

**EUROCITIES CONFERENCE; Integrating Cities II; Milan, 5-6 Nov 2007**  
**WS 4 Civic citizenship: social and civic participation in the community**

**ECRE: an introduction**

- ECRE (European Council on Refugees and Exiles) is a pan-European network of refugee-assisting non-governmental organisations
- ECRE membership includes around 80 NGOs in 31 countries
- ECRE promotes a humane and generous European asylum policy.
- ECRE promotes both the protection and integration of asylum-seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons based on values of human dignity, human rights within a framework of international refugee and human rights law..
- ECRE strives to include the voice of wider civil society, the political community and refugee communities in its work.

**ECRE on Integration**

ECRE has included a focus on integration in its work for over 10 years; ECRE publications have included

- ECRE's Position on Integration [ revised 1999] which set the tone for an understanding of integration to include it being a 'process' not a 'programme', and also a two way process, a multi dimensional one and a long term one, possibly involving more than one generation; see <http://www.ecre.org>
- 'The Way Forward: Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe', July 2005; <http://www.ecre.org/files/Integ.pdf>
- Six 'Policy Briefings on Integration of Refugees and Migrants' with specific policy recommendations in areas of housing, introduction programmes and language courses, assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications, vocational training and higher education, employment and employment support, and civic and political participation; Feb 2007. [http://www.ecre.org/resources/project\\_documents/812](http://www.ecre.org/resources/project_documents/812)

**Integration policy at local, national and European level**

ECRE is concerned that both refugees and asylum seekers are part of the integration equation. Even though peoples' status may give them different entitlements they are not to be discounted: and excluding people from 'integration' can cause 'dis-integration'.

ECRE believes that integration is a two-way process and that the roles and responsibilities of actors in host societies such as city authorities, local governments, educational institutions is a key to this integration

ECRE believes that refugees and other people in need of protection should be included in any mainstream integration policies and practices that are offered to third country nationals, while at the same time taking into account the specific needs of refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, and asylum seekers.

ECRE feels that refugees should not be excluded from the new EU Integration Fund and that the decision to fund refugee integration solely through the European Refugee Fund [ERF] leads to a highly impractical and unrealistic situation.

### **The field of civic and political participation**

The Common Basic Principles [CBP9] states that; ‘The participation of immigrants in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, especially at local level, supports their integration.’

ECRE accepts that people with different types of status may with justification have different entitlements [e.g. voting rights, access to naturalisation and citizenship] but that in principle the civic and political participation of immigrants [including refugees and asylum seekers] ultimately supports the diversity of the wider European community.

However, if we look for example at the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local level, this recommends local voting rights after 5 years. ECRE recommends this after 3 years of lawful and habitual residency. But by May 2006 few member states had signed this [11] or ratified this [8]

Integration is a two way process, and civic organisations- especially locally- have a responsibility to involve and encourage participation of refugee and migrant groups into their work. Likewise political parties also have a responsibility to more actively attract immigrants and offer public training in political processes; in general mechanisms should be put in place to inform newcomers of their entitlements.

Naturalisation, is another key to integration; citizenship and ‘good citizenship’ tests are often seen as a barrier; issues exist re dual citizenship, there are variations in national eligibility rules; ‘discrimination by nationality’ is not illegal but there should be a justification for areas eg public service where traditional eligibility barriers may exist, but with no modern justification.

By ‘civic participation’ we generally understand people’s participation in public affairs through, amongst other, NGOs, associations, trade unions, local clubs and societies as well as through informal networks. ECRE is an NGO network with members in all European countries and strives to represent its policy recommendations based on real life experiences.

