

We Could Be Building Bridges Instead of Walls

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- translated from Danish by Sune Vilsted.

The general portrayal in the media is that an altogether unmanageable number of Africans want to emigrate to Europe. And if we don't prevent it, then it will destroy our society. Since no one seems to have drafted any realistic scenarios, I'll try to compare the situation with something we know:

Denmark was once a distinct country of emigration. Seen in relation to the number of inhabitants at the time, we were only surpassed by Ireland, Norway, and Sweden. That was until around 1920, when it was still relevant to write a native song that began like this: "For a foreign harsh and poor is our country, but rich in memories..."

A big difference between then and now is that there doesn't exist a place nowadays, which can be legally emigrated to. Many are therefore forced out on perilous voyages in congested boats and are dependant on so-called human traffickers. The images we see, typically confirms the notion of waves of poor people, who have had the individual features washed out. This sort of thing is known all too well as a prelude to initiatives that are as cynical as the human traffickers. In war reports, the enemy's feature is usually without nuances.

This contributes to the notion that the choice of these emigrants is often portrayed as irrational and based on a lack of knowledge. That is unlikely the case in this age of smartphones. Even in this frightening year with mass drownings in the Middle Sea, 97,5 % of those who set off towards the Italian border have made it – according to the international migration organisation IOM. It is a completely different "sensible" calculation than from the time, where our ancestors sought Klondike within the famous gold rush. Back then around 1/3 of 100,000 made it. However, we do not know, how many turned back – and how many perished.

Denmark was an impoverished emigration country, located in a rough climate region in Northern Europe. But leaving the country could be done within a legal og organised structure. So around 15 % of the population made the choice of leaving during the course of half a century – including those, who were sent by the authorities because they were a burden to society as criminals or poverty-stricken.

Can we - based on that - guess how many young Africans will head towards Europe over the next 50 years? Not likely, but we can do some imaginations with the numbers. If around 15 % of the Africans embark on this perilous journey, then it is a matter of approximately 200 million during the course of 50 years – around 4 million yearly. That is only around 0,8% of EU's population – but still a very large amount of new citizens to manage every year. It is fortunately unrealistic, because the emigration is not equally distributed in Africa – nor was it distributed equally in the European countries in the past. The majority of African immigrants come solely from a few countries and most of those countries are affected by strife.

There is not a large emigration to Europe from most African countries. Their native songs could also contain the words “rich in memories”. Furthermore, Africa's economy is generally making headway. Around a third of all Africans belongs to the middleclass today. There is no reason to believe that the amount of African immigrants will flare up in the future, if we were to organise the possibility for a less risky and more dignified journey.

It would also be worth to note that the vast majority of African emigrants are young, enterprising, and courageous. Moreover, the likely number of Europeans with African background in the future Europe, might roughly correspond to the challenge facing us, which is that European women give on average birth to below 2 children, while the European average age is rising.

I make this precarious analysis, because I believe that the immigration from Africa to Europe will ascent to a higher level, than we have previously known – and it cannot be stopped. But I would also like to underline that it will be on a level that cannot be managed unless we disregard that they are people like ourselves – with the same need for security and dignity. With nuanced features.

If we destroy the portrayal of them as rational thinking and normal, sensitive individuals – and instead regard them as a threatening wave, which floods our shores, then we create a great fear in ourselves, in our own populations. It is primarily this fear that threatens a successful integration of the future's immigrants, not the task itself. Nonetheless, that fear threatens our right to regard ourselves as cultural societies built on humanism.