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EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – SWEDEN
16 AND 17 DECEMBER 2015



European Economic and Social Committee

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In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited eleven EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practice of the various actors in the current refugee crisis, with the final aim of providing input into EU policy-making. The delegation to Sweden was composed of Karin Ekenger (Sweden, Employers Group), Anica Miličević-Pezelj (Croatia, Workers Group) and Ulrika Westerlund (Sweden, Various interests Group) on 16/12 in Stockholm, and Oskar Wallner (Sweden, Various interests Group) on 17/12 in Malmö. The delegation was supported by Annemarie Wiersma, EESC secretariat.

1. Situation in Sweden

In 2015, Sweden received 165 000 refugees, having the highest number of refugees per capita of all EU countries. At peak moments, up to 10 000 refugees were arriving every week. The Swedish system has been designed for 6 000 arrivals per month, so this number has been exceeded by far over the past few months. Although in September the government was still saying it was able to handle the situation, it changed its stance later in the autumn, partly encouraged by public resistance to its welcoming attitude. In November it announced it would reintroduce passport controls at border points, hoping this would lead to a reduction in refugee arrivals.

As a result of this decision, and because of rumours about which nationalities could easily obtain protection status in which countries (e.g. Iraqi men were said to have a high approval rate in Finland), Sweden saw an increase in so-called transit migrants. Transit migrants travel through Sweden on their way to destinations such as Norway and Finland without requesting asylum. This was a new phenomenon for Sweden, and the country lacks facilities for housing and supporting these people. Additionally, many migrants had been misinformed and were acting on the basis of erroneous information; it was therefore often very difficult to inform them properly and give them the best kind of support.

2. A description of the meetings

a) Caritas Sweden

Although civil society has shown that it is willing and available to help, the Swedish government still decided to tighten its laws and close its the borders to refugees. It would have been better if the government had called on civil society to help with the reception and housing of refugees.

b) Evakueringsboende för barnfamiljer på flykt (Evacuation housing)

The housing facility is run by Stockholm Citymission (an NGO) in co-operation with Save the Children, the Red Cross and Muslim Aid. We were shown around the centre, which had been set up at

government request within 48 hours. The housing project has a short duration; it was first set up to run until the end of December. When we visited the facility, it had just received an extension until the end of January and only in mid-January would it be known if there was going to be a further extension. This clearly had implications for the job security of staff, who were all looking for more permanent jobs.

c) Islamic Relief & Church of Sweden & Swedish Muslim Youth

We met with representatives of the Church of Sweden and Islamic Relief at the parish and also visited the mosque. Together they have arranged housing, hygiene facilities, food supplies, information and various other support measures for helping out refugees during the autumn months. As the number of new arrivals had at that time diminished, they were looking to develop new activities together (housing for unaccompanied minors, jobs for disadvantaged people and language courses). It was pointed out that there was an information gap: people working in the field often did not share their experience with those doing policy work. As such, policies were rarely designed by taking the actual situation in the field into account. That was a missed opportunity.

d) Round table meeting with RFSL Newcomers, Refugees Welcome, FARR, Tamam, Kommunal Trade Union & Akademikerförbundet SSR

We brought together two trade unions, a number of NGOs and volunteering organisations, with whom we talked about the challenges posed by the arrival of large numbers of refugees. Volunteering was found to be very useful, but it was pointed out that this could not become the norm or a permanent activity. There needs to be money and space for professionals who are well trained and well informed. Over the past months, staff has often been recruited hastily, and this might give rise to security concerns, incompetence and an inability to deal with heavy workloads. The recent shift in government attitude and rules (closing of the borders) was found to be counter-productive, as it reduced the amount of control the government had over the situation.

e) Red Cross and Röda Korsets ungdomsförbund (Red Cross Youth)

During the meeting at the Swedish Red Cross headquarters, we spoke about its activities and the role of the 1 200 volunteers working in emergency response. The Swedish Red Cross is not primarily engaged in medical support or screening on migrants' arrival; instead they provide social and legal support, as well as assistance for the authorities working to integrate asylum-seekers, focusing on language courses and social activities. To ensure that volunteers' commitment is maintained, the Red Cross has invested in their training. It also employs activities to ensure their motivation is fed and fostered in the long run. All procedures and guidelines have been documented, which facilitates the training of new staff and volunteers, and many activities and operations are carried out using checklists.

