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Improving the EU’s Refugee Resettlement Policy: How to do more and better?

In my presentation my intention is to talk about the topic from a civil society perspective.

European NGOs have substantial expertise and experience and can help governments with the design and implementation of resettlement programs. The NGOs are strongly committed to taking a role in the official resettlement program and can make a considerable impact by creating conditions to facilitate integration of the newcomers and raise awareness about resettlement. NGOs working with refugees can contribute to the building up of good ethnic relations locally by keeping up dialogue with, and organizing training for decision makers and other stakeholders. The European Red Cross Societies support, and advocate on civil society’s engagement in the resettlement of refugees.

It is definitively wise of the states to engage civil society in integration and increasing support for resettlement.

As a continuation I would like to present activities and recent developments within the **Finnish Red Cross** related to the reception of resettled refugees:

The Finnish Red Cross acts as an implementing partner to the state in the government’s resettlement program effective since 1985 with the current annual quota of 750 refugees. Our role is to assist the resettled refugees upon first arrival in Finland. FRC trained volunteers, and as needed staff, are at the international airport and assists the newcomers during transit. We also assist the resettled refugees in their family reunification process through information and advice and by making practical travel arrangements, once the family member’s residence permits have been issued.

At local level in the resettling municipalities we support integration through volunteering in various ways:

* we train volunteers to become friend persons or families
* we organize international meeting points
* we organize different kind of clubs; discussion groups, cooking and handicraft groups, first aid training etc.
* we organize homework support groups for refugee and immigrant children
* we organize housing help for newly arrived refugees
* we organize summer camps

The programs are often implemented in cooperation with other local actors, NGOs or authorities. By joining forces more people are reached and resources are more efficiently used and overlapping is avoided.

**Developments within the Finnish Red Cross**

The Finnish Red Cross has strongly advocated for resettlement on both national and local level for resettlement. As a member of ECRE the society supports EU NGO’s urge to substantially increase resettlement space in EU. The goal voiced by NGOs is to increase the resettlement space in EU to 20 000 places by 2020.

The Society has raised concerns regarding the Finnish government’s failure to reach the set annual targets of 750 resettled refugees, and that refugees in many cases need to wait unreasonably long to travel to Finland, due to municipalities’ reluctance to offer places for resettlement. The society has reminded the state and the municipalities to fulfill their humanitarian commitments.

*An example of the impact of Finnish Red Cross advocacy*

A concrete example of how FRC has contributed to increasing resettlement space is the case of three small communities; Sonkajärvi, Lapinlahti and Iisalmi in the central north eastern part of Finland. These small municipalities had in 2011 started discussing regional cooperation on resettlement. There had however not yet been any political decision on the issue. When being informed of this development the staff of FRC Headquarters and the FRC regional office that covers, among others, the said municipalities, organized a meeting in which was planned how the FRC could support the municipalities to make a positive decision on the issue. In the process that followed both FRC regional office staff and board members of the local FRC branches of the said municipalities were involved in the planning and discussions. The boards of the branches were also very well informed of the national resettlement program and the objective of the current process. Another objective was also to get the board members to spread the information among the volunteers of the branch. At the end of this preparatory process an event was organized at which the municipalities’ civil servants and town counselors together with staff from the ministry responsible for integration and representatives from the governments’ regional office and from FRC met. At the meeting an extensive information package on resettlement was offered to the participants. FRC refugee work was also presented and the society pledged to cooperate with the municipalities and support the refugees through volunteering, should the municipalities make a positive decision on resettlement.

In 2012 the three municipalities made a decision to resettle 120-150 refugees during

2012-2014.

*Finnish Red Cross ERF-project VAPAA*

At the beginning of 2013 the FRC launched an ERF funded project called VAPAA, which aims at supporting the resettled refugees’ integration through volunteering. The objective is to organize activities which help the refugees expand their social networks and increase their feeling of belonging. Another objective is to increase the volunteers’ awareness and know-how and to strengthen cooperation with authorities and other NGOs. The project is implemented in 10 resettling municipalities, among which Sonkajärvi, Lapinlahti and Iisalmi.

