



RESPONDING TO TODAY'S REFUGEE CRISIS WHILE MAINTAINING SOCIAL COHESION: LESSONS FROM CITIES



**A STRONG CITIES
POLICY PAPER**

ABOUT STRONG CITIES NETWORK

Strong Cities Network is an independent global network of more than 160 cities and other local governments dedicated to supporting city-led efforts to prevent all forms of extremism, hate and polarisation while protecting human rights.

WHAT IS THE STRONG CITIES MISSION?

- To inspire, catalyse and multiply locally driven, non-discriminatory, human rights-based and gender-sensitive policies and programmes that prevent and counter extremism, hate and polarisation in a manner that rests upon trust-based partnerships with communities.
- To enhance the practical implementation of programming and practice at a local level aimed at building social cohesion and community resilience to all forms of extremist- and hate-motivated violence.
- To connect local leaders and practitioners from a range of disciplines, including community relations, social and health services, housing, culture, economic development, as well as youth, religious and other community leaders, and civil society, to share lessons learned and provide tailored training through face-to-face and online exchanges.
- To elevate the voices of mayors and other local leaders and ensure the needs and priorities of cities and other local governments are reflected in national, regional, and international conversations around how most effectively to prevent violent extremism, hate and polarisation.

The Strong Cities Management Unit, which is hosted by the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD), comprises a central support team and Regional Hubs staffed by local experts. It works with all local authorities – including municipal, state, and regional governments – and uses the term "cities" to refer to all variations of such governments.

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DISCLAIMER

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OVERVIEW

Between May and July 2022, the [Strong Cities Network](#) launched a multi-part webinar series on one of the most pressing urban issues of our time: city-level responses to refugee and other migrant flows. Over the course of three webinars, representatives from 10 local governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from around the world shared their experiences in responding to and managing the challenges that an influx of refugees can pose to cities, from short- to long-term. In total, more than 230 people participated in the virtual discussion, which sought to highlight real world case studies and lessons learned that other cities could adapt to suit their own contexts. Below are some of these lessons:

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Refugee influxes can happen anywhere and at any time, whether from conflict, famine, environmental disaster, or other crises. Unless cities have a pre-prepared plan in place, the unexpected arrival of refugees can be damaging.
2. The arrival of refugees is often accompanied by fears and negative stereotypes which, if improperly handled, can cause tension and division between the host and refugee populations.
3. Adequately addressing refugee crises can take several years, and require sustained financial and human resources to meet the range of social, economic and psychological needs of refugee populations.
4. There can be a tendency to isolate refugee populations from the wider community, keeping them in ethnically, linguistically or religiously homogenous enclaves. This can be harmful to integration, inclusion and social cohesion in the long-term.
5. The multitude of actors on the ground - from civil society and community groups to national agencies and multilateral organisations - can result in overlapping mandates and a confusion of responsibilities, with potentially harmful consequences.
6. Emphasis is understandably often placed on fulfilling the immediate needs of arriving refugees; however, host communities are also affected by the situation and may have issues or needs that are unmet or overlooked as a result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Plan ahead** to be able to cope with the sudden influx of refugees, not only in the short-term but for long-term integration. Ensuring that plans, processes and responsibilities are established well in advance and can withstand financial and political changes will help smoothen the process for all involved.
2. **Allocate sufficient resources** to support incoming refugees and help facilitate their integration into host communities, while mitigating the risks of straining social cohesion. This may require lobbying national government or external donors for support.
3. **Develop a clear communication strategy** to help prepare the hosting community and welcome those arriving. This should be delivered clearly, concisely and early in order to allay any fears or animosity, while also being institutionalised to withstand changes in political administrations. This includes countering online mis- and disinformation campaigns used by extremists to peddle harmful narratives around refugees in order to recruit new followers.
4. **Provide roadmaps for integration** for refugees to mark their transition to citizen. These paths should be clearly communicated and involve the host community as an active partner in this process.
5. **Build connections and partnerships** with international organisations and local CSOs which will share the burden of a refugee crisis with you. These partnerships can help address a range of challenges, from communication to housing and livelihoods, while ensuring that no actor is overburdened.
6. **Bridge cultures and alleviate fears early on**, particularly within the host community. Incorporating two-way education at every step of the integration and social cohesion process is critical to achieving this, while also providing opportunities for both sides to meet and form relationships.
7. **Encourage civic engagement** from refugees as a way to get them invested in their community and as a key step to their long-term integration. This requires awareness raising and education, as well as communication, cooperation and understanding among both local governments and the new arrivals in order to foster social cohesion.
8. **Do not overlook the host community** during refugee response, especially if social welfare and other resources are diverted away from long-time resident to help new arrivals cope. Perceptions that host governments are prioritising the latter can breed resentment among the former and should be addressed.
9. **Leverage mentors and community volunteers** in addition to CSOs and city organisations to provide more personal and tailored engagement with members of arriving communities. These can often address aspects of religion or culture that, while important to long-term integration, are often overlooked as cities are focused on the immediate needs of refugees.
10. **Focus on the individual** and what unites humanity rather than what can divide it. For example, many refugees require mental health and trauma services, and it is important to invest in the individual and recognise that patience and compassion is required for long-term integration.



INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2021, 89.3 million people worldwide had been forced to flee their homes under duress, including due to conflict, famine or fear of persecution¹. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine² in February 2022, that number now exceeds 100 million³. According to UNHCR, with over 60 percent of the world's refugees and 80 percent of internally displaced people sheltering in cities around the world⁴, rather than camps, cities are at the forefront of the global response to the refugee crisis. This response becomes more challenging in an era of increased polarisation, dis- and misinformation, extremism and hate, where local leaders and governments in different regions are grappling with how to be both welcoming and socially cohesive cities and there is growing evidence of extremist groups using anti-migrant misinformation to recruit and radicalise followers.

To examine the role of cities in the integration of refugee and other forcibly displaced populations, while maintaining if not strengthening social cohesion, in 2022 the Strong Cities Network hosted a webinar series exploring different city-level responses across the refugee response cycle. The Refugee Response series brought together officials and non-government actors from a number of cities around the world to share their experiences, lessons and promising practices for sustainable and human rights-based solutions. This included how to coordinate and leverage the often-disparate efforts within cities to address refugee response and support social cohesion, without creating or exacerbating existing local tensions that can give rise to or fuel hate, extremism and polarisation.

Each webinar examined a separate phase of the refugee response cycle: [“The Crisis Moment”](#); [“The Day After”](#); and [“Normalisation”](#). In “The Crisis Moment,” participants from Detroit, Kampala City and Bochum highlighted the need for advance planning, adequate resource allocation and clear communication by city officials. In “The Day After”, participants from Calgary, Columbus, Malaga and New York City shared that a comprehensive integration strategy must address cultural differences, trauma and mental health. In the third webinar, participants from Columbus, Kristiansand and Medellin underscored the importance of providing often traumatised newcomers a sense of dignity and belonging when it comes to social cohesion, and how long-term integration is a two-way street that must include efforts geared towards sensitising and addressing the needs of the host community as well.

This paper highlights the key themes and lessons learned from the webinars and elaborates a series of policy recommendations that, if implemented, would alleviate some of the challenges many cities face in maintaining social cohesion, while respectfully and sustainably integrating refugees into their communities.



