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Cities Fostering Belonging: Bolstering the Participation of Young Refugees and Migrants To Foster Inclusive and Cohesive Cities

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The European Policy Dialogue Forum brings together religious leaders, policy-makers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.

 <https://www.kaiciid.org/>
 europa@kaiciid.org

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

"Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Executive summary

This policy brief highlights how cities are in a unique position to foster a safe and supportive environment for young refugees and migrants by enacting tailored policies that emphasise social inclusion over immigration status. As integration is a two-way process that involves both newcomers and host communities, using dialogical approaches is crucial for fostering positive attitudes towards migrants and making them feel like valued members of the community. The mutual learning and exploration of differences that emerge through dialogue methods are critical in providing the necessary emotional infrastructure that fosters social cohesion at community level. This process helps both the host community and migrants develop a sense of belonging. Building strong partnerships between religious and secular actors in urban areas is crucial for leveraging the transformative power of interreligious dialogue. This approach aims to welcome and embrace the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of young refugees and migrants. Drawing on experiences from across European cities, this policy brief introduces the concept of a 'Europe of Sanctuary Cities', where policies and emotional attitudes work together to transform local communities into hubs of social cohesion, shared prosperity and common values.

Introduction

The scale of protests and violent unrest in Paris following the death of Nahel Merzouk, a French teenager of Moroccan and Algerian origin, in July 2023, has raised challenging questions about which policies and measures are best suited to promote belonging in increasingly diverse European cities. Ethnic, gender, racial and religious discrimination are a worrying reality for many young refugees and migrants, including those born in host countries. Studies show that the risk of social exclusion is disproportionately high among those who arrive as migrants and asylum seekers, with vulnerabilities to inequalities often being passed on to the next generation. The systematic engagement of local governments together with religious leaders and actors can improve integration processes for young refugees and migrants, provided two interconnected aspects are aligned: integration policies and emotional attitudes.

Redefining Integration Pathways

Considerations pertaining to migration are politically loaded. The concepts and definitions of ‘integration’, ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ are often contested and understood differently across Europe. The traditional distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ – segregating newcomers into categories of those deserving protection and those who do not – is becoming increasingly unhelpful for effective policymaking. This is especially true in a world where the drivers of people’s movements are often complex and multifaceted.

Similarly, there are different perspectives on how to ensure equal opportunities for refugees and migrants in host communities. Some countries favour assimilation, expecting newcomers to conform to the cultural and social norms of the host community. In contrast, others advocate for social inclusion, designing policies and actions to ensure equal access to public services and encouraging all citizens to engage in decision-making processes that impact their lives.

The European Union’s Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027 views integration as a “two-way process that involves the mutual adaptation of migrants and the host society”. This approach recognizes that newcomers and host communities mutually influence each other, creating a new, shared social environment through their interactions. For this process to succeed, two aspects need to be aligned: first, legislative and policy frameworks tailored to the needs of refugees and migrants, enabling their active engagement in cultural, economic, and social life; second, a welcoming attitude from the local population, which is crucial for recognizing migrants as ‘persons of value’. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue plays a critical role in guiding this continuous process of mutual appreciation, thus fostering social cohesion at the community level, driven by greater acceptance of the ‘Other’.

Navigating Integration and Inclusion Challenges in Cities

Integration processes in Europe are often fraught with challenges and expose young refugees and migrants to significant insecurity, marginalisation and psychological trauma. Yet, many European cities are actively involved in modelling effective **two-way integration policies** and measures for young refugees and migrants that champion more inclusive societies.



*In the Netherlands, **Rotterdam's** “No worries. This is Rotterdam” action programme offers diversity training in schools and hosts over 350 dialogue meetings annually to foster social inclusion. The programme uses migrant community expertise to shape the city's policy-making processes.*

<https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/5th-Integrating-Cities-Report-2022.pdf>

Employment is critical for integration. Yet, studies from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) demonstrate how young refugees and migrants encounter barriers, including discrimination and skills mismatch, throughout Europe. The EPDF policy paper “The Role of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Enhancing Social Cohesion in European Cities” outlines that partnering with the private sector can offer unexpected solutions, including through digital innovation that can accelerate skills-based labour market integration.