The most important value and goal of supporting the newcomers’ integration is to increase their feeling of acceptance as equal members of the community, and to help create a feeling of belonging. The volunteers have noted with joy how the families who arrived in Sonkajärvi in 2013 as quota refugees have received a real boost to their self-esteem by putting on the Finnish Red Cross volunteer vest. Through its activities, the Red Cross gives everyone the opportunity to fulfill their potential and to be of support and help to others. This, in turn, provides building blocks for a new identity. The refugees have passed two levels of first aid courses and are integrated in the Red Cross branch’s first aid group together with other local residents. The local Red Cross branch practices first aid skills with the group regularly to maintain the ability to provide assistance to the authorities and professionals in searching for missing persons, evacuating people or any other scenarios requiring first aid skills. In addition, many young refugees have taken the Finnish Red Cross basic course to form part of the Red Cross friendship service, and they now take the residents of the local nursing home out on walks. Volunteer activities are also a big boost for career plans, as many of the young people involved are now dreaming of one day working in the field of nursing.

**The Finnish Family Federation**

Another example of good practice I would like to mentionis **the Finnish Family Federation** who organizes extensive training to improve, adapt and increase structures that are necessary to meet the challenges of a multicultural society. This feed-back was included in the Know Reset project’s research compiled by the Finnish Red Cross.

In 2011 more than 4000 persons participated in different trainings. Some of the training is organized by the Family Federation but most of the events are trainings organized by the public sector in which the Family Federation trainers act as experts. The focus is on awareness raising; to provide correct information, to highlight the needs of the refugees related to the integration process, share good practice etc. It is important that service providers adapt their services and practices so that the services meet the needs of, and work well also for refugees and other migrants. Integration is a two way process and by adapting service and other structures to better meet the refugees’ needs the society reaffirms the principle of equality while promoting integration at the same time.

Refugees’ community organizations need much reinforcement when providing integration support services. Refugees’ organizations can be either paid service providers or act on a voluntary basis. There are several models for voluntary participation. It is important to remember that voluntary actions may also lead to job opportunities. Since many refugee communities have lived long enough in Finland, and integrated well, it is a good moment to involve them in the reception and integration of newcomers.

**Finnish Refugee Council**

As a continuation I will present **the Finnish Refugee Council**’s feed-back on the Finnish resettlement program and the NGO’s activities related to it. The feed-back was included in the Know Reset project’s research compiled by the Finnish Red Cross.

The Finnish Refugee Council implements various projects to support the work of local level authorities and increase their understanding. Other projects aim at supporting refugees’ own organizations, such as training of peer support and organizational development.

The cooperation with the local authorities is generally good especially in smaller communities. The municipalities are in principle grateful for support but it also depends on the resources allocated for the municipal staff whether the cooperation works out. If for instance only one part-time staff member is responsible for the reception of refugees in the municipality he/she doesn’t have time to engage in other activities than the ones he/she has been employed for. It seems to depend on the municipal coordinator whether the cooperation functions or not. Generally speaking the municipalities have small resources.

This country has capacity to do more resettlement. The current situation is difficult, though, due to the country’s financial situation. Attitudes have also hardened over the last few years partly due to the anti-immigration rhetoric initiated by the populist True Finns-party. There is also a constant shortage of places in the municipalities.

The Finnish municipalities have great independence and can decide on if they want to do resettlement or not. They feel that the compensation from the state should be much higher if they resettle. Attitudes may also play a role. It might help and motivate the municipalities if the state compensation for the first year of resettlement was higher, since the refugees generally need more support during the first year of resettlement.

The country’s increased support for resettlement and expansion of the resettlement places depends on political will as stated above.

The organization is not directly involved with the resettlement program. We are involved with post-arrival cultural orientation, counseling, language and skills training, advising on accessing services and training aimed at local service providers.

