

Europe's cities are on the frontline in tackling the refugee crisis

Written by Anna Lisa Boni on 21 September 2015



Our cities are showing the leadership that EU national governments are lacking, argues Anna Lisa Boni.

What does asylum have to do with cities you may ask: Surely this is something dealt with at national levels?

Yet the latest developments in Europe's refugee crisis have thrust cities like Milan, Paris, Vienna and Munich into the spotlight. We shouldn't underestimate the crucial role that cities are playing in the current crisis.

They are showing leadership in the face of this major political and humanitarian crisis, as news outlets throughout Europe flash images of city train stations surrounded by makeshift refugee camps. City mayors are being interviewed live on TV describing how they are dealing with the crisis.

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Our EUROCIITIES members have been on the frontline receiving asylum seekers and refugees for months now and regularly share information and concerns about their experiences.

It often falls on local authorities to provide newly arrived refugees with the basic protection and services that these often exhausted and vulnerable people urgently need.

City mayors are the ones who must deal with the humanitarian, financial and social challenges of the asylum crisis, often having to react and coordinate their responses in a matter of days, working closely with civil society organisations, police forces and volunteer groups.

Cities need help if they are to continue providing the essential services to assist those arriving in Europe. Giving cities access to emergency funds, and sharing responsibility more fairly - not only across member states but also between government levels - would allow our cities to strengthen and scale up their efforts.

While discussions continue at EU level, our cities have been quick to act. Gdansk, for example, is preparing to provide emergency assistance to refugees arriving in the Polish city.

The local authorities are exploring ways to use vacant housing for refugees rather than camps in a bid to help better integrate them into Polish society. The city is also employing people to act as intermediaries between the refugees and private landlords.

Local politicians in the city are working hard to ensure that the refugees have access to language courses, healthcare and psychological support if needed.

Meanwhile, several Spanish cities, led by Barcelona, have taken the initiative of launching a national network of 'safe cities' for refugees, deploying emergency accommodation and social services where they are needed most.

The European Commission's agenda on migration is a step in the right direction, but the challenges around this issue are wide-ranging.

A reform of the Dublin system is needed to help alleviate the pressure on EU external regions, where local authorities are often least able to offer adequate support and protection to refugees and asylum seekers.

Allowing asylum seekers to work while their claims are being processed would help speed up their integration as well as allowing them to contribute to local economies.

Failing to provide refuge is not an option for our EUROCIITIES member cities. Aside from the humanitarian concerns, the repercussions would be disastrous in terms of social cohesion, public health and the protection of fundamental rights.

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