



EUROCITIES statement on asylum in cities



Context

The number of asylum seekers in Europe is rising due to armed conflicts and political instability mainly in the Middle East and Africa. While the overwhelming majority of forcibly displaced persons seek asylum in countries bordering conflict zones, more and more people are exercising their right to seek international protection and to reach Europe. The increased securitisation of the European external borders has made it harder for refugees to seek protection through legal and safe routes. This has resulted in an increased number of refugees risking and losing their lives in their efforts to reach Europe. The trend of people seeking asylum protection in Europe cannot solely be considered an emergency situation but needs to be addressed as a structural issue requiring structural and effective measures that take human rights into consideration.

Cities in arrival, transit and destination countries in Europe are in a central position regarding the social, humanitarian and financial challenges caused by this situation. We have a particular role in the guarantee of basic protection to asylum claimants and in the reception and integration of newcomers in our society. Our cities are also the places where asylum seekers wait for a decision on their Refugee Status Determination process and where services are provided to them. Finally, it is in our cities that asylum claimants often remain as undocumented migrants if their asylum applications are rejected and return decisions are not applicable or enforced. Their exclusion from service provision would have a detrimental impact on social cohesion, public health and protection of fundamental rights.

Role of cities

As cities, we have a lot to lose from policies that consign asylum seekers to deprivation and exclusion or that put them at risk of becoming victims of abusive employers and landlords, smugglers, human traffickers and organised crime. Activities to manage the consequences of migration and support integration are largely carried out locally. Each city has specific situations to deal with and there are differences between EU countries when facing asylum issues. Sharing responsibilities across Europe today will be crucial to help ensure that those cities and territorial now taking measures to receive newcomers will still be able to do so in the future

It is our role to ensure that asylum seekers settle in well for the duration of their stay, however short or long. This requires systematic and concerted efforts at the local level with a range of stakeholders to provide professional social support and guidance for asylum seekers. Failing to integrate refugees into our societies impedes the respect of

fundamental rights as well as the full realisation of the benefits immigration can bring; it inhibits asylum seekers from making a contribution to host societies and can prove costly in the long term for local as well as for national authorities.

Cities also have a role to play in promoting positive public perception of asylum seekers¹ and a better understanding among the public of the need and obligation to grant them human rights and protection enshrined in national, European treaties and international law. The debate on asylum is often influenced negatively by a misperception of the real nature of asylum trends. We see the need for better communication to citizens on the push factors behind forcedly displaced people as well as positive stories of refugees' settlement in Europe. Many of our cities have already organised activities to help to foster community cohesion and demystify some of the prejudices people have about asylum seekers.

European cities and member states have to find effective and long-term solutions to protect social cohesion and ensure a successful social and economic integration of asylum seekers and recognised refugees.

We support the EU Commission's ambition to promote a new agenda on EU migration policy but we regret that this does not address the whole range of migration and integration issues especially with respect to the issue of asylum. We also support the European Parliament resolution² on the situation in the Mediterranean and the need for a better coordinated EU approach to migration. We look forward to contributing to the debate with cities' experiences and solutions found at local level, and recommend:

Measures to facilitate the integration of asylum seekers and refugees at local level

1. The adoption of specific measures to avoid physical and psychological harm to vulnerable persons at immediate risk of destitution, through the implementation of a coordinated approach at national and local levels. These measures have to ensure that fundamental rights (such as accommodation, subsistence, healthcare) of asylum seekers are met in full and that financial support is made available to local authorities by the EU and member states for the successful implementation of EU directives.
2. Sufficient financial support should be available to cities to help them offer asylum seekers quick and effective access to language training. Asylum seekers must have the right to be gainfully employed and be entitled to equal treatment, pending a definitive decision on their asylum claim. Recognition of their qualifications and of their entrepreneurial potential should also be facilitated. This would enhance their long term ability to contribute to local economies and society, before and after refugee status is granted, furthering their chances of better and faster integration in our society.
3. Voluntary return in its operational dimension is the responsibility of the national governments and relevant international agencies. However, city authorities, if they wish to do so, should be more extensively supported by European institutions, member states and international organisations to enable them to offer quality information to those rejected and those dropping out of the asylum procedure, as

1 EUROCITIES stands by the preamble of the Integrating Cities Charter and continue to “recognise and value the contribution immigration and migrants have made to European cities”.

2 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B8-2014-0362&language=EN>

well as to provide mediation and guidance regarding the voluntary return option and sustainable reintegration in their country of origin. In addition, more flexible, adaptable and truly voluntary return schemes should be designed together with city authorities, European Union, member states and international NGOs for migrants, including refugees.

Sharing of responsibility and solidarity across Europe

4. The establishment of a principle of mutual recognition of refugee or international protection status and the possibility of transfer of protection status across Europe for recognised refugees. They should benefit from the right of free movement and establishment in Europe as soon as they are granted refugee status.
5. The Dublin III regulation should be revised. This regulation puts pressure on the external border regions of the EU, where the majority of asylum seekers enter the EU and where local authorities are often the least able to offer a large number of asylum seekers adequate support and protection.
6. The European Commission and member states should consider making use of the 2001/55/EC Directive on temporary protection in the event of mass influx of displaced person as a measure to provide immediate and temporary protection. Cities should be involved in the implementation of this directive to allow them to prepare for the reception of and provision of services to asylum seekers.
7. City authorities should be directly consulted by the European Commission and the UNHCR as frontline operators and places where resettled refugees will need to integrate. City authorities should also be involved in decision making regarding resettlement quotas, financial assistance, integration models and resources. No resettlement scheme can be successful if a reception place is not available at local level, if local civil society organisations are not involved and if awareness-raising and consensus building amongst the local population are not properly managed. Financial support should be made available to build the capacity of city authorities considering taking part in resettlement schemes.

Funding for services provided at the local level

8. A better balance of European and national funding is needed between border protection and security and structural support for reception, and integration at the local level. This is even more important at a time when many cities have had budgets and resources cut due to austerity policies at the European and national level. In addition, adequate financial resources need to be available in the long-term for structural integration policies and not only for the pilot and mutual learning phase.
9. City authorities, being responsible for social services and social cohesion, are faced with the effects of large and rapid inflows of migrants ('emergency situation' as defined under article 2 and article 21 of the Asylum Migration & Integration Fund (AMIF)). They should therefore be included, alongside national governments and NGOs, in the list of bodies that are eligible for emergency financial assistance in responding to migratory pressure.

In full respect of national competences in the field of asylum, and the different situations in different EU member states, we stress the urgent need for a partnership approach.

As frontline service providers, often responsible for taking care of asylum seekers, city

authorities should be directly involved by national and EU institutions in the implementation of the Common European Asylum System, sharing responsibilities and ensuring a fair distribution of effort across Europe.

A more systematic involvement of cities, together with the changes we propose, will contribute substantially to Europe's ability to respond to one of its most urgent challenges and better enable cities to ensure the successful social and economic integration of asylum seekers and recognised refugees.