REFUGEES AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT
POSITION PAPER

Key points

By the end of 2017, the world counted **68.5 million forcibly displaced people**, including 25.4 million refugees. 57% of the global refugee population comes from Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan, with Turkey, Uganda, Pakistan, Lebanon and Iran among the top refugee-hosting countries.[1]

Like other communities, refugees and displaced populations can be exposed to extremist propaganda and recruitment methods. The dynamic between host and refugee communities can also heighten intercommunal tensions and negatively affect trends in polarisation and extremism.

Cities and municipalities can play an important role in helping to reduce vulnerability and prevent extremist narratives from gaining traction by:

- Signposting essential humanitarian, legal and social services in cooperation with national governments and aid agencies.
- Communicating factual understandings of refugee numbers and local impact, promoting a tolerant, respectful media discourse.
- Partnering with agencies and civil society organisations to facilitating access to information and coordinate integration, cohesion and voluntary return

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Starting points for cities

- **Know** the risks, vulnerabilities and challenges that refugee and displaced populations face in your local community, as well as the frustrations and concerns of host communities.
- **Locate** initiatives implemented by national authorities, aid agencies and civil society partners, that aim to enhance social cohesion and foster positive interactions between host and displaced communities.
- **Consider** complementing or integrating preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work with existing local programmes that address wider resettlement issues, mindful not to exacerbate community stigma.
- **Build** partnerships with other cities which have faced or are facing similar challenges, tackling the isolation of local governments and learning the lessons of successful initiatives.

Partners

Public partners: represent the public interest and include local authorities, national governments, police, educational institutions, and health services.

Refugee and displaced populations: includes refugees, asylum seekers and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Host communities: represent the people living in areas hosting refugee and displaced communities, and include grassroots initiatives, volunteer groups, youth groups, community centres, charities, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The Role of Municipalities

A sudden influx of migrants and refugees can cause multiple challenges for municipalities requiring them to establish short- and long-term mechanisms to enhance safety and allow displaced communities and host communities to adapt to each other. Municipalities should plan, often in difficult and unpredictable circumstances, how to best allocate their limited resources, while coordinating with the national level and collaborating with aid agencies.

Security and first responses

Strong Cities Network (SCN) member cities that host displaced populations have emphasised several steps local authorities and administrations can take if they want to welcome refugees sensitively and safely into local communities (see case study 1 in the case book below).

- Firstly, municipalities should help to **provide basic humanitarian services** usually under the coordination of – or in partnership with – organisations such as the UNHCR, especially when state or local authorities lack the adequate resources to respond to the need immediately.

- Once a population is resettled, municipalities may have a role in **facilitating legal status**. Documentation acknowledges the presence of refugees and may permit them to access education and health services in addition to employment opportunities. Formalising the legal status of refugees is crucial to overcoming socio-economic barriers as well as establishing their position vis-à-vis the host community. Such processes are heavily shaped by decisions made at the national level. National government decisions should be informed by consultation with municipalities, ensuring policy decision can be implemented on the ground on the basis of better local knowledge and understandings.

- Cities and municipalities need to introduce, facilitate or inform measures to **protect displaced groups from exploitation and recruitment.** Refugees' vulnerabilities, isolation and lack of services can see them fall victim to hateful discourses, assault/abuse, criminal exploitation and extremist recruitment. It is important for municipalities to work with security, humanitarian and frontline agencies to enhance security and safety within camps and centres hosting refugees. These may include referral systems, hotlines and online channels that allow refugees to seek help and protection. Acknowledging varying local capacities and mandates, municipalities are nonetheless well placed to support the planning of these measures as well as to direct refugees and IDPs to the relevant support.

- These efforts must also be complemented by wider **awareness raising strategies that promote social cohesion** and positive interactions with the refugee communities (see case book examples below).

Social cohesion, positive interaction and voluntary return

The impact of a refugee presence on a local community and its economy is often misunderstood or misrepresented in popular discourses. This can quickly trigger grievances, resentment and frustration towards displaced populations on the part of host communities. To counter tensions and prevent xenophobic attitudes from becoming a serious threat to security and social well-being, municipalities can play a crucial role in educating the public on the real effect that refugees and migrants have on their societies.