LESSONS

LESSON ONE: PLAN AHEAD

The need for advance planning was the most prominent theme across the series. Several of the cities featured had experienced waves of refugee inflows over the years, and had therefore put the infrastructure in place to support newcomers in the short and long-term. In Bochum, the government response to then-Chancellor Merkel's open-door policy for Syrian refugees in 2015⁵ meant that national and local governments had processes in place to address the immediate needs of Ukrainian refugees, to include a coordinated communication process at the city level. In contrast, President Obama's announcement⁶ in 2016 that the US would accept Syrian refugees set off a crisis in Detroit, one of the designated receiving cities. As Detroit had not previously taken in refugees, an entire welcoming ecosystem had to be set up overnight and refugee resettlement agencies had to restructure their budgets and reallocate resources.

A successful plan involves not only the process for receiving refugees in the short-term, but also a roadmap for integrating the short-term response into the overall strategic plan for the city's development. In Malaga, for example, plans for refugee support are nested within a long-term, cross-cutting city framework that also prioritises social cohesion and countering violent extremism. This recognises the inter-connectedness of the various lines of effort. Similarly in Medellin, years of conflict and violence in the region have spurred the city to include in its strategic planning process the prospect of constant refugee inflows.

Finally, institutionalising the plans and process is important so that refugee support and integration and social cohesion efforts are not dependent on particular individuals in charge during a particular crisis. For example, had Detroit not had a Mayor who supported the Obama Administration's decision to take in Syrian refugees, the outcome might have looked vastly different. In order to protect vulnerable populations and avoid politicising them, planning for refugee integration and social cohesion should be built around processes and infrastructure that can function regardless of politics.

LESSON TWO: ALLOCATE RESOURCES

A critical component of successful advance planning is the allocation of resources to support incoming refugees and their long-term integration into their host communities. Based on its experience with receiving refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and elsewhere, Kampala City has learned to budget for emergencies as they relate to sudden influxes of refugees because “it can happen anywhere, anytime.” In Calgary, the inclusion of funds for refugee response into the city’s housing and employment budgets helps ensure a smooth integration into local communities and prevents the need to scramble in the midst of a crisis to try to find funding to cover refugee-related costs.

Depending on the context, ensuring adequate resources are available may necessitate the city lobbying the national government or external donors to support incoming refugees, as was the case in Kampala City. City officials should be prepared to make their case for their proposed budget, presenting clear justifications and ideally tying their refugee-integration efforts to the overall strength and resilience of the local community. At other times – particularly in conflict-affected and fragile environments - city officials may find it expeditious to seek funds directly from international organisations or NGOs. In these instances, cities should highlight their comparative advantages over central governments, which can be physically far removed from the crisis and typically lack the nuanced understanding of local communities into which refugees are integrated that local governments do.

Resourcing and staffing programmes and services that enable refugees to feel welcome in their new city enhance their individual prospects for long-term integration, which in turn strengthen the community to which they now belong. “Welcome Centres” in cities like Bochum, Calgary and Malaga or the “Victims Attention Unit” in Medellin are not only places for new arrivals to get information but also to feel safe and supported. Each of the cities featured in the webinar series discussed the importance of investing in programmes and services to begin integrating refugees into the social fabric of the city as soon as possible. For example, Kristiansand’s welcome programme includes salary support and provides children of refugees with care as they learn the local language, culture and customs. More broadly, the provision of housing, social care cards, health care as well as interpreters, psychologists, legal advisors and other support staff in welcome centres are all examples of resourcing that enables the long-term success of refugee integration and social cohesion.

LESSON THREE: COMMUNICATE

Participants in the webinar series emphasised the importance of immediate, clear and transparent communications to inform local populations. Without a clear communication strategy, particularly during a crisis moment, the narrative can be easily hijacked, as it was in Detroit in 2016 when some political candidates began using Syrian refugees to stoke fears amongst Americans. These will often manifest online

in the form of misinformation and disinformation campaigns, which are often used by extremist groups to reinforce harmful xenophobic narratives. To mitigate such a risk, in Bochum, a city crisis management team communicates directly with the media and community, releasing reliable information and streamlining messaging to the local population.

