Policy Paper

on Migration

Manifesto

YMCA Europe cares:

YMCA Europe is concerned about every individuals' well-being of body, mind and spirit, and it seeks to support young people and people in need regardless of age, race, gender, nationality, religion, education, social background or sexual orientation. YMCA Europe believes in humanity and stresses that all individuals should be empowered to grow in body, mind and spirit: we seek to create equal living conditions for all humans.

YMCA was founded on the Christian principles and has always been living the spirit of charity, reaching out to all fellow humans in need. YMCA has a long history of commitment to work with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs), especially during both World Wars. Our priority today is to work on inclusion, giving tools to both newcomers and their new communities to live together, aiming at supporting newcomers to achieve independent and fulfilling lives, and building trust between communities. Today, many YMCAs in Europe work for MRAs and internally displaced people (IDPs).

The YMCA of Thessaloniki has been working with the refugees of the camp of Diavata, Greece[1] , and YMCA Ukraine has been working for some years with IDPs in Ukraine. Also, YMCAs in The Netherlands, Germany, France and Spain and many others are engaged in several activities to support MRAs. Our YMCAs provide support to young people, families, and children, contributing to their integration into their new communities through educational programmes, employment facilities and youth work, helping them to build a new future. YMCAs provides young people with recreation and skills development, and families with support through signposting of key services like employment, health, or housing.

YMCA Europe has identified migrants, refugees[2], asylum seekers (MRAs) and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) as one of the most important priorities for all our movements in our 2016-2020 Strategy.

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1. http://refugees.ymca.gr/
2. Geneva Convention on Refugees: A person who has "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." (Article 1A(2))

The story so far

In the recent years, migration flows worldwide have been increasing, especially towards Europe and North America. In Europe, there is a high number of asylum requests in Germany, Italy, France and Greece, and a comparatively lower number of asylum requests in Slovakia, Portugal, Spain, Romania, and Czech Republic. Germany reported the largest total number of immigrants in 2014, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy[3]. In 2015 the EU saw the number of asylum requests double[4]. IDPs in Ukraine have fled in particular from Crimea and eastern Ukraine[5]. The higher numbers of asylum claims are either due to the effects of the Dublin-Agreement (e.g. in the case of Italy or Greece) or to the chosen destination (e.g. in the case of Germany). However, most refugees move first towards non-EU countries, countries for example like Jordan, which now hosts 1.3 million refugees over a total population of 9.8 million. However, the media tend to report that the highest number of MRAs intake belongs to European countries in absolute terms. Nevertheless, it can be observed how the countries in the south of Europe have been receiving higher inflows of MRAs. Many of these people came by boats, in perilous conditions.

The main causes

The causes of migration are many and diverse, like war, conflict, or political persecution: some examples may be the war in Syria, the violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the abuses in Eritrea. They may be related to environmental issues (natural disasters such as hurricanes, drought, flooding, climate change etc.) or social: religious persecution, gender, sexual orientation, discrimination, or sectarian persecutions between and within the same community. Ultimately, the causes can also be related to economic factors: poverty, or simply because there may be better opportunities abroad. It should be noted that IDPs, along with individuals fleeing natural disasters, stateless individuals not outside their country of habitual residence or not facing persecution, and individuals who have crossed an international border fleeing generalized violence are not considered refugees under the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Optional Protocol.

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3. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics

4. https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1602.pdf

5. http://www.internal-displacement.org/europe-the-caucasus-and-central-asia/ukraine/figures-analysis

Migrants can also be workers or students, seeking better working conditions or better education: they often arrive by visa and need to prove their stable financial situation in advance, and in some case this leads to a phenomenon of "brain drain" in their countries of origin.

