

Cities, Refugees and Culture: Briefing

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The Committee on culture of the world association of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the platform of cities, organizations and networks that foster the relation between local cultural policies and sustainable development. It uses the Agenda 21 for culture as its founding document. It promotes the exchange of experiences and improves mutual learning. It conveys the messages of cities and local governments on global cultural issues.

This document has been prepared by the Secretariat of the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) with a view to providing information and facilitating discussion on a relevant issue regarding culture and sustainable cities. In this respect, the briefing presents data and resources and invites readers to provide their views and other examples so as to pursue the conversation.

The views presented in this document are not necessarily those of UCLG and do not commit the organisation.

This article is available on-line at www.agenda21culture.net in English, French and Spanish.

BACKGROUND

Recent developments in the Middle East, Europe and other world regions have heightened international awareness of the situation of refugees and asylum-seekers and the need for public authorities to provide relief. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that at the end of 2014 the number of refugees in the world was 19.5 million, that of asylum-seekers stood at 1.8 million and 38.2 million people were internally displaced – therefore, [59.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes](#). Figures have increased since, with the conflict in Syria as one of several which generate vast numbers of internally-displaced people, asylum-seekers and refugees.

In Europe, which was home to 1.8 million refugees in early 2014 and 3.1 million at the end of that year, approximately 700,000 people, including migrants and asylum-seekers, are estimated to have arrived by sea since early 2015. Other world regions, including the Middle East, Africa and Asia, host larger numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, whereas very high figures of [internally-displaced people](#) exist in several countries in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

As [recent analyses](#) have indicated, urban areas are the main destination of internally-displaced people, refugees and migrants. In this respect, local governments have also been increasingly active in receiving and providing support to refugees and other people in need, as well as in calling international institutions, the European Union and its Member States to mobilise adequate resources and to recognise the importance of cities in this field – as expressed by both [United Cities and Local Governments](#) (UCLG) and its [European section, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions](#) (CEMR), as well as by many local governments in Europe and in other regions.

Access and participation in cultural life should be considered when local policies aimed at receiving migrants and refugees are designed. The [Agenda 21 for culture](#) calls local governments “to provide the means for immigrants to have access to and participate in the culture of the host community”, and the UCLG Committee on Culture has also [affirmed](#) that “cities have always been the point of destination of immigrants, who, after a few years, become inhabitants and citizens. The identity of cities is obviously dynamic...”. An inclusive approach towards migrants and diverse communities should, of course, also include refugees and asylum-seekers.

Studies conducted in countries experienced in hosting refugees have shown that cultural activities can be an effective means of promoting community cohesion, creating better understanding and mutual acceptance between host communities and refugees and asylum-seekers. A [report](#) published in the UK in 2008 also highlighted the impact that the new influences brought by refugee artists can have on local cultural life.

In recent months, several cultural organisations and networks, including the [Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft](#), [Arcadi and other cultural organisations in the Île-de-France region](#), [Die schweigende Mehrheit](#), [Culture Action Europe](#), [IETM](#) and [WOMEX](#) have highlighted the need for cultural policies and actors to engage in addressing today’s challenges, as well as the role that cultural facilities, activities and professionals can play in welcoming refugees and migrants and fostering a culture of recognition, expressing the willingness of many citizens and cultural agents to actively contribute to this.

Whilst stressing this potential for positive change, it is necessary to recall that processes related to the arrival of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants can involve instances of fear, friction and isolation, affecting both the host communities and the newly arrived. Cultural participation and interaction can play an important role in alleviating this, but, above all, holistic and transversal policy approaches, involving public authorities and civil society and being sensitive to the needs of all, should be promoted.

UCLG’s Committee on Culture aims to contribute to the discussion by bringing together a set of relevant approaches, examples and resources.

RELEVANT APPROACHES AND EXAMPLES

Through the contribution of public authorities, civil society organisations and individual citizens, many cities around the world have implemented cultural activities in policies and programmes concerned with the condition of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and migrants. Some examples are presented hereafter:

- Several cities, including [Boras](#) and [Leipzig](#), are promoting wide-ranging welcoming programmes and '[mentor schemes](#)', which provide an introduction to refugees and asylum-seekers' host cities, including the local cultural associations and infrastructure, and which can involve local citizens as mentors.
- Public cultural facilities, including libraries in [Birmingham](#), [Hamburg](#) and elsewhere, have become welcoming spaces, which enable the newly-arrived to come in contact with members of the host community, learn the local language and remain in contact with developments in their countries of origin (e.g. through access to online resources). Other cultural organisations, like [Berlin's](#) Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), are also supporting projects to facilitate the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in their host communities.
- Creative processes can provide opportunities for a diverse range of social groups, including migrant and refugee communities, to come together and generate new symbols and cultural expressions, as shown by several examples – including experiences in [Aarhus](#), [Lisbon](#), [Vaudreuil-Dorion](#) and [Zaragoza](#), among many others.
- Museums and other heritage institutions can also contribute to bringing together different communities and developing integrated and dynamic approaches to heritage and memory, illustrating lesser-known stories and narratives, as proven by examples in [Oslo](#), [Malmö](#), and elsewhere.
- Special funding schemes to support cultural activities involving refugees and fostering intercultural dialogue have recently been established by some local and regional governments, including [Västra Götaland](#).
- Cultural aspects have been successfully integrated in local strategies for the promotion of resilience among internally displaced people, other people fleeing conflicts and host communities – relevant examples including [Medellín](#) and [Bogotá](#).
- International networks of cities which join forces to exchange knowledge and resources towards the integration of refugees and migrants and comprise a strong cultural component have also been set up, including the [International Cities of Refuge Network \(ICORN\)](#), which hosts writers and artists at risk; and the [Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities programme](#).

Local governments and civil society organisations in cities hosting refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants may be inspired by these examples and could devise new approaches suited to their specific contexts.

FURTHER REFERENCE

The following set of resources provides further information about these issues:

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): <http://www.unhcr.org/>
- Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR): <http://www.ccre.org/>
- Eurocities: “Cities welcome refugees”: <http://eurocities.eu/eurocities/news/Cities-welcome-refugees-Manchester-WSP0-A3AETR> (access other links from there)
- European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE): <http://www.ecre.org/>
- European Resettlement Network: <http://resettlement.eu/>
- Council of Europe: Intercultural Cities: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/default_en.asp
- International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN): <http://icorn.org/>
- UN Task Team on Habitat III, Migration and Refugees in Urban Areas (2015), Habitat III issue paper: <http://dialogues.habitat3.org/file/498389/download/542863>
- B. Kidd; S. Zahir; & S. Khan, Arts and Refugees. History, Impact and Future (2008): http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/arts-and-refugees-history-impact-and-future/
- Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft, issue of KuMi journal entitled “From a Culture of Welcoming to a Culture of Recognition” (2015; in German): <http://www.kupoge.de/kumi/kumi150.html>
- Agenda 21 for culture: good practices: <http://www.agenda21culture.net/index.php/goodpractices-eng/good-practices-eng>

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The Secretariat of the Committee on Culture of UCLG is interested in hearing about other stories in this area. Please send your ideas and examples to jordi.balta@agenda21culture.net