Strong leadership and education are core key ingredients of a successful communications campaign. Messaging should be crafted at the mayor level and amplified across the community. Civil society partners should be welcoming people arriving as victims of conflict or under other adverse circumstances while also providing information early and often to allay any fears, apprehension or animosity that may arise in the host community.

Like resourcing, communication responses should be institutionalised to avoid having to start anew with each incoming administration. In Kampala City, Medellin and Calgary, for example, communications revolve around the theme that any person can be a refugee at any time, creating a sense of empathy for incoming populations. In New York City and Kristiansand, the narrative is “you belong, and your presence will help the community thrive.” In Columbus, communication includes information about national and local culture and customs.

A successful communication campaign should also highlight the role of cities in fostering the well-being of the refugees as well as the host communities. Strong social cohesion and anti-hate and extremism messaging should be incorporated into the campaign, with a focus on how the city provides opportunities for work, cultural exchange, growth and the promise of a better life for all. An inclusive communication strategy motivates citizens and refugees alike to feel invested in the success of long-term integration, viewing it as a net positive for all, rather than a zero-sum game between guest and host.

LESSON FOUR: PROVIDE A ROADMAP

Participants agreed on the importance of providing a roadmap for refugees that charts their path from refugee to citizen. A roadmap should be clearly communicated and involve the host community as an active partner, versus an unwilling participant in the process. Upon arrival, refugees are often dealing with trauma, fear and apprehension of the future. Without a roadmap to a “normal” life, refugees can feel overwhelmed or hopeless. This reduces their chances of reaching their full potential as active, contributing citizens in their new homes. This could also create new or aggravate existing tensions with the host community and give rise to grievances or, worse, hate and extremism between or among the newcomers and the local population.

An important aspect of a successful roadmap is placement. In Columbus, integration efforts consider whether incoming refugees may be better placed within a similar community, for example Afghan refugees

with other Afghans, or a more heterogeneous setting. In making placement decisions, city officials should work with the individual or family as well as refugee resettlement agencies and other community-based organisations to find the best fit with the greatest chance of long-term integration and social cohesion. Whereas a young person might be willing to immerse themselves in a new environment, older refugees may find such an experience too overwhelming and prefer living in a more familiar setting where they do not have to “start over.”

Another issue to consider when preparing and presenting a roadmap is at what point refugees should enter the workforce. In Kristiansand, Columbus and New York City, refugees are provided with language training and career building opportunities such as resume writing, navigating paperwork and bureaucracy and converting professional licenses to alleviate hurdles to employment. That said, it is equally important to aim for a balance between integration through the workforce and allowing ample time for the refugees to become culturally acclimated in their new environment. The latter will allow for a smoother transition and help mitigate tensions, frustrations or misunderstandings between refugees and their local colleagues at work.

Finally, a roadmap is critical in preventing refugees from feeling pressured into an informal economy. In Medellin, where people sometimes enter without official papers as they flee conflicts in neighbouring countries, the informal economy can quickly absorb them if the city administration and its community partners are not prepared with a roadmap for legal and sustainable long-term integration into the community.

LESSON FIVE: WORK WITH PARTNERS

Partnerships with international organisations and local NGOs are integral to helping certain cities that otherwise would be overly burdened with inflows. In Kampala City, which bears a heavy burden resource-wise in providing for incoming refugees, these partnerships are critical to the success of the city’s efforts.

Partnerships are more successful when they include individuals and organisations in the community with a stake in the issues. In Detroit, for example, the city administration partnered with social service, resettlement and community and neighbourhood groups to put in place an integration plan for incoming refugees that prioritised social inclusion. The city formed a working group with various stakeholders, each of whom contributed to the plan, thereby mitigating potential grievances and shortcomings. Civil society and faith-based organisations are integral to these partnerships, as the most promising bonds on which to build a cohesive society are often based on shared values, religion or goals.

