

ESTUDIOS

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”: The response of the Christian civil society to refugee protection in Europe

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“Fui extranjero y me acogisteis”: la respuesta de la sociedad civil cristiana a los refugiados en Europa

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es explicar la doctrina sobre la protección de los refugiados desde la perspectiva del pensamiento social católico y ofrecer un análisis comparativo de cómo las diferentes iniciativas inspiradas en los valores cristianos han respondido a los desafíos y oportunidades que plantean los refugiados. Finalmente, el texto ofrece algunas recomendaciones sobre las diferentes formas de avance. Este estudio compara algunas de estas iniciativas en toda Europa, centrándose particularmente en cinco países: Portugal, Francia, España, Bélgica e Italia. El estudio trata de responder a través de la visión tanto de aquellos que han sido alojados como personas desplazadas por la fuerza y como la de aquellos que los han albergado, así como desde la perspectiva de aquellos que unen comunidades y actúan juntos en nombre de los migrantes forzosos.

Palabras clave: *Refugiado, hospitalidad, buenas prácticas, sociedad civil, política europea de asilo.*

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**“I was a stranger and you welcome me”:
The response of the Christian civil society
to refugee protection in Europe**

Abstract: The purpose of this document is to explain the doctrine of the refugees on the protection from a perspective of catholic social thought and to offer a comparative analysis of how the different initiatives, inspired in the Christian values, have answered to the challenges and opportunities that the refugees bring. Lastly, it will present some suggestions on the best ways of going forward. The present study will compare some of these initiatives in the whole of Europe, focusing particularly on several European countries, such as Portugal, France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. This study endeavors to give an answer through the lens of those who have been lodged as displaced persons by the force and of the ones that have welcome them, likewise from the perspective of those who unify the communities and jointly advocate on behalf of the forced migrants.

Keywords: *Refugee, hospitality, good practice, civil society, European policy of asylum.*

**«J’étais un étranger, et vous m’avez
accueilli»: la réponse de la société civile
chrétienne aux réfugiés en Europe**

Résumé: Le propos de ce document est d’expliquer la doctrine des réfugiés sur la protection depuis une perspective de pensée sociale-catholique et offrir une analyse comparative de comment les différentes initiatives, inspirées des valeurs chrétiennes, ont répondu aux défis et aux opportunités soulevées par les réfugiés. Finalement, le document proposera quelques recommandations sur les différentes manières de progresser. Cette étude comparera quelques-unes de ces initiatives dans toute l’Europe, en se focalisant particulièrement sur cinq pays: le Portugal, la France, l’Espagne, la Belgique et l’Italie. Cette étude essaie de répondre à travers la vision de ceux qui ont été logés comme personnes déplacées de force et de ceux qui les ont logés, ainsi que depuis la perspective de ceux qui unissent les communautés et agissent conjointement au nom des migrants forcés.

Mots clé: *Réfugié, hospitalité, bonnes pratiques, société civile, politique européenne d’asile.*

I. Introduction

In his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2016, His Holiness Pope Francis expressed:

At this moment in human history, marked by great movements of migration, identity is not a secondary issue. Those who migrate are forced to change some of their most distinctive characteristics and, whether they like or not, even those who welcome them are also forced to change. How can we experience these changes not as obstacles to genuine development, but rather as opportunities for genuine human, social and spiritual growth, a growth which respects and promotes those values which make us ever more humane and help us to live a balanced relationship with God, others and creation?

The purpose of this paper is twofold: To explain the refugee doctrine on protection from a Catholic Social Thought perspective, and to offer a comparative analysis

of how different initiatives, inspired by Christian values, have responded to the challenges and opportunities refugees bring. Lastly, it will offer some recommendations on ways forward.

Regarding the methodology, the testimonies of refugees and projects highlighted come from different organizations working in Europe, as well as from individuals. My own organization –the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)– works in 14 countries in Europe and 48 worldwide. Throughout the past two years, JRS has mapped 312 projects in Europe which highlight individual and group best community practices towards refugees, with the aim of identifying community building initiatives for local citizens and refugees and ultimately show how do these initiatives build understanding and how do they counter racism and xenophobia.

The present study will compare some of these initiatives across Europe, focusing particularly in five European countries, namely Portugal, France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy.

Highlighted in this paper are also initiatives such as *Duo for a Job* in Belgium or the response of municipalities in Portugal through the municipality structure. Other sources that have been analysed are Caritas Europa's Welcome report with identification of barriers that exist for successful integration. The present paper includes testimonies of both refugees and people working with refugees or accompanying them in their processes of integration. Ethical considerations have been taken into account in the interview process. All names have been changed for security reasons.

By gathering different responses to refugee protection in Europe from Christian-based organizations, this study strives thus to answer Pope Francis' above questions through the lens of those who have been hosted as forcibly displaced persons and of those who have hosted them, as well as from the perspective of those who bring communities together and jointly advocate on behalf of forced migrants.

I. Who is a refugee?

1.1. Why a "Refugee Crisis"? Causes and protracted nature of today's conflicts

War and persecution have driven more people from their homes than at any time since World War II. As at June 2016 there were 63,974,227 forcibly displaced people including 16,515,190 refugees and 36,414,782 people displaced within

their own countries or internally displaced persons (IDPs). There are also believed to be over 10 million people who are stateless and who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. A person over 113 in the world population is displaced in this manner (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017 UNHCR).

