UNCC300 CASE STUDY 2:  
HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION CRISIS

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CASE STUDY: HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

It would have been impossible in the last several months to turn on a television or read a newspaper without seeing images of the flood of refugees and migrants pouring into Europe (be sure to look at the graphs and maps that come up here as well). One wave is coming from Syria and other troubled areas in the Middle East through Turkey and into Eastern Europe and the Balkan states. Another wave is undertaking the perilous journey across the Mediterranean from North Africa arriving in Spain, Italy or Greece. It is estimated that around 800,000 people have crossed into EU territory in 2015.

Under the Schengen Convention, the internal borders of some EU countries are not subject to internal border controls. This means that, once inside the Schengen area, people are free to travel to other member states without travel permits or visas. While the list of Schengen countries does not comprise all EU countries, this map of the European Union may assist in orienting yourself to the area in question.

The response by the various EU member states has been varied. Hungary has erected a barbed wire fence to prevent refugees from entering its territory and this has pushed the migrants towards new routes to enter the EU. These neighbouring states are now buckling under the pressure and resorting to unilateral action of their own. For example, Slovenia is trying to regulate the flow of refugees by erecting a barbed wire fence of its own (audio and transcript). The flow of refugees from Turkey to Greece has diminished after Turkey agreed to take back all migrants who arrive in Greece in exchange for billions of Euros in EU aid. As a result more are seeking entry to Italy (transcript), with the high risk Libya-Italy route seeing an increase in migration with a resulting increase in deaths on the Mediterranean Sea (transcript) as the crossing from North Africa is more perilous than from Turkey to Greece, and Austria setting up blocks to migrants from Italy. Other nations, like Britain, have shown much more reluctance to accept large numbers of refugees.

Trying to get the EU nations to agree on a shared strategy is proving more difficult than one may expect, given that the crisis affects the entire region. In fact, major rifts have appeared as EU members squabble about the most appropriate action to take and pressure is placed on certain members to accept policy direction they may not agree with. The crisis facing Europe is weakening the very fabric of the EU.

Of significance in this investigation of attitudes and policies towards the migration and refugee crisis are questions of the understanding of human dignity at play in the various policy directions currently being debated. Many in Europe consider all refugees as a threat to the way of life and the culture of receiving nations. Such people may favour a policy of closed borders. Others argue that refugees should be treated with humanitarian concern and assistance. Such people may argue that an open policy of support and resettlement is the best way to deal with the crisis. Still others may be paralysed by fear of the unknown or by concern about the long-term economic sustainability of high levels of unchecked migration.

These questions and others are discussed in the perspectives and readings below. As you read the perspectives and articles below, consider which understandings of human dignity are operative in each argument, and what shortcomings such understandings may have in light of a multidimensional understanding of the human person.
THREE MAIN PERSPECTIVES

Many perspectives could be identified in this issue. Here we have articulated only three.

Perspective 1: Organisations working towards changes in policy and provisions for irregular migrants have the effect of mobilising activists within communities, leading to a deeper social recognition of the needs of irregular migrants. In turn, this has the effect of mobilising and empowering irregular migrants to claim their own rights and fight against discrimination.

Perspective 2: All peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life, a right which is afforded by the inherent dignity of all and which is upheld and supported in international conventions and treaties. Preventative strategies and policies of exclusion in some EU states undermine these rights, thus undermining the dignity of irregular migrants.

Perspective 3: Restrictive policy and negative public opinion in relation to irregular migrants negatively impacts the way in which irregular migrants view themselves. They seek ways in which to become more integrated and at home in their host society, assuring a sense of security and enhancing their self-conception.

As you read the articles in the links below, analyse the understanding of human dignity that underpins the arguments and consider how this understanding of human dignity is being brought to bear on the question of migrants and refugees and their treatment. Note that you may find two authors of different ethical positions explaining dignity in a similar way or in more than one way such that it could fit into the same quadrant as another author or into several quadrants. Look carefully for the nuances and underlying assumptions that further qualify the understandings of human dignity such that the authors nonetheless arrive at different ethical positions.

In some of the articles provided, the authors also refer to other authors who offer perspectives on dignity different from their own in relation to the question of parole. You may wish to use the references in the articles provided to trace these additional perspectives.
REQUIRED READINGS

The first reading discusses the ways in which the issue of immigration mobilizes moral positions, social values, and world views. There appears to be a growing antithesis between the hardening of government policy towards irregular migrants and the active support of migrants by various organisations in civil society. This is best demonstrated in terms of the provision of medical treatment (or lack thereof) for irregular migrants, and has further implications for the availability of housing and employment. High levels of social mobilization and political conflict in various countries has arisen, due to the opposition between policies of exclusion (aimed at closing the borders or providing only very limited social support) and advocates for a social commitment to immigrants. While the focus here is on Italy, parallels could be drawn with other nations in the EU.


The second reading addresses the issue of the recognition of the rights of irregular migrants, under various international conventions, and critiques the preventative policies of some EU nations along these lines. The author argues in favour of a number of rights-oriented measures which could complement preventative strategies, thus ensuring that the dignity of irregular migrants is upheld.


The third reading asserts that Western states are concerned about maintaining and securing national borders, implementing restrictive asylum regimes that prevent ‘bogus’ applicants and grant refuge only to the ‘deserving’. One consequence of this policy direction is the negative impact on the way in which irregular migrants see themselves, and their place in the host country. This leads to a reflexive response: the fear and uncertainty of being seen as ‘other’ leads many to take out citizenship in their host country, perhaps for the wrong reasons.

This article explores the idea that the vast increases in immigration have actually had the effect of undermining support for the European Union. Using Italy as a case in point, the article argues that support for the EU and an EU wide solution to immigration becomes more difficult for the general population of a particular nation to accept when large numbers of migrants are arriving and a national level decision making process seems to be out of their hands.


This article explores the ways in which the media can shape public opinion, which in turn influences government policy. The author examines how immigration is portrayed in the media in Italy, France and the UK, discussing whether issues of crime or security are the dominant focus or whether the focus is on a perceived threat to economic prosperity and cultural identity.


In this chapter from International Migration: Globalization’s Last Frontier, the author aims is to refute the various arguments put forward by those strongly opposed to free migration: the huge numbers which may be expected; migration’s effect on local culture; political conservatism and the desire for political autonomy; and security concerns in the face of terrorist threats and international criminal activity.


This article outlines the official position taken by the Church in relation to the rights of migrants. While what is presented here is a Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the US and Mexico, it has universal application.