainstream media coverage;
- Collaborate with other universities, research centres and similar institutions. Network and share information.

Target community: host governments

- Accelerate visa systems and approval of asylum applications. Facilitate the quick social and professional integration of scientists in the host country;
- Establish databases of refugees with suitable expertise. Keep track of their movements

between research centres, universities, and other institutions, subject to personal data / privacy laws;

- Make available and accessible reliable data on the numbers, educational level and fields of expertise of refugees – use openly accessible web platforms and commonly recognized keywords;
- Seek practical improvements in data-sharing laws with the national personal data protection agencies in line with national and international data-protection and privacy-protection standards;
- Identify specific successful initiatives and facilitate their replication;
- Offer employment and career counseling, including to those affected scientists not yet affiliated with an institution;
- Liaise with chambers of commerce and the business sector to encourage internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training;
- Instigate resettlement support and family support programmes;
- Establish a focal point or welcome office that can guide and advise newly arrived scientists;
- Prepare a comprehensive handbook of advice and orientation to assist new arrivals in all matters related to integration;
- Undertake scientific studies and gather statistics to better understand refugee and migration phenomena. Share research findings;
- Plan for employment and professional development opportunities, including tailor-made training and up-skilling;
- Develop an internet-based clearinghouse that collects available opportunities for affected scientists, and which allows affected scientists to post their biodata and immediate interests for host institutions.
- Establish micro-credit schemes for affected scientists wishing to establish small S&T-based businesses.

Target community: home countries [after crisis is over / return to normality]

- Recognising that the progress of the country requires strong intellectual input, make science as high a priority as possible;
- Prioritise areas of expertise required to rebuild research, teaching, healthcare infrastructure;

- Provide incentives (e.g. tax exemptions, competitive salaries, laboratory facilities and promising positions) to persuade qualified individuals to return;
- Develop reintegration programmes and mechanisms to expedite return that are also sensitive to the community of scientists who remained in the country;
- Work with key host-country agencies and databases to identify and contact affected scientists;
- Identify diaspora communities that can help contact scientists and people with other relevant expertise when their skills are needed back in their home countries;
- Identify funding sources – including international donors, development banks, foundations and other partners – to invest in scientific and research infrastructures.

Target community: research funding agencies

- Establish grant programmes (with rapid processing times) that would assist universities, research centres, teaching hospitals and other science-related institutions to employ qualified affected scientists with remuneration at a level sufficient for them to support their families;
- Provide ring-fenced funds for joint academic projects involving refugees and other displaced scientists;
- Reach out to the media, government officials, civil society groups and others to raise awareness of the need for action to help such scientists and highlight benefits and successful case studies;
- Establish awards for superior academic performance by refugees.

Target community: private sector

- Provide opportunities for internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training;
- Consider affected scientists as a strategic resource that can introduce valuable new perspectives and diversity to enrich companies;
- Promote the employability of the affected scientists.

Target community: the news media

- Consider running positive, human-interest stories and case studies of personal and professional success by affected scientists. Investigate also the root causes, missed opportunities and costs of displacement of affected scientists;
- Run more stories on the nature of work performed by affected scientists. Popularize science;
- Encourage and stimulate objective, balanced and fair coverage of relevant issues. Discourage sensational, biased and inaccurate coverage;
- Highlight the issue of affected scientists within the context of broader refugee coverage.

Target community: international organizations

- Organize an international conference on affected scientists to help formulate an effective and coordinated response;
- Consider the establishment of an Intergovernmental Panel on Refugee Academics.

Target community: international organizations and NGOs

- Establish a global society or association of affected scientists;
- Encourage national host governments to make special concessions for affected scientists;
- Encourage home-country governments (once conflict has ended) to invest in science, technology and innovation as drivers of national development;
- Engage the news media and highlight success stories;
- Establish an information clearinghouse system, for example by linking to or cross-linking existing databases and/or filling the gaps in such information resources.

CONCLUSION

Workshop participants shared a fundamental recognition: All affected scientists – women and men, senior and junior – deserve safe places to live and relevant employment while they are away from their home countries. As the recommendations here make clear, meeting these needs will require a holistic, cross-sectoral response.

Further, we recognize that the implementation of measures to support affected scientists and to provide academic opportunities to affected students will likely create stresses on institutions in the hosting countries at all levels, from education and research institutions to government. This risks creating a situation of permanent emergency that will not be efficient in meeting the challenge and that will be more likely to produce frustrating outcomes.

For this reason, responses require institutional adaptation at all levels, by creating new jobs and *ad hoc* professional positions, with the required background and competencies. These adjustments must be made across a network of institutions that work with refugees and other affected scientists: governments, universities, international institutions, non-governmental organisations, and the wider community of social services. Only in this way will it be possible to address the situation of affected scientists in a sustainable, rather than a reactive, manner.

THE RESEARCH AGENDA

It is an overarching priority to develop a broad, integrated research agenda focused on the phenomenon of scientists, engineers, medical workers and others working in science-related fields, and on advanced students in those fields, who are at immediate risk from war, civil strife or political unrest [hereafter referred to as “affected scientists”]. They may be still in their home countries, already abroad, or with official refugee status.

The agenda should be based on a new paradigm: The movement of scientists, driven by conflict and war, cannot be treated as a temporary or emergency phenomenon. Rather, it is a permanent feature of globalisation and geopolitical instability.

This field should be encouraged as a new interdisciplinary sub-specialty within the field of migration studies, with appropriate support from governments, funding agencies and research institutions.

The research agenda must focus on conditions of science in the countries of origin and on the need to integrate affected scientists effectively and efficiently into the scientific communities in their new nations. It should recognize the value of supporting efforts to continue their training and to build their careers, so that they can make contributions to their new countries and someday help to rebuild their home countries.

Toward that end, near-term research is needed to understand the current context and dynamics. This research can support the immediate need to identify affected scientists to inform policies and programmes to assure their integration into their new countries. Longer-term research must monitor and evaluate the social and professional evolution of the affected scientists and the scientific, social and economic impact of their work.

It is essential that this research be conducted in the scientists’ home regions and in their new countries and be conducted by researchers in both the North and the South. Collaborative South-North research should be strongly encouraged to obtain important insights and to build capacity both in the South and the North.

These efforts generally could focus in several areas:

- **Demographic research** to quantify and assess characteristics of affected scientists individually and as a group;
- **Social research** to assess their social and professional integration;
- **Policy research** to support action by institutions of government, science and education related to all aspects of this phenomenon;
- **Science diplomacy research** to support cooperative relations between all countries affected by the migration of these scientists, and especially to strengthen South-South and South-North cooperation on related issues.

This research takes on great urgency during a time in which rising political and social turbulence is compromising science, innovation, development and the free circulation of scientists and scientific knowledge.