

# Cities of Solidarity: local integration in Latin America

Fabio Varoli

**Latin America has long had a reputation for offering asylum to those fleeing persecution. The Cities of Solidarity programme provides a concrete mechanism for providing not only asylum but full local integration.**

When the first group of Palestinian refugees arrived in April 2008 in La Calera, a city of 60,000 inhabitants in central Chile, it was a great event. The central square was filled with people as the people of Calera gave their new neighbours a warm and emotional reception. This was a deeply moving experience for the refugees who, just three days previously, had been living in the extreme conditions of Al Tanf – a camp in the desert on the border between Syria and Iraq.

La Calera is one of the many cities in the 'southern cone' of Latin America that has joined the self-sufficiency and integration programme known as 'Ciudades Solidarias' (Cities of Solidarity) under the Mexico Plan of Action.<sup>1</sup> Municipal governments – such as La Calera – and UNHCR commit to a cooperation framework to ensure international protection, local integration and assistance for asylum seekers.

The municipality accepts responsibility for identifying the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, evaluating the conditions in which they find themselves in their territory and establishing plans of action to address their needs. The municipal authorities appoint staff specifically to support their local integration through social programmes such as family welfare payments, emergency housing plans, food policy plans, support for small businesses and integration into the education system.

"Collaboration between the Municipality of Santiago and the Vicaría de Pastoral Social [the social welfare agency of the Archdiocese of Santiago]," says Veronica Vargas, the Vicaría's coordinator, "has led to a programme of community action in Yungay district which is

having a significant impact socially for the refugees who live in this popular area of the Chilean capital. Not only are public programmes of action successfully addressing the specific needs of the refugees but we are also seeing all types of cultural and educational community projects, which have encouraged the spontaneous coming together of the refugee population and local residents. This is very important if refugees are to take the first steps towards integration in our country."

Particular attention is given to the inclusion in municipal school programmes of child and adolescent asylum seekers and refugees (especially when unaccompanied or separated from their families). Similarly, immediate assistance is given to women considered to be at risk. Continuity, monitoring and the integrated nature of interventions are promoted through a committee made up of various departments of the municipal government, UNHCR and its operating partners, and other institutions involved in pursuing durable solutions for refugees.

Generally, the agreements between UNHCR and the municipal authorities under the Cities of Solidarity programme are ratified by the municipal council and become public policies that remain in force through any changes in public administration.

The importance of these agreements is not limited to refugee access to state social programmes on an equal footing with nationals. The signing of these agreements takes place at public events with media coverage. This provides visibility and has helped to create a more positive and open attitude to refugees. It has also allowed many refugees to establish

networks within the community and direct relationships with public officials in the various services. This in turn has enabled refugees to go through the administrative procedures necessary to obtain documentation and apply for subsidies and to take an active role in finding employment or housing.

## Innovative framework for solidarity

Agreements with municipalities make explicit reference to the Mexico Plan of Action and to the Cities of Solidarity programme. The Mexico Plan of Action, signed by 20 Latin American countries in 2004, gave governments and civil society organisations on the continent a renewed strategic and operational framework that defined "the main challenges to the protection of refugees and other persons in need of international protection today in Latin America" and identified "courses of action to assist countries of asylum in the search for appropriate solutions within the pragmatic and principled spirit of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees."

The Cities of Solidarity programme is without doubt one of the most novel components of the Mexico Plan of Action. It arose from the fact that refugees and asylum seekers tend to settle in the cities – both large and small – of Latin America, particularly in the southern cone. "Latin America can help promote and put into action the concept of protection for persons of concern in urban situations," says Marta Juárez, director of UNHCR's Bureau for the Americas. "There are valuable examples of refugees who have successfully integrated in many locations in Latin America where communities have been welcoming and where local government is working effectively to support them."

The achievement of self-sufficiency and local integration of refugees has continued to be one of the major challenges for programmes for the care of refugees in Latin America. Refugees face complex socio-



Welcoming Palestinian refugees to La Calera, Chile.

economic situations where they have to compete with other disadvantaged sectors of their host communities.

In addition, the programmes for refugees traditionally implemented by UNHCR and its operating partners have been executed with a predominantly 'assistentialist' and patriarchal perspective, unrelated to local realities and social networks.

