



Study visit on Refugee inclusion

Bergen (Norway), 9-10 June 2016

Report

1. Background information

The flows of migrants and refugees coming to Europe from different cultural backgrounds and the consequent difficulties that European states are facing to adequately manage these are highlighting the gaps between the European commitment towards human rights and its practical implementation through effective policies on the ground.

Inclusive integration policies are at the moment key issues in the institutional agenda: policy makers have to tackle new dilemmas, while native citizens are confronted to a misleading perception of immigration as a threat and a source of conflicts undermining their own culture, welfare and security. However, in the present context, both sustainability and development depend on how successfully diversity is managed.

The Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme helps build societies that include everyone, capitalise on the benefits of diversity and migration and reduce the risks. It is now being expanded as part of the forthcoming Council of Europe's Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies. This plan aims to help protect Europe by tackling the rise of extremism and radicalisation, promoting Europe's fundamental values and reinforcing its underlying democratic security.

Among other activities, the ICC programme organises study visits and thematic events that expose a range of policy-makers and practitioners from each member city to practice exchange, reflections and discussions with fellow actors from other cities. The events use an interactive, hand-on format designed to bring energy and ideas into the strategy-making process and help build a stakeholder alliance.

The city of Bergen (Norway) has performed particularly well in the field refugee inclusion, and has thus been selected as the focus of the Study visit on Refugee inclusion.

2. Bergen – A short overview of its welcoming policies

Bergen is the second largest city in Norway, with a population of 277,000 inhabitants. The most important ethnic group –Norwegian citizens– make up 83% of Bergen's inhabitants. Foreign-born make up 15% of Bergen's total population, and there are 1.5% inhabitants with migrant background¹. The unemployment rate is around 3.5 % (reaching around 7% among migrants).

¹ In 2016 the top ten nationalities in Bergen are: Poland (6726), Lithuania (2248), Iraq (1918), Somalia (1837), Germany (1435), Vietnam (1354), Romania (1318), Sweden (1253), Chile (1246), Sri Lanka (1205). However, since September 2015, more than half of the asylum seekers to Norway have been from Syria but these have not been sent yet to Bergen.



Bergen has adopted a number of initiatives, including several welcoming policy instruments, which demonstrate its commitment to the intercultural approach. The City Council has adopted a public statement as Intercultural city (in 2014) and put in place a dedicated cross-departmental co-ordination structure for its integration strategy. Bergen has not allocated a budget for integration, as this has been considered as a cross-cutting field.

Furthermore, some services related to migrant integration as the Introduction Centre for Refugees and the Centre for Learning Norwegian are mainly funded by State grants. The city's services and agencies provide support tailored specifically for students, family members, refugees and migrant workers.

3. The Introduction Programme

In Norway, the government decides on the quotas of refugees² to be hosted in consultation with the city councils that set numbers according to their hosting capacity. In 2016 Bergen has declared availability to resettle 720 new refugees (including family reunification)³. Of these, 160 are unaccompanied minors (among the priorities of the city this year), 460 are adults, and 100 are children with families. In addition, the municipality is expected to receive another 100 people through family reunion.

The city of Bergen regrets nevertheless that sometimes the state level procedure to determine the status of the asylum seekers is slow and that the closure of the borders in South Europe has prevented some of the refugees to reach Norway. However the State, in cooperation with the city of Bergen, has also concluded an agreement with the UNHCR to receive people to be settled in Bergen directly from the refugee camps outside Europe. At least 80 persons are expected to be settled this year through this cooperation system.

Immediately after their arrival in Bergen, the refugees start a mandatory 2 year introduction programme aimed at qualifying them for a job or participation in the ordinary education system. The participants receive a financial benefit, considered as a sort of salary, of around 15 000 NOK a month to participate in this course.

The programme is among the largest in Norway, with around 600 participants. It is designed to accompany people that need qualifications, either in education or professionally. The newcomers that can be immediately integrated into the formal education system or in the labour market will not be requested to attend it.

From a gender equality perspective the programme gives equal rights to men and women. For instance, women also receive their personal bank account and allowance and for many of them this will be a completely new experience with which they need to get familiar.

The refugees are considered to be “normal people in extraordinary circumstances” and thus the programme has to help them restarting their life, taking into account both their personal

² The term « Refugee » refers here to people whose status has been already determined by the authorities and thus have received a residence permit. Also, the officials met during the visit do not speak about “integration”, that could be seen as a duty weighting only on the newcomers, like in the assimilation processes, but rather about “inclusion of a multi-lingual and multicultural population.

