

The path of least resistance? EU cities and locally organised resettlement

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The scaling up of locally organised, city-led routes to resettlement could form part of a larger solution to Europe's current political crisis and deadlock around migration.

Over recent years, local governments have gradually earned a prominent place in Europe's system of migration governance. This increased influence can be attributed to decades-long processes of decentralisation and the devolution of competencies across European countries.¹ From providing housing to ensuring access to education and labour market integration, many aspects of migrants' everyday lives are today directly dependent on the capacity of municipal authorities and their public and private sector partners to effectively fulfil these tasks.

Particularly since the summer of 2015, when local governments had to fill many gaps in the national provision of refugee reception services, there have been clear attempts on the part of local government to influence migration policy making beyond their local mandate. For this purpose, local governments are increasingly teaming up with like-minded partners in transnational partnerships, the most prominent examples being transnational city networks such as Eurocities and Solidarity Cities. These provide not only new opportunities for policy exchange but also for the political promotion of local government objectives, which are sometimes diametrically opposed to the priorities of their respective central governments. Barcelona and Athens, for instance, proposed a direct relocation of refugees between the two cities in March 2016, a plan that was vetoed by the Spanish

government.² In Germany, the Seebrücke movement comprises more than 100 cities and towns and has been pressuring the federal government to allow local authorities to take in refugees directly from the Italian ports.

Locally organised resettlement

Small-scale resettlement schemes based on Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program have been part of the international migration governance system for some time now. While many EU countries have pursued ever more restrictive approaches with respect to international protection, others (most notably Ireland, the UK and Germany) have demonstrated an unusual affinity towards this kind of bottom-up resettlement. The most prominent example, however, can be found in Italy, where for four years a project led by the church organisation Community of Sant'Egidio has been offering safe passage for displaced people from camps in the Middle East and Africa through its Humanitarian Corridors initiative. The project officially started at the end of 2015 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Sant'Egidio and a number of other faith-based organisations and Italy's Interior, Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation ministries.

With the support of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Sant'Egidio and its partners identify potential candidates for

resettlement from refugee camps mainly in Lebanon, Jordan and Ethiopia. After the Ministry of Interior screens and approves the list of candidates, the Italian consulate in each location issues each person with a humanitarian visa. The refugees are then flown to Italy where they lodge their application for international protection. Once there, they are dispersed across cities (currently more than 90 cities in 18 different regions) where they receive reception and integration assistance from a large network of local church associations, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and families. The services offered include accommodation, language classes, job orientation, cultural mediation and legal assistance.

The host organisations are responsible for the refugees' integration for at least a year, although in many cases they continue providing partial support (mainly accommodation) for a longer period, often until people become self-sufficient. All the costs associated with the project are covered by Sant'Egidio and the other host organisations.³ The project currently resettles about 750 refugees per year which, although a modest number, is still more than the number accepted by most individual Member States.⁴ In recognition of its contribution to protecting refugees the project was selected as regional winner for Europe in UNHCR's prestigious Nansen Award for Refugees in September 2019.⁵

Smaller but similar initiatives have recently been established in Belgium and France and – in addition to those bottom-up initiatives that already exist – progressive and resourceful cities like Barcelona, Vienna and Hamburg have openly and repeatedly declared their willingness to host and support refugees. In our view, the expansion of these initiatives by local governments could represent the path of least resistance to more far-reaching reforms of the EU migration governance system. Even though previous attempts for establishing city-to-city refugee relocation mechanisms have been met with resistance by EU Member States, the locally organised resettlement

initiatives and other community-based sponsorship projects have so far not been challenged politically or legally.

Two aspects of locally organised resettlement seem to contribute decisively to lessening the resistance of States. First, the project design satisfies the security concerns of central governments, as national authorities can screen individuals before authorising their resettlement. Second, central governments do not cover the costs of the initial reception and the short- to medium-term integration into local communities. While they still need to provide access to national social security and health-care systems, they receive all the long-term benefits that derive from refugees' permanent settlement and their integration in demographically ageing countries.

Cities and the future of refugee resettlement

There are other reasons to believe that cities are the logical sites for the development of sustainable refugee resettlement schemes. Firstly, local authorities are in a position to assess, easily and accurately, local capacity to host and integrate refugees. They have up-to-date knowledge on housing availability, health-care services and school places, ethnic and religious communities, and local labour market conditions. Secondly, many local authorities have gained significant experience in managing refugee reception and integration and are willing to continue investing in this field. For instance, many municipalities in Germany and the Netherlands now have local offices that work exclusively on immigration and integration governance issues. The knowledge accumulated by these offices and the links they have established with NGOs and private actors can be mobilised for the locally organised resettlement initiatives. Thirdly, local governments have begun to collaborate directly with international organisations like UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF. In Greece, for example, these organisations have been assigning members of their staff to work within certain municipalities, which has

contributed enormously to the development of local migration governance capacity. Local governments can capitalise on these transnational partnerships to give substance to the recent calls for a wider collaboration in the field of refugee resettlement.⁶

From the perspective of local governments, there are also good reasons to promote localised refugee resettlement initiatives. European cities have demonstrated their ambition to enhance their role in migration governance. They experience directly the consequences of immigration and the related policy challenges but are not given a seat at the table when important decisions are being taken. In addition, many local governments openly oppose the deterrence-based approaches promoted by the EU and its Member States. Locally managed routes to resettlement could place cities at the centre of migration governance, at least from an organisational point of view, thus avoiding locally problematic outcomes while at the same time offering better protection to displaced people.

In practical terms, we suggest a two-step approach to expanding locally organised resettlement. Initially, self-financed small-scale resettlement projects led by local authorities could be implemented simultaneously in several countries with the authorisation of the respective national governments. The process could be facilitated by existing transnational migration city networks. While one can be sceptical about the potential of local governments to finance such initiatives, one should remember that – in the absence of financial support from central governments – many municipalities have invested significantly in the reception and integration of refugees over recent years. Moreover, local governments that have openly expressed their willingness to accept more refugees should be able to justify modest additional spending on resettlement projects; the cost of the UK community sponsorship scheme, for instance, is estimated at £9,000 per resettled family.⁷ At the same time, municipalities should call for additional EU funding to support their initiatives. Given that a significant amount of

EU funds for the resettlement and relocation of displaced people have over the years been allocated to EU governments which have then failed to meet their commitments, it is not difficult to see the merit of channelling some of the funds directly to cities. Ultimately, city-led resettlement projects could gradually be expanded both within and across countries, while processes can be improved over time in line with accumulated evidence and experience.

Enlarging the scope, size and quality of resettlement programmes is one of the key objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. At the same time, the gap between resettlement needs and the places made available by States is widening. We believe that local governments could be the driving force behind addressing this mismatch. Given the rapid urbanisation and the expected increase in climate change-related displacement, it seems wise to invest in the development of these sorts of sustainable solutions to migration-related challenges. If successful, the gradual expansion of city-led resettlement practices could turn into a type of ‘controlled’ policy reform that, without reinforcing political divides, could bring about a paradigm shift in migration governance.

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