

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

New Paradigms for Refugee Camps and for Humanitarian Aid Itself

Ethics Matter, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

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Transcript

STEPHANIE SY: Welcome to Ethics Matter. I'm Stephanie Sy.

Our guest is Kilian Kleinschmidt, who was the head of one of the world's largest refugee camps between the years of 2013 and 2014, the [Zaatari camp](#) in Jordan.

Kilian, thanks so much for joining us.

Start out by giving us a description of Zaatari and what it was like when you were there.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: It was impressive. I was asked to take over the management of this camp back in 2013. All that I knew was 100,000-plus people; it's a camp—all camps in the world I thought looked the same—and I was sent there to fix a problem.

STEPHANIE SY: What was the problem?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: The problem was daily violence. It was something the media called actually "the hellhole of humanitarian aid." It was certainly not a very pleasant place. It was extremely rough.

When it came to the people themselves, there were high levels of mistrust among the [refugees from Syria](#), 100,000-plus Syrians. But they also had lots of grudges against the aid workers, against the Jordanian authorities in charge of the camp. So we had daily violence, with demonstrations, throwing rocks, throwing tent poles after us like spears. We had people injured. We had people frightened, not wanting to go into the camp to work, because it was really unpleasant.

I found a tent city of about, I would say, 25,000 families at the time. It worked somewhat, because the supplies, keeping people alive, then worked very well. But there was something else that didn't work.

STEPHANIE SY: At the time you were working for the UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, were they charged with security; and why had things fallen between the cracks?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: No. You have usually a division of labor. The authorities of a country are in charge of hosting refugees. That's what international refugee law is about, the [Refugee Convention](#) is about—simply the whole recognition that people in need need protection. That's the government in charge. Also, in Jordan, in Zaatari camp, the Jordanian police were in charge of security. Then

governments ask the High Commissioner for Refugees, usually, when we talk about refugees, or other agencies, to take care of managing the facilities, managing the supplies, the survival of people.

In this case, yes, UNHCR was the coordinating agency. It had developed and coordinated the assistance to people, with dozens of non-governmental aid organizations helping from different countries of the world. And yes, it was the place where we could all assist and help in the [Syrian crisis](#).

But, at the same time, something didn't work, which was clearly the level of understanding between the refugees, the Jordanian authorities, and the aid community. There was something which didn't correspond to what they were expecting.

STEPHANIE SY: You spent decades in refugee camps in other countries. Is that any different in Zaatari than it would be in a refugee camp in Somalia or somewhere else?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: No, it is not. I think what was different there was, first of all, the camp was very visible. Everybody came to visit the camp, from Secretary [John Kerry](#) to—

STEPHANIE SY: There is a lot of media that has gone to Zaatari.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Media, politicians, delegations of all sorts, thousands of visitors, because it was very easy to see, and it was really the only place where you could actually touch and feel and smell the Syrian refugees.

STEPHANIE SY: But you were used to dealing with the types of tensions that you were describing.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Yes, you would find that in many places. But the Syrians were also very vocal and they were very outspoken really about this, in terms of their saying: "Why are you treating us this way? First of all, we expect from the international community more than just aid, which is something to satisfy your 'guilt' because you are not intervening in Syria"—at the time, 2013.

STEPHANIE SY: So they felt that bitterness.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: There was a real bitterness. They said, "How can you spend only \$500,000 on us a day in this camp whilst you should be sending missiles into Damascus?" That was what they told John Kerry.

STEPHANIE SY: Because they wanted to go home?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: They wanted to see the [dictator](#) defeated. They wanted to go home, but they knew very well going home wasn't really possible because of bombings and war and so on. So they said, "You need to end this, basically what you helped to start." That was one, and that is sort of the dimension where people like me and the teams could actually change something.

The other one is the whole conception of: What is a place where you put 100,000 people? Is it a storage facility? Is it a logistical challenge? Or is it also something where you create opportunities for people, you create perspectives, you allow people to thrive; you don't see it only as a place of doom and gloom?

STEPHANIE SY: I'm guessing that you are going with the latter argument, that it should be a place of opportunity, as opposed to a storage facility for human beings.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: If you look into the history of migration, of forced migration—of desperate migration as we begin to call it as well; if you move out of extreme poverty, it is being a refugee as well in a form.

