

Global Studies

Experience Day PBL task

A man was sitting at a café on the Vrijthof waiting for his coffee. At the table next to him, an older woman and her adult daughter were enjoying a slow breakfast, and he couldn't help but eavesdrop on their conversation. The woman was scanning the paper and suddenly said "huh" in a very interested way. Her daughter looked up from her breakfast.

"What's up?"

"Have you heard about the UK and Austria's plans to work together on a deal for sending back illegal asylum seekers?"

"A little bit. I know the scheme proposed in the UK was super controversial and that Austria wanted to follow something similar."

The mother glanced up at her daughter with a raised eyebrow.

"Why was the UK plan so controversial? Isn't it time that countries started taking back control of their own borders? I think the cooperation with Rwanda would send the message to illegals that they can't just come in uninvited."

Out of the corner of his eye, the eavesdropping man saw the daughter grimace. He supposed this was a point of contention between her and her mother. The daughter started talking at a mile a minute, holding out her right hand to list off points on her fingers.

"The UK's initial plan was so controversial for a few reasons. The first is the under international law, a person has the right to leave their own country to seek protection from another—that is, to seek asylum. It sounds like the UK is trying to avoid taking their fair share of asylum requests, and they could be trying to ignore their commitments to provide international protection. Another issue with it was that the UK planned to send asylum seekers who wanted to apply for asylum in the UK to Rwanda, where Rwanda would do all of the processing. If an asylum claim was granted, the person would not be allowed to go to the UK, where they originally wanted to apply for asylum, but would have to claim it in Rwanda. This could mean that someone with absolutely no networks in Rwanda could end up there, whereas if someone applied in the UK, it could be because they have family or friends there who could help them settle. Another issue is Rwanda itself. Would they be able to ensure the human rights of a large number of applicants? Could the UK be certain that they're following a transparent decision making process and would not return rejected applicants to a country where the applicant's life could be at risk? Plus there's the whole issue that some people think Rwanda is a dictatorship that is using cooperation agreements like this to gain legitimacy in an international arena. It's super complicated."

The mother looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Yeah, that is complicated. But Europe is being overrun by immigrants—how many stories do you see in the news every day about it? You can't deny that there is a migration crisis. And not everyone

who claims asylum actually needs it. You mostly see young men trying to get in. I'm sure people are abusing that system. It seems like everyone wants to come here, and we just can't support that many people. You know how hard it was for you to find a good job when you were young... imagine how hard it is now. We're in a recession. More people for fewer jobs isn't sustainable."

The daughter sighed. She sounded more resigned than irritated.

"I understand that perspective, too, but I think the 'cost' of having some people without real protection needs in the country is worth the value of offering accessible protection channels to those who really need it. Plus it's not like migration is all bad. In some cases, we may need it. For example, Austria has a population problem—there's no way that the pension system can survive without new young workers. There are just way too many older people and not enough young people or babies being born to pay for the older generation's retirement." The daughter sighed even deeper. "I feel like we're defining the problem in the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

"I read an article recently about the Austria/UK collaboration plan, and it said that the overhaul of the asylum system was in response to the migration crisis. By presenting population movement as a crisis, we set ourselves up for certain kinds of responses, and I don't think we've had a very complete problem analysis. I see a lot of different problems connected to migration and asylum, but it looks like we're only focusing on one."

The man was so interested in the conversation that he was surprised when a waiter appeared with his coffee! As he started to sip, he had to think about the discussion and the very wicked dilemmas it highlighted. He was struck by the last part of the discussion he heard: what is, indeed, the problem, and what is it represented to be?

Want to know more? Learn about the Austria-UK collaboration via the Guardian article: [*"Austria to work with UK on Rwanda-style plan for asylum seekers."*](#)