

## Integrating migrants and refugees: how can cities best address the challenges and opportunities?

*Nusha Haghpanah*

*University of Sheffield*

### Executive Summary

International migration is a complex phenomenon which touches a multiplicity of economic and social aspects. Migration touches an increasing number of countries in an ever globalised world. In more recent years, displacement of people from areas of conflict has made the issue of coping with migrants and refugees more pressing (IOM, 2015). The World Urban Forum 9 marked stakeholders from cities around the world coming together to understand how best to implement the New Urban Agenda and make cities work for everyone. This includes refugees and migrants who are typically marginalised and kept out of the decision making process. Now at the stage of implementation, it is imperative that decision-makers pay greater attention to ensure positive integration

and allow refugee and migrant populations to have an effective transition whilst also finding a way to best utilise what the migrants and refugees can offer to their new communities. The recommendations in this policy brief are in response to the New Urban Agenda's mandate and talks at the World Urban Forum 9 for sustainable and inclusive cities with regards to refugees and migrants. They consist of a joint up action from local government, working with the media to change the narrative around migrants and refugees, and a need to empower them, so they can be seen as a solution rather than a problem.

### Context

*'We commit ourselves to ensuring full respect for the human rights of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants,*

*regardless of their migration status, and support their host cities in the spirit of international cooperation’ – New Urban Agenda (2016)*

The above quote was taken from the New Urban Agenda document that was approved by some 170 countries at Habitat III. Often the definitions of migrants and refugees become muddled. Migrants are seen as having a choice in where they are going to live, and may move to a city for work, education or other family reasons. This can be within countries or across countries. However, refugees are people who are forced to flee their home country due to conflict and persecution and have no option of returning home. Both of these groups are often attracted to cities, seeking better opportunities and an improved life for themselves and their families (UNESCO, 2015).

In 2015, refugee numbers increased globally to 21.3 million, compared to 19.1 million in 2014. The number of migrants in 2015 reached 244 million; however the latter was seen to be in line with global

population growth (IOM, 2018). When refugees and migrants arrive to their host country they often become part of the ‘urban poor’ immediately making them vulnerable. They may struggle to access basic services such as shops, doctors, and are unable to exercise their democratic rights.

There are a variety of challenges that cities face when deciding how to implement the New Urban Agenda, particularly around the migrant and refugee population. Globally, the repercussions of the global financial crisis are still being felt and many countries have employed austerity measures. This has resulted in social welfare cuts locally and nationally, reducing the resources available to citizens (Kihato and Landau, 2017). As a result, it has been difficult to accommodate a growing migrant and refugee population. There has also been the challenge of the anti-immigrant backlash which has caused friction within communities and created a new barrier for migrants and refugees. In Turkey, which has absorbed 3.2million refugees during the ongoing issues in the Middle

East, reports are increasing over hostility, social resentment and hate crimes towards refugees particularly in areas on high refugee concentration such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. This picture is not isolated to Turkey alone but representative of a wider problem (International Crisis Group, 2017).

### **What was covered at the World Urban Forum 9?**

Several talks touched on the important role migrants and refugees can play in cities, contributing to the economy, culture and diversity of a population. A talk on 'Unlocking positive impacts of migrants on cities', brought out several relevant points about the problems lying ahead. Tobias Metzner, from the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, discussed the narrative of media and politicians who simply complicate issues. Statistics can often be used out of context in the media as they increasingly require 'click addictive' articles. 'Click addictive' refers to misleading headlines that focus on sharp

and shocking statements to draw readers in.

Additionally, Carola Gunnarsson, a local mayor in Sweden, addressed the need to utilise the power of local government as they are often not given the opportunity to lead on migrant and refugee increases in their countries. This was reiterated in a talk by local government officials in South Africa. Relevant points were raised although the target set by the New Urban Agenda for 2030 means that action needs to be taken now and implementation projects must be undertaken imminently.

This policy brief will go on to highlight the some of the proposals raised at the World Urban Forum 9 and build on them further. It will then address what else could be done to tackle remaining challenges that might arise.