Here in history we have always seen that people who moved also changed—changed sometimes for, let's call it, the better. But they had access to other impulses in their life. So we don't need to look at displacement and exile only as something negative. We should turn it around and say, "There is also an opportunity for people to see something else, to experience something else, to learn something else."

For example, in Zaatari camp, once we had moved on and actually established a dialogue with the people on the same level, eye-to-eye, instead of from above—aid is very arrogant; it's coming almost like the colonial point of—

STEPHANIE SY: "Let me help you."

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: —"I help you, little poor thing, and I am good and I am strong and I know how it works."

Once we had fixed that, we also moved ahead with more opportunity. So, for instance, in the Zaatari camp about 250 girls are playing soccer today; they would never play soccer in Southern Syria in their little villages. About 100 or so have been learning taekwondo. Others are now involved in learning skills which they would not at any point learn back in a rural community in Southern Syria, where most people came from.

That is what we need to understand. People change in exile. But, instead of having that as a negative change, of even a moment of potential radicalization, or potential frustration, exclusion, if you deal with this as a camp or any situation where people do not have full access to opportunities and rights and a future—that change of paradigm we have to introduce.

STEPHANIE SY: Is that a controversial change of paradigm? These places are intended to be temporary. They are tent cities. They are not supposed to be there forever. If you change the paradigm to one in which people actually have potentially more opportunities in a refugee camp than they would in the places they come from, does it make people not want to ever leave? Is that controversial?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: It is controversial. Again, I don't want to accuse, but I want to say that currently we are selling the suffering of people. That is what sells.

STEPHANIE SY: Selling the suffering of people?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Yes. That is how the whole aid system is financed. We have to be clear about that. How does it work? There are crises all over the world, as we speak, with lots of people affected by wars, by extreme poverty, by earthquakes, by strong rains—especially now, in times of climate change, we see that happening more and more.

There is only a very small amount of money available for all of this. Twenty billion dollars a year is what is available for emergency humanitarian support—that's all, worldwide. That's a joke.

So there is a high competition between different situations, between crisis situations. One sells better than the other one, for strategic reasons or because there is more visibility. How do you achieve

visibility? It is with images of suffering. Aid agencies receive money—they are also in competition amongst each other—on the basis of attention. They do not receive money and then work with this in order to work for the long haul and really try to change it. It is about the suffering, which is the number one sales point. That is what needs to change.

STEPHANIE SY: So they have a disincentive to improve suffering because it means they will then get less funding?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: That would be the extreme accusation.

But what I am also saying is we associate with the issues of refugees something negative. The term "refugee" is a status, a legal status if you want. You are protected because you have fled persecution and a situation. But it doesn't change anything of you being a human being. So you are the same human being as you and me. In all of us there is somewhat a bit of a refugee.

STEPHANIE SY: It's really quite profound, though, what you are suggesting, that somehow there is a system in place for refugees to keep their standard of living and keep their opportunities tamped down so that aid agencies can continue to exist. It seems to undermine the exact point of aid.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: First, there are different elements to this. One, again, is because the narrative is wrong. The narrative is: "They are victims and they have to be assisted forever"—until they go home in this case. I think they don't want to be assisted forever; they want to be in charge of themselves. So we need to change that as well.

We changed that narrative in Zaatari camp by saying: "People should be able to pay for the services they receive. They should be able to make decisions. They should actually be 'mainstreamed' into what everybody, in Jordan in this case, would experience in his life."

Also, let's take the Jordan case: 100,000 refugees are in the camp and 500,000 refugees are not in a camp. It is very important to understand that only a small portion of people live in camps usually in the world—because camps, being quite inhuman in a way, as they have been managed, so people do not want to be there; and why should people in a camp be treated in a better way than people who are outside, who pay bills, who have to survive, who quite often do not get aid in this sense? So that is one, changing the narrative, changing the way of how we look at such situations.

The second one: Yes, aid agencies need somehow to survive. They will all tell you—and I believe it is true—that they would like to see something more long term happening. But again, here probably what the mistake is, is to say, "The emergency agencies should be replaced by long-term development agencies." Why are they not going to be replaced by a normal setting of stronger municipal services, if you have municipalities that have received a lot of refugees; why not ask the private sector to do more?

