



Background note

EUROCITIES Social Affairs Forum and Integrating Cities conference 'Welcoming refugees: a city challenge'

Athens, 17-19 October 2016

Introduction

The plight of refugees poses a serious challenge not only for those fleeing conflict but also to European society as a whole. Europe's inability to agree on a joint solution in order to provide a humane response to those seeking asylum puts the continent in peril of growing disintegration and social and political turmoil.

Against the backdrop of a debate over quotas and borders, cities are facing the immediate challenge of providing for the needs of arriving asylum seekers and refugees while also organising for the long-term integration process of all newcomers. Cities are taking the lead in openly welcoming refugees and demonstrating that pragmatic solutions can be taken to effectively tackle this humanitarian crisis. As transit hubs and ultimate destinations for refugees, cities play a quintessential role in ensuring social cohesion in Europe for the years to come.

Aim and objectives of the meeting

The aim of this EUROCITIES Social Affairs Forum and Integrating Cities conference is to enable city authorities to highlight challenges and opportunities presented by the arrival of refugees and engage with European institutions and one another in devising joint and realistic responses to the challenges at hand.

Through a mix of presentations, debates, workshops, exchanges and a political side programme, this event will encourage city authorities to find the right tools to enhance their capacity to act and remedy social challenges in their cities. More specifically, the meeting will:

- highlight the local, humanitarian dimension and explore opportunities brought on by the refugee situation in Europe
- highlight the main bottlenecks for integration of migrants in cities and discuss joint-up approaches among local, national and European authorities to address these, including how European framework and resources can help cities address these challenges
- provide input into the implementation of the EU action plan on the integration of third country nationals
- explore possibilities to implement the 'solidarity cities network' proposed by Athens
- exchange knowledge and experience on approaches to refugee reception and integration- showing examples of how local authorities are welcoming refugees and how these can be scaled up and transferred to other cities
- provide an opportunity for cities to reaffirm their commitment to the Integrating Cities principles
- share the latest EU and EUROCITIES developments, including funding opportunities and the continued implementation of forum priorities in 2016.



Background: Integrating Cities

- EUROCITIES has been active for over a decade in providing input on the role of cities in the reception and integration of migrants and newcomers.
- Our work in this area is led by the working group migration and integration made up of over 30 cities and currently chaired by the city of Helsinki and vice-chaired by Athens.
- Integrating cities was launched in 2006 in Rotterdam as a policy dialogue between EUROCITIES and the European Commission to promote local level implementation of the EU integration agenda. It is underpinned by:
 - **The EUROCITIES Charter on Integrating Cities:** launched in 2010 and signed by 35 cities¹ to date. The charter harnesses the duties and responsibilities of European cities to provide equal opportunities for all residents, to integrate migrants, and to embrace the diversity of their population, which is a reality in cities across Europe. It lists 11 commitments that cities sign up to in their role as policy-makers, service providers, employers and buyers of goods and services.
 - Integrating Cities Conference series (the last conference took place in 2013 in Tampere).
 - EUROCITIES projects on mutual learning on migrant integration, co-financed by DG-Home Affairs through the European Integration Fund. Past projects include INTI-Cities, DIVE, MIXITIES and ImpleMentoring which concluded in 2014.
 - Support from the European Commission through the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" to develop our work on social inclusion of migrants and refugees.
- The **EUROCITIES statement on asylum**², published in May 2015, recognises the urgent nature of this phenomenon and calls for longer-term perspectives to assist in the integration of asylum seekers into our societies
- EUROCITIES is part of the "Urban Partnership on integration of migrants", initiated by DG REGIO in the framework of the EU Urban Agenda, and coordinated by the city of Amsterdam.
- In April 2016, the mayor of Athens issued a proposal that was accepted by mayors of EU capital cities calling for a **solidarity cities network** to facilitate the synergies and exchange of information necessary for a comprehensive and effective response to the refugee crisis.
- The city of Athens was selected to host the Social Affairs Forum as it has been at the frontline in this emergency situation receiving large flows of refugees and managed to play a crucial role in providing urgent solutions, mobilizing forces and calling for unity and cooperation at all levels.
- This meeting will build upon and complement ongoing EUROCITIES' activities in the field of migrant integration, including the Economic Development Forum taking place on 26-28 October in Stockholm, Nacka and Solna on the theme of local economic activities to foster migrant's integration, such as supporting migrant entrepreneurship.

¹Signatories as of May 2016: Amsterdam, Athens, Barcelona, Belfast, Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, Genoa, Ghent, Helsinki, Leipzig, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Malmö, Manchester, Montpellier, Milan, Munich, Nantes, Nuremberg, Oulu, Oslo, Paris, Rennes, Riga, Rome, Rotterdam, Stockholm, Tampere, The Hague, Toronto, Toulouse, Utrecht. Download Charter at <http://nws.euocities.eu/MediaShell/media/CharterforWebFINAL.pdf>

²<http://nws.euocities.eu/MediaShell/media/Final%20EUROCITIES%20statement%20on%20asylum.pdf> .



Useful reading and resources:

- EURO CITIES, March 2016, [Refugee reception and integration in cities](#)
- EURO CITIES, 2010, [EURO CITIES Charter on Integrating Cities](#)
- EURO CITIES, 2015, [Cities and migrants: implementing the Integrating Cities Charter](#)
- EURO CITIES, 2014, [ImpleMentoring Final conference video](#)