Social innovation for refugees

In response to the recent wave of arrivals of asylum seekers to Europe, many social innovations, often led by ordinary citizens, have flourished. Antoine Saint-Denis draws some lessons for policy-making. This article was first written and published on behalf of the European Commission.[1]

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Techfugees meeting in Oslo. (Photo: Tom Hayton)

Social services in the receiving countries of the EU were largely unprepared for the stream of asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean. They were overwhelmed by the considerable and multiple needs of these people. Thousands of NGOs and citizens mobilised and spontaneously used social media to build coalitions and organise a wide variety of services, ranging from emergency responses to more lasting initiatives. Many of them did not thrive, but many others are flourishing. This flow of social innovations arose as a result of non-existent or inadequate public services, new types of civic engagement or new communication and management opportunities offered by technology.

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[1] *https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/content/social-innovation-refugees*

Language course provided by SINGA in France. (Photo: SINGA)

Three types of innovation

Among the wide variety of initiatives, it is possible to draw up a typology:

- Many services aim to improve communication by **overcoming language barriers**, and to deliver information about daily life, rights and duties, healthcare, education, etc. Mainstream web services such as Google Translate are widely used, but volunteer on-the-spot interpretation also plays an important role in facilitating interactions. Like many others, the Welcome Germany app delivers general and local-based information corresponding to newcomers' most pressing needs, in the languages they are most fluent in.

- Another type of initiative consists in **matching offer and demand**. A number of platforms, such as Comme à la maison by SINGA in France, or Takecarebnb in the Netherlands, are used successfully to organise meetings between asylum seekers and local people, thus enabling the former to start a social life and build solidarity networks.

- A third type of tools focuses on the interactions between **public services and people**. Mobilearn is a web tool used by Swedish local authorities to deliver personalised and general officially validated information to registered migrants. Kiron's objective is to give access to online academic learning to students who cannot immediately attend university. Some policy initiatives are on the same path. Within the Skills Agenda for Europe, the European Commission's Skills Profile Tool for third country nationals will support early identification and profiling of skills and qualifications.

Refugees themselves have initiated — or at least are involved in — many of these innovations. Some initiatives, like *mag*das HOTEL in Vienna or the Cucula furniture factory in Berlin (see photo), are two examples of ways to create jobs for refugees. The impact is however much wider. These approaches protect people' dignity and empower them, resulting in accelerated integration. They also give citizens an active role and contribute to positive perceptions towards asylum seekers in the whole society.

Work in progress

Many services are still in a development phase. This is the case for many IT applications, such as Textfugees, a promising interactive automated service available by text message or Facebook Messenger, and Virtuous Triangle from Turkey, one of the winners of the 2016 European Social Innovation Competition, which aims to pair a university student, a local and a refugee pupil for long-term support.

The fact that so many initiatives are still on their way cannot be explained only by the low quality of the concepts on which they are based or by the time it takes to transform a concept into reality. Some of the initiatives launched by volunteers will not thrive beyond the initial momentum and enthusiasm. Moreover, given that most of these initiatives depend on public generosity, sponsorship or public financing, their business model is still uncertain. Many social enterprises have invested in the sector, but building a market takes time. Ultimately, the challenge is how to best articulate different elements filling the intercultural gap, putting IT technology at the service of social work, ensuring consistency with public policy strategies.

Initiatives that target asylum seekers and other migrants at an individual level could be complementary to some of the policy innovations identified in the 'repository of promising practices for labour market integration and social inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees' developed by the European Commission. They have also revealed a great potential for improving mainstream social services so that they are more responsive and efficient.

A Burman refugee caring for an old lady in Finland. (Photo: Maarit Tiittanen)

What can policy-makers learn?

First, a common element among all these initiatives is that their target groups are actively involved in them, and this is a key factor for the success of integration policies. Second, these initiatives reveal a number of ongoing evolutions in the ways citizens, NGOs, social services and public schemes interact, as well as with regard to the role of the public, non-for-profit and private

sectors. This leads to the conclusion that there is still a lot to be done to enhance the complementarity between services, partnerships and even co-creation.

The ESF is expected to support social innovation for migrants. The ESF Transnational Platform – especially its thematic networks on migrants, partnership and governance and public administration – is committed to facilitate the implementation of relevant initiatives.

Migrants check in to abandoned City Plaza Hotel in Athens. (Photo: solidarity2refugees)

Further reading

European Commission call for proposals for 'fast track integration into the labour market for third country nationals targeting exclusively asylum seekers, refugees and their family members': http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=629&langId=en&callId=502&furtherCalls=yes

Social Innovation Community and Syracuse conference: https://www.siceurope.eu/sic-themes/migration/what-happened-brighter-future-europe-innovation-integration-and-migrant-crisis

AEIDL's catalogue of citizens' initiatives: http://www.aeidl.eu/en/projects/refugees.html

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