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Social and Solidarity Economy for the Integration of Migrants and Refugees

EXPERIENCES FROM THREE EUROPEAN CITIES

What roles can the social and solidarity economy (SSE) play in addressing the problems faced by migrants and refugees, particularly in contexts of austerity and welfare retrenchment, growing xenophobia and populist politics? Focusing on selected European cities, the findings of the project *Social and Solidarity Economy, Urban Communities and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups* deepen our understanding of institutions and policies which can help SSE to play a constructive role in the integration of refugees and migrants into a host society.

The number of social and solidarity economy organizations and enterprises (SSEOs)—those which are guided by principles of cooperation, solidarity and democratic self-management and prioritize social and often environmental objectives beyond the profit motive—has grown significantly in the past decade, in tandem with increased demands for the kinds of activities which SSEOs often undertake, ranging from basic needs provision and social inclusion to employment generation and local economic development. In providing local-level social services for the most vulnerable members of society, or fostering their integration into the labour market, SSEOs can play a leading role in realizing a fundamental principle underpinning the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: “leaving no one behind”. In this vein, much of the recent growth of SSE activities, notably in Europe, has centred on service provision and social integration for migrants and refugees.

Migrant crisis in Europe

A dramatic increase in the number of refugees and migrants has affected many countries, both developed and developing, since the early and mid-2010s (UNHCR). Accommodating, not to mention integrating, an increased number of migrants and refugees in host countries has become a policy challenge for many countries of arrival, including in Europe. Extending progress associated with sustainable development to the most vulnerable members of society, such as migrants and refugees, is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s principle of “leaving no one behind”. Yet regional and national policy environments have so far struggled to uphold this principle, and often fail to include migrants and refugees in the design and implementation of policies and institutions.

After the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, many European governments tried to cushion its effects with short-lived economic stimulus programmes, mostly to bail out financial institutions, accumulating unprecedented levels of public debt. In terms of

Social and Solidarity Economy, Urban Communities and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups

The project, for which research was undertaken in 2018–2019, examined the performance of SSEOs in addressing the problems of migrants and refugees, and the policies put in place to promote SSE as a vector for their integration in a host society. This Brief draws on findings from three European cities with varied approaches to managing the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis, migration flows, and SSE development.

- Bergamo, Italy: demonstrated strong resilience during the 2008 financial crisis; experienced high migration flows; has a long history of SSE activity.
- Geneva, Switzerland: also demonstrated strong resilience during the 2008 financial crisis; has high migration flows; has a long history of SSE activity but no specific national legal framework for SSE.
- Heraklion, Greece: experienced vulnerability during the 2008 financial crisis; has high migration flows; has young and relatively underdeveloped SSEOs.

The project aims to provide policy makers and stakeholders with key lessons on the role(s) that SSE plays in addressing problems faced by refugees and migrants, and how SSE can be supported and promoted at the local government level, which has a growing influence in the design and delivery of public services for migrants and refugees.



The project was funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS). Find more information about the [project here](#).



The proximity of SSEOs to local people allows social cooperative members and leadership to be better aware of, and appropriately respond to, politically sensitive issues associated with refugees and migrants in local contexts.

welfare for people, austerity measures have become the “new normal” in many countries. Yet the social and economic consequences of prolonged austerity have often led to increased inequality and social exclusion, as well as growing rates of unemployment and poverty. These effects have been visible in many countries of Europe, and are particularly pronounced in southern European countries such as Italy and Greece which are many migrants’ countries of first entry into Europe.

Migrants and refugees in Bergamo, Geneva and Heraklion

The number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe has increased significantly since the mid-2010s. Between 2014 and 2019, there have been around 1,243,600 arrivals in Greece and 659,600 in Italy, via sea or land routes, according to UNHCR. In Crete, where Heraklion is located, the number of refugees increased to over 3,000 arrivals per year in the first half of the 2010s, according to [Greek police force figures](#). In Bergamo, Italy, the rate of population growth increased from 5.3% in 2004 to 13.8% in 2013, in large part due to the number of irregular migrants arriving in the city. Turning to Switzerland, the number of asylum requests also increased noticeably, from 23,765 cases in 2014 to 39,523 in 2015. In the [canton of Geneva](#), a peak in asylum requests was reached in 2015, rising to an all-time high of 2,184, almost double the number in preceding and subsequent years.

