

Working Group 13:

Local communities and migration hotspots: Taking a fundamental rights perspective

Background

In light of recent migratory flows, the European Commission has established migration hotspots. This was done to provide operational support to national authorities in frontline Member States dealing with significant numbers of new arrivals. The mechanism foresees the establishment of Migration Support Teams, consisting of EU Agencies such as Frontex, EASO, Europol and Eurojust experts, working closely with national authorities. Teams have been to Italy and Greece. Most hotspots are on islands, some of which are relatively small.

In order for this measure to fully function, attention should be paid to certain aspects regarding the co-existence of people arriving in need of international protection and the local people. This includes avoiding prolonged stays for migrants in initial reception facilities and ensuring that any action taken is in the best interests of children, especially as they are not equipped for longer stays. In particular, any potential issues arising from increased demand for natural resources, education, healthcare, social services and employment for refugees must be adequately addressed.

From the moment of arrival, refugees are competing with local people for scarce resources. This includes land, water, housing, food and medical services. This is particularly pertinent on smaller islands. The unhampered access to services for refugees should be secured in a way that avoids tension from the local population. The demonstrations in the island of Kos are examples of the difficulties that can come about. On the other hand, the presence of refugees can have a positive effect on the hosting area. For example, it can promote investments in infrastructure.

Local communities are the first contact for new arrivals and they play a crucial role in creating the basis for long-lasting inclusion in EU societies. Therefore, any measures taken to ensure the dignified reception of asylum seekers should be accompanied by significant support for the communities where they are located.

Objectives

The workshop aimed to analyse the impact of the refugee situation on local communities, with a special focus on hotspots.

Speakers

- Pedro Calado, High Commissioner for Migration, Portugal

- Katerina Eustathiou-Selaha, Director, Agkalia (NGO), Lesbos, awarded the Council of Europe's Raoul Wallenberg Prize 2016 for help provided to migrants
- Lora Vidovic, Ombudsman, Croatia
- Aydan Iyigüngör, Head of Sector, Awareness Raising, FRA.

Main messages

1. There should be capacity building measures to help local communities access EU funds for inclusion measures at the local level.
2. Cross-party political consensus should be reached on migration. This would aid the depoliticisation of the issue, including the engendering of a positive and consistent rhetoric.
3. A coordination mechanism that integrates parties active in the hotspots, including governments, NGOs, local authorities, and volunteers should be created.
4. An information campaign should be conducted that informs everyone (migrants, local communities, and media) of important details.

Promising practices

- Coordinated efforts from several actors such as government, international organisations, local authorities and local communities. Developments are followed on the ground, monitoring and assessing the situation. This results in better advice, better information for local communities through work with the media, and assistance where possible to everyone in the field, including refugees, Croatia.
- Jobs for local communities in towns that deal with a huge influx of refugees, Croatia.
- A general immigrant policy that safeguards the rights for all migrants/asylum seekers/refugees helps to respond adequately to the integration of refugees, Portugal.
- The creation of a common central online platform where any public/private organisation/association can express their availability to help. This platform allows the central administration to assess the suitability of the offer, and balance offers and requests, Portugal.
- Local management and decentralisation resulting in integrating refugees in localities that expressed interest to help and where they can be integrated. They must meet the criteria of being able to provide housing, food, health assistance - including mental health, national language training and inclusion in the labour market. This leads to integration according to local needs and refugees' skills, Portugal.
- A central coordination team with local management allows for requests regarding integration to be expressed directly from the bottom-up. To answer these requests mobile trained teams go to the integration localities, Portugal.
- Bilateral agreements among Member States can facilitate the relocation of refugees, releasing pressure from main gateways and routes. It also seems to be faster than relocation or resettlement, Portugal.

- A magazine has been distributed for free in a national newspaper – ‘myths and facts about refugees’, Portugal.
- Children from public schools were invited to pack their backpack as if they were a refugee. A lot of people participated, even those not at school. The social media hashtag was *#esefossecomigo* (*#whatifitwasme*), Portugal.
- The professional skills of refugees are identified in reception centres, Brussels, Belgium.
- Programme ‘200+200’ funding is being provided to help 200 local families suffering from the financial crisis and 200 refugee families. This is being carried out by the NGO ‘Agkalia’, Lesbos, Greece.
- Language classes (Greek and English) are being offered to refugees. Farsi and Arabic are being offered to the local community, Lesbos, Greece.
- Refugees are being resettled in smaller cities. Italy.
- City ID cards are being given out to people who have recently arrived, thereby helping to create a sense of belonging, Belgium & Italy.
- Language training and education about the culture of the country and local area are being provided, Germany.
- An online platform for employment has been created. This links asylum seekers/refugees looking for work with companies who can employ them, The Netherlands.
- A smartphone app informs people about refugees’ rights, The Netherlands.

Next steps

- Empower local communities through education on human rights, and resources/funding from the Member States or the EU.
- Create a rights-based framework of welcoming criteria (both for hotspots and integration localities).
- Collect and exchange good practices.
- Accelerate and simplify the asylum procedure and relocation process, while assuring that the rights of asylum seekers are always respected during their time spent in the hotspots.
- Raise the knowledge of local authorities/communities about how to access EU funding.
- Foster inclusion of refugees in labour market. A possible idea is the creation of a platform to connect employment seekers and employers.
- Raise awareness of the positive outcomes of welcoming/integrating refugees given the likely impact on the local demographic and economy.
- Integrate refugees in smaller cities and aim for a balance between people’s skills and the needs in localities.
- Create an ‘emergency pack’ in all Member States in case of a large influx of people.
- Invest in social housing and infrastructure.