

**FOSTERING REFUGEE INTEGRATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL BY CREATING
INTERSECTIONAL COOPERATION NETWORK BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES AND
NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS**

**Recommendations for intersectional cooperation model and engagement of
municipalities in implementation of refugee integration policies**

'Big cities, small cities, new gateway cities, open, inclusive cities or older rustbelt cities... Whatever their size or history, successful cities are led by innovative, forward-looking local governments that know how to use the authority and instruments of public office to serve the best interests of all, including new immigrants'.¹

Introduction

Cities are attracting increasing numbers of people in search of a better life, more employment opportunities and better services, but also those fleeing conflict, natural disasters and environmental degradation (IOM 2015). In the context of the 'age of migration', cities are becoming destination points for immigrants and refugees, where integration at the local level is playing crucial role by creating welcoming and inclusive environment for all residents. As Michael Collyer (2015) has indicated, as of 2014, it's thought that 54 per cent of the world's population have lived in cities – and it's expected to reach 66 per cent by 2050, where migration forms a significant, and, often, controversial part of population growth in urban areas.

Migrants have organised themselves at all times and in all cities, where the processes of their accommodation differ, with local authorities and other institutions playing an important role in these processes (Fauser 2012). Cities grow in three ways: through migration, the natural growth and the reclassification of nearby non-urban districts. However, migration is only 'responsible' for one share of this growth and it varies widely from country to country (Collyer 2015).

Immigration and refugee integration in the cities

In the context of international migration to cities, Lithuania is not an exception. The analysis (Ethnicity Studies 2009/1; Žibas 2014) of immigration structure in Lithuania revealed that foreigners (non-EU citizens) are mainly concentrated in the largest Lithuanian cities. Around 75% of all foreigners live in 6 municipalities. The majority of immigrants are residing in Vilnius, followed by the city of Klaipeda, Kaunas and Vilnius District. This means that the major Lithuanian cities are centres of attraction of immigration as foreigners living in the mentioned municipalities make up the majority of non-EU nationals in Lithuania. Eventually, the largest cities (Vilnius, Klaipeda and Kaunas) with more than half of the foreigners in Lithuania certainly create common structural characteristics of immigration to Lithuania. In the comparison to all foreigners in Lithuania (labour immigration, studies, legal activities, family reunification and internal

¹ Good Ideas from Successful Cities: Municipal Leadership in Immigrant Integration. Cities of Migration: <http://citiesofmigration.ca/>. More about refugee integration at the local level, see The Refugee Portal, which connects relevant stakeholders to promising practices on the reception, settlement and inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in cities around the world: <http://citiesofmigration.ca/refugee-portal/>

EU mobility), the number foreigners granted asylum is relatively small, with the concentration in Vilnius, Kaunas and Jonava.²

Cities in the European Union have already become main attraction centres not only for migrant workers, students and entrepreneurs, but also for asylum seekers. However, Lithuania is still not a target country for asylum seekers as the number of foreigners granted asylum in Lithuania is small. Since 1997, 217 foreigners have been granted refugee status and 3856 – subsidiary protection (DDG 2016). According to unofficial estimation, approximately 300 foreigners with refugee status or subsidiary protection are residing in Lithuania, with the biggest proportion residing in few cities: Kaunas, Vilnius and Jonava.

In 2015, 291 asylum applications have been submitted in Lithuania; 17 asylum seekers have been granted refugee status and 69 – subsidiary protection (the majority asylum seekers were from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Ukraine). In 2016, due to more intense relocation and resettlement processes, the situation has changed significantly as the number of asylum seekers significantly increased – up to 425. In 2016, 181 asylum seekers received refugee status and only 14 – subsidiary protection (due to relocation and resettlement, the vast majority of asylum seekers came from Syria). During the first half of 2017, 279 asylum applications have been submitted; 189 foreigners received refugee status whereas only 1 received subsidiary protection (again, due to relocation and resettlement, the vast majority came from Syria with the remaining largest group coming from Iraq) (Migration Department 2015, 2016, 2017).

Lithuania is currently mid-way in terms of meeting its commitments on relocation and resettlement. Until now, out of 1 105 asylum seekers accommodated in Greece, Italy and Turkey, Lithuania has already relocated 414 (38 %) (see table below). However, it has to be emphasised that 256 from those relocated to Lithuania have already left the country. According to the unofficial estimation, the majority of those who left Lithuania moved to Germany with some moving to Sweden.