SSEOs for the integration of migrants and refugees in host societies

The needs of migrants and refugees are heterogeneous, ranging across the social, economic, cultural and political domains. National and local governments across the world respond to these policy needs through partnerships with local non-government actors. Local governments have the advantage of being closer to populations in need than national governments. However, they face multiple challenges such as lack of budget to provide appropriate services for migrants and refugees, insufficient workforce to reach out and document them, and hostility and discrimination against migrants and refugees triggered by local social, economic and cultural factors. The nature of SSEOs means that they are well-placed to play a significant role in helping to address such challenges: they are deeply rooted in local contexts and they address many aspects of development in an inclusive manner. The findings and lessons from the case studies on Bergamo, Geneva and Heraklion presented in the following sections reveal why and how SSE can contribute to the inclusion of migrants and refugees within and sometimes beyond local areas.

SSEOs in Bergamo, Heraklion and Geneva

In Italy and Greece, creating national legal frameworks for SSEOs prompted significant growth in the sector. In Italy, Law No. 381 of 1991 established a specific legal framework for social cooperatives. In Greece, the first legal framework for SSE was created by Law L.2810 in 2000, and legislative decree 112/2017 in 2017 contributed to the growth of SSEOs by recognizing all social cooperatives as social enterprises and removing various legal requirements which had hindered their growth.

In both countries, but primarily in Greece, the economic crisis of 2008 spurred the growth of SSE, with almost half of the currently existing SSEOs created since then. As perception of the failure of the Greek state to provide social and income protection grew, people started to organize themselves in formal and informal SSEOs to provide social services. However, due to demanding bureaucratic procedures for registration, many SSEOs chose to remain informally organized. As of 2016, there were 573 officially registered SSEOs in Greece, compared to 400–600 informal ones (Social Enterprise UK and European Village 2017; see also the [Greek General Register of Social and Solidarity Economy Bodies](#)). Around 20 percent of Greek SSEOs provide services to refugees and migrants. In Heraklion there were an estimated 46 SSEOs in 2019.

The Italian SSE landscape is characterized by a prevalence of small, locally rooted cooperatives which tend to restrict their activities to local areas. Social cooperatives, accounting for 24.2 percent of all 59,027 active cooperatives in 2015 (Istat 2019), effectively contributed to social cohesion and the provision of specialized services for marginalized social groups in need of assistance. The social cooperatives addressed old and new social concerns including those of refugees and migrants in need by engaging with a wide range of actors and creating spin-off initiatives to provide social services in efficient and inclusive ways. The proximity of SSEOs to local people allows social cooperative members and leadership to be better aware of, and appropriately respond to, politically sensitive issues associated with refugees and migrants in local contexts. Bergamo is a hotspot of SSE activity in northern Italy, with 67 registered entities and several support organizations devoted to the promotion of SSE.

In Switzerland, there is no legal framework or definition of social and solidarity economy or social enterprises. In reality, most SSEOs are either incorporated as cooperatives (Art. 828-926, Swiss Code of Obligations) or, more commonly, as associations (Art. 60-79 of the Swiss Civil Code). Associations, defined as an incorporated group of persons “without primary economic orientation”, can be established without many legal requirements and consequently are one

of the most common organizational forms chosen by people interested in the principles and goals of SSE. While most associations have conventional objectives such as the promotion of culture, sports and leisure, a growing number of them deal with topics of social inclusion and integration, such as volunteers and professionals providing language courses or supporting labour market integration for migrants and refugees. In the canton of Geneva, the SSE sector accounts for around 11 percent of total paid jobs.

SSEOs addressing the problems of migrants and refugees

Several characteristics make SSEOs a valuable complement to public and private actors when it comes to meeting the needs of migrants and refugees. First, compared to public sector actors, they are flexible in their activities, making them more able to respond to changing economic and social needs and demands such as those generated by increased numbers of refugees and migrants. For instance, many organizations which were already offering social services to vulnerable people in their locality extended their services to migrants and refugees when the number of arrivals increased. In addition, in many cases new SSEOs were established after 2015 specifically to respond to the needs of refugees and migrants.