But we have that logic of one aid agency has to be replaced by another one. I think this is fundamentally wrong. This is not how the world works and functions. You and I are not assisted by aid agencies. We are working and living in places where there are municipal services, there is the private sector, the public sector, and there is a play also with civil society. This is how anybody needs to live. Again, it doesn't matter whether you are a refugee, a migrant, whatever stamp has been put on you in terms of a category.

STEPHANIE SY: What does that mean as far as what you wanted Zaatari to become? Did you want it to become a city of sorts, where people didn't have that sense of displacement and there was more

permanency to their lives? What would that look like?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: What we tried to move on is, again, changing the way of how you see and look at the place. They looked at it anyway as a city, as a living space.

STEPHANIE SY: They did?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: They did. We looked at it as a storage facility, and the Jordanian government certainly as well. Now, where shall this go? It is not a question of what do you want or not? It is a fact. It had become a city. But applying humanitarian standards, applying different ways of managing a place like this, which don't correspond to the needs of a city, that's where it becomes problematic.

So what I wanted was to replace the humanitarian logic by normal city logic, which would have been much more sustainable. I wasn't saying, "We are creating here a city for the next thousand years." What I'm saying is, "We create a space which is managed; whenever 100,000 people live together, it has to be managed absolutely according to an urban logic."

STEPHANIE SY: Part of that logic for you has been about technology and about innovation. Talk about some of the ideas that you had that could have improved lives at low cost, or in ways that the aid agencies could have actually used to make people's lives better.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: There are two elements.

One is, again, use the know-how we have—how you distribute water, how you manage water, how you set up infrastructure. That is one part. In that, of course, we know today we have smart cities. Why can smart city concepts not be applied to refugee settings? We have the [Internet of Things](#), which could easily be adapted to also poorer environments. The Internet of Things doesn't belong only to the rich. It can also belong to the poor.

For instance, one big issue we had in the camp was when parents had to do something and couldn't leave their kids alone because when they left their kids alone it was dangerous for the kids, such as tent fires in the beginning. You could easily have warning systems in the neighborhood. You could have communication connectivity between different homes.

Technology when it comes to also access to aid was, for instance, a major changer in the Zaatari camp. What is very inhuman is when people have to queue up to get something they don't want.

STEPHANIE SY: Like what?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Like food. We all have different tastes. We all dress differently. We all have different requirements in our daily lives. Here is somebody like me who decides what they eat, how they dress, how they live.

STEPHANIE SY: And you have to line up.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: And you have to line up. Every two weeks you collect some food, which you really hate when you have to eat the same stuff for months and months and years and years. We decided you have to go to the toilet together. We decided you have to clean the toilets together. We decided you have to cook together. That's all sorts of decisions which are made on your behalf. We can change that.

When the World Food Programme changed from food aid where people had to queue up to supermarkets where people could go and shop and make decisions, limited decisions, of how much they would get for their \$1 a day, which is what it cost to feed somebody there, that was changing from an aid/charity recipient with, I would say, lack of dignity, to a happy shopper with a shopping cart.

STEPHANIE SY: That's what it comes down to is what it sounds like you're saying. It comes down to how do you preserve human dignity—and also agency, that sense of "I can make choices."

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: People there made these choices themselves. They wouldn't wait for us to set up the supermarkets, which took about two and a half years to set up, but they were setting up their own shops. They invested. There are 3,000 shops in that camp today with—nobody really knows how much their monthly turnover is; we think it's about \$15 million that changes hands in this camp every month.

STEPHANIE SY: Wow!

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: They brought in all the things, all the commodities we wouldn't distribute. They were selling the aid goods for cheap money—as well, there was also some form of a mafia coming up—and, on the other hand, bought things which made their homes different—different curtains, different colors. For Syrians it is very important to set up a fountain at home where you sit and you have a cup of tea and you have a birdcage and you have plants. That was part of the dignity.

STEPHANIE SY: Can you describe that a little bit more? Describe the dwelling in a refugee camp where there would be a fountain and a birdcage.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: That's the principle. We looked at 100,000 people. We divided 100,000 people by five, which is the number of tents or living containers, whatever you call it, you have to issue. We would put them in rows.

