

CONFERENCE REPORT

CITIES OF WELCOME, CITIES OF TRANSIT



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Cities of Welcome, Cities of Transit

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Introduction

As migration has become a major issue of debate within Europe, with divergent policies across states and dedicated efforts by local governments to accommodate those who arrive, cities come to the fore as key actors in the reception, relocation, and inclusion of refugees and migrants. Across Europe, political arguments and differences have arisen over migration. In such a context, transformative and cooperative models of welcome for new arrivals and people in transit become ever more important.

To address these themes, the conference *Cities of Welcome, Cities of Transit*, took place at the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site in Barcelona from July 14-15, 2016. The conference was organised by the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM), openDemocracy, and the School of Law, Queen Mary University of London. Throughout the conference, speakers and attendees considered the ways in which the arrival and transit of refugees is currently shaping urban environments across Europe — generating various forms of solidarity and welcome, as well as tension and violence.

Cities of Welcome, Cities of Transit brought together academics, practitioners, policymakers and activists to debate these highly topical issues that encompass a number of legal and policy parameters that had as yet not been fully analysed. Conference participants exchanged insights, extended networks and produced recommendations for the safe and orderly governance of migration in ways that foreground human dignity. This report will outline the discussions and recommendations.

The conference took place over two full days, with over one hundred participants. It included four sessions, each organised in a unique and interactive panel format. Session 1 was on 'Cities of Welcome', Session 2 on 'Cities of Welcome and Rejection', Session 3 on 'The EU, Turkey and Human Rights' and Session 4 on 'Cities of Transit'. The conference also included key framing addresses from representatives of the Barcelona City Council, as well as side events that featured a photographic exhibition on 'Refuge in the City' and a film screening of 'Welcome to Italy: Another Look at Italy's Welcome to Migrants'.

The conference also served as an opportunity to develop an ongoing collaboration between UNU-GCM and openDemocracy on 'Mediterranean Journeys in Hope', a web platform where UNU-GCM researchers, policymakers and others contribute their analysis of the migration situation



in the Mediterranean region. Following on from the aims of 'Mediterranean Journeys in Hope', panels over the two days sought to humanise the debates on migration, with the aim to reposition human rights as legal and political priorities, and to open a space for treating human mobility as both a symptom and a feature of global and regional geopolitics. Audio-visual outputs from the conference, featuring interviews and dialogues with conference speakers and participants, are available via openDemocracy for viewing by a global, interested public.

Disclaimer: This was an academic conference. As such, the opinions expressed and discussions arising represent personal opinions substantiated by research, and not those of UNU-GCM, openDemocracy and Queen Mary University of London.

Framing Addresses and Session 1: Cities of Welcome

Facing the need to provide for their newest residents, cities are actively developing their own strategies to welcome migrants and to share best practices amongst themselves. The diverse responses of cities to recent migrant arrivals illustrate how cities are redefining themselves as influential policy actors. The speakers on this panel included representatives of municipal governments as well as policy-oriented practitioners working at the city level.

The speakers agreed that there is a tension between policies established at the national level versus implementation at the local level. European frameworks are focused on asylum seekers, not other migrants, and local governments believe policies need to meet in the middle to address the reality of often blurred categories. But the national governments do not communicate with the municipal authorities, which leads to a contradiction between state-level policymaking and local-level implementation. A multi-level governance response is necessary to promote policies that effectively provide for migrants while ensuring their rights.

Barcelona is one Mediterranean city setting an example of how to develop a comprehensive system that provides new arrivals with the necessary services as well as rights. According to the speakers, although the economic crisis has led to an increase in vulnerable persons, and austerity affects provision of basic services, the perception of immigration as a problem has diminished since the economic crisis. In Spain, the national refugee office is responsible for all decisions; the local and regional governments are not taken into account. Therefore, the municipal government of Barcelona implemented its own plan to complement the state plan. It involves a network of local partners and NGOs. Special attention is given to vulnerable groups, for example LGBT refugees have dedicated housing arrangements provided by a specialized NGO. Policies entitle anyone who has proof of residency to register in the city, giving them access to healthcare and social services, regardless of immigration status. Mayors are also pushing the Spanish state to increase the number of refugees accepted for resettlement.