Cities of Solidarity programmes, on the other hand, promote a different attitude towards the urban context. The city is presented as an open space and a place for opportunities to be explored and exploited. Beyond providing short-term support for the refugee or asylum seeker, UNHCR and its partners look for interaction with community networks and public social programmes, recognising the fundamental role of local, municipal or district public administrations in caring for refugees. It is therefore

make alliances with these local administrations. For UNHCR offices in each of the countries, implementation of Cities of Solidarity agreements means extending institutional capacity building to include regional and municipal entities as well as the central and ministerial levels. Work done to date with these cities indicates that it is not sufficient to establish a regulatory and legal framework that protects the rights of refugees; rather, it is fundamentally important to guarantee the conditions and mechanisms so that public policies are both defined and implemented effectively, entirely on a local level.

#### Political and personal will to protect

However, the issue of 'solidarity' has also played a fundamental role in local public administrations taking on commitments, both personally and institutionally. Ever since Latin

America became a community of independent countries, its peoples have opened their doors innumerable times to persecuted neighbours fleeing their homelands. As reflected in the introduction to the Mexico Plan of Action, Latin America is recognised internationally for its generous tradition of asylum. It has been able to deal with its own refugees creatively and pragmatically, providing examples of how political will, regional solidarity and shared responsibility are essential principles in the provision of protection and the pursuit of durable solutions.<sup>2</sup>

The memories of mass violations perpetrated during the brutal military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s are still in the collective consciousness of many Latin Americans. Tens of thousands of people were forced to leave their countries to save their lives and the international community opened its arms and offered them every opportunity to integrate and to heal their wounds. Many of those who benefited then from international protection have returned to their own countries to rebuild democracy and are today important agents in the political and social lives of their countries. Many leading officials in countries such as Chile, Argentina and Uruguay have personally experienced asylum and the benefits of international solidarity. It is therefore easy to understand why there is currently an exceptionally favourable disposition toward tackling the issue of refugees.

essential in the first instance to encourage public officials to recognise the particular situation of refugees and the differences that exist with other migratory groups and, in the long term, for them to incorporate these perspectives in local public agenda. Effective local integration is achieved through the execution of public policies that take account of the social, economic and cultural rights of refugees as well as their obligations.

Municipal and/or regional governments have become key actors in enabling refugees to achieve a decent standard of living and to enjoy their fundamental rights and for UNHCR and its partners it is increasingly important to

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The Mayor of Montevideo, Ricardo Ehrlich, on signing the agreement to make Montevideo a City of Solidarity, stated that, having been a refugee himself, he had personal reasons to promote the agreement with UNHCR, mentioning the need to give back to the international community as much as had been received by those Uruguayans forced to flee in search of protection during the dictatorship.

In La Calera, meanwhile, local councillors won the immediate backing of various sectors of the local community such as the Arab clubs, the Palestinian women's associations and a network of volunteers created spontaneously to receive and accompany the refugees

due to arrive from the Syrian-Iraqi desert. The extent of the mobilisation exceeded all UNHCR's expectations. According to Roberto Chahuan, mayor of La Calera, the reception organised for the Palestinian refugees was an outstanding display of solidarity involving not only Chileans of Arab descent but the whole community. There were many offers of help. Each refugee child was sponsored by a Chilean family, for example, and private companies offered employment opportunities. He explains: "We are very proud of being a city of solidarity because Chileans, and Chileans of Palestinian origin in particular, owe a historical debt of gratitude to the international community. For this reason we did not hesitate for a moment to open our city's gates to refugees when UNHCR asked us to do so."

While the Cities of Solidarity programme represents a novel strategy offering refugees better options and opportunities for local integration, the cities involved must go much further than the declarations of principles contained in the agreements. Plans of Action made by municipalities are the departure point for a complex process, the implementation of which is a long-term challenge that must be adequately accompanied, monitored and evaluated as it develops.

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1. <http://www.acnur.org/biblioteca/pdf/3453.pdf>

2. <http://www.acnur.org/biblioteca/pdf/3868.pdf>



Michelle Bachelet, outgoing Chilean president, welcomes a young representative of the Palestinian refugees upon their arrival in Chile, at a ceremony in the presidential residence of la Moneda.