³ This doubles the hosting rate declared for last year



wishes and the context of the host society (values and habits). That is why the programme also provides comprehensive physical and psychological assistance including through the support of psychologists, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists that work both with individuals and in group therapies. For the very early phase, the programme counts with an interpretation and translation service from fifty different languages.

After the two-year introduction programme, around 40% of the participants will immediately integrate either the labour market or the education system, while another 40% will enter other qualifications programs like the so-called Second chance programme. The rest will continue receiving social assistance for specific reasons.

3.1 How it works in practice

Within the Introduction programme each participant is assigned a personal contact person (a professional) with whom preparing an individual action plan. The programme is based on the assumption that every participant has the potential to succeed.

The key elements of the programme are the Norwegian language and society course, the labour market training, the formal education programme, and the introduction to the health system.

The learning of Norwegian language is considered to be a prerequisite for a successful integration, being by law, both a right and a duty. Thus within the Introduction programme the city established the municipal Norwegian language school for newly arrived immigrants. In 2015 the school had enrolled around 3700 adult students. The course (600 hours for the full course, compulsory for migrants that want to obtain a permanent residence permit) is provided free of charge for the participants enrolled in the introduction programme. The Norwegian language school of Bergen has developed a specific teaching methodology based on the languages of the countries of origin, translating the Norwegian phonetic and alphabet into those of the main countries of origin.

For what concerns housing, the municipality has set up a specific housing programme for refugees. The city of Bergen owns around 3 400 dwellings for social renting to particularly vulnerable people with low incomes. Within these, families are given priority. Another way of finding accommodation is through the private rental market that is requested to provide this year another 260 dwellings. The municipality works to ensure that the private sector is open to rent accommodation to refugees and newcomers, and controls each rental offer to ensure that housing for refugees does not convert into urban segregation. The municipality further checks that the offers for accommodation reply to a series of minimum standards, including the connection with the public transport, and ensures that prices fit within the average in the market.

According to the most recent data, 70% of the people granted a residence permit find their housing without the assistance of the municipality. However, even in these cases, the contracts are framed by a rental Agreement intervening between the landlord and the applicant. The Agreement is previously checked by the municipality to ensure the conformity of the rental. Regarding social housing provided by the private market, the municipality pays



the guarantee deposit while the refugee signs an agreement with the community and commit to pay the rent.

4. The “Second chance”: work qualification centre for migrants

The refugees⁴ and other migrants who do not succeed to complete the professional, social and language training within the two years of the introduction programme (or other programmes) are given a “second chance” through the “Second chance programme”. The latter started in 2005 as a pilot project run by three professionals and is now a full public programme involving fifteen workers (including psychologists, health care professionals, teachers and IT experts, etc.) cooperating with the Welfare office of the city of Bergen. 160 participants enrolled this year but many others are on a waiting list.

The Second chance programme is mainly aimed at ensuring the integration of the participants in the job market and this includes the teaching of Norwegian language. Participants continue receiving the social benefit (15.000 Nok per adult + 27 Nok per day per each child) but if they find a job in the meantime, the amount of the salary is deducted from the benefit. Since the benefits are subject to taxes, this financial assistance is also considered as a tool for teaching the participants how to administrate money and how to pay taxes.

80% of the people enrolled are women with caregiving responsibility. Most of them are refugees from countries like Somalia, Eritrea and Iraq. In their countries they had low or no educational background, and still have little knowledge of Norwegian language, both reasons why they didn't manage to achieve full inclusion after the Introduction programme. At the Second chance, they all get a tailor-made personalised work plan based on their wishes compared to the social norms of the host society. They are followed by a contact person⁵ who establishes a close relation of trust with the participant, mentors she/he and monitors the progress towards the achievement of the goals. The Second chance programme is built around two main axes: Norwegian lessons and work internship. It includes vocational courses, a “job club”, conversation groups to improve the knowledge of the language, thematic courses on habits, social norms, IT skills, job search, and a health group.

Examples of dedicated projects are:

- The “Cook and Dialogue” course: it aims at teaching participants the catering professions while stimulating dialogue, self-confidence, and language skills. The participants enrolled in the Cook and Dialogue programme prepare for instance catering services for the public schools.
- “Of course I can” is a self-motivation programme designed for people in need of specific assistance. With the help of the mentor, the participants make an assessment of their own resources and set up a dedicated plan to be able to show off their working skills.
- Internship in private enterprises: this is a programme that provides traineeship opportunities in the labour market. The municipality finds and negotiates the terms of the traineeship and ensures that job opportunities follow in case the work provided has been satisfactory. Cooperation with the job providers works well particularly because the internship provides companies with low costs recruitment and a

⁴ Including former refugees, refugees, and family reunified persons.

