

NGO NETWORK OF INTEGRATION FOCAL POINTS

POLICY BRIEFING ON HOUSING FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

'In this village we were living in an asylum pension. Far away from public places. I asked myself, what am I doing here?'



In 2004, the European Council adopted the Common Basic Principles (CBPs) on Immigrant Integration and in 2005, in its Communication A Common Agenda for Integration, the European Commission developed these principles into a framework with action points at national and European levels.¹ This policy briefing focuses on the implementation of CBP 6: 'Access for immigrants to institutions, as well as to public and private goods and services, on a basis equal to national citizens and in a non-discriminatory way is a critical foundation for better integration', and CBP 7: 'Frequent interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens is a fundamental mechanism for integration. Shared forums, inter-cultural dialogue, education about immigrants and immigrant cultures, and stimulating living conditions in urban environments enhance the interactions between immigrants and Member State citizens.'

The living environment and conditions in terms of housing is key to the integration of refugees and migrants. Only by making housing equally accessible to refugees, migrants and national citizens, as well as stimulating multicultural living environments will integration succeed.

In most Member States, many actors, governmental (national, regional and local authorities) and non-governmental, are involved in organising and managing housing facilities, as well as providing accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. The cooperation of these different stakeholders in providing accommodation in combination with social counselling and integration programmes is essential for the realisation of the above two principles, and should be an integral part of any housing solution.

However, the reality in most Member States is that for many asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, the lack of adequate housing is an obstacle to integration into the receiving society. In addition, depending on their legal status, gender, civic status, and nationality, these particular groups face manifold barriers, especially financial and social disadvantages to acquire decent housing. For many, housing is scarce, rents are high, living conditions are poor, and often the only neighbourhoods available are deprived areas. Insufficient and inadequate social assistance often leads vulnerable groups amongst the immigrants, such as new arrivals, undocumented migrants and in some cases asylum seekers and refugees, to situations of homelessness.²

Recommendations for the European Common Agenda on Integration

DEPRIVED AREAS AND INTERACTION WITH THE HOST SOCIETY

Due to their socially disadvantaged position, many migrants and refugees end up living in deprived areas of cities where housing conditions are poor and unemployment is high. In many European cities so-called 'ghettos', where migrant communities live together separately from most of the native population, are on the increase. The poor living conditions, lack of opportunities and lack of contact between migrants and the native population in such neighbourhoods have a bad impact on migrants' and refugees' integration.

For positive and sustainable integration it is very important to promote the development of socially and ethnically mixed communities, as well positive dialogues between different migrant groups and the host society. Social housing, as well as reception centres, should be integrated into already existing residential areas, mainstreaming the availability and the delivery of social services (e.g. childcare, health centres, job centres, educational facilities, sport fields etc.) to asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, and the local population.

HOUSING DURING THE ASYLUM CLAIM

Adequate housing for asylum seekers is a condition for their future integration. Most asylum seekers are accommodated in reception centres, which are often not conveniently located and normally isolated from social and health services and facilities. In some Member States asylum seekers have access to independent housing.³

It is important that these housing arrangements and services take into account the needs of particular groups, such as unaccompanied minors, single women, single mothers, the disabled, and the elderly.

Accommodation in reception centres for asylum seekers should, where possible, be limited to a maximum of 6 months, after which access to independent housing should be facilitated. Any housing arrangements should provide legal, social and psychological services that take into account the individual needs of particular groups.

NEWLY RECOGNISED REFUGEES

Most Member States do not offer enough support to prepare newly recognised refugees⁴ for their life without material assistance. This makes the transition to independent accommodation, and ultimately integration, more difficult, and increasingly, puts refugees at risk of homelessness. Upon receiving permission to stay, people accommodated in reception centres should be given all necessary information to make an informed decision following full consideration of the type and location of housing that might be available to them.

It is important to prepare, guide and assist asylum seekers and refugees during and after their transition phase from direct provisions in reception centres to independent accommodation. This could include social guidance classes as part of their integration programme, looking at how to rent, how to apply for a loan and social benefits, how to pay for electricity, gas and other amenities.

