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European Policy DIALOGUE FORUM

Cities Fostering Belonging:
Voicing the Needs and Aspirations of Young Refugees and Migrants for Inclusive and Cohesive Cities

The European Policy Dialogue Forum brings together religious leaders, policy-makers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.

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Mother Teresa of Calcutta
"Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Executive summary

This input paper puts forward the notion of societal membership based on residency, by discussing the policy implications of young refugees and migrants' integration as a two-way process that mutually engages newcomers and host communities. Cities are ideally placed to create a safe and supportive environment for refugees and migrants since local governments can formulate tailored regulations that prioritise social inclusion over immigration status. To maximise benefits for the whole community, a city's normative infrastructure needs to be supported by positive emotional attitudes that allow migrants to feel accepted and welcome as 'persons of value'.

The mutual learning and exploration of difference that emerges through interreligious and intercultural dialogue processes are critical in supporting this emotional fabric, fostering cohesion and feelings of belonging among natives and migrants alike. Solid partnerships between religious and secular actors at the city and local level are therefore essential to build a conducive environment where the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of young refugees and migrants is embraced with a sense of solidarity and togetherness. In providing examples of experiences across European cities, this paper champions the idea of a 'Europe of Sanctuary Cities', in which the policy and emotional architectures complement each other, making local communities the hubs of social cohesion, shared prosperity and common values.

Introduction

In July 2023, the scale of protests and violent unrest following Nahel Merzouk's death[1], a French teenager of Moroccan and Algerian origin, has raised challenging questions about which policies and measures are best suited to promote belonging in increasingly diverse European cities. Ethnic, gender, racial and religious discrimination are a worrying reality for many young refugees and migrants,[2] including the next generation born in host countries. Studies show that, with the risk of social exclusion being disproportionally high among those who arrive as migrants and asylum seekers, vulnerabilities to inequalities are often passed on to the next generation.[3] Such inequalities hamper cohesive and inclusive communities.

As the integration of refugees and migrants happens locally, the systematic engagement of local governments together with religious leaders and actors holds the promise to grant young refugees and migrants full membership in host communities. Therefore, local authorities' and religious actors' contributions would benefit the development of asylum, immigration and integration policies, provided the competing competencies with national, regional and international institutions are bridged.

Integration or Inclusion?

It is worth noting that considerations pertaining to migration are politically loaded. Concepts and definitions of integration, migrants and refugees are contested and understood differently by different people and institutions across European society.[4] The very distinction between 'refugees' and 'migrants'[5] which separates newcomers into those who deserve and those who do not deserve protection is progressively less helpful in elaborating effective policymaking on migration and integration in a world where people's movements are increasingly the result of a complexity of multiple drivers.[6]

Similarly, there are different perspectives on how to ensure equal opportunities for refugees and migrants in host communities. Some countries favour assimilation,[7] a process whereby newcomers are expected to align to the cultural and social norms of the host environment. Others prefer social inclusion, whereby policies and actions are shaped to promote equal access to public services and citizens are called to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives.[8]

In the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, the European Union (EU) conceptualises integration as a "two-way process that involves mutual adaptation of migrants and the host society". This suggests that newcomers and host communities are mutually influenced as a result of their interaction and generate a 'new', 'common' social environment together. For this process to work, two intertwined aspects need to be aligned: the legislative and policy frameworks and needs-tailored services that allow refugees and migrants to actively participate in cultural, economic, religious and social aspects of life; and residents maintaining a 'positive emotional attitude' that makes migrants feel accepted and welcome as 'persons of value'. Religious actors and dialogue – interreligious and intercultural – can play a pivotal role in guiding this 'collective self-questioning' nurturing a continuous process of mutual appreciation, thus allowing for greater acceptance of the 'Other'.