### **Policy Recommendations**

**More power to local government – space based rather than people based approaches**

Local governments have the capacity and enthusiasm to engage with migrants and refugee populations. Until now national governments have frequently taken the lead, and whilst it is also a national issue, local government can share equal responsibility. It was suggested at the World Urban Forum 9 that national governments should be selective in letting in migrants and refugees as the entire population and resources must be considered. However, once a migrant has entered a country and settled in an area it should reside with local governments to implement integration strategies. This is a sensible approach as local officials are more aware of the area and community and are best placed to utilise the resources at hand.

Furthermore, policies on migrants and refugees should not be directed on to individual people, this can fuel divisions and make some believe they are losing out on public services because of migrants and refugees. By local governments making space based policies they can empower the entire community whilst assisting new arrivals as well. This was

touched upon in a session at the World Urban Forum 9 and needs to be brought to the table with national and local governments globally to alter their approach to policy making.

### **Working with the media to change the narrative**

Committees between the government and media need to be set up to work cooperatively in ensuring that data is used correctly and articles are written sensitively. Using words such as 'crisis' and 'flow' are confrontational and evoke an emotional reaction. During the EU referendum in the UK, the media coverage of immigration tripled in a 10 week period. Out of 111 articles that expressed views about Turks, 98% were negative. Three common themes ran through the press, describing migrants as water (floods, waves), as insects (flocking, swarming) and as invaders (Moore and Ramsay, 2017). This fuelled a lot of backlash against migrants from the general public and was not educational and rooted in facts, but rather sensationalist and pandered to human

emotions. There is the issue that censorship will be received badly by the public if they believe the media are leaving controversial information out. This recommendation by Tobias Metzner, who recognised the implications of freedom of speech, stressed the idea was not about censorship but educating the media to allow them to use data correctly.

### **Empower migrants and refugees – they can be a solution to a problem**

Frequently mentioned at the World Urban Forum 9 was the lack of jobs, especially for young people. This is a problem that countries globally are finding difficult to overcome. A statistic offered in one of the talks at the World Urban Forum 9, stated that Egypt had been successful in allowing migrants to work and even allowed them to set up their own businesses. There are roughly 200,000 Syrian refugees residing in Egypt and some of them have been able to set up SME's that now employ 25,000 people. In Sweden, a case was highlighted of Syrian refugees coming to the city of Malmö, a place that had suffered economically since the 1980's with the

collapse of the shipping industry. Syrian refugees have revived the local economy, opening cafes, restaurants, grocery shops creating jobs for local people while doing so (The Guardian, 2016). These are a exampled of how migrants can be a solution to a problem. There are a variety of ways to implement this globally; one such way that was touched upon by Doug Sanders, a journalist and author, at the World Urban Forum 9 was to give refugees and migrant immediate status as an economic migrant so they can work in society. Waiting until they have learned the language of their destination country will leave their integration too long.

### **Conclusion**

In a complex world, taking in to account politics and the global financial situation, the migrant and refugee population can often be side-lined. Emphasis needs to be placed on the value of migrants and refugees and by addressing it at a place rather than person level, whole communities can benefit. The World Urban Forum 9 marked a successful platform for the exchange of ideas in how

to implement the New Urban Agenda. It also provided ideas that had not been touched on before, which is a mark of progress in terms of alternative strategies that could be undertaken by cities. This policy brief has selected three key points raised in discussions, mentioning their importance and building on them further to unlock the positive impacts that migrants and refugees can offer to cities.

## References

- International Organisation for Migration (2017) World Migration Report 2018.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2015) Cities welcoming refugees and migrants.
- Kihato, C and Landau, L. B (2017) 'Migration, membership and multi-level governance: incentivising inclusion in an era of urban mobility within the New Urban Agenda', *International Development Planning Review*, 39 (4), pp.371-374.
- United Nations (2017) New Urban Agenda.
- International Organisation for Migration (2015) 'Some of the good practices from Conference on Migrants and Cities and World Migration Report'
- International Crisis Group (2017) Turkey's Growing Refugee Challenge – Rising Social Tensions.
- The Guardian (2016) 'Syrian refugees bring life back to Swedish city – with shisha clubs and falafel cafes' (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/21/malmo-syrian-refugees-new-life-sweden>)
- Moore, M and Ramsay, G (2017) 'UK media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign' *Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power* (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/CMCP/UK-media-coverage-of-the-2016-EU-Referendum-campaign.pdf>).