

## ***Reception and integration of refugees Cities on the frontline***

**Policy Dialogue – 4 April 2016**

### **Summary**

In the past year, hundreds of thousands of refugees have entered Europe; many of them have been received and were later housed in cities. But despite cities' frontline role in receiving and integrating migrants, the public discourse does not always acknowledge this. This EPC Policy Dialogue addressed the role of cities in the implementation of integration policies and how they go about delivering public services such as housing, education, health and social services to the new arrivals. The discussion benefitted from the presentation of EUROCIITIES' recent report 'Social Affairs Refugee Reception and Integration in Cities', which highlights the emerging trends and best practices regarding the ways in which cities are responding to Europe's refugee situation.

### **Full Report**

**Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary General, EUROCIITIES**, the co-sponsor of this event introduced EUROCIITIES' recent report 'Social Affairs Refugee Reception and Integration in Cities'. The report highlighted the emerging trends and best practices regarding the ways in which cities are responding to Europe's refugee situation. Boni noted that most of Europe's expertise in dealing with refugees lies at the city level. The role of cities as first points of arrival, transit hubs and ultimate destinations has been well established and acknowledged at both national and European levels.

Boni reiterated that cities are on the frontline when it comes to implementing Europe's integration policies. The study confirmed that cities have shown strong leadership and the ability to coordinate different city services and external stakeholders.

While the majority of citizens have reacted positively to new migrants, Boni claimed, she does not underestimate the tensions caused by politicians playing on the fears of the general public.

**Thomas Fabian, Deputy Mayor of Leipzig, Germany and chair of the EUROCIITIES social affairs forum**, informed attendees that Leipzig had received and integrated five thousand refugees in 2015; this was close to double the number that the federal government had told them to expect.

Fabian noted that EUROCIITIES social affairs forum offers a platform to discuss migration and refugee issues and exchange best practices. He berated the tendency to focus on the problems rather than solutions, noting that cities had no choice but to find solutions.

Leipzig is committed to housing refugees in different areas across the city as it aids integration by working against the concentration of migrant communities in particular areas of the city. Fabian stressed that there are serious health, education and social issues that have to be taken into consideration when integrating refugees, citing the educational examples of finding kindergarten places to placing refugees in apprenticeships.

According to the Deputy Mayor the key element of integration is employment and this is dealt with from day one he states, in terms of offering refugees languages classes and support and exploring employment and

training options, from their initial reception. He also said that private partners have a role to play in the housing of refugees and in managing their integration into the labour market.

In terms of fostering inclusion Fabian believes it is important that migrants engage with the range of social, health and education available services they have to learn to help themselves, although he acknowledges that assistance should be offered where required. But he rejects the idea of separate services as this would limit engagement with local people and work against integration into the broader society.

**Heather Roy, Secretary General, Eurodiaconia** a network of churches and Christian-based organisations, present in thirty-two countries with more than thirty thousand service providers, said that some of their members are involved with only reception activities, others cover integration work and others still do both.

Roy said it is important to note that their members deal with refugees, migrants and undocumented 'invisible' migrants. Eurodiaconia affiliated organisations first and foremost adopt a basic humanitarian approach to their work in providing food, shelter and support. This support can be as simple as handing out bottles of water and sandwiches to refugees as they arrive but it can also encompass a whole range of services aiding integration from registration to assistance in accessing local services such as education, health and social services.

Regarding undocumented migrants, Roy raised concerns on whether there was a danger that their fundamental human rights could be discarded, because they did not fit into the right legal category. However, she did acknowledge the intense pressure of local authority services as the number of refugees reaching Europe has gone well beyond anyone's expected projections.

Roy raised the case of local officials being misinformed and over officious, for example she had heard of a case of one group of migrants being told that it was against the law for them to use public funding.

She also noted that the lack of upfront funding to local service providers was hampering both reception and integration services for refugees, in that service providers on the ground were offering provisions without any clear commitment to be reimbursed, which could be especially problematic for smaller organisations. It was also said that there is a lack of psychological support for refugees, attendees were reminded that many refugees had come through extremely difficult psychological situations so it needed to be remembered that their needs can go beyond food and shelter.

