



Refugee policies for the intercultural city

Policy Brief



Intercultural cities
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INTERCULTURAL CITIES POLICY BRIEFS

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While local authorities do not have competence over Council of Europe member states' policies on the granting of asylum, they do have very considerable capacity to foster a 'welcoming culture' towards asylum-seekers and, particularly, to facilitate the building of relationships between those whose claims are successful, acquiring refugee status, and members of the host community. This is an important element of local strategies for intercultural integration – indeed for many larger cities one which has moved rapidly up the agenda and will continue so to do – particularly in those states which have accepted proportionately (Norway and Sweden) or absolutely (Germany) the most refugees.

The Council of Europe and its partner cities have developed an intercultural approach to issues of integration which enables cities to reap the benefits and minimise the risks related to human movement and cultural diversity. Its key elements are:

- Setting-up spaces and opportunities for deep interaction and co-creation between people of different cultural origins and backgrounds, to build trust and realise the creative potential of diversity;
- power-sharing – involving people of diverse origins in decision-making in urban institutions, be they political, educational, social, economic or cultural;
- fostering intercultural competence in public, private and civil-society organisations;
- embracing cultural pluralism and the complexity of identities through leadership discourse and symbolic actions; and
- managing conflict positively, busting stereotypes and engaging in a debate about the impact and potential of diversity for local development.

In much media reporting in recent years, refugees have been represented as the subjects and objects of merely instrumental behaviour – 'economic migrants' at the mercy of 'traffickers' – thus denying natural expressions of human empathy towards those fleeing conflict and oppression while occluding the contribution refugees granted asylum can make to their new home. Of course, states-party to the Refugee Convention of 1951 are obliged to offer asylum to those with a 'well-founded fear of persecution' in their country of origin.

But some municipalities, and NGOs, have sought in addition to give expression to that sentiment of empathy towards individuals fetching up in their locality, to engender a network of supportive social relationships. The more far-sighted have seen the potential which refugees can offer, over the long run, to local social, economic and cultural performance – an example of the 'diversity advantage' the ICCs network has sought more generally to exploit. Success in both these endeavours, however, depends entirely on a well-managed process of integration. These three themes are developed below.

'Refugees welcome': sending the right signals

Challenging xenophobia towards refugees entails replacing a notion of a collectivised 'self' and an alien 'other' by recognising individual diversity and a shared humanity. This can make members of the 'host' community feel more positive towards refugees and make the latter feel more welcome in their new home.

In September 2014, the municipality in Erlangen in Germany, which had been asked to accommodate 300 new refugees, organised a giant picnic around a banqueting table 180 metres along on the main street. Around 1,000 native Erlangers and asylum-seekers shared the experience, with the refugees invited to tell their individual stories and anti-rumour materials provided on placemats. The event attracted much, positive, media and social-media coverage, at a time when Germany's refugee intake was largely being represented in a manner raising public anxieties.

Refugees include journalists too, of course. And they can offer a different experience if given the opportunity by media organisations in the city to which they have fled.

Paris, a member of the International Cities of Refuge Network as well as the ICCs, supports the [Maison des journalistes](#) in the city, set up in 2002 to welcome journalists who have fled their country of origin and to help them rebuild their careers. It publishes its own journal, *L'oeil de l'exile* (eye of the exile) to give them a voice in their own right.

One of the most daunting aspects of the refugee experience is dealing with the public administration of the 'host' society – including not only language barriers but also the fact that impartial public rules may well be far from a typical experience in a country of origin riven with conflict or where the state is under ethnic control. Of course, things will be made much easier if there is a 'one-stop shop' for newcomers, including refugees, in the municipality of arrival.

Bergen in Norway has established an Introduction Centre for Refugees, which welcomes around 400 new refugees per year. This leads into a two-year introduction programme, for participation on which each individual is paid a monthly stipend, with the aim of preparation for employment or entry into the education system. Health care and psychological support to facilitate the adaptation of the refugees to the new societal context are also provided.

In Berlin, meanwhile, a group of Syrian refugees, mentored by the ReDi School for Digital Integration (see below), have been working on an app, ['Bureaucrazy'](#), which would store in a database all the possible official forms newcomers might encounter and translate them into English and Arabic. The app would offer multiple-choice-question steers through typically encountered problems and guide users to the appropriate municipal office.

Housing is an immediate need, and municipalities may find themselves under pressure from sudden refugee influxes. One option is to look to disused properties, especially if the alternative is camps, which may not only be inhospitable but also unsafe, particularly for women. In Athens, an empty seven-storey hotel was [taken over](#) in April 2016 by solidarity campaigners, housing some 400 refugees arrived via Turkey. The residents take part in collective administration, such as cooking and cleaning, and take management decisions democratically. This is in sharp contrast to the experience of refugees effectively trapped in camps on Greek islands.