Do I belong where I reside? Integration and Inclusion Challenges at the City Level

Young refugees and migrants come to Europe to pursue a life of dignity, safety and wellbeing. Yet, their integration process is confronted with a multitude of barriers in transit and upon arrival, which expose them to significant insecurity, marginalisation and psychological trauma.

> **Sanctuary city:** *though sanctuary cities have existed throughout history, the modern concept originated in the United States during the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, when churches stepped in to provide sanctuary to the migrants fleeing the civil wars in Central America. They gave them temporary shelter and protection from deportation, as asylum claims were routinely denied by federal authorities. This was a form of civil disobedience at first, a protest to the morality of policies that they believed were unfairly discriminating against the migrants. Today the concept of 'sanctuary cities' has evolved and, though there are differences in each sanctuary city in the US, one commonality is that municipal authorities refuse to "supply information about city residents' migration statuses to federal immigration agents, when a resident has been arrested for a non-immigration-related offense".[9] Whereas European sanctuary cities have not typically refused to enforce immigration law, rather fostering a culture of hospitality and like many US sanctuary cities, allowing undocumented migrants access services and opportunities, such as education, health services and employment regardless of their legal status. This poses a competency clash between municipal and federal (US) or state/regional (Europe/European Union) authorities.*

The concept of sanctuary cities embraces the idea of creating a safe and supportive environment for refugees and migrants regardless of their legal status, granting access to essential city services, such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and legal assistance.

> *In **Amsterdam** – The Netherlands – 'city citizenship' functions as a higher identity category, where every 'Amsterdammer' is a citizen of the city regardless of age, belief, ethnicity or origin. The concept redefines and evolves the notion of societal membership based on residency.*

However, according to most European legal frameworks at the national and regional level, young asylum seekers who arrive unaccompanied lose key protections upon reaching adulthood[10] unless they are in education or employment. Additionally, most young refugees only receive temporary residence permits, which adds uncertainty to their long-term prospects of building a life within host communities. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, 42,000 asylum applications by unaccompanied minors were lodged in 2022, the majority were by minors close to adulthood. This was the highest number since 2016, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis and almost double the number received in 2021. The Western Balkan countries, which many young refugees and migrants transit through for extended periods, recorded a similar phenomenon. This raises important questions regarding the adequacy of **protection policies for young refugees and migrants**, particularly in the delicate transition into adulthood.

> ***In Italy**, the Immigration Law considers the vulnerability of young refugees and migrants and allows for the protection of Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs) on the grounds of age only, regardless of whether they request asylum or not. The protection and the permission to stay are granted up to the age of 21, to allow support during the delicate transition to adulthood. While the national law prescribes Voluntary Guardians until the age of 18, the **city of Turin** has been piloting the 'social tutor', a citizen who volunteers to mentor, take care and support the path into autonomy of young migrants and refugees from 18 to 21.*

Despite the challenges presented by protection policies established at the national level, many cities in Europe are actively involved in modelling effective two-way integration policies and measures for young refugees and migrants. In doing so, these local authorities tend to adopt a whole-of-society approach in supporting the overall integration process of the young newcomers.

> *In the Netherlands, **Rotterdam's** "No worries. This is Rotterdam" Action Programme builds on the sentiment of living together in a city where everyone is a minority. To put this into practice, the city promotes the acceptance of diversity in schools, provides training on diversity and inclusion and facilitates more than 350 dialogue meetings each year with citizens for improving social inclusion. In addition, Rotterdam draws on an expert pool of migrant communities to reflect on and contribute to the city's policy-making processes. This was a crucial step in the development of anti-racism policies following the city's reckoning with its colonial heritage. https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/5th-Integrating-Cities-Report-2022.pdf*

Appropriate **employment policies** are critical to allow young refugees and migrants to enter the labour market. Their swift economic inclusion not only fosters empowerment and dignity but profoundly changes how newcomers are perceived in the host communities: not people in need of public assistance, but contributors to the common good. To crystallise this concept, Chris Richmond, CEO of the start-up Mygrants, encourages a change in perspective: "We should think of everyone as talents on the move". Yet, studies from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) demonstrate the "significant and disturbing levels of discrimination in access to employment" young refugees and migrants suffer throughout Europe.11 As discussed in the European Policy Dialogue Forum policy paper "The Role of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Enhancing Social Cohesion in European Cities",12 partnering with the private sector can offer unexpected solutions. In this regard, digital innovation can facilitate and accelerate skills-based labour market integration.