Established refugee communities can and do play a supportive role in resettlement. The Refugee Council trains refugees’ own organizations in service providing. Also migrants’ umbrella organizations have been offered trainings. Trainings have been organized on a national level.

In Finland a huge problem is that the time between selection and travel to Finland is unreasonably long. Sometimes the waiting period lasts several years. We feel that this fact definitively has a negative impact on refugees’ motivation to integrate.

As explained above the main problem is that municipalities are reluctant to resettle refugees. The procedure is that when a case is proposed to a municipality the decision of resettlement is made based on specific considerations which are related to the services that the municipality may offer the refugees to support their integration together with political will. The municipalities sometimes complain that the advance information they receive of the refugees often is inadequate, scarce or completely wrong which makes it difficult for the local staff to meet the refugees’ needs. Refugees may also leave the municipality of first resettlement if they feel that their needs are not being met.

ERF is one funding opportunity enabling NGOs to carry on activities for resettlement but in many cases this funding is not available for small NGOs since the own share of financing is too high for them.

We don’t think the public opinion on refugee settlement is very positive. It generally correlates with recession. Currently the media doesn’t focus on resettlement; the “hot potato” for a couple of years has been family reunification which mainly has been presented from a negative perspective.

Harmonization on EU-level would be necessary. EASO has a role to promote this.

EU member states should better share the responsibility of refugee protection with countries of first asylum and it’s important that they have the acceptance to do so from their own population. When the countries of first asylum are given sufficient support it benefits the refugees living in the countries. They may be willing to let the refugees integrate in the country.

For refugees it is always better if they can integrate in a society which culturally and socially is similar to their country of origin. When such a possibility exists the country of first asylum should secure the samerights to the refugees as their own citizens and a possibility for naturalization. Through the solidarity of the EU it is also secured that the countries of first asylum keep their borders open in case of conflicts in neighboring countries.

**Developments on the state level**

To make the Finnish resettlement program including integration more effective and to speed up the process the **Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy** has run two ERF financed projects; the HAAPA-project from 2010 till June 2013 and the VIPRO-project, from September 2012 till July 2013. The projects further aim at clarifying and improving the processes of the state and municipal actors and to strengthen the know-how of the municipal staff. The HAAPA-project has financed 17 local projects through which the municipalities have improved their health- and psycho-social services and organized functional training for the resettled refugees. The VIPRO-project has produced a Resettlement Handbook and made recommendations regarding how the system of reimbursing the municipalities may be made simpler. Both projects are seeking funding for continuation.

**Concerns voiced by the Finnish NGOs that participated in the Know Reset research**

At this point I would like to round up the concerns voiced by Finnish NGO’s in the Know Reset research regarding the Finnish Resettlement program:

All Finnish NGOs working with refugee issues feel that Finland could resettle a larger number of refugees than the current number. Actually for already a decade ago political decision was made that the resettlement quota would be increased annually by 50 places until 1000 places were reached. The decision was nevertheless never implemented by later governments. Finnish NGOs have during a number of years advocated for an increase of resettlement places up to at least 1000 places. However in the current situation in which the government has had difficulties even in meeting the current target, 750 refugees resettled annually, focus must obviously be on fulfilling this target. Additionally the current attitude climate in Finland may be such that no political party dares to take an initiative to increase resettlement places on its political agenda.

Another problem which was mentioned is that refugees in many cases need to wait too long to travel to Finland due to municipalities reluctance to offer places for resettlement.

The NGOs also felt that there should be more flexibility regarding preparedness to receive more refugees in unexpected situations in which larger populations are forced to flee, e.g. situation in North Africa in 2011 and now Syria. Flexible solutions for unexpected major conflicts or disasters should therefore be created.

The NGOs stressed the role of the media as an agent for influencing attitudes. Continuous training on migration issues should be provided to the media. This can be organized by NGOs.

For the general public refugees and asylum seekers are often seen as two separate groups and a holistic approach is lost. The NGOs felt it is necessary to point out that the two categories are formed by human beings that have been forced to flee.

