

Aid and refugees in Europe: an interview with Wolfgang Jamann – full transcript

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Camilla: So my name's Camilla Burkot. I'm a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre and it's my pleasure to be sitting down today with the Secretary General and CEO of CARE International, Wolfgang Jamann. Welcome, thank you very much.

Wolfgang: Mm-hmm.

Camilla: I thought we'd just talk a bit today specifically about the situation in Europe at the moment, the refugee crisis and the impact that's having on aid. As I'm sure many listeners and readers will know, about a million migrants came into Europe last year. Just this morning I heard on the radio, IOM saying that there's been over 100,000—

Wolfgang: This year alone.

Camilla: —this year already.

Wolfgang: Right.

Camilla: And obviously, that's causing quite a bit of anxiety in the aid and development communities, both about what implications there might be for aid budgets, either to cover the costs, but also I heard—read about some calls from some officials saying we should be cutting—or European countries should be cutting aid to countries that sort of refuse to take back their nationals who haven't been granted asylum. So just first I'd be interested to know what you think the implications of this refugee crisis are going to be on European government aid in the short term.

Wolfgang: Okay. Thanks, yeah, I think the fact that a bit more than a year, about 1 million people found a place in Europe, found safety, is actually quite an incredible development. And I really hesitate to call this a refugee crisis, because at the moment, it's an incredible effort of a number of European countries, obviously not Germany all alone, but quite a few who are involved, to deal with the need of those people.

And what happened over the last few years is more encouraging than anything else I've seen in my professional life in many other circumstances. The volunteers that have mobilised support to those refugees, I mean not just by expressing this kind of welcome culture that people talked about, but also materially and physically, and literally helping people, that are trying to find homes for them and trying to help them with language and showing them around, and all of that. It's quite incredible.

And you know, even if we talk about the kind of struggles that some of the European countries seem to have now, obviously, to deal with that continuous flow, and some of the negative repercussions that we'll have to deal with, I think we must not underestimate that Europe, and a couple of other countries out there as well who are joining in, are showing fairly positive attitudes to one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world, which is Syria.

Now starting from there, of course one needs to watch now how both practically, in terms of capacity and in terms of some of the repercussions I talked about, Europe will have to deal with the continuous flow. You said 100,000 the first two months, and this is high despite the fact that the Mediterranean is rough, the waters are cold, not that many people come at the moment because it's fairly risky. It shows that the refugee flow will not cease rapidly.

These people need money. That is clear. They need material support. But the biggest discussion in Europe is not so much around "Do we have enough money to help those people?" In fact, my own government, I'm German, is working on next year's budget based on the fact that they can easily integrate the costs that are related to the over 1 million refugees in the current budget.

Now why is that possible? 1 million people are a lot of people. I think these are very rich countries that have shown that they can deal with crisis in an appropriate manner. Twenty-five years ago, Eastern Germany was integrated into the West Germany economy, these were 18 million people. In the mid-80s, you had several hundred thousands of people coming from—native German from Russia. And they were coming into a society that was not fully fit for purpose in bringing them basically in, because they were mostly rural labourers, very far from the societal norms, a little bit similar to what we're experiencing yet. And the country was able to integrate that without a big deal.

Now, it is possible, of course, but the countries will have to think about how to make that happen. Let me pause here. I'm not sure I'm answering your question and –

Camilla: No, no it's –

Wolfgang: I may be going a little bit into the bigger context. But I think it's necessary not just to focus on what does it do to our aid budgets, but also see that the societies are challenged to deal with a much bigger issue than finding the money for 1 million people.

Camilla: Mm-hmm. I think that is still an interesting question. It's encouraging actually, to hear this, a more positive and bigger picture take, because I think that gets quite lost in a lot of the coverage about this. But in terms of the question of the aid budgets, what's your

sense? Do you think that more countries will start pulling money from their aid budgets to help cover those costs?

Wolfgang: It's obvious we're seeing some of it. We're seeing some of that in the so-called 'better' or 'good' donors, particularly in the Nordic countries, which is particularly irritating. But I don't think that is like an economic necessity. I think that is partly feeding into political agendas that come from the governments in these countries that have already moved into a fairly conservative and fairly restrictive positions, and it might well be that the refugee flow into these countries is being utilised to feed political agendas that are supposed to move away from global responsibility, providing humanitarian response on a broad front, being responsible for global education of your own society.

I think all of that is being visible in some places. It's amazing to see countries like the UK, for instance, which is of course not taking in many refugees, but having a fairly significant aid budget, at least over the last couple of years, is one of those countries that have hit the 0.7 per cent mark, and also you can see that there's actually quite a diversity, and you can also see that the European Union, as such, at the moment is not really shaky with regards to redirecting some of the EU budget to domestic refugee issues.