What they did is they didn't stay in rows for five minutes. They changed them. They put them together. When they got these, basically, containers, they cut them into pieces, built something else out of this—they built shops; they built different homes; inner yards. They made sure it became very personal. "The right to individualism" I called it as well. People really wanted to be different. They wanted to be different from their neighbor. They wanted to say, "Come and see my home."

There, for the Syrians, we even found people building a fountain out of little stones and cement and so on. In the very early days, when they just had a tent, they would put tents around and have the fountain, just to sit there and have their cup of tea. Later, they built their homes with prefab parts and elements and so on.

But the first part was: "Somewhere where I say, 'This is where I sit. That's me, that's me and myself, and I'm different from my neighbor.'"

STEPHANIE SY: That seems like a natural human instinct. Also, I think, there is an instinct to work. What were most of these people doing for work? What were their opportunities?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Unfortunately, again, Jordan, like most refugee-hosting countries in the world, did not allow the refugees to work, because: "You're something special; certainly don't become too comfortable."

Again, that is wrong. Strong people will make strong decisions. They will make strong decisions to return when they can and will also invest back in their home country. That is also one of the paradigms we have to change. Invest in people, make them as strong as you can, so they will contribute to your economy; and also, of course, be stronger when their country, or their region or whatever, becomes livable again. That is one part.

But yes, they cannot work. So people had a problem of access to organized work. What happened was, like everywhere else, as they were fabricating their new homes, they didn't listen to us, messed up the entire planning of the place, and designed it in the way they did, they needed plumbers; they needed to steal the electricity, so they needed 250 electricians to do that. What that meant, as well, was basically setting up electricity companies selling the connections. This is what they did.

STEPHANIE SY: So there would be sort of these black markets everywhere?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: There were black markets because that's not part of the aid system.

So they were kind of busy the whole day. It drove us crazy because they stole everything that was communal facilities. They dismantled 85 buildings—some of them were made out of cement blocks, concrete blocks—up to the foundation everything was taken—because, again, who wants a communal toilet? So they built private toilets.

STEPHANIE SY: How did you deal with that? Someone described you as "the mayor of Zaatari." How did you deal with those issues while you were there?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: I was also compared in one [article](#) as "a mix between [Bruce Willis](#) and a bulldozer," or something.

STEPHANIE SY: Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* or . . . ?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: I had to be quite strong, in terms of saying "this is yes," "this is no." I had to be more macho than macho. It's a very male-dominated society as well. It was very important to, first of all, of course, understand different visions and bring them together. I remember that very strong moment when three little boys had perished in a fire.

STEPHANIE SY: At the camp?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: At the camp. People were very annoyed and they overran our place, with angry men throwing stones, hitting us, and so on. Then, somehow, we managed to cool them down and have a discussion. Then we had a discussion on: What should this place look like? How do we manage services? How do we manage the space? How do we manage everything together?"

Suddenly, they said, "Look, if only part of this we can change, we will not throw stones and rocks at you anymore. We will"—I was a bit exhilarated—"shower you with flowers." Then we agreed we had to plant the flowers first.

STEPHANIE SY: Yes.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: The result was we started moving and setting up kitchen gardens. When I left, back in 2014, I must say one of my worst enemies from before was planting little flowers in front of my office container.

STEPHANIE SY: So you were sort of showered with flowers in some way.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: We all showered each other with flowers. The point was to change that whole concept of it's a horrible place into it's a lively, bubbly living space.

STEPHANIE SY: You are talking about the systemic difficulties and the incentives that aid agencies have to change. You are also talking about aid. When you look at solutions, to dismantling maybe the old narratives and paradigms that might be trapping these people in lives without dignity, where do you begin?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: How do you turn this all around into a big opportunity? Again, moving away from the whole idea that these are just a burden because we have to feed them—they want to feed themselves.

That also is linked then to who is actually providing and working on the solutions. I think here, again, the public sector can do a lot; the private sector can do a lot. Receiving areas, which in the majority of the world are poor areas—that's where the old rule of "poor plus poor is double poor" applies currently. So poor refugees and poor migrants are coming into poor areas and neighborhoods, and they actually become really a burden in that sense, because nothing is happening around them. Already the almost nonexistent infrastructure is exploding basically.

Look at a place where we are now beginning to do some work, which is Northern Iraq.