Children represent a disproportionate number of displaced persons, accounting for nearly half of the displaced population, amounting to 28 million children total. An additional 20 million child migrants have fled their homes for a variety of reasons including extreme poverty or gang violence. In 2016, around 45 per cent of all child refugees under UNHCR protection came from Syria and Afghanistan, where child exploitation is endemic, but there are thousands of other displaced children at risk of human rights abuses throughout the world. Globally, children on the move are at risk of forced military recruitment in Eritrea, of sexual abuse in Democratic Republic of Congo, of human or organ trafficking in Sudan or of exploitative labor in Lebanon.

The record level of forced displacement is not a refugee or migration crisis, but a crisis in responsibility sharing, solidarity, imagination, and leadership. As some even suggest, it is rather a crisis of values. Developing states host nearly 90 per cent of the world's forcibly displaced persons, while developed states –with only a small number of exceptions– adopt the language of responsibility sharing, but reject this ethic in practice. For example, Ethiopia hosts 700,000 refugees, while Europe debates opening humanitarian corridors to allow the admission of just 500 refugees from Ethiopia.

Yet, developed states need immigrants. By 2030, the European population will decrease by 20 percent, and the need for immigrant laborers will increase accordingly. It is hoped that these demographic realities could help to reorient public opinion.

Human mobility has been a constant in human history and has enriched humanity; no country can address this challenge on its own; and partnerships and dialogue between sending and receiving states are pivotal to an effective response. Italy's vision of responsibility sharing, for instance, is to invest in countries of origin through leveraging private investment; to protect vulnerable migrants by promoting legal migration; and to enhance the contributions of migrants to their new societies.

One of the most serious issues of our time is the mixed flows of people and the need to protect not only refugees and asylum seekers, but people who flee from abject poverty, new forms of violence, and impossible lives due to environmental degradation, all coming to European countries using the same means.

1.2. People the 1951 Refugee Convention fails to protect. De facto refugees

The reality of migrants seeking safety has evolved since World War II as well as the subsequent development of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Many of today's so-called migrants are people in need of international protection. The definition of a refugee contained in current international law is still useful today because it focuses on the causes of the migration and to the protection of people, but it needs to be expanded along with the refugee protection regime, which needs to be matched to the new realities of the XXI century.

The current weaknesses and gaps of the EU protection regime have practical consequences for many people that are in need of international protection. The distinction between deserving and undeserving refugees brings potentially catastrophic consequences for the protection and wellbeing of many people in Europe, who are left undocumented and prone to radicalization, destitution, and crime.

Refugees have always existed, but the right to asylum and the legal category of 'refugee' was set out by the United Nations in its 1951 Convention and was originally bound in time and space, as it was created to address the plight of Holocaust victims, other refugees from the Second World War and new refugees from Central and Eastern Europe who faced discriminatory persecution by their own governments. The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as someone who has been persecuted, or has a reasonable fear of persecution, because of race, religion, ethnicity, membership in a particular social group or political view.

Though narrow in its scope, the Convention arose out of a much broader recognition that where States are unable to offer *de facto* or *de jure* protection to their citizens, the international community has an obligation to offer protection. But in practice, the definition does not capture the totality of circumstances under which people are forced to cross an international border and are unable to return as a result of an existential threat faced at home.

Increasingly, large numbers of people are leaving their country of origin for reasons that fall neither within the 1951 Convention definition nor within the category of voluntary, economic migrant. The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has made reference to people moving as a result of severe economic and social distress. The combination of livelihood collapse, environmental disaster, and state failure increasingly contributes to non-refugees leaving their country of origin (Betts, 2013).

In 1992, the Catholic Church expanded its understanding of the term ‘refugee’ to include ‘*de facto* refugees’, encompassing victims of armed conflicts, erroneous economic policy, and natural disasters, as well as internally displaced persons. Following a wider definition set in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)’s 1969 Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa² and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees³, the 1992 Vatican document “*Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*” offered a new definition of refugee:

In the categories of the International Convention are not included the victims of armed conflicts, erroneous economic policy or natural disasters. For humanitarian reasons, there is today a growing tendency to recognize such people as de facto refugees, given the involuntary nature of their migration. In the case of the so-called economic migrants, justice and equity demand that appropriate distinctions be made. Those who flee economic conditions that threaten their lives and physical safety must be treated differently from those who emigrate simply to improve their position.

More recently, in his 2015 statement for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis pointed to another dimension of the refugee phenomenon, saying that “migration movements are now a structural reality.” It is this statement that shows the greatest challenge. Pope Francis sees that countries are not acting as free agents in making moral decisions: rather that the world economy is built increasingly upon an interlinked system of unfettered free market capitalism which seemingly needs the disparity of wealth, currently in evidence between countries, and the armed conflict that results, which in turn leads to refugee flows.

1.3. The principle of impartiality in the Christian tradition

A common question for people working in faith-based organizations today is: “Do you only help Christians? Do you only help Muslims?” Moreover, religious identity is becoming for some organizations and countries the criteria to select people whom to reach out to.

