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A brief reflection and review

July 2020

Reflection

I would like to start by saying a few words about my positive experience and my fascinating academic journey with the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM). I'm forever grateful to John Nassari and Anita Fabos, my brilliant lecturers at University of East London (UEL), who invited and introduced me to my first IASFM conference which was held in June 2009 in Nicosia, Cyprus. After that love at first sight in Nicosia, as a PhD researcher at London South Bank University (LSBU), I attended almost all the subsequent IASFM conferences, namely: Thessaloniki-Greece (2018), Poznan-Poland (2016), Bogota-Colombia (2014), Kolkata-India (2013).

In every conference I was moved and impressed by the rich diversity of the participants, meaningful and lively presentations and discussions including friendly and warm chats with coffee in hand. I must say, these conferences have truly helped me with my study, and as someone with first-hand refugee experience, I started to appreciate and articulate my own voice. I was encouraged to ask more in-depth questions about forced migration history(ies) (told-and-untold), about refugee protection and refugee integration issues in host communities.

These conferences provided me with fresh information and knowledge and spurred me to learn more in this demanding and multidisciplinary field. Each conference directed me to learn more about forced migrants' stories; about unaccompanied refugee children; about the fate of desperate refugee parents escaping war zones with many dying attempting to cross the Mediterranean still hugging their babies in the sea; about those refugees who are pushed to the darker margins in some towns and cities in this world, with some forced to become beggars and sex workers; about refugees living in camps not having enough safe drinking water; and now in June 2020, in our lockdown world, most refugees still do not have fair access to adequate health care during this Coronavirus pandemic. (lsbu-podcast May 2020).ⁱ

Each conference also encouraged me to look carefully at the slow and complex process of refugee integration in host societies which usually follows refugees' often painful journeys, poor reception, and challenging physical settlement or re-settlement in different places. Each conference also emphasised the power of refugee agency by highlighting their positive energy and efforts in learning a new language, fighting the refugee label as a fixed and exclusionary social identity, trying to re-learn a trade or learn a new skill, re-build a safe home, contribute to their host communities, work hard, and try to be optimistic in achieving a better and more peaceful world for their children.

Finally, I would say this, the IASFM conferences have definitely enriched and certainly positively shaped my academic venture and I would like to thank the IASFM's present and past ExComs and all the members sincerely and whole heartedly.

Review

I asked the lovely Michele Millard (IASFM) and Giorgia Dona (UEL) to support my nomination to join the ExCom in Thessaloniki in July 2018. I had two sets of reasons for joining:

First, obviously, I wanted to repay my debt to the IASFM, and I was curious to learn about how an international project is actually run, and adding to my activism CV.

Second, I wished to contribute to the fundraising and development efforts whilst also to be a refugee voice within the committee.

In short, I am glad I joined, I ENJOYED IT, but I am not so sure about the extent of my contribution. I am comfortable though in my mind that I tried. I am leaving the ExCom at the end of July 2020, and I am equally glad that a capable, caring, and professional committee will undoubtedly continue the good work and would surely and successfully lead the IASFM towards the Ghana conference in July 2021, and I look forward to see you in Accra then.

One critical point that I would like to bring to your attention is that I think the collective approach regarding work and time commitments of the ExCom should be changed /improved slightly by striking a better balance between the following two demanding and often competing sets of tasks:

A) Dealing with IASFM's functioning mechanism including processes, procedures, creating new documents, AND leading / communicating with members (not just asking for their e-vote), addressing forced migration events, informing / leading new research.

B) Leading / reflecting on real-world issues and new developments in this interconnected world including current lockdown and urgent public health issues affecting both academic research and forced migrants. One outstanding contribution of current Excom-IASFM is the leadership shown by introducing the Code of Ethics document advocating responsible and meaningful research practice in our field and we should build on that, and the planned webinar with UNHCR in October is a good opportunity.

Recommendation

The IASFM should employ a co-ordinator, a communication officer, and a fundraiser, who all should be based in the same office and the EXCom should then have enough time and space to be more effective policy makers, advisers, and potential leaders within the global community of IASFM.

With my best wishes,

Ayar