

Migration today is part and parcel of our societies. It is an inherent feature of our globalised world.

It brings richness and opportunities, but it also comes with challenges.

The events in the Mediterranean over the Christmas and New Year's period remind us all of this.

We were all deeply moved by those events, in which two cargo boats with around 1200 migrants on board were abandoned and left to drift dangerously in the Mediterranean.

This is unacceptable.

Why?

Because political and economic instability in many regions of the world generates a constant influx of persons towards Europe and this will not go away.

These people are looking towards Europe to protect them.

As Commissioner in charge of Migration and Home Affairs, I clearly see the need for decisive and coordinated EU-wide actions.

In this context, cooperation with civil society has a key role in addressing migratory challenges.

The conclusions that came out of today's Forum are tangible proof that it was worth enlarging the scope of this Forum, given that all migratory challenges are closely inter related and require broad forms of dialogue.

To contribute to this dialogue, I would like to share with you my ideas and approach to the different issues debated over the last two days.

Smuggling is dangerous and exposes people to unsafe and inhumane travelling conditions. Last year, 3.000 persons are estimated to have lost their lives attempting to reach Europe by crossing the sea. During their journey to Europe, many fell into the hands of traffickers and were victims of violence including sexual abuse.

All migrants pay a fortune to these ruthless smugglers for a passage to Europe.

To protect people from these criminals, the European Union has undertaken many important initiatives to tackle smuggling, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of facilitators.

The Commission is also putting in place awareness campaigns in many countries of origin and transit - including in Ethiopia, Niger and Pakistan – to warn people about the risks of embarking on journeys to Europe.

These efforts need to be pursued further.

Smugglers are smart. They are well organised in professional and flexible networks that transcend borders.

They use social media to share information and operate from locations such as international waters where they are difficult to locate and arrest.

That is why cooperation with countries of origin and transit is a cornerstone of the Commission's strategy to fight smuggling.

This cooperation also encompasses the assistance to the refugees in these third countries.

As confirmed by yesterday's discussions, civil society can play an important role in this respect by helping in "debunking the myths" about smuggling and irregular migration.

Clearly "bottom up" messages and information have much more impact on people than institutionalised campaigns.

Another important element that emerged strongly from the discussions on countering smuggling is that NGOs – and local and regional authorities – which provide assistance to smuggled migrants shall not be criminalised. I fully agree with this, of course, as I also agree on the need to protect the fundamental rights of those who are being smuggled. Those who we need to punish are the smugglers!

We all know why migrants undertake such dangerous journeys.

They want to come to Europe to escape war and conflicts or they are simply looking for a better future.

So what can Europe do to tackle the phenomenon of smuggling at its roots?

Regarding access to the asylum procedure and assistance to refugees, let me stress the urgent need for EU Member States to implement fully the Common European Asylum System in order to ensure effective, safe and fair access to the asylum procedure, including at the border.

At the same time, a serious effort must be made to establish a truly European programme for the resettlement of refugees. Member States have so far offered over a total of 36.000 places to Syrian refugees, making it the largest pledge in the history of EU resettlement efforts.

- Europe needs to do more.

Right now, the Commission is discussing with the Member States on how to ensure a more balanced distribution of resettled refugees among all Member States. We will

soon elaborate on the proposal for a pilot project on resettlement in which all Member States and Associated States could take part.

We count on your support in encouraging all Member States to take their part of the responsibility for resettlement. Member States need to understand that refugees are not a burden; on the contrary – if the integration process is successful and if their access to employment is encouraged and facilitated – they can be an important resource for the host country.

Last, but not least, people who seek and obtain refugee status in the European Union, should become fully part of our societies. The European Commission will continue to help and support Member States in implementing and developing integration measures and policies at local, regional and national level.

The discussions in the workshops yesterday showed that a successful path towards integration has to start from the very beginning. This is why an effective partnership with civil society organisations already at the identification stage, when people arrive, is crucial for ensuring that the successive integration process works well. The Praesidium project in Italy is a good example of this.

Ladies and gentlemen, all the challenges discussed over these two days are closely inter-related and require a European response.

That is why the Commission intends to present a comprehensive approach in a European Agenda on Migration with central objectives:

- To assist migrants in need of protection (be it asylum seekers, refugees or victims of trafficking);
- to reinforce Europe's borders in respect of migrants rights and to better manage irregular migration flows;
- to make Europe attractive by opening legal channels and supporting integration.

To achieve these objectives, migration has to be embedded in all relevant external and internal EU policies.

The results of the discussions during this first meeting of the European Migration Forum constitute a valuable contribution to the preparation of this Agenda.

Finally, we must not forget an important additional challenge that we are facing, inside Europe.

We need to change the perception of the public opinion on migration.

Our biggest concern is the rise of racism and xenophobia, fuelled by populist movements across Europe.

To communicate the positive contribution of migration, I intend to launch an EU-wide campaign to improve the narrative about migration in cooperation with Member States later this year.

In this respect, you, as civil society organisations, could also contribute in promoting positive messages on migration.

The European Commission is determined to build on and further develop coherent, comprehensive and effective policies that allow all Europeans citizens and all migrants of all origin and community to find their place and have a bright future in our society.