Studies (Ethnicity Studies 2009/1; Žibas 2014; DDG 2016, other), which were oriented towards refugee integration in Lithuanian society, revealed broad field of challenges. For example, it showed that social context (unemployment, undeveloped social resources and skills, housing and language obstacles, lack of social contacts with receiving society, etc.) in which refugees find themselves while solving their everyday challenges, makes a significant impact on the integration process. Language obstacles and opportunities of employment allow refugees choosing only unskilled and poorly paid jobs. In addition, collective relations and internal networks are mostly used social resources of refugees in order to deal with challenges of unemployment, housing and social assistance. Moreover, the successful integration is related to the municipality, in which refugees are residing as the course of integration often depends on the assistance of NGOs.

As the follow up of institutional and legislative developments in the area of immigration and migrant integration policies as well as relocation and resettlement processes (where Lithuania signed an agreement to relocate / resettle 1 105 asylum seekers), since 2017, almost every municipality has appointed person, responsible for coordination of refugee integration policies and processes at the city level. However, due to the lack of knowledge, low immigration rates and, eventually, direct experiences providing integration measures, the recourses at the local level are being used only partly, excluding municipalities from their direct duty; especially, taking into consideration the concept of integration, which has to start and be organised at the local level.

² 43 600 foreigners and around 300 foreigners granted asylum.

Regarding the integration at the local level in Lithuania, structural challenges occur as municipalities are not enough involved in mediating refugee integration processes as there is no systematic coordination and cooperation between municipalities, NGOs and governmental institutions. On one hand, there is a quite visible effort at national level, with policies, governmental institutions³, NGO⁴ and local community initiatives⁵. On the other hand, it is clear that cooperation mentioned above is still in the initial development stage.

Recommendations

To initiate municipal integration initiatives, political will and societal consensus in necessary. At the same time, it is necessary to involve local authorities in immigration and asylum policy making processes at the national level. Therefore, in the first instance, there is a need to:

- Recognise the important of municipality's role in migrant integration processes in general, and refugee integration in particular;
- Develop immigration and integration strategies or programmes, which show that municipality (not the country) is competing for immigrants and refugees;
- Introduce the principles of diversity and equality in all municipality's policies and activities, including private / public sector's corporate social responsibility and diversity management at the workplaces;
- Encourage mayor and administration to become the part of visibility and public campaign for human rights, diversity and integration;
- Ensure that immigrants and refugees have possibility to participate in democratic processes with the purpose that all residents would have possibility to participate in city governance, considering both conventional and unconventional forms of political and civic participation / engagement;
- Adapt good practices from other successful municipalities and go far beyond that;
- Provide services those languages that reflects immigration structure in the municipality;
- Promote immigrant / refugee entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic integration; promote social entrepreneurship as a background to create welcoming and inclusive environments in grass roots societies;
- Enable public spaces to act as facilitators for better integration and community engagement;
- Introduce benchmarking strategies and longitudinal monitoring mechanism to receive data on immigrant / refugee integration in the municipality: housing, labour market, entrepreneurship, adult and children education, conventional and unconventional political participation / civic engagement forms, other (Cities of Migration 2012);
- Successful integration can be achieved through close collaboration between the municipal government, local communities, volunteers, educational institutions, businesses, and refugees / immigrants (Horsens Commune 2016).

Refugee integration system in Lithuania

Along with the ratification of 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, since 1997 Lithuania became a receiving country for refugees and asylum seekers. These agreements, together with the Law on Refugees (2000)

³ The inter-ministerial Commission under Prime Minister's office, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, its Department of Supervision of Social Services, Rukla Refugee Reception Centre, other.

⁴ Lithuanian Red Cross and Caritas Lithuania as key stakeholders.

⁵ 'Rukla Support', 'I Welcome Refugee', 'Assistance to Refugees in Lithuania'.

formed legal framework of Lithuanian asylum policy. In 2004 the Law on the Legal Status of Aliens (29.04.2004 No. IX-2206) has changed the asylum application process by adapting the EU *acquis communautaire* into national legislation.