Partnerships can help address a wide range of challenges, from effective communication to housing and livelihoods. In Columbus, the city provided a guarantor fund so that property owners could feel more

confident in renting housing units to refugees, and organisations in the city were able to secure loans for refugees to start their own businesses to facilitate their self-sufficiency. Ensuring that no single actor or organisation in the city is responsible for the integration of refugees into their new communities is paramount to fostering a sense of community, shared responsibility and a common investment in the success of the whole versus the individual parts. Equally importantly, the shared mission and shared responsibility strengthens social cohesion and helps to mitigate issues that may give rise to hate or extremism.

LESSON SIX: BRIDGE CULTURES AND ALLEVIATE FEARS

A critical component of successful integration and strong social cohesion is bridging cultural divides and alleviating fears on both sides of the integration process. Cultural differences between incoming and host populations, especially those that may seem to one side strange or unfamiliar, can lead to culturally uninformed or inappropriate mistakes. At worst, fears surrounding cultural differences can result in deliberate acts of hate or violence. There is, therefore, an urgent need to incorporate two-way cultural education at every step of the integration and social cohesion process, from welcome and registration, to communication and infrastructure strategies. City administrations should take the lead on creating opportunities for cultural education and exchanges within their jurisdiction and working with the refugee population and local organisations to foster consistent and respectful dialogue.

In Columbus, for example, cultural orientations are part of the integration process from the start and include efforts to alleviate refugees' fears of foreign customs and practices. This includes meetings between incoming refugees and members of law enforcement in a two-way educational experience that ensures refugees' first encounter with foreign law enforcement is not under negative circumstances.

In Detroit, the city invited police officials to speak to groups of refugees and talk through public safety challenges with them. This is particularly helpful for refugees who may have fled countries where law enforcement and security services are adversarial actors. Fostering a sense of safety and understanding helps the entire community, ensuring that any potential disputes or transgressions are dealt with in a respectful, lawful manner and avoiding incidents that could lead to mental or physical harm to any individual. In New York City, for example, the slogan "NYC Cares" sends a strong message of support to newcomers, as does the interactive, multi-cultural environment in places like Calgary, Kampala City and Malaga.

LESSON SEVEN: FOSTER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The success and sustainability of long-term integration rests partly on newcomers becoming active members in their communities and believing their voice is welcomed; civic engagement is therefore key in

activating a sense of ownership and investment in a refugee's new community. Although securing the right to vote may take some time, involvement in the political process can start as soon as the refugees are ready to participate. Doing so, however, often requires an effort to shift individual's expectations and enhance their understanding of their new environment. Many refugees come from conflict-affected countries or lived under oppressive regimes. Depending on their experiences, they may be more hesitant to voice political views or believe in the democratic process.

To help overcome this hesitancy, the local government in Kristiansand takes the time to explain the political process in Norway to newcomers, including how it differs from their home countries. This approach recognises that education is the first step towards responsible civic engagement.

Civic engagement and democracy are not, however, only about elections. In Columbus, representatives from refugee and immigrant communities are part of the Franklin County Board of Commissioners' "New American Advisory Council." The council holds a "New American Forum" every year where representatives from the mayor's office, schools, business and the refugee communities discuss the implementation of welcome plans during roundtable discussions. Recommendations are then presented to county commissioners for their own discussions on policy and funding. In Medellin, districts prepare development plans at the neighbourhood and community levels and oftentimes, the most active members of the process are newcomers who are passionate about contributing to their new communities and welcome the opportunity to do so. In providing such opportunities, cities not only allow newcomers to feel a sense of ownership, and therefore care, towards their new communities, but also foster communication, cooperation and understanding towards one another. This benefits social cohesion by focusing on the future and not on the past, with which there are more likely to be negative emotions associated.

LESSON EIGHT: DO NOT NEGLECT THE HOST COMMUNITY

Devoting a significant proportion of a city's (or local or international organisation's) social welfare and other relevant resources to refugees risks alienating the host communities that are asked to welcome them, particularly if those communities are themselves in need of support. Even the perception that the host government is prioritising newcomers over long-time residents of their city can breed resentment that can undermine integration efforts.