> *The start-up Mygrants - active in **Bologna** (Italy), offers an interesting application of digital innovation. Data-driven tools and technology used by Mygrants map the skills of individuals and match them with skill gaps and labour shortages. In doing so, the potential employer receives a dynamic CV that mirrors what a person knows and knows to do, without elements related to age, ethnic origin, gender or religion. People are considered for what they know and not according to prejudices and stereotypes around them. https://mygrants.it/en/*

The data gathered by the Mygrants platform shows that 90% of its migrant users in Italy – more than 623,000 – are under 35 years-old. Mygrants helps map formal and informal skills, offering opportunities for upskilling that are crucial to employability and entrepreneurship, facilitating internships, job placement and traineeships according to the individual's skill level and thus preventing de-skilling and brain waste.13 Interestingly, **Trento**, Italy has adopted a white label of Mygrants called LoSo (I Know) to support the upskilling and **job inclusion of local NEETs** (Not in Education Employment or Training).14 This example shows how addressing challenges faced by 'the Other' often leads to positive spill-over effects for host communities.

An effective and swift labour market integration of refugees and migrants offers measurable savings for public administration, particularly at the municipal level. The earlier young refugees and migrants emancipate from social assistance, the more significant the savings for local authorities are. The achievement of economic autonomy creates an incentive to explore **outcome-based or pay-by-result finance tools and approaches** based on migrant economic inclusion success rates.

> *Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) are an example of a new approach to addressing social issues through **results-based financing**, with significant financial benefits for local communities and city governments[15]. SIBs are unique public-private partnerships that fund effective social services. Impact investors provide the capital to scale the work of high-quality service providers. The government repays those investors if and when the project achieves outcomes that generate public value. SIBs transfer risk from the public to the private sector and align project partners on the achievement of meaningful impact.[16]*

The ability to combine public and private funding to the evolving needs of city populations brings many benefits, particularly in terms of enhanced impact and effectiveness. Funding flexibility paves the way for more **sustainable integration policies**, bolstering cohesive and prosperous communities. An experience from Helsinki offers an inspirational example for religious actors and civil society organizations about innovative partnerships that add value to their achievements in supporting the economic inclusion of young refugees and migrants.

> " *The "KotoSIB", launched in **Helsinki** – Finland - in 2017, offers an example of the first European social impact bond promoting fast track employment and integration of almost 2,000 refugees. The Finnish Orthodox Church is among the investors [17]https://kotosib.fi/en/#yleista. In faith-based finance, a common thread is promoting social good, community welfare and ethical responsibility. Islamic finance, with its principles of social justice, risk-sharing and ethical investing, offers practical tools for supporting refugee integration. Instruments like sukuk [18](Islamic bonds) and waqf (endowments) can mobilise resources effectively, making them beneficial for cities that often grapple with limited resources, especially in European cities with growing Muslim communities. [19]*

Housing policies are an essential piece in the mosaic of an effective two-way integration process. Finding suitable and affordable housing solutions that prevent the creation of ghettos is a standing challenge, exacerbated by ethnic and religious discrimination in host communities. Inspirational examples come from the cities of Vienna, Austria and Trieste, Italy that have addressed the issue systematically, thinking about the whole city's population paying special attention to vulnerable groups.