⁵ Each contact person is responsible for a maximum of 18 refugees.



reputation of being a socially responsible brand. The Second chance supervisors ensure a close follow-up and provide specific guidance.

In addition, this year the local business association (owned by the city) has launched a pilot project to open-up 60 places for low skills migrants and refugees that will now enter into a specific working programme.

Last year 55% of the participants who completed the full programme at the Second chance, including the internship, integrated the job market. A State funded cost-benefit analysis carried out in 2011 showed that the Second chance programme is good value for money. This view is shared by the current government that has recently increased the funds to this programme.

5. The Bergen Reception Centre for Refugees

The city of Bergen counts with several reception centres for refugees. Some are run by NGOs and some other by private companies but all are framed by national law and funded by the government. We visited Landas Mottak, a transition Reception centre that is originally meant to host candidates to refugee status that are supposed to stay there up to three months. However, the delays of the procedure aimed at clarifying their status (one to two years) make their permanence longer.

Landas Mottak is run by an NGO and is located in a former high school that belongs to the Municipality. It has its own sport facilities and borrows free of charge three other gym facilities from the municipality. When we visited the centre, a total of 190 persons were hosted (they were 218 a few days before the visit). 80% of the asylum seekers are men who travelled alone. When they arrive to the centre, they need both physical and psychological support also because they are worried about the fate of the members of the family that they left home.

There are no unaccompanied minors at Landas Mottak since those are hosted in a dedicated reception centre. However, the centre hosts children that arrived with their families. According to the national law, every child that is likely to spend more than three months in Norway has the right to education. The municipality of Bergen has adopted a broad and proactive interpretation of the law and, supposing that children candidates to receive the refugee status will necessarily spend more than three months in Norway, decided to enroll them in school directly upon arrival at the Reception Centre. These children integrate all the schools of the municipality (to avoid school segregation); moreover in each of the seven districts of Bergen there are schools specialized in receiving non-Norwegian speaking kids.

The Reception centre has 50 full time employees (well above the average of the refugee centres run by private companies) and provides the first classes of Norwegian language. The hosts can work in the centre (in own cleaning and catering services) for around five hours per week, in return of a small incentive.

The centre cooperates with the police (they have weekly meetings to prevent possible conflicts) and with the NGOs that provide volunteers for helping the kids with their homework, animate discussion groups, and organize sport activities.



An interesting practice within this specific Reception Centre is that the hosts are organized in a “Resident council”, which ensures their democratic representation and participation in some of the decisions related to the functioning of the Centre.

6. The programme for unaccompanied minors

The Bergen municipality (through the Child protection office) has launched a specific programme for unaccompanied children who got the residence permit or refugee status. If the child reaches the age of 18 before her/his status is determined, she or he passes under the adult system programme.

Unaccompanied minors (UAM) are among the priorities of the municipality. These are children and youth in need of specific care and support. Since the year 2000 about 300 UAM have been resettled in Bergen; this year, the city has given availability for resettling another 160. In total, these kids represent more than 25 nationalities, although this year most of them are Afghan boys, Eritrean and Somalis of both genders, and Syrians. 80% of UAM are males.

There are huge socioeconomic, educational and emotional differences among UAMs, who are often in a “survival mode”, with different implications for the services to be provided. For instance, there are children who have been victims of family violence or child abuse, and at the same time young adults that have the necessary skills to integrate the university. This led the municipality to put in place an individual assessment of the needs of each child, both upon arrival and on a regular basis. The children that participate in the UAM programme are thus accompanied to express their wishes in terms of expectations from the welfare and assistance system, of plans for future, and of self-determination.

Early integration in the education system and access to job opportunities are considered to be essential in the inclusion process. The workers involved in the UAM programme have to build credit and trust, and invest time and energy in the first phase to build up an individual relationship with each kid. However, the results are good: for instance 90% of Afghan boys are either working or enrolled in higher education after four years in Norway. These are higher rates than the average of Norwegian born kids. Promoting self-motivation and the identification of each one’s talents and skills are considered to be key factors for this success.

The new ambitious targets set this year to increase the number of UAM to host suppose however for the municipality to put in place new strategies so to be able to ensure the same deep and individual follow-up to each kid. This is why the city has started cooperation with the private sector (mainly for job opportunities), and with so-called “support families” that can foster care.