- **Coordinate access to resources aimed at facilitating integration**, including language classes, professional training, access to diploma validation procedures, etc. The municipality can often play a

signposting role between civil society organisations who offer these services and refugees who need them.

Municipalities can initiate or support **local communication campaigns and initiatives** to encourage dialogue, interaction, and a factual understanding of the effects of a refugee/IDP influx, debunking misconceptions whilst acknowledging concerns on both sides. Left unchecked, a media discourse based on blame and discontent can easily fuel hate, and see refugees transformed into scapegoats for social problems and economic strain. (See examples 6 and 7 in the case book below).

Many refugees will express the desire to return safely to their countries and hometowns, when circumstances allow. Municipalities play a critical role in **ensuring refugee communities are not subjected to external pressures and threats that may influence their decision to return**. They can also facilitate access to information about return plans led by aid agencies where applicable. It is however important to note that measures aimed at prompting refugees to leave can prove to be counter-productive and actually lead to a deteriorating situation for both refugee and host communities without triggering returns. Supporting adaptation and integration mechanisms, even for temporary stay, supports more effective safety and security.

Polarisation and radicalisation

Misrepresentations of refugees and their impact on host communities have served far-right groups with anti-immigration agendas across multiple global regions. Pervasive and unchallenged narratives that draw on popular concerns and fears are generating a worrying shift in bringing once-fringe extreme views into mainstream political debate. These groups capitalise on an "us vs. them" mentality and exacerbate the fears of host communities to increase their popularity and push their political agenda.

Such are the sustained and increasingly coordinated efforts of these groups, many SCN cities face a growing threat from reciprocal radicalisation – mutually reinforcing extremist narratives among both immigrant and host communities. The dehumanisation of the 'other' and the spread of acts of violence targeting minorities have contributed to the radicalisation of individuals in host communities who believe their identity and opportunities are threatened. This has manifested in rises in hate speech and hate crimes, but is also an increasingly explicit motivation in recent terrorist attacks. This can in turn lead to the radicalisation of segments of the immigrant and refugee populations, who rebel against the alienation and discrimination they are subjected to and whose vulnerabilities may be exploited by extremist groups. Municipalities need to work with both host and refugee communities to counter the mutually reinforcing narratives promoted by these extremist groups.

In regions dealing with protracted conflicts, the influx of refugees has been a hard pill to swallow for many host communities that already suffered because of limited resources and strained infrastructure. Several campaigns against Syrian refugees have emerged for example, often with a nationalist pretext, and in some cases perpetuated by both state and non-state actors. Such campaigns also appeal to complex, longstanding and often emotive historical tensions and ethnic divisions as well as regional and political allegiances, exacerbating polarisation and fuelling extremist narratives.

Recommendations

Based on our work with more than 120 global cities, the SCN identified several areas in which municipalities can help improve responses to refugee and displacement crises, and reduce the risk of radicalisation and recruitment. Our recommendations are aimed at helping municipalities mobilise their existing strengths.

- Cities and municipalities should be **involved in national government decisions on refugee and IDP responses**, informing policy and implementation with local understandings.
- Cities should coordinate with national authorities, aid agencies and civil society partners as part of a **multi-stakeholder response** to ensure access to services and support and be positioned to signpost displaced communities to appropriate services.
- Cities should work with relevant partners to **support security and protection measures, including support services for both concerns related to radicalisation and wider security vulnerabilities**. Referral mechanisms to assess and tackle cases of radicalisation must be highly sensitive to both community stigmatisation and human rights concerns, and should draw from international good practice.
- Cities should **facilitate access to information for refugees and displaced communities** to be able to make informed decisions, especially with regards to voluntary return and access to legal documentation.
- Cities should **promote the economic inclusion of refugees** and in parallel **support the livelihood of host communities**.
- Cities should **support and coordinate access to education for refugee and forcibly displaced children.**
- Cities should initiate or support **campaigns to counter hate speech** and promote transparent accounts of refugee and host community experiences.
- Depending on the availability of financial and human resources, cities should establish institutions to **lead on the implementation of local refugee policies and offer municipal-sponsored services**.