> " *The key to **Vienna's** success in providing social housing policies has been shaped by the municipal political commitment that housing is a basic right, combined with the city's determination to keep the massive stock of subsidised homes built during the past century in public hands. https://www.politico.eu/article/vienna-social-housing-architecture-austria-stigma/ . The "Trieste Model" implemented by a local NGO, the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), is based on the 'diffused' accommodation of refugees and migrants in apartments and small hostels primarily in the city centre. In contrast with the standard accommodation in camps, this approach fosters daily contacts between the host community and the newcomers, reduces tensions and mistrust while boosting feelings of belonging. For a full description of the Trieste model see: https://ifsh.de/file/publication/OSCE_Yearbook_en/2018/Volpicelli_en.pdf*

Education and language acquisition is critical to overcome barriers for communication and mutual understanding. The linguistic integration of migrants can be a complex process. For members of the host society, the visible presence of new languages can trigger anxiety or fears about national identity. Some migrants may view the acquisition of the dominant language of their new home as a form of enrichment of their identity. For others, learning the new language may cause stress due to the inability to express oneself or put a strain on their existing identity. Individual-centred approaches have proven to be more effective, confirming the added value of a faith-based perspective that looks at each person in his/her uniqueness.

> " *Carolin Hillenbrand, Founder and Director of **Coexister Germany** an interreligious organization present in **various cities in Germany**, offers a meaningful example around the challenge of learning the host community language: "In Coexister Germany we realised some people were failing at the official language courses, not because they lack capacity, but because they never had real school education, so first they need to learn how to learn. So, we learn together by interacting, playing, connecting and applying different informal learning techniques adapted to each individual need and the person little by little starts learning and understanding more. This has proven to be very effective". https://coexister.de/*

Expanding the access to **scholarships for tertiary education** is a powerful tool to allow young refugees and migrants to continue their education. Not only can this tool be a catalyst of educational inclusion and upgrade for those already present in host communities but it also offers a legal pathway to allow young refugees and migrants to move from countries of transit or first reception to long-term European destinations. The **Union of Exiled Students,**20 based in France, has been advocating for a more systematic use of scholarships to allow young refugees and migrants access to tertiary education in European cities.

> *The project, **University Corridors for Refugees** UNICORE 5.0, is being promoted by 35 Italian universities with the support of UNHCR, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Caritas Italy, Waldensian Diakonia, Jesuit Refugee Service and others. It aims to increase opportunities for young refugees and migrants residing in countries of first reception – including those staying in camps – to continue their higher education in Italy.*
> *https://services.unhcr.org/opportunities/education-opportunities/university-corridors-refugees-unicore-50*
> *Building on this initiative, churches in Europe and faith-based organizations together with civil society, universities and international organizations are multiplying 'University Corridors' and other forms of **community sponsorship**.*
> *https://www.icmc.net/2022/10/11/icmc-co-organizes-workshop-on-the-long-term-expansion-of-community-sponsorship-for-refugees/*

Political participation is essential to build truly inclusive and cohesive communities. Cities are ideally placed to develop pathways for young immigrants to run for locally elected positions, increasing the representation rate of refugees and migrants. The establishment of consultative bodies for city administrations offers further ways to improve political participation at local level. However, still divided between the two main approaches – jus sanguinis and jus soli – national **policies in Europe for the acquisition of citizenship and naturalisation** still limit the recognition of political rights, resulting in the political marginalisation of young migrants and refugees, including – often – second-generation young people.

Sanctuary Cities: the Potential of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue are important tools that can help create a 'welcome culture',21 a concept that compounds the necessary positive emotional attitude that is the true 'glue' of a harmonious two-way integration process. The significance of religion as a binding influence and source of belonging is beyond doubt. Culture, faith and religion act as stabilising forces in migrants' lives and help them get through the challenges of the integration process. Interreligious dialogue is a critical tool to make faith and religion sources of community bonding and not of division.