***Mygrants**, a **Bologna**-based start-up, offers innovative digital tools to map skills and match individuals with labour market needs. Employers receive dynamic CVs that are the result of an online state-of-the-art skills' mapping through gamification, which bypasses biases related to age, ethnicity, gender or religion, while the algorithm automatically matches the existing capabilities with labour shortages.*

<https://mygrants.it/en/>

Effective and swift labour market integration of young refugees and migrants not only offers measurable savings for local administrations but also an incentive to explore **outcome-based or pay-by-result finance tools and approaches** based on migrant economic inclusion success rates. This approach is based on the potential to **combine public and private funding** to meet the evolving needs of city residents. Funding flexibility paves the way for more **sustainable integration policies**, bolstering cohesive and prosperous communities.



In 2017, **Helsinki**, Finland, saw the launch of “KotoSIB,” one of Europe’s pioneering social impact bonds, aimed at improving employment and integration for nearly 2,000 refugees. This initiative, with investments from the Finnish Orthodox Church (<https://kotosib.fi/en/#yleista>), serves as a prime example of how faith-based financing can support integration efforts, emphasising social justice and community welfare. It also demonstrates the potential for mobilising resources in cities facing budget constraints.

Expanding access to **scholarships for tertiary education** is a powerful tool for enhancing the integration prospects of young refugees and migrants. This tool can catalyse educational inclusion and career advancement, while also providing a legal pathway for moving from transit or first reception countries to long-term destinations in Europe. The Union of Exiled Students has been advocating for a more systematic use of scholarships to enable young refugees and migrants to access tertiary education at European universities.

Political participation is essential for building truly inclusive and cohesive communities. Cities are ideally placed to develop pathways to improve the active and passive voting rights of refugees and migrants. Creating consultative bodies within city administrations has led to improving political participation at the local level, as highlighted in the Network for Dialogue policy brief “Engaging Migrant and Refugee-led Organizations in Policymaking in Europe”. However, the lack of decision-making power risks limiting this mechanism to tokenism. Other forms of political involvement would be needed, possibly based on the fiscal contribution of refugees and migrants, to ensure that every resident develops a strong sense of belonging.

Embracing Sanctuary: The Role of Dialogue in Cultivating Inclusive Cities

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue are critical tools for creating a ‘welcome culture,’ which embodies the positive emotional attitudes that serve as the foundational ‘glue’ for successful two-way integration. The importance of religion and faith as unifying forces and sources of belonging provides stability in the lives of migrants. It also helps build essential bridges between the host community and newcomers, transcending differences. This approach facilitates a shift in attitudes from fear to mutual understanding and acceptance.



The project **“Imagine: Learning to Live Together Addressing Controversial Issues”** in Toledo, Spain, used historical interfaith and multicultural settings to critically explore what unites the city’s citizens. This model was echoed in Timisoara, Romania, and Cyprus to showcase how religious values are a source of union and cohesion. <https://www.uv.es/icie/ucv.pdf>

The concept of sanctuary cities embraces the idea of community membership based on residency, grounded in the mutual appreciation of differences and commonalities among community members who share the same physical and emotional space. In sanctuary cities, young refugees and migrants are granted access to essential services like education, employment, healthcare and housing regardless their immigration status, providing a safe and supportive environment for newcomers.



Sanctuary city as a modern concept originated in the United States in the 1980s when churches provided shelter and protection from deportation to migrants from Latin America fleeing civil wars as an act of civil disobedience. European sanctuary cities have typically not refused to enforce immigration law, but foster a culture of hospitality, allowing undocumented migrants access to essential services and opportunities, such as education, health services and employment.

Faith-driven initiatives provide opportunities to remove barriers of fear, build bonds and help young refugees and migrants find belonging and give back to their new communities. Similarly, the chance to spend time together and to become immersed in each other's culture or in a shared activity, be it cultural or otherwise, is an important way to build trust based on mutual understanding and shared humanity. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue also motivate positive curiosity, particularly for young people, presenting the richness and dignity of human diversity, and encouraging education and language skills.