7. The anti-radicalisation programme

Last summer the government of Norway approved an anti-radicalisation action plan, in response to the information related to a number of Norwegians travelling to Syria as foreign fighters (among 50 and 100).



The city of Bergen adopted its own anti-radicalisation action plan for the period 2015-2020 in September 2015, to be implemented in close cooperation with the police department. The Action Plan aims at preventing radicalisation in communities at risk. The implementation of the Action Plan is funded by a combination of city and state funding.

The AP includes activities aimed at preventing radicalization, such as:

- training courses for Imams to raise awareness about the dangers of radicalization; this course is organized in close cooperation with a local mosque;
- courses for teachers on how to address these matters in school and avoid polarisation of opinions. A hundred teachers underwent the training until now and the City will continue these courses;
- training in media and press freedom for the Muslim communities, to engage in a constructive dialogue on what does it mean to live in a society with freedom of expression, including on religious matters;
- dedicated discussion groups for vulnerable communities on conservatism and family violence, leadership and social integration.

However, the Action Plan also targets people that have been victims of radicalization or are in the process of being radicalized. In this field, the AP takes inspiration from a methodology developed in Denmark (Copenhagen) which has a special focus on the youth. The municipality of Bergen addresses this matter through a dedicated unit of 14 workers that operates in high risk areas schools and neighbourhoods.

As part of the Action Plan, the municipality pays attention to avoiding religious stigmatization/prejudice, polarization or manipulation of information, and the spreading of conspiracy theories by providing correct information.

The City of Bergen has also closely cooperated with the large Somali community in Bergen. A Somali imam presented the case of the local Somali community and the cooperation project that this community has implemented over the past few months. According to last available data the Somali community in Norway is mainly composed of young people (80% of Somali residents are under 40 years old). Somalia is a country which has been for almost thirty years without any political direction, meaning that its youth is not familiar with concepts such as rules, authority, leadership. From a religious point of view, the Somali population is overwhelming Muslim with, in addition, some very strong traditional values and a patriarchal societal scheme which differs from the traditions and habits of Norway.

For all these reasons, the indicators of integration (related to the knowledge of the language, access to employment, and education) show a big gap of this community compared to others. Most of the Somali refugees didn't receive education in their country and lack the necessary background to integrate the school system in Norway. Also, there is a family breakdown in Somali families and there are several incidents of family violence when they settle in Norway, mainly because the men cannot accept that their wives will have to work. Moreover, Somali society is based on sharing things and values while the Norwegian one is based on competence, self-sufficiency and results. These are the reasons that pushed this Somali Imam to approach the municipality with the view of preparing and adopting a specific preventive action plan on anti-radicalisation.



The biggest challenges to face were:

- the need to break down the barriers internal to the community (traditional, cultural and social);
- the need to install a permanent dialogue within the community on matters that are difficult to face/taboo;
- the need to get the trust of the targeted community, having in mind that being the target of an anti-radicalisation programme is a sensitive/difficult issue to bear;
- the need to raise the self-esteem of the community and shift the focus from the past to a reality orientation.

The programme is built on a “reality orientation”, i.e. on helping the Somali community to project itself into the Norwegian reality and find there new role models.

8. The public library: a place for social dialogue

The public library of Bergen also plays a key role in the inclusion of refugees and has a strong cooperation with the Introduction centre. It is a hub for cultural activities, provides books translated in several languages, as well as bilingual versions of famous Norwegian publications. Everyone can access and use the library without the need for papers or identity documents.

The library has a learning centre and some learning activities including a reading group, an IT club for immigrants - run by a Somali refugee - and a “Norwegian language café”, in cooperation with the Joint Immigrant Council in Hordaland.

Particularly in the past 5 years, the library has become a meeting place for dialogue and has increased the number of activities aimed at multiplying the meeting opportunities between Norwegian residents and the new-comers. For instance, the library organises events during which the refugees can present their countries through an historical and socio-cultural lens, and explain the reasons that made them feeling unsafe in their homeland. The last event of this kind was on Eritrea and the attendance of Eritreans and Norwegian was equal in proportions.

9. The cooperation with the NGOs

Participants to the study visit to Bergen had the chance to visit one of the premises of the Bergen Red Cross, which is the largest of Norway and exists in Bergen since a hundred years. The municipality funds many of the activities run by this NGO, but some other are financed through private contributions (both sponsors and members).