The condition of MRAs and IDPs

MRAs, depending on the situation in their home country and the journey to the new state, may have mental health difficulties arising from witnessing or enduring traumatic experiences. They have often lost all their belongings, perhaps even friends and families. MRAs and IDPs are seeking shelter, protection, and humane living conditions. They may have suffered exploitation and abuse, especially young people, and women. Human trafficking is common, and in some cases the families are indebted to the traffickers and struggle to pay their debts. They may have physical health issues from lack of proper nutrition, clean water or injury that may have incurred. Refugees and asylum seekers especially may stay in camps with very poor conditions resulting in developing various threatening conditions. Lack of access to healthcare may mean that these conditions stay untreated. Many children may arrive unaccompanied or separated from their family, and they may not have attended formal education for an extended period. Many MRAs may have arrived in Europe without any funds and restricted access to support, then ineligible to work legally.

MRAs are often put in crowded refugee homes (formal and informal camps as well) and are not allowed to work, have the pressure of studying the language of the new country, while they are waiting for the granting of the asylum (which might not be granted) and live in constant fear for their family members who have stayed in their country of origin. In a situation of uncertainty and in poor general conditions, where inactivity is the only choice while waiting for the procedures to run their course, many develop depression, loss of self-confidence and some level of cultural shock, often derived from a bad feedback from locals. Deprived of the possibility of working, many may turn to illegal work or crime.

European societies and their response

Our societies are reacting in different ways to migration flows towards Europe.

The rhetoric is often negative, and hate crime directed at migrant populations across Europe is on the rise. Inversely, there are many communities that have welcomed migrants, supported their integration. The views of the public regarding economic migrants have been rather negative, seen as competition for an already struggling job market for Europeans. There is a feeling amongst many blue-collar communities that migrants are gaining top access to the welfare system, undercutting pay and fundamentally changing the demographics of their community.

This has manifested in the seismic political shocks such as Brexit, as a clear rejection of migration. While there is no data confirming that jobs are going first to MRAs and then to locals, after years of budget cuts regarding social benefits many fear the repercussion of further pressure on social welfare. These concerns have raised support to stricter asylum laws and actions to prevent refugees from entering Europe (e.g. the Hungarian border fence). On the other hand, there are increasing numbers of xenophobic movements, and many elections see the success of isolationist governments

Problematic consequences

Migration is often used as a tool for dividing society and creating a scapegoat for discontent on issues such as the jobs, welfare etc. Though historically, migrants have contributed positively to society, there is a feeling amongst many that communities are changing rapidly and feel powerless to the change. This has opened the door to xenophobic movements that do not discuss economic and ethical issues on the costs/benefits of migration or the needs of vulnerable people escaping war and poverty, but rather make it about race and religion. The narrative has been driven by fear of terrorism and a rejection of cultural diversity[6].

There is a fear in some communities that cultural diversity may lead to the loss of identity and traditional customs. There are grievances by people who feel like their communities are changing at a rapid rate: this should be discussed without immediate dismissal as racism. However, the fear mongering around Muslim migrants, often considered all violent extremists, fuels the racism we see rising in Europe. What we shall never forget is that refugees are the first victims of violent extremism, although they are often identified with it. Social unrest fueled by religious and cultural misunderstanding, strong secular traditions in certain countries and lingering economic tensions have all contributed to paint a complex picture. This often leads to racist tensions even and most often in regions which have a low percentage of migrants.

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6. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38881349

Part 2: Recommendations

We believe that MRAs and IDPs are humans first and foremost, and should be granted the rights associated with that. There is a need for a first response and a long term one too. As first response, we need to make sure people are safe, healthy and taken care of. Food, clothes, a decent level of shelter, healthcare, and a thorough assessment of needs should be provided. In the long term, we need to make sure that either people can integrate, and become part of society if they wish to stay, or help them relocate wherever they wish to, whether that is back home or to a different country where family and friends have settled down.

