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VISION EUROPE SUMMIT

Improving the responses to the Migration and Refugee Crisis in Europe

Lisbon
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
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Mr. Artur Santos Silva, President of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Good afternoon, everyone!
- I am delighted to be here today with you and I am most grateful to the organizers for the opportunity to address this amazing audience.
- Your Summit focus on a range of topics that are challenging European policies and practices on such an unprecedented scale that one may wonder whether gaps have become too wide to bridge. At least, something is already definitely broken since the EU has lost one of its Members and solidarity of EU governments has been badly shaken over the past years for various reasons.
- Yet this only makes a strong call for joint action more necessary than ever. No effort should be spared to find ways out of the ongoing crises, addressing problems one by one as French thinker Descartes would have advised us to do.
- When it comes to the so-called refugee crisis, my take is that the broader picture should not be ignored. At the end of 2015, there were around 65 million people displaced, more than at any time since the second world war.

- A recent UNHCR Report on Global Trends clearly shows that “while the spotlight last year was on Europe’s challenge to manage more than 1 million refugees and migrants who arrived via the Mediterranean, the vast majority of the world’s refugees were in developing countries in the global south”.
- Conflict, state fragility and natural disasters create a growing refugee global challenge and fuel protracted emergencies.
- To me, it is crystal clear that a new paradigm is needed to tackle this challenge and that the refugee system has to be reformed. Refugees cannot be parked in camps for years, they cannot be asked to put their lives on hold for months, they cannot get thrown to hell while just seeking a safe haven.
- As a starting point, I think that a basic distinction has to be made between migration and refugees. As Paul Collier uses to stress “Refugees are not migrants; they are the people who would rather stay in their home country but are driven into neighboring countries by violence and hunger. Their aspiration is to find a normal life”.
- For them, this means, first and foremost, to be able to earn a living and get education for children and youth. Furthermore, their common dream is to go home as soon as possible and be part of the post-conflict recovery. Ask parents, ask youth and children.
- What I hear more often from our Syrian students is the wish not to be seen with the label “refugee”, but to feel as any other of their classmates, to be integrated into the academic community, to participate in seminars, to be able to have their Erasmus semester etc.
- And it is not a coincidence that most of civil engineering and architecture students choose to do their final thesis on “rebuilding old Damascus”, “social housing in future Syria”, “reconstructing Aleppo”...

- Another important point that I would like to make is that for me the refugee crisis in Europe is not only about how to integrate refugees through appropriate public policies in close cooperation with civil societies, but also how to address the wider challenge of building open, inclusive and tolerant societies.
- In my opinion, a growing sense of cultural insecurity is fueling a kind of backlash against cultural change that makes it difficult to communicate across difference, value intercultural exchange and perceive diversity as a source of potential and advantage.
- This cultural insecurity together with greater income and wealth inequalities as well as rising economic insecurity and social deprivation within and among the EU countries shape the wider context of the crisis in Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Since 2013 I have been focused on developing an emergency scholarship programme for Syrian students stuck by the war. This programme is managed by a NGO called Global Platform for Syrian Students whose mission statement aims at providing a full package of education services that allow them to go back into academic life and get their university degree.
- We have around 100 students in Portugal and 50 in other 9 countries most of them in the Middle East region. We are looking for scaling up the programme and also for launching two new initiatives, one focused on Syrian medical students and doctors; the other one seeking to promote master degrees on social sciences and humanities, two areas in great need of strategic action.
- So let me leave here an invitation to all of you here present to consider joining our efforts.

- Moreover, further to these very concrete programmes, I have also been involved in making international advocacy for boosting higher education opportunities in emergencies.
- My take is that if we fail to prioritize higher education in handling humanitarian crises, we will be responsible for rendering entire generations uneducated, developmentally disadvantaged and unprepared to contribute to their society's recovery. On top of that, we will be contributing to fuel people's despair, rage and victimization, all seeds and water for disaffection and alienation.
- Make no mistake: higher education in emergencies is not a luxury.
- Higher education offers protection, enhances resilience and builds hope for the future. This is particular true for the critical 18-25 years old youth bracket. Harnessing the energy of young educated people should be a strategic priority. Young people are particularly at risk of becoming marginalized when stuck in their lives by protracted conflicts or lengthy crises.
- If crisis-time is not used to train the next generation of societal leaders, to empower new elites and trigger a whole range of changes – social, economic, physical, institutional -, recovery, transition and reconstruction will become but a more uncertain, fragile and delusive journey.
- Therefore, my strong conviction is that higher education can play a true critical role to rebuild war-torn states or disaster-affected communities provided that a strategy based on longer term goals is implemented since day one of the humanitarian aid.
- This is why it is crucial to bridge the development-humanitarian divides in this field of action, bring together all key constituencies and develop a joint plan for action drawn on comparative advantage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I must reckon that it has not been an easy task to make the case for higher education in emergencies. International organizations tend to resist to change, civil society organizations are too often shaped by a competing mood, governments dislike innovative solutions that involve risk
- So advocating for more higher education opportunities for refugees and forcibly displaced persons has been a bit of a struggle with ups and downs...
- However, I am more than happy to underline that a good step forward was made last September at the UN Summit on migrants and refugees. In the outcome document – the New York Declaration - member states eventually recognize the role of higher education and commit to “promote tertiary education, skills training and vocational education. Paragraph 82 reads “In conflict and crisis situations, higher education serves as a powerful driver for change, shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women by maintaining their hopes for the future, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination and acts as a catalyst for the recovery and rebuilding of post-conflict countries “.
- Without sounding immodest, I am proud to have contributed to this achievement At least it owned me an exhausting hike through a huge traffic jam under heavy rain pouring on New York ... needless to say that when I arrived at my meeting I was myself feeling closer to call an ambulance than being able to argue about academic emergencies...

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Against this backdrop, we and our partners, we have developed the concept of a Rapid Response Mechanism for Higher Education in Emergencies, as a possible fast track entry point of humanitarian response.
- We are now working on setting up a coalition of partners to develop further this concept and making it ready for a pilot to be launched hopefully next year.
- More than my words, I think the animation film we have produced on it will provide you with a fair idea of the gist of this innovative project. Before watching it, let me renew an invitation to you all to join our efforts.
- Thank you and let 's watch the film.