> *The project, **Imagine: Learning to live together, addressing controversial issues**, was implemented in **Toledo** – Spain - using historical interfaith and multicultural settings to explore critically what unites the city's citizens. It showed that religious values are a source of union and cohesion. https://www.uv.es/icie/ucv.pdf*
> *The same approach was successfully implemented in other parts of Europe, such as **Timisoara** – Romania – and in **Cyprus** https://www.intercultural.ro/en/imagine-seminar/ ; https://www.peace-ed-campaign.org/imagine-project-receives-global-education-award-cyprus/*

Yet, according to Dr. Tamar Shuali, Co-Director, Spanish National Coordinator for the Council of Europe (CoE) North-South Centre Global Education Network: "There is a huge lack of knowledge among teachers on how to address the interfaith aspect and how it is essential to youth empowerment and wellbeing. To address this gap, it is critical to create non-formal, peer-learning based initiatives".

> **The Network for Dialogue (N4D)** is a KAICIID-supported interreligious and intercultural network of grass-roots actors using dialogical approaches to foster the social inclusion of refugees and migrants. The Network has developed several resourceful tools to support refugees and migrants and is implementing projects to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue as a key approach to foster two-way inclusion processes. https://network4dialogue.eu/resources/

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue also motivate positive curiosity, particularly for young people, presenting the richness and dignity of human diversity. According to Anila Noor, Founder and Director, New Women Connectors: "By coming together, religious leaders can give youth an understanding on why it is important to advocate for harmony, for human rights, for equality. So that young people think they are not preaching for their religion, but they are preaching for common values".

> **Shaza Alrihawi, co-founder of the Global Refugee Network** offers examples of how in their work in **German cities** they visit schools regularly sharing refugees' stories. Starting from their lives before the war, sharing insights about their families, friends, houses and toys, young refugees regain human dignity and an identity outside of being a refugee in the eyes of their German peers. Personal stories and direct interaction display a mutual impact on refugee as well as the hosting youth, with spillover effects on their respective families.

Faith-driven initiatives provide precious opportunities to remove barriers of fear, build bonds and help young refugees and migrants find belonging and give back to their new communities. Similarly, the opportunity to spend time together and to become immersed in each other's culture or in a shared activity, be it cultural or otherwise, is an important bridge to trust that is based on mutual understanding and shared humanity.

> The **Neighbours programme** – which facilitates structured encounters between Jewish congregations and local migrant communities – proves to be impactful because by gathering people of different religions together community members are less likely to hold preconceived ideas about each other. Similarly, by hosting refugees, the Jewish community volunteering in **Welcome Circles** has an immediate positive impact on attitudes between the Jewish community and new arrivals, facilitating social integration. https://hias.org/statements/eight-jewish-congregations-europe-join-initiative-fight-antisemitism-and-promote-cross-cultural-understanding/

As proven in a wealth of studies, migration narratives and attitudes towards refugees and migrants can significantly influence policies.[22] Harmful narratives affect the daily lives of newcomers in host communities and are most visible at the local level. Aware of the potential of positive narratives city administrators and civil society actors have engaged in initiatives to raise awareness, prevent discrimination, improve coexistence and harness diversity by promoting a change in the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of the host community.

> Positive examples come from cities like **Bilbao** – Spain – where the city's anti-rumour social awareness strategy aims to counter negative conversations about prejudices and stereotypes about refugees and migrants. The project carries out training activities for citizens, awareness-raising and meetings engaging the network of anti-rumour agents. https://eurocities.eu/stories/anti-rumour-agents-against-racism/ Similarly, since 2020, **Nantes** – France – has implemented a campaign to communicate about discrimination with the public. To support this, the city has installed a **hotline called 'AlloNantes Discrimination'**, through which citizens can lodge complaints and receive support when they experience discrimination. https://metropole.nantes.fr/luttes-discriminations

Fostering an attitudinal change is an area where interreligious and intercultural dialogue show their greatest potential. Local authorities' initiatives with the support of interreligious and intercultural dialogue specialists hold the promise to identify innovative approaches and build communities that foster belonging among all their members.

