DEAN RESEARCHES REFUGEES IN MALTA

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Here are some sobering facts: there are currently 65.3 million displaced people in the world, this year more than 4,742 people have died crossing the Mediterranean, both numbers are the worst they’ve ever been, and both numbers are growing. As the global refugee crisis challenges countries around the world, the Dean of the Graduate School-Newark, Kyle Farmbry, has embarked on a multi-faceted investigation of the issue.

With the support of a Fulbright fellowship, Farmbry visited Malta from September to December of 2016 to assess the complexity of the situation. He met with refugees, NGOs, aid groups, and the Maltese government. Malta has long been a hub of the refugee crisis and to this day the country’s integration policy is trying to catch up. That makes it a valuable center for research on lessons that can be applied elsewhere.

“My hope is that my work might add a drop to the bucket of knowledge that could be relevant. The issues here are so complex,” he says. “We’ve got questions about the flows of people and about how exactly people are being welcomed. The welcoming is not always with open arms.”

Around the world, refugees face several obstacles when they arrive in a new country. From documentation, to discrimination, to language barriers, to employment opportunities, and access to health care. For young people, who make up half of the refugee population, they also face problems with education.

“In many cases they are either not getting access to any education or to quality education,” says Farmbry. “We have a real demographic issue that we’re going to have to wrestle with because you certainly don’t want to have a lot of people who aren’t getting access to educational opportunities.”

As an educator, this is where Farmbry is focusing much of his research. He has been working with a group of young refugees ages 15-30 who came together to form a grassroots organization called Spark 15. Their mission is to advocate for the full integration of refugee and migrant youth. Since its inception last year, the group is already making progress with gaining access to post-secondary institutions, with providing language classes, and with sharing their experiences with the UNHCR at a forum in Geneva.

Sari Albaaga, 25, is a member of Spark 15 and he knows all about the difficulty of getting an education as a refugee. Back in 2013, he was living at home in Libya, and studying software development at a local university. Then the war broke out and he was forced to flee. “It wasn’t
a matter of choice,” he says. “It was like leave or you might not be alive anymore.”

While fleeing, Albaaga didn’t have time to gather all of the documentation he would need to attend university in Malta. To make matters worse, university officials did not have an admittance protocol for refugees – they expected him to have all the same paperwork as a regular international student. Because he didn’t have that, it took Albaaga three years of petitioning the administration to allow him to continue his studies.

“I lost three years of my life just trying to get them to understand that I have the right to enroll,” he says.

One of the founders of Spark 15 is Hourie Tafech, a twenty-five-year-old Palestinian woman who was born and raised in a refugee camp in Lebanon. Her family has been in the same camp, without any civil or political rights, since they fled Palestine in 1948 after the Israeli occupation. She is now in Malta working towards a marketing diploma, but she has run into a long list of hurdles trying to find education.

Tafech says that many of these problems could be solved if governments stopped seeing refugees as problems. Instead, she says, it would behoove governments to see refugees as people with the potential to contribute, and to facilitate their development and integration.

“If a person becomes educated he will depend on himself. He will find work and not be dependent on the government for social benefits,” she explains.

Farmbry has been meeting with both Tafech and Albaaga to learn the nuances of their bureaucratic challenges. However as the wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq continue, and as poor economic conditions around the world worsen, this issue is here to stay.

Farmbry believes that more people need to turn their attention in this direction, especially American students interested in international relations, like the students at RU-N’s Division of Global Affairs. Because the refugee crisis is a worldwide issue, Farmbry is also in the early stages of writing a book about the global rise of xenophobia and its link to migration. He plans to feature Malta as a case study, as well as the USA and South Africa. The book will also attempt to put forth possible solutions and best practices.

“Countries are going to have to be a little more forward thinking in terms of development of strategies for integration,” he says. “There’s not really asking the question of what might be done to help people when they land in a way that’s better for everybody.”