



EDITORIAL

OUR OBLIGATION TO DISPLACED SCIENTISTS



▲ Romain Murenzi,
TWAS Executive Director

Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq – in these countries, violent conflict and insecurity in recent years have driven millions of people from their homes. Each has its own history, its own political and cultural dynamics. But in each one, and in many other troubled countries, circumstances drive people to a difficult conclusion: that life at home poses intolerable risks. And so they leave, joining a stream of refugees and displaced people that today is unprecedented in the years since World War II.

They arrive in Jordan or Lebanon, or in Italy or Germany or Canada. They worry about how they will eat, where they will sleep, where they will work. Sometimes they are welcomed, but often their new neighbours have their own worries – about the spread of conflict or about terrorism, about how the newcomers might change their home culture. On all sides, there is great uneasiness.

In the North, and even in countries adjoining the war zones, there are misconceptions about those who are seeking refuge from war. We tend to see them simplistically. In fact, though, there is a spectrum of migrants. While some are poor and have limited education, others have skills and rich experience. Some are scientists and engineers, doctors and nurses, science teachers and promising science students.

At TWAS, we count those people in the broad scientific community as members of *our* community, and we see it as imperative to understand their experiences and needs. Forced departure from their home countries can seem like a one-time disruption, but in fact the repercussions can last years, or even generations. And the costs to the individuals and their countries can be enormous.

Consider the cost of educating one PhD-level scientist. Countries such as Syria and Iraq have had schools and universities that were the envy of their neighbours; the schools produced a capable corps of researchers and doctors. For

each individual scientist, the cumulative costs of education and training amounts to tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. If half of a country's scientific workforce flees, that investment is compromised. The benefits go to a new country, or they are lost altogether.

When the conflict ends and the time comes to rebuild, the country will have lost a generation of trained scientists and a generation of students. This will cripple the recovery, and the costs will be compounded. Without a strong science sector to support economic growth development, there will be fewer opportunities for everyone. Poverty will be perpetuated. Instability will persist. More people will leave. We see a similar pattern rising from other conflicts in the global South – for example in Venezuela, Mali, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. And it affects not just the country, but also the region and the world.

Confronted by these circumstances, TWAS has focused intently in recent months on the challenge of displaced scientists. Thanks to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and others, we have been able to provide support to scientists in the region. We have been able to connect with them, to aid their work and to tell their stories.

In just the past few years, we have provided fellowships to displaced scientists. Yemeni medical researcher Fathiah Zakham, after enduring terrible challenges at home in Yemen, recently won the TWAS-Fayzah M. Al-Kharafi Prize for women scientists from S&T-lagging countries; today she has a fellowship in Switzerland. Planning is now underway to bring the most promising displaced scientists into our Young Affiliates programme.



Harnessing Science to Help Refugees

An estimated 80 million people around the world have been displaced in the wake of violence and conflict, driven from their homes and in many cases their countries. What can scientists, engineers, and health professionals do to help these people?

ISSUES & EVENTS

Displaced scientists strive to restart professional lives in new lands



Record numbers of scientists are fleeing persecution and conflict. Most universities and communities can benefit from the brain gain.

Migration—the choices we face

More than 1 million refugees and migrants are trying to find a new home in 2017, and more than 200 million people in the world are living in poverty. Many have been displaced by war, violence, and persecution. In a world where the global population is growing, we must find ways to help these people.



can nations rebuild and progress when much of their workforce has fled?

When a large number of people leave a country, it can have a significant impact on the economy and society. However, it can also bring new ideas and skills to the host country.



Dr. A. D. Brown, Director of the Center for Global Health and Humanitarian Assistance, Johns Hopkins University.

AL-FANAR MEDIA website header and article snippet in Arabic. Title: فيلم لتوثيق حياة باحثين عرب في المنفى.

L'Espresso magazine article snippet. Title: Siamo scienziati, chiediamo asilo. Subtitle: Scappati da Siria, Libia, Afghanistan. Sono i profughi che gli istituti di ricerca e le università si contendono.

▲ Issues related to war-displaced scientists – and the work of TWAS and its partners – have drawn international press coverage.

For almost 35 years, TWAS has worked to build science in the developing world and to prevent brain drain in countries where every scientist and every engineer is a vital resource. South-South cooperation has been central to this effort.

We start with an assumption that they want to return home. And so, no matter where they are, they are important assets for the developing world.

Through its science diplomacy programme, TWAS has brought countries from the South and North together to explore the issues. We are working with partners – including those within the UN system – to find ways to increase support and improve policy.

For displaced scientists, the road home is not always direct, and the journey may take many years. But laws in their host countries may not

offer an easy way to normalise their lives, and resources may be lacking to support their work. This should be a target for South-South and South-North policy and diplomacy cooperation.

Above all, we must always take the long-view: Today's displaced scientists and engineers will have children in their new countries, and these children may have their own potential to be talented researchers in 20 or 30 years, and to make valuable contributions to scientific knowledge.

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