Dhéret asked the next speaker **Valeria Setti, Policy Officer, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission**, what the European Commission could do more to assist cities and local authorities in providing better services.

Setti began by recognising and applauding the work cities had done and were doing in resettling and integrating refugees and migrants. She said the Commission had formally recognised the role of Cities in migrant and refugees' integration since 2011. She also stated that the Commission is currently working on a new action plan addressing the integration of migrants that would further recognise the importance and role of local authorities, including cities.

The Policy Officer also mentioned Commission led initiatives such as the European Migration Forum and round-table discussions with Mayors as clear examples of the European Commission pro-actively addressing issues of refugee and migrant integration, through working with the relevant local authorities and services who are operational on the ground.

Setti claimed the new Action Plan will show that the Commission is going further in terms of concrete actions and activities, going well beyond DG Home Affairs. She said there is a growing awareness that tackling the migration situation and dealing with integration requires strong partnerships between sections of the Commission as issues of integration clearly covers the remits of DG Employment, DG Culture and Education as well as other areas dealt with by the Commission. The Commission has created internal inter-service groups to coordinate the efforts of the different elements of the Commission which have a role to play in integration policies and practices. These efforts are said to represent the Commission's renewed commitment and enhanced focus in tackling migrants' integration.

The Commission is aware that competencies primarily lie at Member State level and it has no intention of stepping on the toes of Member States, instead aiming to support and enhance national efforts, focusing on adding value to Member States integration activities.

Setti also said the Commission is aware of the funding challenges around the issue of refugees and migrants integration. It is aware that the fact that the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) goes to Member States rather than directly to local authorities is viewed as problematic. She also recognised that overall not enough funding goes directly to cities and local authorities; this is expected to be addressed in the new Action Plan. The dissemination of information regarding innovative good practices in resettling and integrating migrants and refugees is another area in which the Commission envisages playing a stronger role.

## Discussion

**Dhéret** welcomed the fact that a more integrated approach to addressing the refugee and migrants' situation was now being put into place. She asked what more could be done. **Setti** said that gaining clarity as to when you will become a citizen is an important aspect of integration. She added that Europe can learn from the US, where migrants know exactly when they will receive their green card and when they will become citizens; this can be a key aspect of integration.

**Boni** said that EUROCITIES continued to work with a variety of EU authorities and agencies requesting that more structural funds and funding for operational programmes be made available to city authorities, who are on the frontline in meeting the reception and integration needs of migrants and refugees. She claimed there needs to be a paradigm shift with cities, local government and regional authorities coming together around the table to decide who is in the best position to provide the assistance that is needed at any particular time in each circumstance. In order for this to happen there needs to be a more systematic dialogue on how EU policies towards refugees and migrants need to be developed and better coordinated.

When asked about the housing of migrants, **Setti** talked of the excellent initiative to recruit landlords to rent houses to migrants. She said that more than two thousand landlords are involved in the programme. **Fabian** reiterated the importance of housing refugees and migrants throughout the city, both in terms of encouraging integration and minimising possible ghettos. But also to counter criticisms that migrants are housed in poorer areas, with the resultant pressures on local services.

Panellists were asked if they felt the EU had a moral and ethical obligation to deal with economic migrants, even if they did not have a legal obligation to these migrants who were after all only seeking a better life.

**Fabian** said that those refugees who are not rewarded legal status are not treated differently, many of them cannot be sent home, so they will receive services while they are in the country. If the migrants have to leave Germany this comes under the responsibility of regional governments not city governments.

**Roy** reiterated that their organisations meet the needs of undocumented migrants; they do not make a distinction between the status of refugees and migrants when it comes to providing humanitarian services. She also said there need to be more debates on addressing the challenges of 'invisible' undocumented migrants. Even though undocumented migrants may not be part of the official system, it does not mean they are not present in society.

It was also noted that the EU could possibly be more supportive in addressing the issues which push economic migrants to leave their home countries in the first place.

Regarding deeper assimilation, **Fabian** noted that problems can arise when refugees and migrants are told they do not belong here, in that this creates the danger that they will fall back on their home country identities. He believes authorities have to give migrants the best chance to integrate and become an integral part of society.