Short term solutions

Whatever solution European countries decide to adopt, there is a need to have a clear plan for dealing with migration in terms of responsibilities. European countries should ensure in particular that MRAs especially are transitioned from camps into quality housing as soon as possible. Low conditions in camps only increase the health and education gap for young people. There should be balanced and informed debate around the reasons of migration and international relations, and European countries should create spaces and programs for intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The role of civil society

Civil society organization need to have a central role in all inclusion policies. Their role is to keep the community cohesive and to foster trust and cooperation within all communities and all their members. NGOs and youth organizations should provide help and receive funding for their work in this area. Their message of inclusion needs to be expressed and divulged to governments. Their ultimate role is to promote dialogue and the unity of human kind. They should help to recognize the enrichment coming from the coexistence of several different cultures. It is important to promote inclusion and celebrate other peoples' cultures, while celebrating and preserving old traditions as well. Youth organizations can reach people where sometimes governments cannot: they can lead community actions thanks to their outreach, and they have a responsibility to do so. However, they also deserve support in their cohesive action from State actors.

Youth organizations work mostly through volunteering, and volunteering is also their great tool to build ownership and collective spirit in its participants. However, great resources are needed to reach out to people who are new to our communities, and to those who have been living in our communities for long, while feeling excluded. The State should cooperate and enable youth organizations with resources and tools, but also planning and establishing objectives together.

As YMCA we commit to give young MRAs and IDPs a voice, to empower them, to shape policies, to take ownership and not being victims of circumstances. YMCA aims at giving MRAs and IDPs a safe space to build more confidence, more sense of belonging, and a stronger tie to their new communities.

Long term solutions

European countries should endeavor to ensure that MRAs and IDPs are integrated sufficiently, and provide access to services and employment so that they will be able to start supporting themselves. In particular, the EU should keep funding programmes that strive to support dialogue between the migrant population and their new communities. European countries should foster coherent and comprehensive inclusion and integration polices. Language classes are fundamental, but MRAs will also likely need to get some knowledge of culture, life skills, and general information about their new countries.

They should also enjoy freedom of religion and worship: this means equal religion opportunities according to national standards. Temporary and long-term quality housing should be provided with an inclusive integrated approach, as should high quality education for all underprivileged in society, migrants and natives. Legal working opportunities with strong working rights should be available for all in society, to avoid a rise in the black economy exploiting vulnerable people. For this reason all European countries should be working on recognition of titles and qualifications for MRAs and IDPs. But most of all what is needed is a revision of European cooperation agreements concerning the migration regime, like the Dublin Agreement. What is needed is a common and comprehensive European solution, aiming at enhanced solidarity.

There is an increasing anti-Islam rhetoric equating a niche aspect of Islam, Jihadi Salafism, to Islam in general.

Jihadi Salafism is a radical form of Islam that has inspired many to commit crimes and human rights violations in some Muslim majority countries. However, the main victims of this radical form of Islam are millions of Muslims across the world. It is vital then that people know about these realities, and about the common ground we share. Racism as well is a serious issue nowadays in Europe. It is important to show examples by public figures of serene coexistence and positive stories of normal people and their successful integration into their new communities.

Humanizing people and their stories is of fundamental importance, but it should also be clear that racism cannot be accepted. Media stakeholders have an important role in this complex issue. They are influencers. They determine the way in which public opinion perceives MRAs and IDPs, since few people have actual direct knowledge of them. Media can fuel racism, but it can also advocate for minorities and mediate. For this reason, it is important for us to promote civil actions to put pressure on media supporting hate towards MRAs and IDPs, while always supporting freedom of press.

We should also deal with the instabilities that cause migration: European countries need to reflect about their role in the conflicts causing displacement, and agree on coordinated diplomatic efforts to end them. With the same aim, they should seek to end economic exploitation. However, migration is a global issue. European countries should seek to increase aid to the countries of first displacement, like Jordan, Libya, etc. They should also seek to improve living conditions in the countries of origin instead of externalising border controls, with the aim of just stopping emigration at the source.

Considering our roots and values, we believe also that European countries should fight racism, supporting mutual respect and understanding, promoting intercultural dialogue. The most important principle among European values is the principle of non discrimination: we believe that people are human rights holders regardless of their age, race, gender, nationality, religion, education, social background or sexual orientation.