But that also has to do with their mandate. You have the European Consensus [on Development], the European Consensus does not allow you to utilise some of the humanitarian money that is available inside the European Union. It has to stay outside the European Union.

Camilla: And so I guess kind of related to that, what's your view about these ambitions to try and address the problem at source, to send more money to Turkey, for instance, or to try and shore up—I guess essentially to try and keep people from coming over, to deal with the problem over there?

Wolfgang: So that is very visible at the moment. I mean obviously, the sheer number has overwhelmed, maybe, the psychological ability of those societies too, more than the material ability, to host the refugees. So what you see at the moment is a combination of both financial incentives, to Turkey in particular. Whether it's incentives, whether—you can use stronger words of course, I mean there's a lot of pressure coming out of Turkey, basically to make sure that money flows or else. But this is actually now combined with a number of mechanisms that are being put in place, both in the European and the periphery of Europe, the Balkan states and in Syria itself and the neighbouring countries of Syria, to make it more difficult for refugees to move.

I mean you've seen that Turkey itself has closed borders to Syria. People are stuck at the borders. Not for long, they need to be helped, they need to be let through. But the

'wave through' policy is obviously over. I mean all the countries that are involved, Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia, of course neighbouring countries of Syria, Libya, they're all kind of restricting the flow of people. And that has to be seen in that context. I think it's just more complicated now for people in need to move from A to B.

Camilla: Do you think that is part of the reason why we're seeing so many people coming through in the last couple months, is a sense that 'this may be the last chance'?

Wolfgang: Yeah, that's a good question. I guess the initial impulse was reacting to a combination of—I mean like a year ago—a combination of lack of perspective in the refugee camps, where people were hanging around for two or three years, and then of course, WFP all of a sudden not having enough money to feed them.

So then people start moving and then people realize it's not that difficult to move, or maybe the risk that you take can be calculated vis-a-vis the benefit that you may get. So then it turned out to be a fairly—I mean I don't want to under-rate, of course people die on those routes – but a fairly manageable route, and then of course more and more people come. And then your point comes in: how long will borders be open? And then people move.

And that's actually why, at the moment, many families are moving. Many women with kids come. I was in Croatia and Serbia a couple of weeks ago, and you see much more family members trying to find either their husbands or young men that went first, with the notion that "How long will that be possible for us? So we better move now." Actually, at the moment, it's a bit cheaper as well to pay for the passage over the Mediterraneans, because it isn't that many, it has been about 2,000 to 3,000 per day over the last two months, while it has been more than 5,000 per day last autumn and winter. So I think in terms of supply and demand, it's become cheaper. That's why women and children are now coming. They're taking that risk and they might realise it might not be possible after a while.

Camilla: You mentioned a couple of sort of historical shifts that—as examples of Europe being able to cope with this sort of vast, quite significant population shifts. I wonder if you see any other precedents or any situations that offer lessons for how this current situation might be dealt with. I know some people have called for a 'Mideast Marshall Plan'. I wonder if that's a useful way of thinking about—or a useful model?

Wolfgang: I think you've got to differentiate between three things at the moment in this crisis. One is, how do you stabilise the region that is currently completing disintegrating? How do you stabilise the conflict around Syria?

Secondly, how do you deal with the several millions of people that are—that have lost their homes, that have lost all their assets in this humanitarian crisis?

And the third one is, how do you deal with the societies back in Europe to find a way to deal with these developments in a constructive manner?

Now, the Marshall Plan is of course trying to provide some kind of solution to stabilisation of the region, which is absolutely necessary. And the Geneva peace talks that are happening right now, and the agreement between the US and the Russians that was signed yesterday, I don't know where that's going to lead to, but all of this I think might help stabilise the region, which is an absolute necessity.

Now secondly, there will, even if you have a stabilisation in the region, that will take a while actually. You will still have millions of people in dire need. So these people also need not just humanitarian help, but we need to find a way to give them back their perspectives in life.

The average refugee out there has a span of about 17 years, of people spending outside their country. That's not just Syria, that's world – that's an average figure worldwide. But the people who run away from Syria, they're not used to sitting in a tent. They've been architects, lawyers, whatever, and they need to have some kind of different perspectives, obviously, otherwise they will try what they're doing right now, moving to a more safe and more conducive environment. So definitely, the international community will have to think hard about giving those people a different kind of perspective than a heated tent for the winter.

The third piece is the Marshall Plan that we need actually for our own societies. Some of the societies in Europe are not—have not been very successful dealing with migration. Look at France, for instance. You have the banlieues, you have the people from Northern Africa that have formed a parallel society, which is not conducive at all.