STEPHANIE SY: In Kurdistan.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Kurdistan. There is the city of Dohuk. It has doubled its population over the last three years. So now is the answer in that to set up camps for 700,000 people; or is the answer to deal with the issues which the mayor of Dohuk has, the governor of Dohuk has, which is more solid waste production? The place has four times as much solid waste a day than before—sewage, water. Affordable housing would be maybe the way forward.

Again, production, investment, and creating of jobs. Instead of throwing money for the next 20 years on aid, move it away and say: "Yes, of course we have to provide survival aid for people who come—that's clear, first, aid—but then move into investments where, whether it's refugees or whoever is there, it is still beneficial to everyone." That becomes, in fact, a trigger, an incubator, for change.

STEPHANIE SY: There are some [1 million migrants and refugees that made it to Europe](#) last year, many of them in Germany. Do you feel like the German government is prepared in these ways that you talk about to capitalize on the human capital that is coming in? Are they equipped to do that, with the numbers that we are talking about?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Germany, I think, is a very interesting case. Here we have a very rich nation, one of the richest in the world, with an enormous need in terms of workforce. I can tell you that industry has a very big smile in Germany. They are saying, "Finally we are getting the people we need."

Interestingly, it is quite often not really directly linked to unemployment. In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs that they cannot find anybody to do. In that sense, in Germany you will have the politicians screaming, "Help! We cannot deal with so many people." But you have, in fact, many mayors and, for sure, the private sector, saying, "Yes, please, bring more people. We need more people because we are dying off. We are not making enough babies. Demographically we need new people." Europe needs over the next 20 years some 50 million people if it wants to maintain the

same level of production, of income, and, of course, to cover the costs of the aging population.

STEPHANIE SY: That is an example of where Chancellor [Merkel](#) really saw the potential for opportunity, the type of narrative that you are talking about.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Yes, she saw the opportunity. She didn't move far enough to come up with a vision of what is in fact the society of our future. The society of the future, which is already by all means a mix of all sorts of people, even in Germany—we may not be as diverse as, let's say, where we are sitting now, in New York, but we certainly are very diverse already—but the diversity will have to grow further. In fact, in a way, with the globalization, the mix of people is a bit boring, because we will all look more or less the same after a while. But she didn't come up with that vision.

However, again, I am saying the million people helped, and we should be thankful to those million people, with all the difficulties, the dangers, the money they invested to come, because it has been shaking up the political system. It has been an incredible moment of the civil society waking up, people looking at issues. We are discussing refugees and migration at every corner. People who had never been thinking about this for the last 20 or 30 years, because we were too rich, are discussing it now.

We are suddenly saying, "Ah, maybe we have also to rethink aid, we have to rethink the way of how we distribute resources." We are still pretty much in the old colonial mode of—I call it the "[SimCity](#)"—collecting of resources, little boats coming from all over the world, bringing timber and rare earth metals into our big cities; and we become richer and richer; and all that we do in a way is we are sending some luxury goods back to the elites of poor countries. That is, in a nutshell, how this still functions.

But that system is now challenged. I find it absolutely amazing and crazy how everyone is now waking up. I mean big entrepreneurs, big companies, corporations—they all say, "How can we change this?" Yes, we have to change something, because it is just the beginning of a world with greater mobility, a world where through globalization and information exchange you can't keep the poor in that corner of the world and they don't come to you.

STEPHANIE SY: Really are you talking about sort of a borderless world?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: I think yes, in a way. We shouldn't be afraid. There will be always a natural regulation, in the sense of people go where there are opportunities. On the one hand, we have to think of how we do more so that people do not have to migrate; but at the same time, we have to also do more so that people can migrate.

STEPHANIE SY: A lot of the backlash that I have been reading about in places that have received a great number of refugees—places like Germany or Sweden—a lot of the backlash is local people who feel like, "Well, I didn't get job training and I didn't get the sort of economic—" That conversation is also happening here in the United States, with the immigrants who are coming here from Central America. A lot of times you will hear interviews with local residents of towns that have received refugees who will say, "Well, I'm not even getting that support from my own government."

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: There is a point to that. Besides that, we are sitting here in the biggest refugee nation on Earth—I mean everybody here fled from something or was moving for new opportunities over the last few centuries. The United States, Canada, Australia are perfect examples.

