

Volunteers and asylum seekers

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People in communities where asylum seekers and refugees have appeared offered various forms of support to the new arrivals as states failed to provide even the essentials.

Amid rising numbers of asylum seekers arriving at European shores over recent years, reception and processing facilities – especially in countries of first arrival – were often overburdened. Asylum seekers faced insufficient infrastructure for their reception and integration, leading in many cases to secondary migration. For years, in the streets of Athens and on the islands of Lampedusa and Sicily, in the train station of Milan and the ‘Jungle’ of Calais, they often took matters into their own hands.

The public and political perception was generally one of failure of those countries’ migration policies, of the Common European Asylum System and of the Dublin Agreement. The focus in Brussels, Strasbourg and many capital cities was not on local situations but on rules and principles to re-establish an orderly asylum system, either by forcing countries to abide by existing standards or by creating a new system.

Meanwhile local people in Sicily helped with onward travel by giving directions, buying train tickets or even by giving lifts to asylum seekers.

Volunteers at transit hotspots like Milan, Athens and Calais provided support by distributing clothing and food, and offering legal advice or medical assistance.

These engagements by volunteers – citizens and non-citizens alike – took place in the shadows; the beneficiaries were, after all, widely considered to be irregular migrants. Yet increasingly, locals who witnessed the despair and needs of asylum seekers in their communities joined traditional activists. This was the case in particular where asylum seekers and refugees were distributed to towns that had not received any contingents previously and had little infrastructure and resources beyond housing available. Locals would come forward to donate essentials but also to get to know the new residents. Thus volunteers inadvertently become a force of integration.

Taking on state duties

The engagement of locals with asylum seekers in their neighbourhoods became a widespread phenomenon across Germany, as increasing numbers of asylum applicants



British volunteer Katie Griggs holds weekly cycling sessions in central Berlin where Syrian asylum seekers can learn to ride bikes. But the meet-ups are not just about cycling; for asylum seekers and volunteers alike, it is also about forging connections and lasting friendships.

meant that housing had to be found for them in new and sometimes remote locations. Established organisations working with refugees in Germany estimated an average increase of 70% of interest in volunteering for refugees over a period of three years and more than a third of volunteers were active in self-organised groups and initiatives rather than in established NGOs.¹ This is unlike any other volunteering. Volunteers with refugees are, our study shows, predominantly female, in their twenties or over sixty, and more often with a migrant background and non-religious than the societal average. For them their engagement is not about volunteering itself but specifically about helping refugees. What we documented in our study was a mainstream movement of volunteering for refugees being established across society.

Over the summer of 2015, thousands of people in German cities rallied round to help asylum seekers as bureaucracies failed to register, house and feed the new arrivals. Previously, the main tasks of volunteers had consisted of facilitating visits and communication with officials, translation and language lessons, advice and support related to integration. Now

volunteers donated and distributed food, clothing and other essentials. The solidarity and hospitality that people offered brought a dimension of welcome to the reception of refugees that state institutions cannot provide. The delicate balance between helping refugees and relieving the state of its core roles swung towards volunteers picking up where bureaucracies failed. At times, state institutions intentionally relied on volunteers.

Critics have warned about neo-liberal policies to out-source to volunteers the state's obligations to refugees. In the long run, the role of volunteers has to be defined more precisely. It is important that volunteers do not substitute state obligations but engage in welcoming refugees to their new society. In their shared actions they create a civil society that is open to and accepting of new members. In fact, many of the tasks that volunteers fulfil cover core elements of refugees' integration processes.

In 2015, civil engagement for refugees has sprung up across Europe. Europeans have practised solidarity with refugees irrespective of national borders in ways that European politicians have long failed to do. The challenge that arises from this grassroots

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activism is to prolong the solidarity shown beyond the emergency that was created by failed top-down policies. Many volunteers point out that the ad hoc support they provide lacks efficient organisation. Effective and sustainable structures for volunteers have to be built up. NGOs and businesses can add experience and know-how not only to grow and strengthen volunteering capacities and effectiveness but also to manage the expectations of everybody involved.

Ultimately, the European Union may benefit from the volunteering movement as much as refugees. It should provide funds for organisational structures but not take control of the civil society engagement. Governments have long underestimated the widespread potential for receiving, integrating and protecting refugees in European society. European states should follow the volunteers'

example by orientating refugee policies to the needs of asylum seekers in order to make a European 'society of welcome' possible.

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1. From a survey of over 460 volunteers and more than 70 organisations. Karakayali S and Kleist J O (2015) *EFA-Studie: Strukturen und Motive der ehrenamtlichen Flüchtlingsarbeit in Deutschland*, 1. Forschungsbericht: Ergebnisse einer explorativen Umfrage vom November/Dezember 2014. Berliner Institute für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin www.bim.hu-berlin.de/media/2015-05-16_EFA-Forschungsbericht_Endfassung.pdf