Yet, immigration need not lead to a loss of identity. Pope Francis evokes “the duty of civility” which can give rise to a sense of fraternity that

does not threaten us, but engages, reaffirms and enriches our individual identity (cf. Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in an Inter-academic Conference on “The Changing Identity of the Individual”, 28 January 2008).

² <http://www.unhcr.org/45dc1a682.html>

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/about-us/background/45dc19084/cartagena-declaration-refugees-adopted-colloquium-international-protection.html>

A cornerstone of humanitarian law, the principle of impartiality, put into practice, especially by faith-based organizations, can be a source of reconciliation, a sign towards a different way of thinking and imagining societies, even in the midst of war.

Fear too often drives state responses to refugees and immigrants. However, fear cannot be the basis of how states, religious communities and individuals care for refugees. The best way to dispel fear is through human encounter. This fear can also be found in religious communities. There still exists in our parishes a sense of loss and insecurity among some long-term parishioners who feel that the parish they built no longer belongs to them.

Refugees have something to teach us. As Pope Francis said to a group of refugees at the Jesuit Centro Astalli in Rome:

Though treated as a burden, a problem, a cost, you are really a gift. For every one of you can be a bridge that unites distant peoples, that makes possible the encounter between diverse cultures and religions, a way to rediscover our common humanity.⁴

The response by EU Institutions and Member States must be governed by the acknowledgement of the inalienable dignity of every human being and by the values that are constitutive for European societies, such as compassion, solidarity, hospitality, the respect for family life and the rule of law. The fundamental rights of all human beings, irrespective of their nationality or citizenship and immigration status, must be respected so as to allow for the full enjoyment of these rights.

2. Civil society advocacy on refugee protection

2.1. States' obligations to provide access to protection in Europe

EU Member States are bound by a number of international legal instruments which they have agreed to and ratified, and they are under the obligation to respect the right to asylum as laid down in European Union law (Article 18 EU Fundamental Rights Charter).

⁴ Message of Pope Francis on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the JRS Centro Astalli, 19th April 2016: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160419_videomessaggio-centro-astalli-35anniv.html

The obligation of States not to expel or return (*refouler*) a person to territories where she or he would face threats to their life or freedom “is a cardinal protection principle”, most prominently expressed in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but also in Article 19(2) of the EU Fundamental Rights Charter. It “applies to all refugees, including those who have not been formally recognised as such, and to asylum seekers whose status has not yet been determined.”

Whereas the territorial scope of Article 33(1) 1951 Refugee Convention and Article 19(2) Fundamental Rights Charter is not explicitly defined, the meaning, purpose and intent of the provisions demonstrate their extraterritorial application, e.g., situations where a State acts outside its territory or territorial waters.

The prohibition of torture and other forms of cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment or punishment, as laid down in Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 4 of the EU Fundamental Rights Charter, is also providing protection against “*refoulement*”.

According to the European Court for Human Rights (EHCR) established case-law, State Parties to the ECHR have the right to control the entry, residence and expulsion of migrants. However, expulsion, extradition or any other measure to remove a migrant may amount to a violation of the ECHR, where the person in question would face a real risk of being subjected to treatment contrary to Article 3 in the receiving country. In such circumstances, Article 3 implies an obligation to provide protection.

This obligation is also applicable where a migrant is apprehended not on a State Party’s territory but under circumstances where “the State through its agents operating outside its territory exercises control and authority over an individual, and thus jurisdiction”. These cases include those involving the activities of a State’s diplomatic or consular agents abroad. A potential asylum seeker/refugee comes into contact with an EU Member State’s official not only when apprehended at the borders, but also when contacting an embassy or a consulate for obtaining a visa or at an airport where immigration officers posted abroad control passports and visa.

In these specific situations, the Court, basing itself on customary international law and treaty provisions, has recognised the extraterritorial exercise of jurisdiction by the relevant State. (European Court for Human Rights (GC), Judgement of 23 Febr. 2012, Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy (application 27765/09), paras 113–114 with further references.)

This, in turn, means that this extraterritorial exercise of jurisdiction by an EU Member State must be in full conformity with human rights law. However, the visa regime in combination with the pre-entry clearance and the sanctions against carriers that

have transported passengers without the necessary visa can result in a de-facto denial of all legal means of seeking asylum. Thus, in cases of victims of serious human rights violations, these measures can become incompatible with Member States' obligations to provide protection. Therefore, there is an urgent need to install "Doors for Refugees" at the EU borders (Moreno-Lax, 2008).

2.2. Access to the right of asylum

Since the end of the 19th century systems have become more and more deterrent for migrants and the "externalization" of borders. As displaced people and other migrants increasingly move out of the conflict-ridden and less developed regions of their displacement and into relatively rich and stable regions of the world, the countries of destination are increasingly working to contain and even stem the migration flow before it reaches their shores. Perversely, countries that have developed generally rights-sensitive standards and procedures for assessing protection claims of asylum-seekers within their jurisdictions have simultaneously established barriers that prevent migrants, including asylum-seekers, from setting foot on their territories or otherwise triggering protection obligations.