In Lithuania, refugee support is provided first at the Refugee Reception Centre in Rukla for a period of up to 3 months. It continues later on the municipal level, or, should the person concerned wish so and a commission created by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour take a relevant decision, integration may start in the municipality from the very beginning. Where for objective reasons a foreigner granted asylum fail to prepare for integration in the municipality within 3 months, this period may be extended. Support offered by the Reception Centre for to unaccompanied minors, with the child's best interests taken into account, may be extended until they reach the age of 18. In the case of unforeseeable circumstances, subject to a decision of the Director of the Reception Centre and consent by the commission, support at the Centre may continue further (LSRC 2016).

After the period of integration at the Reception Centre is completed, support for integration continues in the municipal territory for a period of up to 12 months counting from the day of departure from the Reception Centre (for vulnerable persons – up to 36 months). Integration in municipalities continues through municipal institutions and non-governmental organisations (integration institutions) with which contracts on refugee integration are concluded by the Reception Centre and which receive funding for performing integration activities. The current total period for support for integration is 15 months (3 months at the reception centre and 12 months in the municipality).

Experiences from the Nordic Countries

Contrary to the Lithuanian case, experience of the Scandinavian countries shows that Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden provide refugees granted a residence permit with support for housing and a possibility to move to municipal territories as soon as possible after granting asylum. Housing search in the respective municipality and the conclusion of a contract with the owner are taken care of by public authorities. This procedure linked with the general duty of municipalities to organise language training for immigrants and refugees and to ensure childcare services and school attendance is the main distinctive feature of the project of support for integration in the Nordic countries.

Municipalities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which bear the costs for the reception of refugees, receive financial compensation from the state for the provision of targeted integration services (UNHCR 2014). During an initial transition period, in the first years of integration, refugees receive financial allowances to cover their costs of living, including rent.

For example, in Denmark, when an asylum seeker is granted asylum, the Danish Immigration Service assigns the asylum seeker to a municipality, where refugees and their families are required to take part in integration program, which means that the municipality must provide a permanent residence/housing, access to language school, job centre and activation. Within the programme, a refugee is not allowed to move from the municipality assigned, unless another municipality is willing to take over the responsibilities or if the refugee can take care of herself/himself (Bendixen 2016).

Sweden and Denmark share a practice to enable arriving refugees to work in the private or in the public sector, with 80% of their job maintenance allocated from the municipal or state budget for a period of 6 to 24 months. Such employment is linked with language training at work, organised by the municipality. A half of foreigners participating in such a programme remain employed in the labour market after the end of the programme

(European Parliament, 2016, p. 38). In Denmark the programme functions in a similar way. The initial phase is to conduct an individual evaluation of refugees' skills and have them enrolled in Danish language learning (for 4 to 8 weeks). After the end of the first phase, people are offered an opportunity to work as an assistant or trainee in an undertaking and to continue language courses. Employers are not given any financial responsibility, and it is the municipality that takes care of keeping refugees in the labour market (for 26 to 52 weeks) (European Parliament 2016).

By concluding above mentioned information it is necessary to emphasise that municipalities in the Nordic Countries are playing crucial role in the implementation of refugee integration policies, where local authorities are responsible for different integration measure and areas: from housing to employment. Contrary to the experiences in the Nordic Countries, the initial refugee integration stage in Lithuania is being organised in culturally, economically and socially limited environment (small town Rukla, where NATO battalion is established). After leaving such environment, integration is taken over by NGO sector, where in many cases municipalities are not playing an important role.

Recommendations for engagement of municipalities in implementation of refugee integration policies

As it is indicated in 'The Strategic Document for Refugee Integration' (LSRC 2016), the main aim of the refugee integration policies should be to promote and develop refugee integration initiatives at the local level, by creating state-coordinated integration infrastructure, involving municipalities and non-governmental organisations as the key providers of integration measures. At the same time, refugee integration policy has to ensure the transparency and continuity of activities of municipalities and non-governmental organisations, to seek that integration measures for refugees are in line with the goals and objectives of the integration policy as well as with the special needs of different refugee groups.