Some other countries, like Germany, have been fairly untouched by migration. Of course you've got a lot of Turks coming in for labour migration, but it's not a society that has worked under—has experienced much of integration from very foreign environments.

These societies need to get used to the fact that, since 25 years this is a globalised world. Okay? This is a world where people migrate. This is a world where people know from each other. This is a world where you can't hide where things go wrong or go well.

And we just have to do away with the fact that some—with some notion that there could be kind of havens of peace, prosperity and stability and not being touched or affected by all the trouble that is out there, that we obviously, to a certain extent, also

cause with some of the failed policies that we're having ourselves. So I think the work in our societies needs to include getting used to globalisation, which includes migration.

Camilla: Mm. Mm yeah, I think that's really important point that there's shifts that have to be made on both sides, if you like.

Wolfgang: Absolutely. I mean the Marshall Plan back home, which is more a psychological society plan, not a material one, would be necessary.

Camilla: Yeah. One other thing I'd be interested in your perspective is about any impacts that you think this situation might be having on private giving to NGOs like CARE. Are you seeing sort of changes in how your supporters, or the kind of support that you get, is reflecting this?

Wolfgang: That's interesting. In Germany, we have basically asked a representative sample of our donors, "Should we work with refugees back home and not just in Syria or surrounding countries?" And about 70 percent of our donors have told us yes. So we wouldn't have touched it if our donors don't want us to do this.

It's more of an obligation, I guess, than a risk. So I think we're taking that up now and of course we're counting then on the donors to support us in that endeavour. I think it's too early to say whether that will affect the private donations that we need and receive for our work overseas, which is still our core business.

But I think what is appreciated, that the refugee scenarios, or migration, or however you want to call it, which includes a fairly long way from a place where people start from, where they don't live in a satisfying situation – and it doesn't have to be war, it can be poverty, it could be drought, whatever – through a fairly complicated and dangerous, and difficult route to a destination, right? We as aid agencies need to find ways to help and assist people in the whole spectrum, including improving, of course, the situation in the places where they live, but also being able to help them on the way, and then trying to play a role in the places where they go to.

In the past, we have only been focusing on the first bit, improving the living conditions of the places where people live, and this is maybe not good enough, and I think this is what donors, or private donors, expect us, to have a much more comprehensive approach to help the refugees.

Camilla: Yes. And lastly, so the World Humanitarian Summit is coming up in May this year. I'm interested to know what you would like to see, or how you would like to see this refugee—I'm trying not to call it refugee crisis now—refugee situation figure into those discussions?

Wolfgang: So I think there's some—I mean obviously there's been a Secretary General's report that was issued a couple of weeks ago, I think, which was quite encouraging with some of the messages that are in there, which are not just about improving the quality of aid but also calling the international community into the responsibility of dealing with some of the underlying issues.

I do think, though, that we have to be cautious that the Humanitarian Summit does not become a refugee summit. Humanitarian crises, as we see, happen at various levels. I mean we had a hurricane in Fiji, the biggest ever recorded in the area. We have a current global drought-stroke-flooding scenario due to the global El Niño, which is affecting 60 million people, okay?

We have about 60 million people on the move, migrants and refugees, and we have maybe 30, 35 fragile states, fragile societies which are either badly governed, which are resource poor, which are in all kind of different types of troubles. And the people are not being served in those countries by those who should help them, which is their own governments, or the structures that we would expect in a functioning nation-state.

So our humanitarian work actually needs to deal with a high complexity at the moment, and it's becoming more complex, actually, in the future. So I would hope that we're not just talking about refugees in the Humanitarian Summit, but take a broader picture and have a look at how humanitarian aid is asked to contribute in a bigger, more significant and maybe higher qualitative manner as well. And unfortunately some of those situations have come to stay, so just to get used to this as well.

Camilla: Yes. As you said, a reframing of perspectives.

Wolfgang: Reframing. And one of the big issues is, of course, how do we create the resilience of the people? I mean it is one of the six or seven, I think, key messages in the report of the Secretary General. I mean make sure that people themselves are able to resist the increasing number of shocks that will be out there, be they man-made or natural disasters. Definitely a very worthwhile opportunity that we have out there, as I said, hopefully not just overshadowed or focused through the refugee situation.

Camilla: Yes. Well, it will be interesting to see what comes out there.

Wolfgang: Right.

Camilla: I want to thank you again, Wolfgang, for taking the time.

Wolfgang: Sure.

Camilla: And wish you all the best for your stay in Australia.

Wolfgang: Thank you, likewise. Good luck with your good work.

Camilla: Thank you.