Furthermore, culture plays a central role in creating social cohesion at the city level. For example, in the city of Karlsruhe, the library provides newspapers from over 100 countries, the music faculty at the university lends out instruments, and there are programmes that arrange for new arrivals and established residents to attend museums and art installations together.

Cities have been able to network and exchange best practices via organizations that facilitate meetings of local authorities, such as Eurocities, United Cities and Local Governments, and the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR). ECCAR and UNESCO have joined to create an initiative through which 135 member cities were surveyed to identify common approaches to combat racism, and the members have cooperated in order to produce a database of good practices and recommendations. These lessons apply when developing policies to welcome migrants and refugees.

Cities play both an immediate emergency response role as well as a long-term role in integration. However, providing funding specifically for refugees while cutting funding for other vulnerable groups can lead to anti-immigrant sentiment. Cities are calling on national governments and the EU to act, because there must be proper infrastructure and direct funding for cities coming from the EU level.

Session 2:

Cities of Welcome and Rejection

With the arrival of an increasing number of asylum-seekers to Europe in recent years, states along the routes have not always welcomed refugees or made access to a shelter easy. The Balkan route has, for example, been the theatre of different forms of intervention, which has seen the militarization of borders going side by side with the solidarity of citizens, activists and local governments. As all the speakers of this panel have confirmed, two types of movement were clearly visible along the Balkan route: the movement of refugees and the movement of solidarity. However, it is undeniable that receiving communities were not prepared for such a massive movement of people. Therefore, in addition to the physical borders, several others existed: mainly logistical, linguistic, and above all political.

Despite this, for some time in 2015, together with newcomers there were also volunteers, NGOs, and activists promoting a culture of welcome. Then, states along the route started to physically close the borders and the right to refuge was denied to all those who were not of Syrian, Iraqi, or Afghani nationality. It became almost impossible for activists and volunteers to accompany migrants along the route. Still, civil society organizations and social movements, together with local governments, play a key role in the inclusion of migrants in host countries. However, these three different entities have diverse organizational cultures and modes of communication. The panellists contributed to explaining how this variety of players can interact on the ground and how to involve more citizens in this process of solidarity.

The first and most important challenge that emerged from the different interventions given in this panel is the fact that both the policy framework and the media often criminalize migrants, along with activists and volunteers, particularly in the case of spontaneous social movements and grassroots associations. This makes it more difficult to convince common citizens to join and volunteer for this cause. There is a need to work with policy programmes to help develop a sense of solidarity that goes beyond the nation.

Non-national solidarity has proven to be strong in cities: from villages in Greece and Italy to European capitals, there have been plenty of examples of



welcome which have been more inclusive of refugees and migrants. However, episodes of racism and the criminalization of migrants have also occurred and have resonated through local, national, and international media. One additional challenge is then to change the narratives around migration and the terminology used. Very often, the vocabulary used is discriminatory itself and shows a prejudicial hostility towards migrants. Some speakers highlighted how important it is that NGOs, activists, and local governments be involved in specific programmes aimed at fighting stereotypes and hate speech. The most successful of these projects have been addressed to young people who are more inclined to change their opinion about these topics. However, many more resources are needed to increase the reach of these projects.

Session 3:

The EU, Turkey, and Human Rights

The controversial March 2016 EU-Turkey agreement to end irregular migration is the most recent manifestation of the EU's desire to manage mass migratory flows and prevent irregular migration to Europe. Yet, serious concerns have been raised regarding the legality of this agreement and respect for the human rights of those transferred back to Turkey. The academics and lawyers on this panel sought to analyse what common ground exists as the basis for a European law of welcome.

In the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the concept of solidarity is centered on the state. This paradigm imposes considerable limits in developing effective and human rights compliant responses to refugee flows. In May 2016, as part of reforms to the CEAS, the Commission proposed further changes to the Eurodac¹ (European Dactyloscopy), a pan-European database that stores the fingerprints of asylum seekers and certain categories of irregular migrants. According to the proposal, both the scope and the personal information collected and stored within the system are significantly widened with a view to responding more effectively to the current refugee crisis and to tackling irregular migration. In this context, the metamorphosis of Eurodac will make it a powerful immigration control tool with significant repercussions for the fundamental rights of third-country nationals.