Integration happens exceptionally at the local level. Therefore, UNHCR addressed the importance of welcoming communities, which might play a crucial role to ease refugees' adjustment to their new surroundings and successful move towards self-sufficiency. Based on the experience of the Nordic countries in facilitating refugee integration through specific programmes, it is critical to ensure that: (i) receiving communities are assigned the responsibility to receive refugees in advance; (ii) local authorities and service providers are prepared and capacitated to receive and support refugees; and (iii) the host population is informed and prepared to welcome refugees. It is also important to consider financial mechanisms to support municipalities in their new tasks by working with state funds, which may be complemented with EU and other funding.

UNHCR strongly recommends engaging municipal authorities and local communities in providing foreigners granted asylum equal access to services. Strengthening the role and status of municipal authorities includes possibilities to delegate them the functions of providing integration-related support and services to persons granted asylum. The scheme should include a financial support package to cover costs of integration-related support measures and services (LSRC 2016). Such initiative could be considered as a model for a broader integration perspective, including different types of migrations in different municipalities. Moreover, it could create the potential for municipalities to become so called 'resource centres' and ensure diverse and strategic integration environment, which could be self-sustainable over time and space.

Municipalities have to be responsible for creating multicultural dialogue and inclusive environment for refugee integration. Refugee isolation and lack of social contacts with

the local community and municipal institutions are one of the main integration challenges, while municipality is the closest institution to local community. Such separation from the community enhances the state of mistrust, fear and insecurity both for refugees and for the local community. In the long run that state generates further polarisation of the two communities (refugees and the host local community) and leads to failed integration. Therefore, municipalities should actively engage local communities to accept and support refugees. Targeted information and local media campaigns and awareness-raising events strongly contribute to creating a welcoming environment.

The implementation and monitoring of the refugee integration policy and the improvement of implementation methods at municipal level is the cornerstone of effective integration, associated with cooperation between municipalities, public authorities and non-governmental organisations. Therefore, there is a need to:

- Create state-coordinated refugee integration infrastructure based on intersectoral cooperation involving municipalities and non-governmental organisations as the key providers of integration measures;
- To ensure the involvement of other institutions (all ministries and municipalities, trade unions concerned and foreigner associations) in integration processes; To promote intersectoral cooperation, where municipalities could act as coordinators, involving state authorities, non-governmental sector, employers, religious, sports and cultural organisations, schools, vocational and higher education establishments, grassroots societies, trade unions, private sector and refugees;
- To develop competencies of the staff of municipalities. Municipalities have to ensure that all relevant representatives from municipal structures (social workers and teachers, representatives of local labour exchange offices and migration boards, other) regularly participate in professional development in line with the needs of refugees and improve their intercultural skills and ensure the quality of providing services to refugees with various needs and skills;
- To ensure the accessibility of services to refugees. It is appropriate to apply local integration programmes creating working groups active on the local level that would include educational establishments, the municipality, NGOs, the private sector and the local community. Each municipality should deal with its own specific issues taking into account the immigration structure and targeted policy measures applicable to various refugee groups;
- Integration and educational programmes should be decentralised, which is why it is important to develop local initiatives covering learning, integration into the labour market, social inclusion processes and active citizenship. There should be cultural mediators not only in NGOs, but also in municipalities. These mediators would communicate both with refugees and with local authorities;
- Engage municipal authorities and local communities to provide refugees with the equal access to services. Strengthening the role and status of municipal authorities includes possibilities to delegate them the functions of providing integration-related support and services to foreigners in general and refugees in particular.

To ensure continuous activity of municipalities, the continuity of service provision, quality control, financing and long-term planning, following functions for municipalities have to be considered:

- To provide refugee integration measures on the local level in cooperation with NGOs;
- To monitor and analyse the need for, relevance and quality of services provided to various refugee groups;
- To improve service provision, capacity and competencies;

- To participate in activities of the intersectoral commission coordinating the implementation of the integration policy, to provide information on challenges and good practices and to put forward proposals to relevant institutions and organisations;
- To promote the involvement of refugees and their organisations in intersectoral cooperation processes on the local and national levels;
- To strengthen the ties of refugee organisations with public authorities, other non-governmental organisations and grassroots societies;
- To strengthen voluntary refugee activities, deepening their integration in local communities and promoting civic and political engagement.