To prevent this from happening, Kampala City allocates 30% of donations from international organisations to the host community. Removing the impetus for resentment on the part of the host community based on neglect, or the perception of neglect, is important for bolstering social cohesion in rapidly changing or expanding communities, particularly when the incoming population is seen as "foreign" in religion or culture, which tends to evoke feelings of competition rather than burden-sharing. This appears evident in the European response to Ukrainian refugees (where the narrative was "they could be you") in comparison to the prevalent narratives with regards to Syrian, Afghan or Somali refugees in some European countries

(where the narrative is “they are here to take your job”)⁷.

In Calgary, community engagement is a core part of the refugee response. The approach is that communities must be built around the refugees because the refugees become part of the community, and so it becomes a self-fortifying bond. In Kristiansand, the refugee response approach is predicated around the principle that inclusive cities attract people who in turn attract jobs and companies. In this case, everyone must participate so that everyone can become a beneficiary, which incentivises all-around participation. Kristiansand also hosts a “City for All” week annually, where participants from all walks of life come together in conferences, seminars, debates, roundtable discussions and dialogue corners to discuss policies perspectives and normalise differences. Malaga and New York City, among others, identify as cities of refuge, with the Spanish government’s delegate in Andalusia calling it a “land of solidarity” and New York City acting as a sanctuary city for undocumented immigrants.

LESSON NINE: UTILISE MENTORS AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

As important as city and organisation-level responses are to the integration process and for social cohesion, it is important not to overlook the personal aspect. For example, mentorship programs are integral to the development of bonds between the newcomers and their communities; whether age or faith-based, these one-to-one regular exchanges can shape the entire experience of both parties and create opportunities for wider engagement through the participants’ families or friend groups, all of whom serve as building blocks for a healthy and cohesive society. Mentors can provide advice and guidance in instances of bullying or lack of confidence on the part of the refugee. Parent-to-parent mentoring can provide a lifeline for overwhelmed refugees trying to support their children while also navigating their own struggles and challenges. In Columbus, refugees are matched with a volunteer host family, and in several cities in our webinar series, mentors are assigned to refugees and asked to sign up to a weekly commitment.

Refugees, depending on the circumstances under which they arrive to their new home, have often lost faith in humanity; it is important to address those feelings and restore that faith. Mentorship programs and faith-based communities are thus important for helping refugees move on from their painful past.

LESSON TEN: INVEST IN THE HUMAN BEING

A final lesson imparted by our webinar participants was to not lose sight of the human behind the refugee label. Time and again, we heard, “this can happen to anyone” and that refugees must be treated first and foremost as unique individuals who have something to offer to their community. Emphasising the concept of shared humanity also brings communities together to focus on common ground, rather than differences in faith or culture.

Overlooking the need to address the basic human needs of refugees when they arrive could hinder any subsequent efforts to integrate them into the community. Many refugees are in dire need of mental health and trauma services when they first arrive. New York City and Calgary recognise that unaddressed trauma leads to long-lasting mental health challenges and therefore include mental health services in their refugee integration plans. Inclusion, encouragement and investment in the individual are all critical ingredients for successful integration. In Kristiansand, the concept of two separate cities or communities growing side by side is rejected; rather, the focus is on respecting the individual and inviting them into the community as an asset versus a burden or charity case. The message is “once you are here, you are one of us” and that the individual should bring his or her background to the table and use it to help shape the community. This allows a strong foundation upon which the community can expand.

Finally, it is important to recognise that patience is required for much of these lessons to be fully implemented and ingrained at the city-level. Our webinar participants underscored that “these things take time.” However, with adequate planning, resourcing and communication, a tangible roadmap and investments at the individual and community level, refugee integration and social cohesion can be achieved and sustained.

ENDNOTES

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