Consequently, those who would otherwise have been able to avail themselves of asylum procedures, social support, and decent reception conditions are often rebuffed to countries of first arrival or transit that have comparatively less capacity to ensure protection of human rights in accordance with international standards.

According to the latest UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM) statistics, more than 5,000 persons were reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean in 2016, thus remaining the deadliest migratory sea route worldwide in 2016.

The majority of persons who seek protection in the European Union are forced to do so because people fleeing violence, war and human rights violations in Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, or Syria, countries of transit such as Lebanon –with 25% of its population being a refugee– do not offer safety and the possibility to establish a new existence. This is especially true for 'failed states' like Libya, but also for other countries that do not yet have established effective and sustainable protection mechanisms.

The lack of safe and legal ways to enter Europe in search of protection forces these to-be-refugees to rely on smugglers, putting them in danger of falling prey to traffickers and other criminals. They risk their lives in unseaworthy boats on the

Mediterranean, or by climbing the fences at the external land borders of the European Union. Smuggling and human trafficking need to be understood as part of a failed system where there are no alternative legal options. The increasing number of people in need of international protection perishing on their way to safety is a reminder of the limitations of the current international protection regime. For a Syrian who is forced to leave the country, today there are no legal means and they are forced to cross the mountains towards Lebanon, with the help of smugglers. All borders with Syria are closed at the time this article was being written.

Once in Europe, inconsistencies plague asylum systems. A similar case presented in Britain, Italy, Germany and France could yield four different results. Asylum systems in countries like Italy are overwhelmed, and some nations are tightening their requirements. The same case could be presented to four different commissions in Italy, again with four different results. Again, the key issue is that certain cases do not fall under the right categories.

Refugees, by definition, cross one or multiple borders resulting in an inherently international phenomenon that requires the involvement of an international system of refugee “protection” and law, a United Nations body, countries, and religions to successfully provide comprehensive solutions. Historically the only solutions that have proved successful are those which are multilateral, such as the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese refugees in the 1980s or the coordinated response of European countries to the refugee influx of Bosnians. The Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 caused an exodus of 200,000 refugees. Most of the refugees fled to Austria. Austria immediately called on states to help both financially and by physically sharing the refugees by means of resettlement. As a result, most of the refugees were resettled very quickly in 37 states. Those facts stand in stark contrast to the contemporary resettlement practice that is characterized by a scarcity of resettlement places and few resettlement states. In recent years, commendable attempts have been constrained under the weight of competing sovereign interests, such as it is seen in the European Union.

After the tragedies of Lampedusa and Malta in October 2013, the discussion on providing more safe and legal paths for persons in need of protection to enter the European Union gained a new dynamic. Decision-makers from the entire political spectrum quickly joined Pope Francis and other representatives of religious communities in their call for solidarity with migrants and protection seekers. Since then, however, the Commission-led ‘Task Force Mediterranean’ has not come up with proposals in this regard, neither has the European Council adopted any major changes to existing policies, in the context of new ‘guidelines’.

Alternative forms of protection based in current existing European regulations could be implemented and more robust protection mechanisms could be put in place. It is, again, the role of Church agencies and other civil society actors to advocate for changes in policies and legislation and to make proposals to this effect. One example is the humanitarian corridors put in place by the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches, the Methodists and the Valdesians. In collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, up to 1,000 vulnerable Syrians are being sent from Lebanon to Italy. The same will be developed for refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia who are presently in Ethiopia.

Consequently, a path to protection in Europe can only be considered as "safe" if it is actually accessible for a certain protection seeker who is forced to leave his or her country, and if the full respect of human rights is guaranteed, including the right to an effective remedy against a negative decision on an application.

2.3. Recommendations by Christian churches on alternative European refugee protection mechanisms

Organisations representing Churches throughout Europe –Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic– as well as Christian agencies particularly concerned with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, are deeply committed to the dignity of the human person, as well as to the concepts of the common good, of global solidarity, and of the promotion of a society that welcomes migrants. They work under the conviction that the core values of the European Union as an area of freedom and justice must be reflected by day-to-day politics. It is against this background that they have made proposals for the development of policies, in particular with regards to safe and legal paths to protection in the European Union.

Since 2014 the Jesuit Refugee Service, together with other Christian groups have voiced the need to create safe and legal pathways to access protection in Europe and elsewhere⁵.

The groups of persons who are in need of protection in the European Union have many diverse backgrounds. The situation of someone fleeing war and violence in

⁵ In November 2014, a set of Recommendations for the Development of Safe and Legal Paths to Protection in the European Union, was published by Caritas Europa, Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe, Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, International Catholic Migration Commission, Eurodiaconia, Quaker Council for European Affairs, and Jesuit Refugee Service Europe.

Syria or Iraq can be completely different from the circumstances that an opponent of the regime in Eritrea is facing.

Therefore, different measures and policies must be developed to meet the wide variety of protection-seekers' needs. The following are some mechanisms that should be included.

a) Humanitarian Visas

For some groups of forced migrants, the issuance of humanitarian visa could provide an effective way to protection. Where persons can access an embassy or consulate of a Member State, either in their countries of origin or in transit countries, they could be provided with a visa authorising them to travel to this Member State. Upon the applicant's arrival in the country of destination, the usual asylum procedure would follow.

