

Towards the integration of refugees in Europe

by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles

The guiding principle for national integration policies in Europe should be a mainstream approach to refugee integration where possible and the provision of specialised services where necessary.

Refugee integration is a dynamic two-way process, in which individual refugees, governments and society work together towards building a cohesive society. This process begins from day one. Integration relates both to the conditions for and actual participation in all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political life of the country, as well as to refugees' own perceptions of acceptance by and membership in the host society.

The focus in the current refugee integration debate, however, is often limited to individuals not living up to integration expectations held by host societies. Part of the challenge to facilitate integration of refugees lies in the fact that refugees share many integration needs with other migrants and resident third-country nationals but are also likely to have special needs as a result of their displacement and their treatment in the asylum determination process. Refugee integration is closely related to the reception phase and the quality and length of the asylum determination procedure. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) recommends that the reception phase should be recognised as an integral part of the integration process of refugees.

Creating a welcoming society

Research on public perceptions about refugees has shown that people who are least in favour of ethnic diversity live in mostly ethnically homogeneous areas. There is little public understanding of the reasons why refugees have to flee. Reporting on asylum issues is an emotive and sensitive area and all too often the media revert to the use of imprecise language and stereotypes when describing refugee issues. Over the last few years a climate of intoler-

ance and xenophobia has emerged in some European countries, opposing the integration of refugees and exploiting the public's fear of 'the other'. Such an attitude – based on racism rather than facts – is unacceptable and highly counter-productive to the development of a cohesive society.

Political leadership is needed to shift the focus from deterrence, numbers and costs to asking how to most effectively meet European states' international legal obligations. The fears and needs of host communities need to be taken seriously but policy makers must refrain from playing out fears of different population groups against each other – or from avoiding the topic all together.

In order to promote a welcoming society to facilitate refugee integration, ECRE recommends that:

- Education at schools, colleges and in the workplace should promote respect for differences and highlight the benefits of cultural diversity.
- Policy makers and governments should take more responsibility for ensuring accurate and balanced public information on refugee issues.
- Governments should identify and counteract misinformation, in particular where it incites fear and mistrust of refugees, and explain clearly that refugees are people in need of protection.
- European governments should seek to introduce national anti-discrimination legislation and systems to monitor refugee access to the labour and housing markets as well as to health, social, education and other community services.
- Easily accessible systems should be introduced for lodging com-

plaints about discrimination.

- Anti-discrimination legislation must be backed up by penalties reflecting the seriousness of the crime committed, and by public awareness campaigns highlighting direct, indirect and institutional discrimination.
- States must work to ensure that refugees are made aware of, and can access, their rights.

Political and socio-economic integration

The aim of political integration is to bring about conditions which allow refugees to participate in all aspects of the political life of the host country. There are, however, significant political differences among states with regard to equal opportunities for refugees.

One key question is whether refugees should be identified and treated separately. Integration initiatives could either address refugee-specific needs or act as 'bridges' to mainstream provision. They could be combined with services provided to migrant or minority groups, with the overall objective being the eventual incorporation of refugee perspective(s) in minority and equality policies. Any positive action must be time-limited according to individual need, with clear exit strategies and geared towards equal opportunities.

With regard to political integration, there are many challenges to refugee participation in politics. In some countries, where refugees have the right to vote at the local level, refugee issues are placed higher on the political agenda with politicians becoming more responsive and aware of the concerns of this group. In Ireland, for example, where asylum seekers/refugees were allowed to vote and stand for vote in local elections in June 2004, the political debate was changed; refugee-related issues were debated and members of the immigrant and refugee community were successfully elected.



Albanian asylum seekers arrive at Brindisi, Italy.

Refugees may face a number of barriers to socio-economic integration resulting from their experiences of flight and involuntary exile: lack of knowledge of the language of the host country, isolation and separation from family members and physical and mental health problems relating to past trauma. Failure by governments to address these functional barriers to integration can result in the marginalisation of refugees and can impact negatively on society as a whole.

Lack of access to the labour market during the initial period of arrival in a country of asylum seriously hinders refugee integration in the long term. In addition, very few European countries allow asylum seekers to work while they await a decision on their application for asylum. Vocational training, recognition of qualifications, education and language tuition are important factors in the process of achieving gainful employment [see article pp33-35] and vocational training can also play a significant role with regard to refugee empowerment and integration.

Refugees can suffer from a range of health problems relating to their experiences of war, political persecution, torture and imprisonment and the conditions of escape from their

country of origin. Physical and mental health interventions need to take into account the range of circumstances of refugees' lives.

Housing provision impacts on a number of other integration outcomes, such as health, education and employment. Refugees should be allowed the same freedoms as nationals to choose where to reside.

Integration interventions need to be targeted at the particular age-related needs of refugee children, young people and older refugees. A gender perspective aimed at meeting the particular needs of refugee women, while recognising the difficulties faced by refugee men, should also be incorporated,

Many European governments rely on NGOs for the delivery of integration services to asylum seekers and refugees. Information exchange and communication can help in putting together the different approaches and ideas so that they complement each other rather than compete against each other, to the detriment of services.