Children have particular needs, of course, including that they start, or renew, their education as soon as possible. Language is an obvious barrier to successful introduction to the new schooling system.

In Neukölln in Berlin, 'welcome classes' have been established for refugee children. These give them a fast-track introduction to German over their initial six months to one year, so that they can make the transition.

Fully half of the world's refugees are under 18, according to Unicef. And refugee children, most especially unaccompanied minors, may well present acute symptoms of trauma which need highly sensitive and individualised attention.

Melitopol in south-eastern Ukraine has had to cope with internally displaced persons from the conflict area a couple of hundred kilometres east and Crimea to its south. One IDP started a project there, 'A Smile of a Child', involving a group of local activists, Mobile Group for Children's Development, including professional psychologists. They organise mentoring events for children (and their parents) in parks, courtyards, playgrounds, libraries and other public spaces. They raise awareness of the values of tolerance and peaceful co-existence, strongly supported in Melitopol, and offer individual psychological coaching.

Refugees who have suffered trauma or lost or had to leave loved ones may struggle to develop an integrated sense of self; meanwhile, they may feel perceived as the Barbarian at the Gate in the society in which they find themselves. The arts can offer an oblique way in which refugees can reconsider who they are and articulate who they have become – in a way which can humanise their experience to those for whom it is 'foreign'.

Botkyrka in Sweden runs a project called 'Connect, Create, Communicate: art as a language to make new voices visible'. The municipality's Multicultural Centre has made its arts studio into a mobile tool for visiting refugee centres to engage individual refugees in arts activities.

Refugees do need professional support of various kinds. But they are also individual human beings who need above all warm personal relationships in the strange new world in which they find themselves. Such relationships affect members of the 'host' community too – making them [significantly more likely](#) to believe their state should have a responsibility to help refugees. NGOs can make a big difference here in fostering friendships – something public agencies cannot really do, yet very important.

In several major German cities, including Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg, the NGO '[Start with a Friend](#)' (its slogan, *Aus Fremden können Freunde werden*) creates one-to-one friendships between refugees and 'locals'. The organisation engages and trains intercultural mediators to help match individuals. Nearly 1,500 of such 'tandems' have been created since the launch in April 2015. The '[Give Something Back to Berlin](#)' organisation has meanwhile organised some 600 volunteers to support around 50 projects – from cooking to arts to language-learning – to connect newcomers to social organisations in the city. These include monthly community meet-ups between young refugees and non-refugees, to mingle and introduce skills and hobbies to one another.

Copenhagen runs a [Host Programme](#) to facilitate encounters between newcomers, including refugees, and individuals willing to act as hosts – including 'culture hosts' to provide entrees into the city's cultural and community life. Key to its success is collaboration between the municipality and the Danish Refugee Council, which provides Danish conversation courses and information on local associations and activities, and another association focusing on educational and vocational aspects of integration. Nearly 200 hosts have come forward from the two organisations.

Turning 'huddled masses' into productive local citizens

No one wants to be defined as a 'refugee'. It perpetually recalls the trauma he or she may have fled and leaves them feeling passive victims of their fate, when they desperately want to build a new home for themselves and their families. By contrast, migrants in today's Europe may well keep on moving (or returning), while using new technologies to keep in touch with family back home. It is thus essential to turn refugees into 'citizens' as quickly as possible – and not just by the formal progression of their asylum claim.

If the 20th century was '[The American Century](#)', it was in large measure because of the invitation inscribed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, enticing the 'huddled masses, yearning to breathe free' to America's shores. World-leading innovations such as Hollywood and jazz cannot be fathomed without recognising the contribution of Jews who had fled the pogroms of eastern Europe. The link, scientifically, is via the contribution which '[cognitive diversity](#)', if well managed, can make to problem-solving.

In 2000, the European Union's Lisbon Strategy sought to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the new century. But such catch-up aspirations with the US, in productivity for instance, have not been [realised](#), as the successor Europe 2020 Strategy [recognised](#) – while mentioning Europe's 'cultural diversity' as an asset only in passing. The mayors of Paris, London and New York have however jointly [written](#): 'Investing in the integration of refugees and immigrants is not only the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do. Refugees and other foreign-born residents bring needed skills and enhance the vitality and growth of local economies, and their presence has long benefited our three cities.'

One of the strong features of Nordic approaches to integration has always been the so-called 'workline' – linking integration to insertion in the labour market. And the mayor of Stockholm, Karin Wanngård, has [said](#): 'The increasingly negative discourse surrounding refugees in Europe is worrying. Not only do we have a moral responsibility to help those who are fleeing war and persecution; refugees can also bring real economic benefits to Stockholm and the rest of Europe.'

Vejle, a Danish municipality with 109,000 inhabitants, has its own strategy for the housing of refugees. It is based on a fundamental belief in an intense 'introduction programme to the labour market' and a strong integration effort with which housing is combined.