The issuance of humanitarian visas in individual cases allows persons to travel in a legal and safe manner to the territory of a Member State for the purpose of making an application for international protection.

Humanitarian visas are underused in Member States and should be further supported and promoted, including at the EU level.

A good example for this model is the policy adopted by Brazil for persons fleeing violence in

Syria: The Brazilian embassies in countries neighbouring Syria are responsible for issuing special humanitarian visa for Syrians and other national people affected by the Syrian conflict who want to seek refuge in Brazil. Claims for asylum need to be presented on arrival in Brazil.

b) Resettlement

Refugee resettlement continues to be an important tool of protection of the most vulnerable refugees and a tool of solidarity with countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

More and more European Member States are engaging in resettlement or humanitarian admission, but overall numbers of places remain limited. EU institutions'

activities could contribute to achieving more ambitious targets. Refugee resettlement requires a whole-of-society approach and government's role should be to facilitate the work of the society, not only to resettle refugees. To the extent that resettlement is viewed as a government function, it loses community engagement and support (Bhatia, 2017).

c) Family Reunification

Family life is of utmost importance also for the well-being of refugees and crucial for their successful integration. According to Pope Francis: "Concerning those who arrive and who are duty bound not to close themselves off from the culture and traditions of the receiving country, respecting above all its laws, the family dimension of the process of integration must not be overlooked: for this reason I feel the need to reiterate the necessity, often presented by the Magisterium (cf. John Paul II, Message for World Migration Day, 15 August 1986), of policies directed at favoring and benefiting the reunion of families."

The right to family reunification is laid down in the EU Family Reunification Directive. The EU Court of Justice has underlined in its jurisprudence that the aim of the directive is to enable family life and promote it, and that the directive must be interpreted and applied in this light.

An application of the directive at a national level meeting these requirements and refraining from unjustified restrictions would enable a considerable number of persons in need of protection to come to Europe in a safe and organised way and to join their relatives already living in European member states who can provide assistance to set up a new existence. The concept of 'family' should be interpreted more broadly to include not only the nuclear family but other relatives as well, especially where relatives find themselves in emergency situations.

d) Lifting visa requirements

An alternative to the issuing of 'humanitarian visa' could be the lifting of visa requirements especially in cases where greater numbers of persons must flee an individual State in search of protection.

If lifting of visa requirements were to lead to a considerable increase of persons seeking protection in EU Member States, the Temporary Protection Directive could

be invoked and applied. Lifting visa requirements would allow persons seeking protection to travel safely and spend their money on ordinary travel means rather than paying smugglers.

e) In special cases: Private sponsorship

Private sponsorship is an option to consider for allowing people to come to the European Union.

It allows for access to EU territory on invitation by a legal resident in an EU state, whether there are family links or in other circumstances (for example an NGO, a Church entity or a group of people living in the member state decides to sponsor one person or one family from Syria). The sponsor is responsible for the asylum seeker, e.g. guaranteeing her/his living costs for a specific period so that there is less impact on the local social welfare system.

Canada’s program of private sponsorship of refugees represents a global best practice that should be widely emulated. Private sponsorship enhances public confidence, contributes to a culture of encounter, and results in stronger sponsorships.

International and European law oblige EU institutions and Member States to develop measures and policies that open safe and legal paths into the European Union for those who must flee war, violence and severe human rights violations. Such a policy would also be in line with core Christian and European values. We believe this model should, however, not be considered as a general solution to the existing problems but as part of a larger response with different mechanisms, as explained above. Safe and legal paths to protection in Europe must be complemented by fair asylum procedures, proper and human reception conditions as well as by integration policies that allow forced migrants to establish a new existence in an EU Member State.

Persons seeking or granted protection as well as migrants in irregular situations must never be left in destitution and excluded from enjoying their human rights; instead, they must be treated as what they are: Human beings with dignity who are right-holders.

3. Good practices of community protection in EU member states

3.1. Community Building Initiatives

According to Pope Francis “the problem of refugees, of migrants today is the greatest tragedy since that of World War II” (General Audience, Vatican, March 22, 2017). The Pope encourages organizations working with migrants and refugees “to continue in their commitment to the reception and hospitality of the displaced and of refugees, fostering their integration, taking account of the mutual rights and duties of the one who receives and the one who is received.”

Across Europe, good practices for campaigns and initiatives have improved the culture of welcome and integration in Europe, creating inclusive communities where everyone is valued. This has been often overlooked by the media. Different civil society refugee protection programs have developed; local citizens have opened their doors to people in search of safety – migrants and refugees – sharing meals, learning languages and simply being together.

This chapter identifies community building networks, and analyzes findings on best practices of community initiatives. By facilitating individuals to see the world through another’s eyes, we analyze how these initiatives build understanding and how they counter racism and xenophobia. The initiatives studied are faith-based, particularly of Christian denomination, which facilitate interactions and encounters between local people and forced migrants.

Faith communities have assumed a leading role in championing protection, education, employment, and legal migration opportunities for refugees. Some have been existed for decades while others have been created after bigger numbers of refugees started arriving in Europe in larger numbers in 2015.