By facilitating structured encounters between Jewish congregations and local migrant communities, the **HIAS-led Neighbours programme** dismantles stereotypes. Similarly, by hosting refugees, the Jewish community volunteering in **Welcome Circles** highlights how interfaith encounters build understanding and inclusion: <https://hias.org/statements/eight-jewish-congregations-europe-join-initiative-fight-antisemitism-and-promote-cross-cultural-understanding/>

Despite ongoing efforts, harmful narratives and hate speech still affect the daily lives of newcomers in host communities. To promote positive narratives, city administrators could harness the critical role of religious leaders and actors to amplify the impact of local initiatives to raise awareness, prevent discrimination and improve peaceful coexistence.



In **Odemira, Portugal**, the **Bowing Project** takes everyday activities and transforms them into dance, written text or art in order to connect people. They also use intergenerational dialogue to foster a sense of cohesion in the community. <https://gulbenkian.pt/en/read-watch-listen/bowing/>

Experiences in European cities prove that encouraging an attitudinal change is the area where interreligious and intercultural dialogue demonstrates its greatest potential. Initiatives sponsored by local authorities, with the support of religious leaders and dialogue specialists are critical for fostering a sense of belonging among community members, promoting long-lasting change.



Shaza Alrihawi, co-founder of the Global Refugee Network (GRN), improves understanding in German schools by encouraging young refugees to share their personal stories. This method cultivates empathy, allowing young refugees to reclaim their sense of dignity within the community and positively impacting their families as well.

Building on those experiences, European cities are in the position to leverage the potential of interreligious dialogical approaches, while systematically engaging religious and faith leaders in shaping and implementing integration policies for young refugees and migrants.

Cities have a unique capacity to swiftly and effectively tackle problems impacting their residents' lives. Therefore, they play a vital role in ensuring that all community members are actively engaged in fostering an environment where everyone feels like a valuable contributor to the common good.

Recommendations



FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

- Partner with the private sector to develop platforms and projects, such as digital skills mapping mechanisms, to fight discrimination to the access of labour markets, using innovative digital technologies;
- Adopt innovative social finance tools and approaches, such as social impact bonds, to ensure the sustainability of local integration policies in cooperation with religious institutions;
- Promote the establishment of, and engagement with, consultative bodies or other political participation mechanisms where young refugees and migrants can be meaningfully involved, beyond tokenism. Additional support in terms of capacity-development could ensure that their concerns are suitably recognised, expressed and factored into policymaking;
- Promote policy learning and exchange of best practices with local authorities in Europe that act as sanctuary cities, in order to understand the key success factors in fostering inclusive and supportive environments for refugees and migrants in hosting communities.



FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTORS

- Support interreligious and intercultural initiatives engaging young refugees and migrants by offering spaces to enable positive interactions, learning from and about each other, providing opportunities for community members to voice their concerns;
- Campaign for narratives about refugees and migrants that can resonate with local audiences and allow for fostering understanding and empathy, reinforcing a common sense of belonging between host and migrant communities;
- Offer spiritual support tailored to the unique needs of refugee and migrant populations aimed at emotional well-being, trauma healing and intercultural awareness to navigate the identity challenges related to displacement and migration;
- Urge local authorities to allow all migrants – regardless of their immigration status – to access basic social services – health, education, housing, training – as well as employment.



FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

- Advocate the universal access to local services – health, education, housing, employment - regardless of the immigration status of residents;
- Foster the political participation of young refugees and migrants by supporting and mentoring their engagement in advisory councils and other civic participatory platforms and mechanisms.
- Engage with local authorities in developing transparent evaluation methods and mechanisms to ensure accountability in implementing policy recommendations at the local level;
- Advocate for the implementation of policies and practices typical of sanctuary cities, emphasising the evidence that confirms their positive impact on the prosperity, security and cohesiveness of the whole community.

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