*An example was ECRE’S Refugee Stories Project, where stories were told involving protection and integration issues against the background of the EU's efforts to develop a Common European Asylum System (CEAS). As this process enters its next phase, ECRE urges better understanding and fairer treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in the public debate in order both to inform the development of a fair and humane asylum policy in Europe and to improve integration processes.*

<http://www.ecre.org/refugeestories>

Political participation; this is not just about voting rights and the right to stand for election but participation also involves training e.g advanced writing skills, public speaking and ability to participate in and chair meetings

By political participation we generally understand this as people's participation through formal democratic structures, such as membership of political parties, and voting in local authority and parliamentary elections. *In a rare scenario, in Ireland, where asylum seekers and refugees were allowed to vote and stand in local elections [June 2004], the political debate changed and included refugee-related issues, and members of the immigrant and refugee community were successfully elected.*

There are ways, e.g. through involvement in public consultation processes, where input into the democratic process is possible without voting rights. *A good example of this is an asylum seeker and refugee advisory group under the EQUAL programme in England; <http://www.easidp.org.uk/advisorygroup.html> where the creation of the Advisory Group and its involvement of refugees and asylum seekers themselves in the EQUAL development partnerships has helped to overcome the invisible barriers between service providers and asylum seekers through consultations and direct involvement.*

*The level of support and training offered to the Advisory Group recognises the vulnerable and socially excluded position many asylum seekers occupy.*

*An acknowledgment of the Advisory Groups' existing skills, knowledge and expertise is crucial to empowering them.*

*The Advisory Group's work with LORECA, the Mayor of London's working group on asylum seekers and refugees, for whom they have carried out several policy consultations, has allowed the voice of asylum seekers to be heard at a senior level within a major policy making institution in London*

## **Developing policy on integration**

*The EQUAL programme and its focus on the social and vocational integration of Asylum Seekers has aimed to play a role in the identification and dissemination of good practice and policy lessons to help asylum seekers integrate into society. The lessons learned from EQUAL activities must be used to promote horizontal 'mainstreaming' (promoting changes at local or regional level and focusing on good practice) and vertical 'mainstreaming' (promoting changes at political and administrative level). see [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/equal/activities/etg5\\_en.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal/activities/etg5_en.cfm)*

*The following policy recommendations, based on EQUAL good practice, have valuable lessons for all newcomers and have involved empowerment as a key principle in their development.; [[http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/equal/news/200706-malmoasy\\_en.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal/news/200706-malmoasy_en.cfm)]. Specific reference to be made to the Reception Directive; [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2003/l\\_031/l\\_03120030206en00180025.pdf](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2003/l_031/l_03120030206en00180025.pdf)*

### *Advice, Education and Training*

*1. Upon arrival, asylum seekers should have the right to and be informed about: (1) a skills audit process, (2) access to language training and (3) access to vocational training incorporating a practical component. The needs of disadvantaged groups of asylum seekers should be taken into account.*

*2. Asylum seekers must have the possibility of having their professional and academic skills recognised. Vocational training should preferably be provided in mainstream programmes with nationals.*

### *Employment and Employer Relations*

*3. Employer organisations and trade unions should become involved in opening the labour market for the creation of new jobs based on diversity, and influence policy makers to revise reception conditions.*

*4. Article 11 [in the Reception Directive] should be amended. Asylum seekers should have direct access to employment unless Member States can prove that this will substantially disrupt their labour markets. Issues of social inclusion are to be taken into account.*

### *Capacity Building*

*5. Article 24 [in the Reception Directive] should be amended. Member States should give clear guidance on the necessary qualifications for support staff. The empowerment of asylum seekers should be an essential part of all activities targeted at asylum seekers (e.g. setting up an advisory group of asylum seekers).*

*6. The instruments for dissemination and policy impact used and developed in the EQUAL Initiative should be further developed, adapted and transferred to the new ESF programme.*

These would be important building blocks for the integration of any newcomer.

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Presentation by David Hudson, British Refugee Council, London, representing ECRE's, 'Core group' on Integration and the EQUAL EASI Development Partnership, London.  
[Davidahudson1@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:Davidahudson1@tiscali.co.uk); 0044 7815697579

Contact ECRE **ECRE Brussels Office**: Rue Royale 146, 2nd Floor, 1000 Brussels  
+32 2 514 5939; [London office: +44 (0)20 7377 7556]; [ecre@ecre.org](mailto:ecre@ecre.org); [www.ecre.org](http://www.ecre.org)