One of the findings and experiences of these initiatives is how interaction and encounter deconstructs stereotypes. Community protection initiatives are a reflection of counter-narratives to fears that are growing in Europe: fear of losing one’s identity, fear of losing access to employment, and fear of a growing insecurity. We have seen how the influx of more than one million migrants into Germany in 2015 and 2016, mainly Muslims fleeing countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, has hardened public views on migration, weakened support for Chancellor Angela Merkel and fueled xenophobia. Fifty-nine attacks on refugee shelters were

recorded in Berlin in 2015 and 48 in 2016. After the truck attack on a crowded Berlin Christmas market in December 2016, refugees in Germany pleaded their host nation to avoid placing migrants under a blanket of suspicion, after police commandos raided their shelter⁶. “My message to the Germans is: ‘Don’t suspect everybody, don’t generalise.’ We have nothing to do with this crime,” said Ammar Wazzaz, a 45-year-old refugee from the Syrian city of Idlib. Yaser, a 32-year-old refugee from Syria, said he became dejected when he read about the attack on Facebook: “We fled this kind of terrorism and it is following us here”.

The main findings of community building initiatives analyzed have shown that most of them are small in scale and size –they have budgets less than 25,000 Euros– but have an impact in communities among the individuals that participate in them. The findings also reflect that community building initiatives focus on a small number of participants, between 20 and 300 on average. They are normally financed through grassroots methods ie. Big sales, fund raisers, Church communities.

The participants involved, both forced migrants and local citizens, are working aged adults, between 26 and 60 years old. Their volunteers are mostly European citizens but there is also a significant percentage of third-country nationals. Refugees involved differ from country to country. For example, in Italy most of the refugees involved in these community activities are young single men whereas in France there are many refugee families. One of the best practices found is the model of “duos”, or mentors in the community who become friends, trainers, godfathers. Duo for a Job, in Belgium matches young job seekers from diverse backgrounds with people older than 50 who have a professional experience in related fields and who can accompany and support them in their search for a job. The young person (mentee) and his/her mentor meet for a minimum of two hours a week over a period of six months.

Regarding activities provided in local communities, they cover a variety of services for people such as housing with families, local communities, or religious communities; centers where people can go to have lunch or dinner and where both local people and migrants collaborate in the preparation of meals which are then distributed; skills training; leisure activities; and intercultural activities. Cooking is an easy way to involve illiterate people, since it is an activity which does not demand too many words and allows participants to learn culinary vocabulary so people can more easily go shopping or exchange recipes.

⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/germany-truck-migrants-idUSL5N1EF3F2>

An informal way of learning the language and identifying needs, is through the creation of “conversation tables.” Individual accompaniment often starts there, through language and culture exchange. Shared hobbies, such as sports, the arts, and other activities, is another way to foster encounter and exchange. We have found that mentors, such as friends or trainers for these hobbies have had the largest impact.

Interestingly, the creation of spaces where meetings can take place is one particularity of these initiatives. They have both set physical locations for activities – offices, community centres, outdoor spaces such as a park or a garden – as well as various locations, through outreach in the community or changing from one space to another. 52% of the community building initiatives happen in a physical space and 48% do not have a physical space.

a. Portugal: The experience of being a host

Portugal is a good model of community-based hospitality. Not only the civil society, but the country itself, is quite open to refugees.

The way hospitality works is through a municipality-based system called Platform of Support to Refugees (PAR, in its Portuguese acronyms). PAR is formed by over 40 civil society organizations mobilized to provide support to refugees. The Jesuit Refugee Service in Portugal is the secretary of the platform and coordinates the welcoming of families. PAR is present in each municipality across the Portuguese territory and works through a wide range of service providers, such as associations, local municipalities, religious congregations, and families. Its aim is to welcome families who have been accepted in Portugal from Greece through a relocation scheme. PAR has a strong awareness-raising component, a network of volunteers, and institutional support. The platform organizes and sets up access to education, accommodation, and transport for refugees, amongst other services.

In September 2015, following the call of Pope Francis, the Confraternity of Our Lady of Nazaré, charitable institution of the Nazaré municipality decided to join the recently created PAR. Susana Zarro, responsible for the Brotherhood Community Center, oversaw the hospitality project. She shares the following experience as a host:

In March 7, 2016, we received a Syrian family of nine, a couple with seven children. They were living initially in our community center, and now live in a house that we have prepared for them. At the moment, we are working to safeguard their independence by helping them with food, accessing healthcare and education, and dealing with bureaucracy.

The Nazaré community mobilized to receive the family. They arranged their furniture, bedding, and toys for the children. We have felt from the beginning that the reception has been very good. Nazaré is a land of tourists. We are used to being open to many different cultures and people from other countries. There was some initial uncertainty about hosting refugees to Portugal, but the experience has proven to be very enriching.

To receive this family and to live with them is to realize that they are a family like ours. The only difference is religion and culture, but the love that they give us is the same that we give them. The family said it was God who guided them, since they did not know where they were going. Now they say that they were lucky to come here and to get to know us. We can say the same.