ECRE argues that:

- Refugees should be entitled to long-term residence rights regard-

ing family reunification, freedom of movement, access to employment and education.

- The right to vote and stand for election at the local, national and European level should be granted to refugees after a maximum of three years' residence. (Participation at the local and European level is allowed in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Belgium.)
- Citizenship is an important policy instrument for facilitating integration. European governments should give consideration to Article 34 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Council of Europe's Recommendation 564 (1969) on the Acquisition by Refugees of the Nationality of Their Country of Residence and in particular facilitate the naturalisation of refugees.
- EU legislation currently limits the right to family reunification to people meeting the criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It should be extended to apply to any person not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention but nevertheless in need of international protection.
- Any restrictions on employment should be lifted at the earliest possible stage and no later than six months from the time of the

- initial application for asylum.
- Study grants should be made available and qualifications more readily recognised.
- Health providers should, as far as possible, develop culturally sensitive services that reconcile European norms of health with non-Western health orientations.
- Training for professionals, including doctors, nurses, teachers, interpreters and others, on refugee and cross-cultural issues should be made available at educational establishments and in the workplace.
- States should ensure the involvement of all sectors of the refugee population, including special needs/vulnerable groups, in the design, implementation and evaluation of integration programmes.
- Government authorities and NGOs delivering services to asylum seekers and refugees should work in partnership with responsibilities clearly outlined.

The final steps of the integration process happen in inter-personal relationships at the local level – in the neighbourhood, at the workplace, in the education of their children and as friends. Policy makers need to be aware of the inter-personal dimension of integration by creating opportunities for these types of interaction at the local level.

Cultural integration

Cultural diversity is a characteristic feature of today's democratic Europe. European societies differ considerably, however, in the degree to which they embrace cultural diversity and in the ways they deal with both recent newcomers (refugees and migrants) and established foreigners and minorities in general. Europe's own history as a refugee-producing region must not be forgotten, nor the fact that both migration within Europe and inward migration to Europe have contributed to the growing wealth, not the impoverishment, of Europe. This should be acknowledged in integration policies both at the national and at the European level.

'Culture' is not a static concept but is constantly evolving. To provide for cultural integration it is not necessary that all individually perceived notions of one particular culture in a

country be acquired. There are, however, a number of core values that underlie the cultures of democratic European countries: human rights, the principle of equity, the protection of minorities, democracy, the separation of state and church and the rule of law.

Religion plays a major role for many asylum seekers and refugees and this can pose both opportunities and challenges to societies. Newly arrived groups might revitalise already existing religious groups but their beliefs might also come up against a separation of state and church in secularised Western societies. Religious organisations in the host society can promote religious tolerance, respect and understanding between members of different faiths, provide services for newly arrived refugees as well as provide opportunities to get in contact with others already established in the community.

Refugees have cultural ties in more than one country. Although primarily a political and legal matter, dual citizenship can be seen as a tool to acknowledge these 'trans-national' or 'multiple' identities. Some countries have recognised dual citizenship as a possibility to attract international economic cooperation through foreign direct investment or tourism. In European countries, however, the belief persists that dual citizenship poses questions of loyalty and belonging.

- Different inter-religious platforms should be established to strengthen the knowledge of religion(s) among government staff, journalists and the public, including school pupils.
- The role of religious organisations in promoting respect and understanding and providing essential services should be recognised and drawn on by policy makers.
- Refugees should be allowed to continue to hold their original nationality where possible (ie be granted dual citizenship).

Conclusion

The recommendations above cannot present a panacea for all integration challenges in all countries. However, all countries must improve their integration efforts and realise the importance of developing cohesive societies. Equally, individual refugees

need to be aware of their responsibilities towards their host countries with regard to common values. Refugees themselves are the most important actor in refugee integration and integration initiatives should include their input, knowledge and expertise. In order to assure that refugee voices are heard in the integration debate the empowerment of refugees is crucial.

This article is based on ECRE's forthcoming paper 'Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe'. This is part of a series of proposals, developed by ECRE, entitled 'The Way Forward – Europe's Role in the Global Refugee Protection System', which is designed to provide constructive recommendations on a number of topical refugee policy issues in order to contribute to and positively influence the European debate. The paper on the integration of refugees was developed with input from ECRE member agencies and was written by Christiane Wirth, Henry Mårtenson, David Hudson and Roswitha Weiler. Email: ecre@ecre.org Website: www.ecre.org

Towards a European Resettlement Programme

In this paper ECRE calls for Europe to substantially increase its resettlement activities at both national and European level and thus take a fairer share of the large number of refugees worldwide in urgent need of resettlement. ECRE suggests how a joint European resettlement programme could be developed and how it could function, on the basis of the views and experience of ECRE member agencies. The paper looks at how commitments to resettle a certain number of refugees could be set and shared by states, as well as what criteria should be used to target agreed commitments. It addresses the resettlement process in some detail and suggests how identification, processing, decision making and pre-departure activities could be adjusted in the context of a European resettlement programme.

Paper online at www.ecre.org.