Benefits & Risks

Benefits	Risks
•**Policy**: developing a municipal role that aims in part to reduce the risk of extremism can better inform national policy measures and develop greater awareness at government levels of the relationship between displacement and extremism. •**Practice**: municipalities are well placed to coordinate the responses of other agencies and signpost people to appropriate services. •**Narrative**: cities can play a vital role in challenging divisive and extremist discourses, acknowledging the concerns of both displaced and host communities and providing factual accounts of local circumstances.	•**Stigmatisation**: Exceptional care needs to be taken to avoid further stigmatising vulnerable groups by implementing policies that could be exploited to reinforce an association of refugees/IDPs with extremists. •**Partnerships**: Aid agencies are understandably concerned by the introduction of P/CVE initiatives alongside humanitarian support damaging trust and transparency in emergency responses. •**Communication**: municpal roles and support for new initiatives must be communicated clearly and transparently, minimising the opportunity for programmes to be misrepresented by those with divisive agendas.

REFUGEES AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT
CASE BOOK

The following is a brief library of examples which illustrate what local initiatives seeking to integrate displaced populations can look like in practice. They demonstrate the diversity of initiatives in scope, scale, and reach, and provide a starting point for municipalities wishing to pursue such work, as well as lessons which can be learned.

CASE STUDY 1: Office of International and Immigrant Affairs (Aurora, United States)

The City of Aurora, Colorado, opened an Office of International and Immigrant Affairs to facilitate the integration of immigrant populations. The municipality is implementing a comprehensive plan to help immigrants and refugees take part in the civic, economic and cultural life of the city. The 2015-2018 Comprehensive Strategic Plan was developed in consultation with immigrant and refugee populations in order to better identify and address their needs. The strategy adopts a holistic and city-wide approach and includes activities related to the promotion of citizenship, employment, safety and arts among others. Key initiatives include a Welcome Centre to coordinate information and host activities, a Natural Helpers programme to introduce newcomers to local services and amenities, and an International and Immigrant Teen Police Academy building trust between police and young people. Through this experience, Aurora seeks to lead on city-level integration efforts. You can learn more about the work of Aurora's Official for International and Immigrant Affairs, including some of these initiatives, through our SCN interview with Ricardo Gambeta, who leads this work.

> **Key lesson**: adopting a participatory approach through input from immigrant and refugee communities, and designating a dedicated municipal office that can run key activities helps building a holistic city-level integration strategy.

Learn more about this initiative here.

CASE STUDY 2: The Refugee Centre (Montréal, Canada)

The Refugee Centre (Canadian Refugee Initiative) is a non-profit organisation founded by students, graduates and community members based in the City of Montréal. The centre aims to provide refugees arriving to Montréal with modernised services that will facilitate their access to educational, social and economic opportunities. The Refugee Centre focuses on developing new technologies to address the needs of refugees in Montréal through their sister organisation "DevBloc". One of DevBloc's innovative online applications, "LUNA AI", is a conversational platform that allows refugees to complete the documentation necessary to claim refuge in Canada by simply talking into the app; the application is then able to extract the relevant information efficiently. Other programmes offered by the Refugee Centre include legal aid, language classes, an employment resource centre, programming workshops, help with university applications and a start-up advocacy fund.

> **Key lesson**: A grassroots initiative led by students can be turned into a leading organisation through the innovative use of technology to promote social integration.

Learn more about this initiative [here](#).