In the wider EU external migration policy, EU Readmission Agreements (EURAs) have been framed as a vital tool. The assumption behind the EU-Turkey deal, and EURAs more generally, is that they will ease and increase the expulsion rates of irregular immigrants in the EU.

Practices like the EU-Turkey deal, which has heavily informed the Commission's proposals to further amend CEAS and its cornerstone, the Dublin system, are indicative of a certain trend in EU asylum policies. On the one hand, the commodification of people and de-solidarisation of asylum through trade-like practices, and on the other, the transformation - in the name of solidarity - of refugee protection in a "protection by proxy" construction contrary to international and European law principles.



Up until the closure of the Balkan route in mid-2016, Greece had been serving as a transit country as the main entry point to Europe. As a response to such exceptional flows, the EU institutions proposed the “hotspot approach” and the intra-EU relocation scheme. EU states have demonstrated a lack of solidarity in barely committing themselves to relocating refugees from Italy and Greece under the temporary emergency relocation scheme established in September 2015. Instead, most states have been sealing their borders and adopting legislation that significantly lowers asylum standards and leads to responsibility shifting. The de facto failure of these remedies to control the flows into Greece led to the EU-Turkey Agreement, which poses serious legal concerns.

Turkey currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, the vast majority of whom are fleeing conflict and instability in neighbouring Syria. Many have gone on to seek protection in the EU, a mass movement of persons that has resulted in significant challenges to the asylum frameworks and reception capacity of both the EU and Turkey, and raised humanitarian concerns regarding the safety and humane treatment of those seeking international protection.

An alternative paradigm of solidarity could focus on the rights and needs of asylum seekers and refugees. There exist a number of avenues towards achieving this aim, ranging from the application of the principle of mutual recognition of positive asylum decisions to steps towards greater centralisation in the CEAS, with the ultimate aim of achieving a constitutional provision for a uniform refugee status.

1- The Eurodac's original purpose was to assist the Dublin system in identifying the country responsible for dealing with an asylum application. In 2013, the database underwent its first significant change: from a merely administrative tool, it transformed into a criminal law weapon by allowing access to asylum seekers' data for law enforcement purposes.

Session 4:

Cities of Transit

Moving away from a focus on states, this panel sought to look at the localised points and places in which people seek refuge, temporarily or longer. From railway stations, parks, and abandoned buildings in European cities to the 'jungle' in Calais, from the brand new 'hotspots' on Lampedusa to the Idomeni camp at the Greek-Macedonian border, formal and informal 'transit points' for refugees have taken centre-stage in the Mediterranean migration crisis. This panel sought to make sense of the ways in which these 'points' shape and are shaped by local/urban contexts and national and EU policies. Panellists addressed how these affect practices of solidarity and welcoming in a crisis that is too often framed in terms of threat and security, and the ways in which these migration spaces affect the wider urban and political environments in which they are situated.

Panellists addressed the fact that migrants are not simply undertaking journeys between two points but rather, their journeys are circulations that involve often fragmented and complex trajectories in and through transit points. Such transit points emerge as a result of coercive push-back and hardening border policies that construct migrants as threats, and that create, reproduce, and 'normalise' crisis scenarios. Panellists spoke about the increasing violence in transit spaces: migrants are vulnerable to physical violence and ill-treatment, detention, police interventions, mass evictions and the destruction of precarious and temporary living spaces. The panellists demonstrated how many of these violent practices and rights violations that infringe basic humanitarian principles are illegal (and not the migrants themselves, as negative public discourses might attempt to suggest).