f) Stockholm City Mission – Crossroads day centre

Crossroads supports homeless EU migrants and third country nationals who have migrated from another EU Member State. Crossroads meets both basic needs, such as meals and showers, as well as long-term needs, such as help in finding employment and legal and social counselling. Many of the people that come to Crossroads for support are third country nationals with a long-term residency status in another EU Member State, who have made use of their right to free movement. For a variety of reasons they have, however, ended up jobless and homeless. Another category are third country nationals with a temporary permit in a different EU Member State who are not aware that there are restrictions on their right to work, social security and housing in other EU countries. The economic crisis has led to a surge in this type of intra-EU migration and Crossroads has had to deal with an increasingly changing demand, as it was initially catering mostly for Swedish and EU nationals only.

g) Läkare i världen

Läkare i världen is a human rights organisation that focuses on health in the network of Doctors of the World. We heard the stories of many women receiving treatment at Läkare i världen, and these indicate that there are sufficient grounds to grant them asylum. The stories have, however, not been heard by the migration authorities, because when families apply for asylum, very often it is only the man, as head of the family, who is heard. Läkare i världen insists that all women be interviewed individually, possibly away from their husbands and by someone female with a female interpreter.

h) Kontrapunkt

Kontrapunkt is both a cultural and a social centre. It functions as a platform that promotes free, non-established cultural life, with particular emphasis on being an underground scene with global and local roots. Kontrapunkt had cooperated closely with Muslimska Församlingen ("Turkish Mosque") over the months prior to our visit. Last autumn it actively worked towards organising reception and housing for refugees as they arrived in Malmö. As of September, has provided refugees with shelter for the night on 16 000 occasions. Additionally, it made available clothing, suitcases, medical aid and toiletries. It also set up a soup kitchen to provide meals, provided language training and some legal assistance, and organised cultural events and social activities. Many volunteers were also trained during this period. They were very disappointed that the government decided at a given moment that Sweden was no longer able to deal with the influx of refugees, while organisations offering their help were convinced that it was possible (in the end, their help was refused and the border closed).

i) County Administrative Board of Skåne (Länsstyrelsen)

The County Administrative Board represents the state at county level and serves as a link between local inhabitants, municipal authorities, central government, the Swedish Parliament and central state authorities. Integrating refugee children into the school system sometimes proves difficult. The County Board wants to address the challenge posed by transit migrants, who do not request asylum in

Sweden and are therefore not covered by the Swedish reception system, but finds itself constrained by the rules. It expects that the introduction of temporary protection permits will hinder integration. For people to make an effort to integrate into their host society, the prospect of a long-term stay has a large positive impact. Finally, the County has been struggling to find accommodation for all the refugees who have arrived in recent months.

j) Skåne city mission

At the Skåne city mission centre, refugees can get legal advice, food, clothes, social assistance and take part in social activities. There is a major need for legal aid, but only one or two NGOs in Malmö employ a legal professional to provide legal aid. This is mainly because of a lack of funding, causing a shortage of professional staff and difficulties hiring professional interpreters. The importance of a) cooperation with other organisations that are specialised in particular areas and b) being part of a network to share experience and knowledge were underlined.

k) The Church of Sweden

Since last September the Church of Sweden has been able to open St John's Church as a shelter at night. The migration authorities made use of this for three weeks in September and during November when they could no longer accommodate all the single men. The recent changes to Swedish law and policy are likely to have the undesired effect of leading to more irregular migration, undocumented migrants and corresponding social problems. The responsibility for assisting those people will large fall on civil society, as undocumented migrants are invisible to the authorities.

l) Ensamkommandes förbund (Unaccompanied Association)

The Unaccompanied Association's youth facility functions as a social network where unaccompanied children and young people can support and empower each other. Despite an ongoing dialogue with the authorities, it is very difficult to obtain funding. The project therefore has very few staff and relies mostly on volunteers and the youngsters themselves. Many young migrants are ill-informed about their situation, rights and obligations and feel destitute and empty. The meeting place is therefore very important to them, as it provides them with a place where they feel safe and at ease.

3. Conclusions

a) Legislative and policy framework

There is no common EU solution to address the arrival of large amounts of refugees, nor a proper common asylum system. EU laws are not always properly implemented and Member States do not always adhere to international law and standards.