CASE STUDY 3: The Refugee Law Clinic (Dusseldorf, Germany)

The Refugee Law Clinic was established in 2013 in Cologne to respond to the growing number of refugees arriving in Germany. The initiative spread across German cities including SCN member Dusseldorf. The initiative is run by law students who volunteer to offer refugees and asylum seekers free legal counselling during pre-scheduled consultation hours. The volunteers are trained to answer questions on migration and asylum law and are able to refer claimants to registered lawyers who can take cases further. The clinic mainly deals with issues concerning family reunification, hearings and other procedures. The clinic also helps relieve local administrations dealing with a large volume of claims.

> **Key lesson**: Student-led initiatives are able to place skills at the service of the refugee community, filling a resourcing gap and providing a focal point for legal support to triage claims.

Learn more about this initiative [here](#).

CASE STUDY 4: Bordeaux Mécènes Solidaires x Action Emploi Réfugiés (Bordeaux, France)

Bordeaux Mécènes Solidaires is a territorial foundation that helps organisations access resources offered by local enterprises in the department of Gironde in France. Action Emploi Réfugiés is among the projects being sponsored by Bordeaux Mécènes Solidaires. The project started as a pilot on Facebook in 2016 and quickly became a reference-point on employment for refugees in France. To expand their activities in Gironde, Action Emploi Réfugiés partnered with Bordeaux Mécènes Solidaires to facilitate contact between refugees and local employers via an online platform and to assist with CV creation and information sharing.

> **Key lesson**: Expanding employment opportunities for refugees can also be an asset for local businesses. In the absence of resources for a major employment scheme, social media and tech platforms can help facilitate connections with support from local organisations.

Learn more about Bordeaux Mécènes Solidaires [here](#) and about Action Emploi Réfugiés [here](#).

CASE STUDY 5: SRDH Association for Development (Beirut, Lebanon)

SRDH ("Sarda") Association for Development is a Beirut-based organisation working in the Sabra area of Beirut, known for hosting large numbers of Palestinian refugees. With the arrival of Syrian refugees to the region, this initiative started fundraising among friends and distributing ventilation fans and baby products to refugees. The organisation now runs several programmes such as the "Amaluna" ("Our hope") kindergarten, capacity building trainings for refugee youth, and health services. The organisation partners with other NGOs such as

Oxfam and the Palestinian Organisation Popular Aid for Relief and Development to secure premises, trainings, funding or services.

> **Key lesson**: Empowering refugees to mobilise aid and launch self-organised initiatives can ensure that urgent needs are met and can give refugees an important stake in finding solutions.

*Learn more about this initiative **here**.*

CASE STUDY 6: "Grande-Synthe: La ville où tout se joue" (Grande-Synthe, France)

Damien Careme, the Mayor of Grande-Synthe in France has been a vocal defender of refugees in the north of France, using his position to lobby at the national level and on social media to improve the living conditions of migrant communities. A movie titled "Grande-Synthe: La ville où tout se joue" (Grande-Synthe: the city where everything plays out) focuses on the city's vision and gives the migration issue significant attention. The movie spurs an open conversation on issues which may be difficult to discuss outside of political positions.

> **Key lesson**: Mayors can use their public profiles to advocate effectively for migrant rights and protection, using different media and campaigns to make issues accessible and encourage discussion outside of heated political arguments.

*See the trailer **here**.*

CASE STUDY 7: Youth Trainings (Majdal Anjar, Lebanon)

Campaigns must also be coupled with interventions on the ground such as the ones led by the municipality of Majdal Anjar in Lebanon, where a community prevention network is delivering social cohesion and conflict transformation trainings to Syrian and Lebanese young people to help them foster positive interactions and oppose hate speech and prejudice. These activities can be delivered in formats that appeal to youth. A three-day camp has been organised by the network to allow youth to build stronger relationships and acquire non-violent communication skills.

> **Key lesson**: Young people from displaced communities need to be active participants in integration and cohesion initiatives, not just passive recipients. To do so, they need to be equipped with skills and knowledge. Multi-stakeholder infrastructures in a municipality are well placed to facilitate this type of training and build direct relationships with displaced young people.

*Learn more about the youth camp **here**.*

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[1] UNHCR, 'Figures at a glance' https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html last accessed January 2019.