THE PRIVATE HOUSING MARKET

In many Member States there is a lack of assistance for newly recognised refugees to find independent accommodation in the private housing market or to provide them with access to social housing. Since newly recognised refugees were often not allowed to earn a living before recognition, it is difficult to save for the rent or the rent deposit necessary on the private housing market, or successfully apply for a bank loan.

Public administrations should take more measures to facilitate access to the private housing market and assist those individuals who cannot compete on the private housing market in finding social housing. Governments could provide housing allowances or subsidies, as well as help with deposits and (credit) references.

DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM IN THE PRIVATE HOUSING MARKET

Aside from legal restrictions and financial barriers, many newly recognised refugees are often socially disadvantaged in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, size of their family, legal status etc. These hindrances could be more easily overcome if different stakeholders at all levels work together to face up to discrimination and racism that this particular group is facing in the private housing market.

It is important to involve all members of society in the struggle against discrimination and racism in the private housing market, especially practices that impede the access of refugees and migrants to housing opportunities. Stakeholders involved in the implementation of the right to housing for refugees and migrants, should include refugees and migrants, tenants/residents and housing associations, landlords, and public administrations.

¹See Council Conclusions, Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union, 14615/04 of 19 November 2004 and the Communication from the European Commission on A Common Agenda for Integration – Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union, September 2005, COM (2005) 389.

²See Caritas Europa, Migration, a Journey into Poverty? A Caritas Europa study on poverty and exclusion of immigrants in Europe, June 2006.

³ECRE recommends that independent housing and community developments should be the basis of any reception system for asylum applications. Any obligation to stay in state-sponsored reception centres should be kept to a minimum. See ECRE's report The EC Directive on the Reception of Asylum Seekers, November 2005, p.18.

⁴Most of whom have lived in reception centres for a long period of time waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

ITALY

Throughout Italy there are initiatives such as the one in Bergamo, where the Casa Amica, a 'social housing' agency, has been involved in the creation of a network amongst the most important stakeholders in the field (e.g. local municipality, province, migrant associations and house-builders association), and promotes projects for housing, buying and renovating apartments in order to make them available for rent to disadvantaged persons, including refugees.

THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR) has a presence both in reception centres (and all other asylum seekers centres), as well as local departments in the majority of the country's municipalities. In the reception centres, the DCR team informs refugees about existing housing possibilities, and often organise one or

two 'facilitation days' to ease the move from a centre to independent housing. In these 'facilitation days', a volunteer assists the refugee and/or family with signing the rental agreement, applying for a loan to furnish the house, applying for social benefits, gas and electricity, etc. In most municipalities, the local departments of the DCR will provide social guidance as part of the integration programme, which is organised by the municipality and which the refugee is obliged to follow.

PORTUGAL

The Portuguese Refugee Council (PRC), with the help of EQUAL I funding, started with the construction of a new reception centre in Loures. It is integrated in a residential area and it will be, in part, a community centre. The services available (kindergarden, sports field, documentation centre) will both be delivered to asylum seekers and to the local society.

This policy briefing has been produced by the NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, which brings together 28 non-governmental organisations in 19 European countries in the refugee and migration field with the aim of advocating for better integration policies and practices for refugees and migrants in Europe. The Network is coordinated by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) in liaison with Caritas Europa. The Network was established in June 2005 and received financial support from the European Commission (INTI preparatory Actions 2004) and the Network of European Foundations (European Programme for Integration and Migration) from September 2006 to February 2007.

This policy briefing is part of a series of six on the integration of refugees and migrants in Europe addressing the following topics: Housing; Introduction and language courses; Assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications; Vocational training and (higher) education; Employment and employment support; and Civic and political participation.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) is an umbrella organisation for cooperation between almost 80 European non-governmental organisations in 31 countries concerned with refugees. For more information: www.ecre.org

Caritas Europa is one of the seven regions of Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations working to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed, in over 200 countries and territories. For more information: www.caritas-europa.org

For more information on both organisations' positions on refugee/migrant integration: ECRE's The Way Forward: Europe's role on the global refugee protection system – 'Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe', July 2005

Caritas Europa's Integration – A process involving all, March 2004

FRONT COVER: This quote has been taken from ECRE's Refugee Stories project, which relates the experience of men and women who have sought sanctuary in one of 12 EU countries over the past ten years. More information: www.ecre.org/refugeestories/

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