The asylum seekers and refugees tend also to be perceived differently also on the local level. It is perceived that refugees who have been granted protection through the asylum procedure require less investment; money and other support than resettled refugees. On the other hand the asylum procedure generates costs that don’t fall under the municipalities’ governance, since the reception of asylum seekers is financed by the state. The state should therefore increase the remuneration for resettlement to the municipalities in order to secure enough places, and to create high quality integration programs that meet the refugees’ needs.

The NGOs also felt that EASO by managing the EU resettlement scheme has an important role in promoting, both by financial incentives and by sharing good practises, an overall increase of resettlement places in the EU.

The NGOs also stressed that along with securing more resettlement places goes provision of high quality integration support, so that the newcomers really become included in the Finnish society. For newly arrived refugees it is of utmost importance that processes are predictable and assertive.

For this end it is important to allocate resources and clarify the processes and the responsibilities. The cooperation between public sector actors and NGOs is a way of increasing resources and know-how. Since many refugees communities have lived long enough in Finland and integrated well, it is a good moment to involve them in the reception and integration of newcomers.

Refugees’ community based organisations need much reinforcement when providing integration support services. Refugees’ organisations can be either paid service providers or act on a voluntary basis. There are several models for voluntary participation and it is important to remember that voluntary actions may lead to job opportunities, too.

Training for public sector staff on local level is needed especially when a municipality is starting up resettlement. The local actors need extensive training to improve, adapt and increase structures that are necessary to meet the challenges of a multicultural society. It is important that service providers adapt their services and practises so that the services meet the needs of the refugees, and work well also for refugees and other migrants. Integration is a two way process, and by adapting services and structures to better meet the refugees’ needs the society reaffirms the principle of equal opportunity while promoting integration at the same time.

Currently the municipalities, due to the precarious financial situation many of them are facing, actively look for additional resources which they may find in services provided by NGOs.

Successful cooperation will nevertheless depend on the resources allocated to the municipalities. The cooperation becomes successful only if coordination is organized and resourced. If the resources are scarce it may result in that the paid staffs have merely time to engage in tasks he/she has been employed for. It is worth investing in cooperation with NGOs since it will pay off in the long run and be of benefit to all involved, not least the refugees.

The NGOs pointed out that it is important to select whole families, even extended ones, since what best promotes integration, motivation and feeling of security comes through the presence of the family.

The NGOs felt very strongly that unnecessary delay between selection and reception procedures should be avoided. Refugees should be involved in integration programs as soon as possible after selection. If cultural orientation is organized in the country of departure it is essential that the refugees travel to the resettlement country shortly after the CO.

*As a summary the following gaps and challenges were highlighted by the NGOs:*

* The Finnish resettlement quota has remained at 750 refugees for a long period of time, while the country has capacity to receive more.
* There is not enough preparedness to receive refugees quickly in unexpected situations of mass flight.
* Municipalities are not motivated to offer places for resettlement
* Integration is not implemented as stated in the Integration Act, due to lack of resources. There may be substantial regional and local differences in implementation.
* The reasons why Finland resettles refugees and receives asylum seekers and processes their asylum claims is not fully understood by the general public.
* There should be continuous training for media on migration issues.
* EASO’s role regarding resettlement is vague.
* NGOs may have difficulties finding funding for their integration activities.
* Refugees CBOs need to be given a clearer role at supporting newly arrived refugees.
* Currently there’s too long waiting period between selection and start of integration program.
* No CO is currently organized for Finland bound refugees.

...and the following recommendations were made:

* The Finnish quota should be increased to at least 1000/year.
* Structures should be created for preparedness to resettle in unexpected emergency situations.
* Integration programs need to be properly resourced.
* Media should be trained to inform the general public clearly and understandably about migration issues.
* EASO’s role vis-a vis resettlement should increase.
* NGOs and refugees’ CBOs should be properly funded for their integration activities.
* Funding for municipalities that resettle refugees should be increased.
* Procedures should be established that secure quick transfer to resettlement country after selection.
* CO should be organized for all selected refugees.

Thank you!