

»» Causes of flight and migration: a combination of structural factors and actual drivers

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In 2015, there were 250 million migrants worldwide (approx. 3.2% of the global population). At the same time according to UNHCR, 59.5 million people were fleeing from war, persecution and criminal violence, 38.2 million of them were internally displaced people and 21.3 million were international refugees at the end of 2014 (UNHCR 2015; UNDESA 2015).

Today, these very long-lasting refugee situations are not only a humanitarian crisis but also a social, economic and development policy challenge. Accordingly, root cause-oriented approaches are required in development cooperation. But what are the root causes and drivers for flight?

Differentiating between flight and migration

The difference between flight and migration lies in the extent of free will: while international migrants, in principle, make a free decision, refugees are forced to leave their homeland due to conditions that directly threaten their physical integrity. Most migrants, however, do not come from the main crisis regions but from middle income countries (157 million).

Structural causes for flight and migration

The most important structural factors which can give people reason to leave their countries and increase the pressure to migrate are:

- *Structural poverty and lack of economic prospects*
- *Dissatisfaction with their government and lack of political participation*
- *Long-term tensions between religious groups*

- *Long-term deterioration of their livelihoods (for example, lack of water, desertification)*

Handling these structural factors has always been part of international development cooperation. However, in the sense of triggering the need to flee, these factors generally only have an effect in interaction with severe developments which endanger the security and physical integrity of people.

Severe drivers of flight

The decision between fleeing or staying in the country with a danger to life is an individual and difficult trade-off and is rarely down to a single cause.

We can differentiate between the following typical severe drivers of flight:

- *War, armed conflicts and extremism*: these factors are decisive drivers for the current refugee crisis: the majority of refugees originate from countries where there is civil war such as Syria, the Ukraine, Afghanistan or Somalia, in which extremist groups are also currently active as warring factions.
- *State persecution, human rights violations and other (criminal) violence*: state repression on the other hand is the most important trigger in countries with repressive regimes such as Eritrea. Criminal violence plays a decisive role in Central America where, for example, post-war societies with subsequent high criminal violence emerge, like in Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador, which has led to significant refugee movements. In Columbia, the combination of civil war and criminal violence has created a dangerous mix resulting in over 6 million

internally displaced people.

- *Natural disasters and extreme food insecurity*: according to expert estimations, 19.3 million people left their homelands in 2014 as a result of natural disasters (these are not yet included in the UNHCR figures mentioned at the beginning). Countries affected by this were China, India and the Philippines.

The different reasons for flight cannot always be clearly differentiated from one another and often overlap.

Conclusion: no blueprint solutions

Flight and migration are generally due to structural causes. However, where flight is concerned, there are also severe drivers in play. The importance of individual and country factors in this causal complex varies considerably from context. Development cooperation, therefore, has to reflect the country-specific factors in every case.

Development cooperation must be preventative in order to handle the structural factors of flight and migration. However, if the situation has already escalated the only things that can still help are to address severe drivers of flight or to support host communities in order to limit a further refugee crisis and (violent) conflicts as well as to prevent forced displacement to third countries. ■