Moreover, there is a need not only to appoint a unit or person responsible for integration on the municipal level (that was already done), but, at the same time, to provide, for example, the following functions:

- To implement and coordinate the national refugee integration policy on the local level;
- To draw up reports on the implementation of refugee integration policy at the local level and initiate proposals on policies implemented in this area;
- To collect statistical data on positions taken by refugees in the society (unemployment rate, child education, adult education indicators, etc.);
- To continuously monitor integration services and issues at the local level;
- To select strategic partners (service providers) implementing integration measures and to monitor their activities;
- To ensure intersectoral cooperation at the local level involving all parties concerned;
- To improve the dissemination of information at the local level.

These (above discusses) functions (as instrument) should obtain certain content; therefore, very specific activities (in accordance to the specific integration context in each municipality) should be initiated. For example:

- Initiate dialogue meetings in local communities for interested parties to come together for information about current topics and processes in the field of integration;
- Development of a platform for volunteers to offer their services for various tasks in cooperation with existing parties (NGOs and municipalities);
- Preparation of volunteers from clubs and associations to support integration; for example, providing volunteer sports leaders with the tools they need to help refugees come into sports clubs;
- To coordinate initiatives between refugees and local communities and enhance dialogue;
- Foster internal communication between municipality departments, including knowledge of the tasks, skills, and tools that different departments possess in relation to integration;
- Ensure / enhance equal access to key integration areas: housing, labour market, health care, social assistance / service, education, etc. Such activities have to be implemented in the framework of internal cooperation (within administration of municipality) and external cooperation (with municipal institutions, NGOs, local communities and, finally, private sector).

Alternative / additional solutions

One of the solutions to deal with refugee integration challenges could lie in a new EU refugee policy that offers the municipalities, who already take on the main task of integration, new room for play through additional funding. Municipalities that voluntarily take in and integrate refugees should not just be refunded the costs of receiving the refugees but also be given resources that they can use to improve the municipal infrastructure (schools, administration, promotion of trades and crafts) (Schwan 2017). That kind of asylum and refugee policy could also inject greater human and economic vitality into the EU, which is in its interest:

- Municipalities whose inhabitants are moving away could acquire new citizens who give them new life, work there and boost tax revenue;
- Existing infrastructure at risk of closure (nurseries, schools, medical care, housing supply, mobility, trade) can be used again and where appropriate developed;
- New cultural, sports and other projects in which the (new) citizens cooperate with one another could bring closer social cohesion and inject new (meaningful) life into the municipalities again, improve the atmosphere and counter the widespread, diffuse fear of the future;
- This could create a new coherence between proclaimed European values and individual action, which would boost the self-esteem, reputation and authority of EU citizens (Schwan 2017).

Finally, while creating and implementing refugee integration policies at the local level, following EU level initiatives have to be taken into consideration:

- Urban Agenda for the EU; particularly, Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees: <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/inclusion-of-migrants-and-refugees>;
- Cities of Migration: <http://citiesofmigration.ca>. More about refugee integration at the local level, see The Refugee Portal, which connects relevant stakeholders to promising practices on the reception, settlement and inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in cities around the world: <http://citiesofmigration.ca/refugee-portal>;
- Eurocities: migration & integration: <http://www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/issues/migration-integration-issue>;
- Migrants4Cities: <http://www.migrants4cities.de/en/the-project>;
- Migrants' Inclusion in Cities: Innovative Urban Policies and Practices: [file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Migrants' %20Inclusion %20in %20Cities.pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Migrants%20Inclusion%20in%20Cities.pdf);
- Cities Welcoming Refugees and Migrants: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002465/246558e.pdf>;
- World Migration Report 2015 – Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2015-migrants-and-cities-new-partnerships-manage-mobility>;
- GLOBAL MIGRATION. Resilient Cities at the Forefront. Strategic actions to adapt and transform our cities in an age of migration: http://action.100resilientcities.org/page/-/100rc/pdfs/Global%20Migration_Resilient%20Cities%20At%20The%20Forefront_DIGITAL%20%28High%20Res%29.pdf;
- Smart cities: <https://smartcities.ieee.org>;
- Networks of Towns 2017 programme / funding: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens/funding/networks-towns-2017_en;
- And many more...

Such initiatives give the opportunity to search for good practices, project partners and funding. Finally, it gives the understanding that integration should be organised at the local level, where, actually, it happens.

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