STEPHANIE SY: It was built on refugees and immigrants.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: They were built on this whole concept of people coming.

When the Germans came, they were very strange and strangely looked at, back in the 19th century, and so on, running away from poverty and political persecution and so on.

What it should actually provoke—and this is also what, at least in Germany, I can see—is we are rethinking social systems. What is dangerous—and I agree with this—is then to say, "We should give less because these are the migrants, these are the refugees, so they should get less."

But suddenly, we are discovering we have forgotten about social housing, affordable housing. Again, the logic was—after the [Second World War](#), Europe built millions and millions of cheap apartments because it had to; it was all destroyed. That created a whole social housing market. That was replaced by the eagerness of the banks to sell you a private home. The result is that in places like Germany and many others over 48 percent of the homes are privately owned today, which is, on the one hand, also affecting mobility. But it certainly doesn't give the same access to the poor people.

It is true. What we have seen is, of course, the newcomers initially, many of them, push into the space of the poorer people. That is for labor; it is for accommodation; it is for a number of things.

But also we shouldn't forget in Europe, which is true, that Europe has gone through that borderless Europe expansion with the massive expansion towards the East, which was very fast, and which brought also a lot of people into, let's say, the more wealthy parts. So the Germanies and Hollands and so on are full with basically migrants from the East.

STEPHANIE SY: From the Baltic States.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: The Baltic States, Eastern Europe, Poland and so on, Romania, and Bulgaria.

That has created a lot of competition in, let's say, the lower sections of income and reduction of the social housing, the affordable housing market. So it should be a push for us to rethink the social systems.

STEPHANIE SY: I think [Bono](#) wrote in an [editorial](#) recently in *The New York Times* that there should be sort of a new [Marshall Plan](#) to address these issues. Is that what it is going to take? And do you see that the richer, more industrialized countries are going in that direction? The last I read, the United Nations was saying they had like 40 percent of what they need to address aid even for Syrian refugees.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: But again, I think we have to move away from that logic that you just give more and so on. It's a greater responsibility for all states. I am glad that I will be very soon involved also with the German government in shaping, let's say, a new concept of aid.

So there is a lot of rethinking of how we actually work on, not preventing conflict—there will always be conflict—but we have to do more about climate change; we have to do more about extreme poverty—after all, we have to sustain development goals. We are saying that in 15 years nobody will be poor anymore. It is not going through this logic of "Oh, we just give more money." It has also to go through a logic of new, different partnerships. It has to go through the logic of saying: "In fact, the world has an answer to everything already. We have answers to energy problems, we have answers to how to clean up water, we have answers to medical issues, and we are improving them all the time." Some will say it is maybe too scary at times, the technologies we have already.

But what is happening, unfortunately, is it is not moving to where it should be used most. If I look at Jordan again, which has such a burden of so many more people, it has no drinkable water. But it has the Red Sea and it could very easily use desalination to water its deserts. It could have enough water for everyone to live off right now. We are talking about eventually the whole Middle East is going to dry up and, to an extent, it will come to more conflict and so on. So why are we not investing into water technology?

STEPHANIE SY: Into technology.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Into technology. I would say that, for instance, a very simple method is that the nappies for babies contain a product which if you would mix it up with soil binds water. So you can actually have very dry soils revitalized and be able to capture all the water which comes maybe once a year or so. These are simple things, very simple things.

STEPHANIE SY: A lot of these technologies you talk about—and you have talked about 3D printing and perhaps using that to produce prosthetics in refugee camps—they are cost-efficient as well.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Absolutely. Again, let's use the connectivity we have. It is not anymore the doctor who has to save lives traveling from New York to Southern India and does some surgery there also. Telemed centers are very easy. You have connectivity in many places. You can put it into engineering and culturing.

You have in any society today—we always think, "In Africa you will not find anything." Many African countries are very advanced already. There is technology used—not in our places—and you can build up on that.

Let's take Kenya. Kenya has, by the way, developed [Vision 2030](#), very innovative, moving ahead on poverty reduction, on water, on energy, and so on. But it has also one of the most advanced systems for money transfer. You don't need banks anymore in Kenya—sorry to the bankers—but there it happens with your mobile phone. Everybody is paid and is paying for services with mobile phones.