Sweden has tightened its laws because of the very large influx of refugees. It would have benefited from more commitment and solidarity at EU level. After the delegation's visit to Sweden, in January 2016 the Swedish government introduced legislation obliging transporters (for example for travel by ferry, bus and train) to check passengers' identity papers before they entered Sweden.

The needs of particular migrants have to be taken into account not only when a relocation decision is taken, but also in the asylum procedure. The identification and treatment of vulnerable groups/people has to be improved. There is for instance very little recognition for male victims of sexual abuse, while this is something quite common in certain parts of the world.

Notwithstanding the importance of the proper implementation of rules and procedures, care should be taken to avoid this putting the health of refugees and migrants at risk. Refugees are for instance required to register with the authorities (apply for asylum) before they can receive health care. In the event of extreme emergencies, this can pose serious problems. Also, when organising reception and support for refugees, it is important to acknowledge that local norms and standards might be too high and that it is not necessarily a problem if they cannot be met. Migrants and refugees often have lower expectations about reception facilities than we would expect. They might prefer to stay in a facility which did not necessarily meet all the standards, rather than being on the street.

Many migrants and refugees suffer from trauma, caused by what led them to leave their home country in the first place or by the journey itself. Treating such traumas can be facilitated by (the prospect of) family reunification.

It was found that temporary protection status complicates integration and a restrictive migration policy causes irregular migration.

b) Public support and coordination

Understanding of the benefits of migration will increase public support for migration and thus for the development of a common EU approach to the arrival of refugees.

Many villages in remote areas of Sweden are known to suffer from demographic decline. They are now benefiting from the arrival of refugees, who provide extra workforce, consumption, students in schools, etc. The positive aspects related to this phenomenon - which without doubt also occurs elsewhere in Europe - could be highlighted to increase public support for migration.

It has been found that involving people with a migrant background in the reception and integration processes has many benefits. They can be cultural and linguistic mediators and share their experiences with newly arrived refugees. They foster an understanding of the host society, but also ensure a more positive attitude of the host society towards refugees.

c) Role and capacity of civil society

When determining whether or not a state is capable of handling the influx of refugees, the capacity of civil society should be considered too.

Organisations are best to stick to their expertise and team up to fill the gaps, as opposed to trying to cover all types of activities internally. The various organisations involved in support networks should hold regular coordination meetings and would be advised to document their joint initiative for future reference, as well as create checklists, procedures, etc.

Refugees rarely speak the language of the host society and some do not speak any other European language (such as English, German or French) either. Employing staff that speak Arabic or another commonly used foreign language is therefore useful, but organisations could also make use of a network of informal interpreters. These could be volunteers who help overcome basic language problems (usually by phone) on an ad hoc basis. It is important that the right balance be found between the risks and benefits related to using professional or informal interpreters.

To be able to anticipate arrivals, civil society organisations have maintained regular contacts with other, similar organisations in Europe about refugee flows (numbers, routes, destinations, etc).

d) Funding and support

There is a clear need for support, mostly financial. Almost all organisations we spoke to said they could achieve more and operate more professionally if more money were to be available. At the moment, funding is only available for established, well-defined projects, and organisations need to employ a person specifically for writing project proposals and managing project implementation and follow-up. When facing budgetary constraints, this is often impossible to afford. The usual project funding procedure is also too slow for such pressing cases.

Besides funding, the EU could provide support for coordination between the different stakeholders. Sharing documented guidelines, best practice and other experience would foster mutual learning, enhance performance and avoid duplication.

In times of emergency, Swedish organisations have found that calls for help to rally the general public or members of their own organisation often generate a good response. Such volunteers gain useful experience and organisations are interested, but not always able, to engage them on a more continuous basis.

Emergency projects often have a short duration, which clearly has implications for the job security of staff and the ability of organisations to attract and retain qualified personnel.

e) Refugee-oriented measures

On their way to and through Europe, refugees often rely heavily on information obtained through informal channels. Much of this information is false or incorrect. Ill-informed, they take bad decisions and sometimes even end up lying unnecessarily during their asylum interview. As a result, some end up in an irregular situation.

When recognised refugees have been involved in providing support to asylum-seekers, they have provided valuable expertise in terms of language, experience, understanding, etc. At the same time it has provided them with meaningful experience. In addition, it might increase understanding between the beneficiaries of international protection and the host society (see above).