“Speak” is another initiative with the main objective of offering solutions to the problem of social and cultural exclusion by tackling the language barrier and promoting interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds. This project has a training component with volunteer teachers whose aim is to mitigate the effects of low levels of self-esteem or the impact of unemployment on the refugee community.

b. France: Being hosted and wanting in turn to host

Since 2009, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in France has developed the *Welcome Network*, a program for individuals, families, and religious communities to welcome refugees into their homes for a period of one to two months. Refugees are accompanied by mentors in their journey towards integration into French culture and the learning of the French language. JRS Europe is now developing this project throughout the continent, inviting European citizens to open their homes⁷.

In offering hospitality, much of the success depends on efforts to involve others. The *Welcome Network* underscores this reality. What started as a small seed of hospitality has grown rapidly, spreading to 34 French cities. In Ile de France, JRS coordinates 150 families hosting asylum seekers. At the end of 2016, 1,200 families hosted 600 asylum seekers. JRS France works with 200 supervisors. “I am discovering the joy of receiving, of knowing that, for a while, my guest will not be hungry or cold,” said volunteer Bernadette. “I am discovering the grace of smiling when they welcome me every evening”, explains the refugee hosted by Bernadette.

As a person being hosted, Abbas⁸, an Iranian refugee living in Paris, shares:

⁷ <http://www.jrsfrance.org/reseau-welcome/presentation/>

⁸ Abbas is an Iranian refugee living in Paris. His name has been changed for security reasons.

Before, I said I couldn't find humanity in this country but every day now hope grows in my heart. When I have a house someday I will save one room for the Welcome Project, so I can take someone in and give him food and take him to get his papers.

Another reality in France is the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé, who shelters refugees coming from Calais refugee camps. Villagers in and around the village of Taizé have also been involved in hospitality initiatives, organizing themselves semi-spontaneously to offer French classes, bike rides, and community meals. The first group, after going through Calais, were welcomed in Taizé in November 2015, and now live in the region. All except one was granted refugee status. Most of them are now working or receiving life-skills trainings.

One of them, named Safi⁹, shares his experience:

My name is Safi. I am Sudanese from Darfur and I am 26 years old. I spent my childhood in a small village in Darfur. I lived with my parents and my five brothers and sisters. Our family was a large one and we had lots of goats and sheep. Life was good.

In 2003, the war broke out and life became very difficult. In 2011, my village was bombed and my mother and one of my brothers were killed. The army arrested me, they wrongly accused me of belonging to a movement opposed by the government. When I was released, my uncle suggested that I flee. I feared for my life and I left for Libya. After four terrible months there, I took a boat to Europe. I arrived with nothing and I was looking for protection, accommodation, and food. I have been lucky to find this in Taizé, where I have found a new family. I had never met Christians, I only knew them through what the Quran says. In the Quran we read that there are different paths to God and that we must live together in peace with people of other religions. In Taizé I can see this in a very concrete and easy way. Today there are people who use Islam as a pretext for war. But in fact they distort our religion. Like Christianity, Islam is a religion of peace.

c. Belgium: Access to employment facilitated by mentors

A particularly strong model of community building initiative is the one run by the Jesuit Refugee Service through its project "Up Together", which serves a vulnerable group of forced migrants who, after living several months in a detention center, had their residence denied but left to were remain in the country. They are thus "unreturnable" migrants –normally single adults– people who have not been granted asylum but cannot go back to their countries of origin either. "Up Together" has witnessed that administrative detention has an extremely negative and traumatic impact on individuals. They are deprived of any status and forced

⁹ The name is changed for security reasons.

to live clandestinely; they are left stateless or at risk of statelessness or destitution. “Up Together” invites families, individuals and communities to welcome them, accompany them, and helps them get on track. By doing this, a local solidarity network is created.

Another initiative in Belgium includes “Duo for a Job”, which promotes the exchange of experiences between different generations and cultures, facilitating the future employment of young refugees, and recognizing the value and experience of local elderly people. Its volunteers include adults coming from 57 professional sectors in Brussels, Liège and Antwerp.

It is a network of 386 mentors, with 25 new mentors joining every month and 94 % of mentors becoming re-enrolled. Being a mentor means engaging concretely in a societal project. Once trained by the association, the mentor will coach a young person for two hours a week over a period of six months. They will help define his/her professional project, look for job offers, train him/her for interviews, and discuss the codes that are specific to the sector or to the local culture. By sharing the mentor’s experience gained throughout his/her career, the mentor will really offer a young person the chance to build her own project. It is proved to bring new meaning to the mentor’s own project. To take part, the mentor must be over 50 years old; have professional experience to share (whether retired or still working); and be available for a few hours every week.

Chantal, a mentor, explains

‘Duo for a Job’ started from the desire of young people in Brussels to combat social and geographic fault lines in their city by breaking walls between neighbors, and assigning value and tasks to those whose skills or experiences are not enough acknowledged in Western societies. ‘Duo for a Job’ trains and links young people and those who want to assist refugees in their integration in Belgium through the training of mentors and the full engagement of the community.

On the other side, Mamadou, says

Duo helps people acquire confidence and better organize our professional skills. The mentors help us think carefully about our job search, but also the possibility to continue studies or get training. They help me build my life.

d. Italy: Promoting autonomy

The “Communities of Hospitality” project in Italy is run by the Jesuit Refugee Service’s Centro Astalli, in collaboration with religious communities and families in

Rome willing to welcome those who arrive to the city fleeing war and persecution. Centro Astalli has two staff members and four volunteers involved in this project.