STEPHANIE SY: So there are all these tools that are working in different places. I guess your vision is to use them globally. Is that what your new venture is?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: That is what we are trying to do. We call that [Switxboard](#). It is basically a switchboard between what the world can do and where there would be opportunities—let's call it opportunities, not needs—to use the know-how. Whether it is good old engineering capacity, management know-how—any skills—or whether it is top-notch technology which really is a game changer, it doesn't matter.

But what is happening right now is only known to a very small portion of the world. So let's dig this all out, make it visible. That is what that brain is in the middle—we call it Switxboard—needs to find and make available.

Why do we call it Switxboard? Because it needs to still connect. We don't function only by virtual connectivity. We also function because we have human relations. So we say we need an operator who connects and makes sure that there is a communication. If somebody has invented something—let's say someone in Kenya has invented a process—he or she can move that, with our help, if you want, with the help of that Switxboard, to Northern Iraq; or Northern Iraq moves an invention back to Germany, or something. That connection is what needs to take place.

STEPHANIE SY: You were with the United Nations for 25 years. Why did you end up leaving the auspices of the United Nations?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Because I was always a rebel, I cannot deal with established systems. Even though I believe everybody—I worked for a great organization, the UNHCR—but, even there, it is very difficult to move with the speed of the world.

Just to tell you, it took UNHCR, the UN system, years to accept Skype as a communication tool. So they were spending millions on communication because Skype was considered dangerous. It takes ages to have a little innovation really move, and that innovation at that point is already totally outdated.

So let's move at the speed of the times. I decided that changing the system from within is maybe not what is functioning. The system will have to continue and has absolutely a very important value to rescue and save lives. But let's try to find that other world and bring that other world, with an incredible, let's call it, firepower, to move on, to add on, and actually replace a system of charity with a system of equality, of sharing, and having everyone have access not only to human rights but also to what the world knows how to do.

STEPHANIE SY: Can most of the people who are at Zaatari be defined legally as refugees, or are they economic migrants, or is it a mix of both?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: They obviously fled a war, and the war in Syria is one of the most brutal conflicts we have seen for a while, with 1,000 militias and horrible crimes against humanity being committed.

Of course, once they are there, then they are thinking "How do we move on with our lives?" After five years of being basically kept in limbo, without real chances for a proper life, they are thinking about their children, trying to avoid the lost generation we are talking about. It is for them a very important value that they can see that there is progress and movement in their life. That's why many of them decide, not only from the camp but from the whole Middle East and from many communities in the world, to move on.

STEPHANIE SY: Is that an important distinction? You are talking about who is going to be granted asylum in Europe, for example. You have not just Syrian refugees making the journey across the Mediterranean; you have people from Afghanistan; you have a lot of Eritreans that are fleeing forced conscription. How would you categorize those people?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: I think, certainly we shall not and cannot touch the Refugee Convention in the current climate, where people are already doing everything they can not to follow what the Convention is saying about protection of people.

However, in fact, we should enlarge it—we must enlarge it—because the reality is that when people do not have access to their human rights, and that means poverty—let's look at the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)—if you don't have access to water, to work, to health; even leisure is actually a human right. What do people do in this case? To become very cynical, we could even say, "Please buy our guns, start a war, and then you are allowed to come because then you become a good refugee." That we need to change. If the only chance right now to check into another country is either being very rich—that's what we do when we go on holidays or we decide to settle somewhere—we can do it because we've got money. But they can't. So we need to find new ways for also poor people to move up.

Let's not forget, again, most of the people who are on the move are poor, and they are not moving to the rich countries; they are moving to slightly richer areas; they are moving to urban centers. Urbanization is one result of exploitation, climate change, extreme poverty, and so on. That is why we are calling this desperate migration as well—"I am moving to a little better place because I have absolutely no chance to survive where I am." So we need to really look into those issues.

A good thing is that here in New York we will have the first [summit](#)—I think since the Second World War, actually—on the topics of desperate migration and refugees on the 19th of September, in the wake of the General Assembly of the United Nations. That will be, hopefully, the moment where we say: "We need the Refugee Convention as it is; but we also need the agreement on the rights of people and how to help people who have no other choice but moving away from the place where they are. If we don't allow this to happen, then we will really have a world which is not only unjust but becomes unlivable even for the rich."