> *In **Odemira** – Portugal – the **Bowing Project** takes everyday activities and transforms them into a dance, a text or something artistic. Art is used as a tool to connect people, including for inter-generational dialogue, fostering a sense of cohesion in the community.* https://gulbenkian.pt/en/read-watch-listen/bowing/

Yet, cities still struggle to have the local dimension fully recognised as essential in the processes leading to cohesive societies. Political considerations related to nationality – and the criteria on which membership in a national group is based – still limit the local authorities' role in matters related to asylum, immigration and integration. Capable of dealing with problems impacting the life of the citizenry more swiftly and more pragmatically, cities have a greater potential to ensure that community members are actively engaged in providing an enabling environment where everyone feels belonging.

In this regard, the Secretary General of **the Border Towns and Islands Network (BTIN)**, Carlo de Marco, crystallises such considerations as follows: "We need to rebuild the basis of our societies. Who has the power to do this? States have less power than they once did. We need to re-distribute power and resources locally. We can then imagine a Europe of sanctuary cities."

> **The Border Towns and Islands Network (BTIN)** *is an association of local authorities established in Malta in 2019, founded on the concept of the "border" as a limit that offers the opportunity to explore suitable policy and operational approaches where refugees and migrants are equal members of socially cohesive communities. Founding members of the Network are the Municipality of **Lampedusa and Linosa** (Italy), Local Council of **Marsa** (Malta), **Agios Athanasios** (Cyprus), **Grande-Synthe** (France), **Pesaro** (Italy), **Siklósnagyfalu** (Hungary) and **Straß** in Steiermark (Austria).* http://www.snapshotsfromtheborders.eu/welcome-border-towns-and-islands-network/

Emerging recommendations

FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

— Improve protection measures for unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors beyond the age of emancipation and ensure the preservation of rights in the transition to adulthood.
— Fund scholarships and students' support programmes in local universities that ensure access to tertiary education and the establishment of 'University Corridors' from countries of reception or first arrival.
— Partner with the private sector to develop platforms and projects, such as digital skills mapping mechanisms, to fight discrimination to the access of labour markets, using innovative digital technologies.
— Adopt innovative finance tools and approaches, such as social impact bonds, to ensure the sustainability of local integration policies in cooperation with religious institutions.
— Promote the establishment of, and engagement with consultative bodies or other political participation mechanisms for young refugees and migrants – including refugee and migrant-led organizations.

FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTORS

— Support interreligious and intercultural initiatives engaging young refugees and migrants by offering spaces to enable positive interactions, learning from and about each other, providing opportunities for community members to voice their concerns.
— Create opportunities and offer spaces for members of the community to volunteer as mentors/tutors of young refugees and migrants and encourage congregation members to undertake these opportunities.
— Advocate for religious universities to develop and promote scholarships for young refugees and migrants.
— Engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships with municipal authorities, the private sector and civil society, including in the field of results-based, social impact financing.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

— Develop and run locally tailored on- and offline campaigns to positively reshape narratives about refugees and migrants.
— Engage young people as local broadcasters or guests on broadcasts to share positive news about the presence of newcomers in the host communities.
— Advocate for the universal access to local services regardless of the immigration status of residents.
— Foster the political participation of young refugees and migrants by helping them get engaged with advisory councils and other civic participatory platforms and mechanisms and mentoring their progress.

Questions for Reflection:

How can religious leaders and actors address the polarisation of opinions and attitudes regarding the presence of young refugees and migrants in Europe?

What kinds of engagement should young people from the host community undertake at the city level, with young refugees and migrants, and/or religious and civil society actors to contribute to more welcoming communities towards young migrants and refugees? How can they be mobilised?

Which spaces – institutional, operational and emotional – and opportunities for interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be created to enhance cooperation and advance the various aspects of integration for young refugees and migrants?

What does it take to make your city a sanctuary city?

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