Its aim is to promote the integration of refugees into Italian society during the delicate period when their cycle of government assistance ends. It focuses particularly on helping them reach autonomy and find housing since it is quite challenging for refugees to find a room or an apartment to rent with the unstable and low salaries they often receive.

During the semi-autonomous period where refugees stay in the free spaces offered by religious communities, Centro Astalli follows them closely and helps them on an individual basis towards independence for a period of no more than one year. Individual refugees and refugee families have the possibility of continuing their path towards social integration and gaining access to employment and other personal needs.

“In order to acquire independence, it is vital to become self-reliant and also to regain the dimension of family life, as well as build new relationships, and gradually integrate into the local community,” explains a JRS worker.

Refugees, religious communities and volunteers are constantly accompanied and supported by Centro Astalli staff, which represent for all the focal point and the experts whom to reach out to in case of doubt or need.

A host engaged in the project explains how educating on the value of hospitality through welcoming refugees at home is vital for her:

My family and I have been hosting Marie, a refugee woman from Mali, who has been living with us for one month. My two daughters, ages 7 and 8, are curious about her and every morning before going to school they check if she is awake to say to her ‘good bye, have a nice day’. Educating my children in openness to others and hospitality is for me essential for their future lives. I do not need to explain this with words to my children but they see and feel the importance of sharing with those who are going through difficult times. Marie is a Muslim, her father was a Christian. She often joins us in our evening prayers – “We trust the same God,” she says.

We also go to Centro Astalli with our questions. For example, we are aware that Marie needs money for her 10-year-old son to join her in Italy. Centro Astalli is always willing to give us good advice.

4. Ways forward: a culture of encounter

Assistance, care, and solidarity towards forced migrants by many individuals across Europe have been filling the gap between formal declarations of refugee protection and the European policies and responses. But what motivates people to reach out to refugees in need? What moves young people to act? The following words of Pope Francis summarize the values which motivate people to be involved in refugee assistance and, at the same time, set the way forward: “A change of attitude, to overcome indifference and to counter fears with a generous approach of welcoming those who knock at our doors.” Interaction and encounter is vital to building understanding between people. On a social and grass-roots level, we believe that community building initiatives promote encounter and social inclusion. This hypothesis has been proven by practices such as those explained above. But social responsibility to protect refugees needs to be shared widely through different layers of our society.

In his address to participants in a conference on migration in February 2017, Pope Francis stressed the need for “person-centered,” not politically-driven, policies and responses to migrants and refugees. “Today more than ever,” he said, “it is necessary to affirm the centrality of the human person.” He characterized international migration not as a problem, but as “an expression of that inherent desire for the happiness proper to every human being, a happiness that is to be sought and pursued.” Many religious traditions revere migrants, recognize the hand of God in this timeless phenomenon, and, in the words of the Holy Father, view “all human life” as “an itinerant journey towards our heavenly homeland.”

Pope Francis also underscores the need for a “coordinated and effective response” to forced migration by welcoming, protecting, promoting and to integrating. He contrasts this response to the “rejection” of refugees and migrants, which he describes as a shared attitude “rooted ultimately in self-centredness and amplified by populist rhetoric” that “makes us see our neighbour not as a brother or sister to be accepted, but as unworthy of our attention, a rival, or someone to be bent to our will” (Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2015). “The antidote to rejection,” he said, “is a change of attitude.”

What if every refugee was accompanied by an individual or a family in their host community? Through friendship and the accompaniment of one or two refugees, our perspective of the “global refugee crisis” would change dramatically. Social transformation comes from individual and community responses that value personal interaction. This is a very practical way of protecting refugees.

The following testimony by a German woman living in a small village in the Black Forest is an example of how accompaniment of refugees breaks the culture of fear:

This year, I will spend Christmas at my parent's place, together with my boyfriend and our friend Henry, an asylum seeker from the Gambia. In the isolated small town where we normally live, Henry has become our closest friend, so we had originally decided to stay in town with him for the feast days. As my parents, living in another city, very much wanted to have us over for Christmas, they invited Henry, too. Then they asked if he was trustworthy to have around the house, something they have never asked about any of my friends before. They were worried that he might misbehave, or steal. Although generally liberal-minded, my parents do not know a single refugee personally – and so they are afraid. My mother once said that she found the young African men shopping at the local supermarket looked a little frightening. It is true that their unfamiliar features can sometimes make their facial expressions harder to read for Europeans. Our friend Henry sometimes wears an expression that could be interpreted as sullen – but because I have got to know him well over the months, I know that this is just what his face sometimes looks like and that he might be laughing the next second. I am not afraid because I know him. I am not suspicious of a group of young black men in the park because they might be just as nice as Henry is.

The region of Germany where I studied is the region currently behaving most aggressively towards immigrants. It is also one of the regions with the lowest percentage of foreigners living there, compared to the national standard. People are afraid of who they do not know.

My mother has called to ask what they could get Henry for Christmas and what he would like to eat, so I guess in her case, fear is already being transformed.¹⁰

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