[Editor's note: For this question, Kleinschmidt showed examples of the technology he is talking about. Please watch the final video clip on the video tab or watch it on YouTube [here](#).]

STEPHANIE SY: One of the things you have talked about is the opportunities for innovation and the use of technology in some of these refugee camps. I see you brought some props with you. These are examples of what could be done?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Yes, these are examples.

This, for instance, is very common today in our world. We help with prosthetics printed and assembled with the most modern technology, printed by 3D printers, assembled, and so on.

This particular hand has been done in Jordan by a Syrian refugee who lost a leg himself. He learned within two weeks how to use a 3D printer. It is a fantastic project of our partner organization [Refugee Open Ware](#). They are setting up maker spaces in Jordan where Jordanians and Syrians alike are connected to the world, to the lab community, the [fab lab](#) community of this world.

If there is a patient—this is one example, a hand—the information on that patient is shared. To simplify it, somebody says, "I've got time and I will help to develop a new hand, a new piece, a new something, and will actually do that in an open-source approach." So a hand like this one, instead of maybe costing \$500–\$600 apiece, you bring it down to \$50–\$60 apiece. It is not yet scaled up to the right extent, so there are only a very few patients benefitting from something like that. But that needs to be done.

If you just look at the Syria crisis, over 200,000 people have lost a piece of their body. And the technologies we have to help the blind—there are lots of blind people. People lost really incredible—they lost their capacities to live properly. At the same time, we have a lot of that technology. So why not share it, and why not equip the people themselves to deal with this?

STEPHANIE SY: That's terrific.

What's the other device that you brought?

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: The other one is another example of technology. This little thing here has been developed by a [start-up in Berlin \[AESD\]](#). It's called MONDIALAB. They didn't really know what to do with this. They invented this thing. Then they came to me and they said, "This is absolutely great for poor communities."

What is this? It's a testing device. It is basically—although there are some legal issues and you can't call it this—a medical lab. It has the same capacity as—I wouldn't say as a multimillion-dollar lab—as a real lab which tests you. This thing can test you for cancer, for Ebola, for malaria, for pregnancy, for anything that has to do with the most common diseases. It's a biomarker process. The thing costs about \$400, this little thing. You can have it in your pocket and it can do 5,000 tests without having to be charged.

That is, of course, a game-changer. When I am sitting in the middle of nowhere, I can test myself, because I've got a fever; I find out whether I have malaria or not; I transfer the results of that to a doctor who sits god knows where. I can not only consult with a doctor, but I can also provide, with geolocation, exactly a mapping of where we would have a malaria outbreak.

STEPHANIE SY: It's that connectivity you were talking about, too.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: It's again connectivity. It brings us down from this sort of logic—for instance, health is only accessible to the people who can afford it or who are near a big and costly facility. This makes health accessible to all of us. It is one example of thousands of products.

That is also what we would like, with the Innovation and Planning Agency and Project Switxboard to make more visible, and actually also help companies or inventors, start-ups, who have such products to scale them up. There we can, again, combine not only charity but also business. Why not? There has to be, of course, an economic logic behind this. But let's develop it and that will change the world. Things like that will change the world.

STEPHANIE SY: Kilian Kleinschmidt, thank you so much. That was terrific.

KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT: Thank you.

Audio

Kilian Kleinschmidt describes how he, together with the refugees themselves, transformed the Zaatari refugee camp from what the media called a "hellhole of humanitarian aid" into a lively living space with shops and even fountains. Indeed, the entire aid paradigm needs to be transformed, says Kleinschmidt, and he offers innovative ways to do it.

Video Clips

Kilian Kleinschmidt describes how he, together with the refugees themselves, transformed the Zaatari refugee camp from what the media called a "hellhole of humanitarian aid" into a lively living space with shops and even fountains. Indeed, the entire aid paradigm needs to be transformed, says Kleinschmidt, and he offers innovative ways to do it.

TV Show

Kilian Kleinschmidt describes how he, together with the refugees themselves, transformed the Zaatari refugee camp from what the media called a "hellhole of humanitarian aid" into a lively living space with shops and even fountains. Indeed, the entire aid paradigm needs to be transformed, says Kleinschmidt, and he offers innovative ways to do it.

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