The Red Cross works in close cooperation with the city of Bergen, by supplying/complementing the public service with volunteer work. Among the main programmes:

- The Refugee-guides: this is a national Red Cross activity which works with Norwegian people willing to meet-up with refugees. It is about provoking matchmaking between locals and refugees that commit to spend time together over a 9-month period. These



meeting opportunities also provide a chance for refugees to practice Norwegian and get acquainted with bureaucracy or social norms, as well as for Norwegians to get knowledge about the social and political situation of foreign countries. Each year, the Red Cross in Bergen registers approximately a hundred connections between refugees and Norwegians in the frame of this activity. Another closely related project targets young adults (aged 15-25) and is implemented in cooperation with the Introduction Centre and the Child-Care Service, addressing especially UAM in need of building their own social network. This programme works on a more individual approach and aims at connecting UAM with Norwegian families.

- Conversation tables: this activity addresses all foreigners, regardless from their status. A hundred volunteers animate language courses based on practicing conversation (not grammar or writing). There are four courses per week, attended by around 300 people (one of them takes place at the public library).
- EVA: this is a programme targeting women victims of domestic violence, abuse and exploitation. It is an individual programme based on meetings one in one, completed by group activities aimed at reconstructing broken identities and improving self-esteem.
- Til topps: this is a multicultural hiking group which allies sport activities with self-esteem. Participants take the challenge of preparing together to hike the biggest mountain of the country as a symbol of achieving difficult goals.
- Multimix: this is a meeting place that provides a social network for young people (aged 14 to 29) from different backgrounds. This autumn the Multimix knew a record of participation from asylum seekers.

The Red Cross also cooperates in the implementation of the anti-radicalisation action plan of the municipality.

Another NGO which works on a regular basis with the municipality on refugee inclusion is Save the Children.

“A good neighbor” is the name of a project that Save the Children launched in Bergen in 2008 and that is now implemented in four of the most important Norwegian cities. The project is designed for families that have been settled in Norway (i.e. whose members received a residence permit) and it aims at easing the inclusion of refugee children in the Norwegian society. The situation of refugee children is very peculiar: they spend some time in a reception centre, facing uncomfortable living conditions but counting with the presence of both parents who most of the time are not working yet. However, once they are settled, the parents enroll in the introduction course, attend language courses or internships, and have less time to spend with their children. At the same time, leisure activities and spare time are key factors of participation in the life of the society. Based on these facts, Save the Children has designed a project that helps creating a sense of belonging by engaging refugee children in sport and leisure activities that are available within the community.

The volunteers map the activities available at local level, they match them with the wishes of the kids, and put in place a support system through the help of volunteering Norwegian families that “mentor” the newcomers until they are able to organize for participating in the chosen activities in an autonomous and independent way. For the family in special need, Save the Children also helps through financing the necessary sport equipment.



Once more, this project is carried out in cooperation with the municipality which identifies the families in need of assistance from Save the Children.

Interestingly enough, all the NGO met during the study visit said they don't need to struggle to recruit volunteers since there is a genuine will of Norwegian citizens to host and help newcomers integrate in the society.

10. Conclusions

The welcoming policies implemented by the city of Bergen are definitely an example of good practices and their success is proved by the very good rates of the main inclusion indicators (education, employment, and housing).

There are at least two main reasons behind such a success:

1: The forward looking approach to inclusive integration: over a decade now the Norwegian State has been implementing a proactive and long-term approach to the intercultural integration of migrants and refugees. The country has allocated important human and financial resources (much higher than the average of other European States) to the early resettlement phase (i.e. the first four years) by designing comprehensive individual support programmes aimed at empowering new citizens and enable them realising their personal aspirations based on their realistically exploitable talents. This approach is certainly successful since, as showed by many research and scientific assessments, the impact of the refugees on medium and long-term growth of a country depends on how fast and effectively they will be integrated in both the society and the labour market. It is however regrettable that the Norwegian parliament has recently passed a series of decisions aimed to tighten the current asylum policy.

2: The extremely good governance of the inclusion process by the city of Bergen: the city's welcoming and inclusion policies show a very good understanding of the diversity advantage concept and represent an efficient long-term investment in favour of democratic security. The choice of considering intercultural integration as a cross-cutting issue has proved to be successful in practice: the city has an overall, comprehensive and coordinated vision of all aspects related to inclusive integration, with an extraordinary level of inter-service cooperation/synergies. Moreover, the city has managed to involve in this endeavor both the civil society and the private sector with, as a result, a whole society devoted to shape a more diverse and rich community. As one of the officers met said: "Integration is everybody's business!"