In Paris – although the organisation is spreading internationally beyond France – [SINGA](#) offers refugees incubator space for them to develop their own projects, be they business, social or cultural. It connects individuals to those within the 'host' society with whom they need to develop relationships. And it organises events and workshops which can engage refugees and indigenous residents, building communities of professionals. SINGA runs a platform called [CALM](#) ('*Comme a la maison*'), which matches individuals with a spare room with refugees in need of temporary accommodation while they get their on their feet, facilitates an agreement between them and offers intercultural mediation as required.

Yet refugees often face many barriers to making a contribution, from issues of language competence to recognition of their qualifications. Their potential is thus not fully realised and they end up in positions undervaluing their capacities.

The Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg seeks to [ease the path](#) for refugees into the institution by orientation interviews, German courses and taster sessions. Indigenous students help by partnering and mentoring individual refugees.

Asylum-seekers in any event are stuck in limbo while their claims are processed. In Germany, for instance, this takes on average between 12 and 16 months, during which time skills attenuate and individuals can become demoralised.

In 2015 a young social entrepreneur set up the [ReDi School of Digital Integration](#) in Berlin, a co-creation between the tech community and its asylum-seeker students. It offers courses and workshops as well as providing co-working spaces for students and their mentors. The focus is half on programming, half on fostering a spirit of enterprise and building networks.

L&D Support, based in Amsterdam, has developed an [InCheck](#) system to assist in the assessment of refugees' competences, qualifications and potential career paths. Generating bilingual reports, it makes it easier for social and employment advisers to comprehend individual clients.

Individual mentoring can help, including through the commonalities established by shared professional expertise. Brokering relationships with potential employers is also key.

In Amsterdam again, [Refugee Talent Hub](#) is an open platform which brings together companies, public agencies and NGOs to match the talents individual refugees possess with the needs of employers. It helps bridge any gaps, for example by encouraging language training and internships while refugees are waiting for opportunities to appear. And Erlangen has brokered a relationship with Siemens, which the company has now replicated across Germany, offering internships to asylum-seekers.

Managing integration

In a globalised economy, there is no future for societies which try to put walls around themselves: Japan's two 'lost decades' have been as much about its [closure to newcomers](#) as its macroeconomic policy. Whereas Europe's economic powerhouse, Germany, accepts some 40 per cent of asylum applicants, in Japan only 0.2 per cent of refugees are successful with their claims. Local authorities which want to be competitive, therefore, need to go on the front foot by proclaiming their openness to the world, showing positively how humanity and hospitality can be winning values – and how hope can trump the fears stirred up by xenophobic populists. Hamamatsu is a Japanese municipality seeking to join the ICCs network. The city's [Intercultural Center](#) offers, among other things, 'global citizen' training courses, sending speakers to schools and community centres to improve understanding of foreigners living in Japan and Japanese who have lived abroad.

Malta has periodically been where waves of Mediterranean refugees have fetched up, via Libya, in recent years. Valletta, the capital, is keen to put itself on the wider Mediterranean map and its [intercultural strategy](#) has a large horizon: 'Valletta has the potential to change the terms of debate on "foreigners" in Malta, which is currently framed by defensive fears in response to global events in the neighbouring region, and economic problems across Europe, towards a valorisation of cultural diversity, managed in an intercultural fashion, and a more outward-looking perspective on the wider Mediterranean region. In and through this strategy, stakeholders in Valletta will develop and support best practices to make this a reality.'

The Council of Europe [White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue](#) defined integration as 'a two-sided process'. This made clear that the onus of integration does thus not lie entirely with the newcomer, as against the host society, while at the same recognising the importance of individual agency. Precisely because they may have been severely victimised in their country of origin or during their flight, refugees need to feel a sense of positive control over their lives – not just that they are passive recipients of welfare (or, worse, of abuse) in the place they wish now to call home.

Municipal approaches to integration therefore need to work with individual refugees and their associations, not *for* them. Across the Intercultural Cities network, a clear lesson has been that municipalities will perform much better in this arena if they work in partnership with members of minority associations. This is a key rationale of the co-ordination office for refugees established by Neukölln, liaising with the flotilla of NGOs and volunteers active in this arena.

Municipalities can and should, of course, work together for mutual benefit and information sharing – that is the driving rationale of the ICCs network. And, in the face of the reluctance of a number of European states to meet their obligations under the Refugee Convention, several cities have stepped up to form a ‘coalition of the willing’. The [‘Solidarity Cities’](#) network was launched in October 2016 during a EUROCITIES meeting in Athens, at the initiative of its mayor, Georgios Kaminis, with the support of Amsterdam, Barcelona, Gdansk, Ghent, Leipzig and Stockholm, among others.

The mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, said: “Where are our European values of solidarity, humanity and dignity when it comes to the refugee crisis? The response at national and EU level is clearly not enough, but cities have stepped up.” And it is now clear there is much good practice on which those who show the political will can firmly base well-meaning interventions.