Refugees

Nowhere to go, or know where to go?

The current crisis in the EU raises important questions about refugees in the twenty-first century.

Europe is in the grip of a crisis. Large number of refugees are using a complex network of routes to travel to the EU, straining relations between EU member states and creating divisions over how to cope with the influx. There is little doubt that the vast majority of those arriving can be classified as refugees. Eurostat data on asylum seekers from 2014 shows that most come from regions of war and conflict (see graph).

Refugees or economic migrants?

What is your mental image of a refugee? Most of us tend to think of a starving, possession-less, terrified person heading for the first safe place they can find. Often this is somewhere close by: either a bordering country, or another region in their own country. This is exactly what many Syrians have done. Since conflict began in their country in 2011, 1.5 million have fled to neighbouring Turkey. Another 2 million more have escaped to Jordan and Lebanon.

In the past few months many refugees in the near east have decided to move again and head for Europe. The news media have reported that most wish to travel to Germany and certain other EU destinations, like Sweden. The idea that refugees want to make choices about their destinations has led some parts of the European media to suggest that the migrants on our television screens are not refugees, but are trying to improve their economic standards. Economic migrants

What is a refugee?

A refugee, defined by the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, is someone who ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.’ Refugees are migrants forced to move. They are sometimes called asylum seekers until the status of ‘refugee’ is granted to them.
move to find work and improve their standard of living. When so many people are on the move it is exceptionally difficult at crowded borders and reception centres to decide the status of each individual.

**Refugees with knowledge**

Should we be surprised that some refugees have a clear destination in mind? Probably not:

- The Syrian conflict is now 4 years old and has escalated to involve ISIL. Many refugees believe they will never return to Syria and must begin to think long term about their future.
- In an age of cheap mobile phones and the internet, refugees know the ‘best’ places to move to. Many have travelled to Germany, which has made clear it expects to take in hundreds of thousands of refugees. They have avoided France where they fear being made unwelcome (see map).
- As refugees reach the EU, they send word back to family and friends about routes, destinations, and the welcome (or otherwise) they are likely to receive.

One of the themes of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 was the use of social networking to organise civil uprising. We should not be surprised to see these same networks being used in the context of refugee movements. Just because a refugee is not stumbling blindly to the first place of safety, but has a destination in mind, does not make him or her an economic migrant.

**Activities**

1. View the famous Michael Buerk report on the 1984 Ethiopian famine, and the Reuters video about the current crisis (see links below). What similarities and differences can you see between the two groups of refugees?
2. Does Europe’s open-border policy make managing a large influx of refugees easier or harder?
3. Look at a range of online newspapers (Telegraph, Guardian, Mail, Mirror). Can you identify differences in editorial focus, tone and use of language in the reporting of refugee issues?

**Weblinks to follow up**

The BBC’s Michael Buerk reports on the 1984 refugee crisis caused by the Ethiopian famine: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYOj_60YuJc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYOj_60YuJc)

Reuters news agency video on the crisis: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX1FCS2ZST4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX1FCS2ZST4)

Eurostat EU data on asylum applications, updated quarterly: [www.tinyurl.com/nmeh4k5](http://www.tinyurl.com/nmeh4k5)

The EU’s border cooperation agency FRONTEX has a useful website: [http://frontex.europa.eu/](http://frontex.europa.eu/)

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