Second, being more democratic and inclusive than the private sector, SSEOs facilitate the participation of refugees and migrants within and beyond organizations. In Italy, many new SSEOs established after 2015 were created by migrants and refugees themselves.

Third, SSEOs create resilient local economic circuits and maintain the principles and values of SSE in local areas which provide better economic and social conditions for migrants and refugees as well as for the native population. For instance, the SSEOs in Greece and Italy demonstrated resilience in providing services to migrants and refugees even during economically challenging times. Social cooperatives in Bergamo played a significant role in maintaining employment levels and providing social services to migrants and refugees in the context of reduced government services. As of 2019, 14 out of 21 Bergamo SSEOs continued to provide social services to migrants and refugees.

Fourth, being locally rooted and based on trust built in local communities, they provide tailor-made services for those with different needs and demands. In Heraklion and Bergamo, services provided by SSEOs vary widely ranging from emergency relief and helpline services; in-kind support such as temporary accommodation, food and clothing, health services and medication; and education, training and integration into the labour market. There is nevertheless a focus among SSEOs in Heraklion

and Bergamo on providing services aimed at meeting basic and urgent needs. In contrast, SSEOs working for refugees and migrants in Geneva tend more to fill the gaps left by government services, since the latter respond to migrants' and refugees' basic and urgent needs rather comprehensively. The SSEOs there mainly provide less costly and complementary services such as language training, legal or administrative support, or cultural and leisure activities.

Finally, built upon the principle of solidarity within and between organizations and actors, SSEOs contribute to reducing potential tensions and conflicts which may be triggered by rapidly increasing numbers of migrants and refugees. New SSEOs, and especially those established by refugees and migrants themselves, can benefit from links with long-established organizations to improve dialogue and integration, and ultimately reduce tensions in local areas, as was documented in Italy.

In addition, active participation in decision-making processes at the subnational level of government is one of the common characteristics of SSEOs in Greece, Italy and Switzerland. This is especially the case for those established after the 2008 financial crisis in Italy and Greece, which take part in public meetings and assemblies to advocate for issues related to migrants and refugees. In Switzerland, many crucial policy decisions regarding migrants and refugees are made at the cantonal and municipal levels but there is often a lack of policy harmonization between these levels of government, resulting in programme duplication and gaps. Geneva SSEOs have adopted the role of watchdog and contributed to making policies and programmes more coherent. They provide real-time information about migrants' and refugees' living conditions, actively lobby local policy makers for migrant inclusion, and have consequently contributed to improving government service provision for refugees and migrants. In the suburban commune of Meyrin, canton of Geneva, for example, municipal authorities have endorsed SSE values and activities by incorporating them into their policies and programmes, including those for migrants and refugees.



Realizing the sector's potential and further strengthening the capacity of SSEOs to serve refugees and migrants within and beyond local areas requires well-crafted public policies and institutions.

Strengthening SSE support for migrants and refugees: Lessons for policy

Despite demonstrating its resilience during economic downturns and contributing to service provisioning for refugees and migrants, the SSE sector in the three cities remains small in terms of share of employees, production and influence in the local political economy. Realizing the sector's potential and further strengthening the capacity of SSEOs to serve refugees and migrants within and beyond local areas requires well-crafted public policies and institutions. Research carried out for the project highlights the importance of an enabling policy and institutional environment for SSEOs to mitigate the vulnerabilities faced by migrants and refugees. Such an enabling environment includes, but is not limited to, institutions and policies that:

- legally recognize SSEOs as equal partners in public dialogues and facilitate co-production of policies;
- encourage SSEOs to meet new demands and needs;
- help to raise awareness about the role and activities of SSEOs in contributing to social cohesion and the integration of vulnerable groups of people, in particular in the context of increased arrivals of migrants and refugees;
- support the creation of SSEOs and networking between them, in particular those organized by vulnerable people themselves, including refugees and migrants;
- provide effective technical assistance to SSEOs, including capacity development for SSEO workers delivering various services;
- support SSEOs' access to markets and financial resources to create resilient local economic circuits and ensure that the economic value created stays in the local area;

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