The different presentations also demonstrated that while migrants are construed by policy discourses and authorities as commodities, security threats, and victims, they are also agents and subjects. They highlighted the enormous grassroots response across Europe in which many citizens were moved to stand up against the inhumane treatment of refugees - it was people (and not policies) that demonstrated solidarity with migrants. Numerous initiatives emerged – for example, people came forward to help and support refugees in Calais with clothing donations and youth programmes while working with community leaders in a number of refugee-led initiatives. In Athens, a collective kitchen brought refugees and other city residents (who were mobilised against



austerity and precariousness) together in a spirit of collaboration, trust, sharing and friendship. In this context, refugees were catalysts for social change and active citizenship from the bottom-up. Similarly, in Marseille, refugee struggles met other socio-political struggles and new collectives emerged to support refugees with legal advice, shelter, information, and intercultural engagement. At the same time, they had to face resistance, hostility, and racism from other residents of the city who were not open to refugees.

These diverse expressions of solidarity occurred even though many who participated had little experience or resources. Crisis can thus be seen as an opportunity and impetus for radical transformation, hopeful change and new horizontal relationships, rather than looming disaster or threat to social order. However, greater attention must be paid to addressing the polarised responses to the arrival of migrants and refugees, and to addressing the violence in spaces of transit to ensure that these rights violations are not normalised through policy.

Conference Side Events

PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION: REFUGE IN THE CITY

Refuge in the City is a project that frames the perspective of people with refugee status, who are currently resident in Barcelona, and also depicts the city as a space of arrival and relocation. The aim of the photographs is to personify and dignify citizens who are often viewed as part of a shapeless mass and who have been transformed into simple statistical numbers. It seems essential to give them space and let them speak with their own voice, so that they can reveal a small part of their present, everyday life. The exhibition was introduced and presented by the photographer, Tatiana Diniz, a visual anthropologist working on 'Hopeful Journeys', a UNU-GCM project that studies the role of hope as a strategy of orientation in the context of migration in the Mediterranean region.

FILM SCREENING OF WELCOME TO ITALY: ANOTHER LOOK AT ITALY'S WELCOME TO MIGRANTS

Welcome to Italy is a series of five shorts written, shot and directed by immigrant young people in Italy. They present a mosaic of micro-stories which have in common an inside approach to the migrant condition as well as a composite portrait of Italy and its system of welcome reflected in the eyes of those who arrive. *Welcome to Italy* is a documentary shot by ten migrant hands, produced by the Archivio delle Memorie Migranti with the support of the Open Society Foundations and the Fondazione lettera 27, and the crafted editing of Aline Hervé and Lizi Gelber. The authors of the films all come from very different worlds and experiences and were not chosen for their experience in the audiovisual field. Many of them had never held a videocamera before. Following the screening of these powerful films, the audience had the opportunity for a dialogue with the filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer.

Conference Recommendations

Cities of Welcome, Cities of Transit offered a wide-ranging dialogue on the importance of cities as spaces of welcome and of solidarity. However, borders, the law, and states still impact on the extent to which these solidarity efforts can come into fruition and ensure that the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees are upheld. Based on the rich presentations and fruitful discussions at the conference, the following policy recommendations are offered:

- Cities should build translocal solidarity by networking, cooperating, and exchanging best practices on local level initiatives to welcome migrants and refugees, regardless of status.
- Governments at all levels should engage and support civil society initiatives in cities that work in solidarity with migrants.
- The EU, and other donors, should disburse funds directly to cities implementing programmes to provide services and promote the inclusion of refugees and migrants.
- More resources should be put at disposal of local governments and civil society to construct social programmes and implement relevant projects aimed at fighting stereotypes and hate speech.
- Policy frameworks and the media should promote positive narratives around the positive contributions that migrants and refugees make, and avoid negative narratives around migration that contribute to criminalizing newcomers and humanitarian actors who try to help them along their difficult journeys.
- Local and national governments should ensure that rights violations that occur in transit spaces, which often remain invisible and unrecorded, are documented and responded to.
- Local and national governments should ameliorate the inhospitable conditions of formal and informal transit spaces to ensure dignified conditions. These spaces are not necessarily temporary, but may become places where migrants live for longer periods of time.
- All actors should recognise migrants as socio-political subjects who are already enacting their political rights and provide channels for migrants' voices to be heard.

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