



The Urban Challenges of the Migration and Refugee Situation

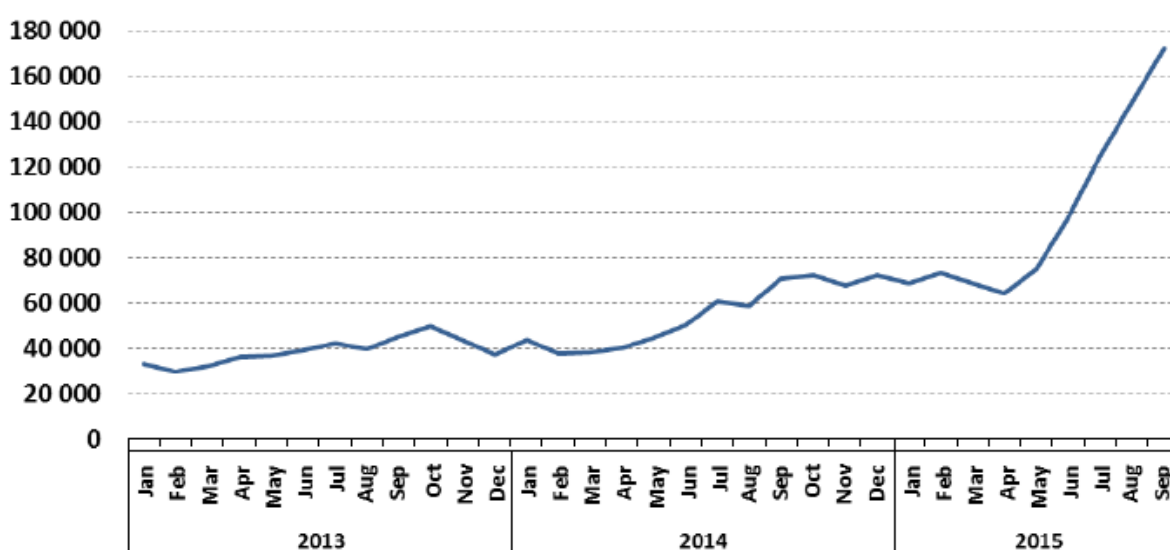
Input paper for the informal Ministerial meeting on Urban Policy under the Luxembourg Presidency

27 November 2015 in Luxembourg

1. Introduction

Europe is currently experiencing one of the most significant influxes of asylum seekers in its history. Armed conflicts and political instability in the Middle East and Africa are pushing more and more people to risk their lives in their efforts to reach Europe. This refugee crisis puts the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) as well as the capacity of Member States to help those in need of refuge and protection to a test. The humanitarian, social, and financial challenges caused by this situation are on an unprecedented scale and call the political level to immediate action.

To illustrate the situation, the total number of applicants for international protection recorded by the EU+ (EU28 plus Norway and Switzerland) has been steadily rising since May and has reached a new record high for the fifth consecutive month in September with over 172'000 reported applications (see graph below). The number of applications in September 2015 alone equals more than a quarter of the total number of applications in 2014. Moreover, the European Asylum Support Office assumes that the mark of 1 million applications was passed at the end of October.



Source: EASO Latest Asylum Trends (September 2015)

— Asylum applications

Cities are undoubtedly at the forefront of the refugee situation as they are often the first port of call for migrants and asylum seekers due to the level and quality of services and infrastructure that they provide. In fact, cities play an essential role for asylum seekers and recognised refugees in the short, medium, and long term.

In the *short term*, cities are, among others, responsible for managing the reception and providing the basic protection and services that newcomers desperately need. For these purposes, cities – with the indispensable help of international agencies, NGOs, and volunteers – create temporary reception and medical centres. In the *medium term*, cities are also often the places where asylum seekers wait for a decision on their application for international protection. During this stage, cities are often responsible for providing housing, ensuring subsistence, and offering a perspective to asylum seekers through the means of language training. In the *long term*, cities substantively support the economic and social integration of recognised refugees and often provide essential services to undocumented migrants whose applications were rejected. What this shows is that the current migration and refugee trends cannot be solely treated like an emergency situation, but need to be addressed as a structural issue with wide-ranging and long-term repercussions for almost all policy areas.

The situations that cities across Europe face are different and so are their solutions. EUROCITIES has published a series of articles under the title “Cities welcome refugees” that shine a light on how different cities are responding to the migration and refugee crisis. Budget cuts at all levels of government following the recent economic and financial crisis have restricted the financial margin of cities for most of the activities mentioned above. It is clear that local authorities need adequate support to deal with the refugee situation. The European Commission published a factsheet concerning “EU support for better management of integration of asylum seekers and refugees”. Member States also took a variety of measures to respond to the situation. In this regard, it is worth recalling the EUKN background paper on ‘Immigrant integration in European Cities’ that was developed for the DG meeting under the Cyprus Presidency 2012 and the EUKN background paper on ‘Internal mobility in the EU and its impact on urban regions in sending and receiving countries’ that was developed for the DG meeting under the Lithuanian Presidency 2013.

In the context of urban policy, the focus should be on tackling the medium to long-term challenges and strengthening the role of cities in facilitating the integration of those who stay. The EU Urban Agenda can provide a useful framework for guiding further initiatives.

2. Placing the refugee situation in the EU Urban Agenda context

With the majority of asylum seekers and refugees gravitating towards Europe’s urban areas, it is clear that the medium to long-term challenges and opportunities related to the integration of newcomers will be tackled in and by cities. Dealing with the migration and refugee situation on the ground requires the coordination of policies and funding at all levels of government. Such policies include housing, urban poverty, deprived neighbourhoods, as well as jobs and skills in the local economy.

An EU Urban Agenda should demonstrate that it has the necessary flexibility and openness to deal with urgent challenges that are of high political priority and have a clear as well as immediate impact

at the EU, national and local level. Addressing the current migration and refugee situation under an EU Urban Agenda raises the question of how exactly to deal with this topic in order to create an added value at all levels of government.

In the joint proposal for the themes from the Netherlands and the European Commission that was presented at the Meeting of Directors-General responsible for Urban Policy on 21 October 2015, a list of 12 vertical themes as well as a selection of cross-cutting themes and principles were proposed. The 12 themes selected will form the basis for actions under the umbrella of the EU Urban Agenda and will be linked to thematic Partnerships (see the “Memo about the State of Play of the EU Urban Agenda”). Furthermore, the topics for the calls under the Urban Innovative Actions will be aligned to the selected themes.

The theme of migration and refugees is one of the 12 vertical themes (“Inclusion of migrants and refugees”). Considering that the migration and refugee situation affects in a transversal way other themes such as housing, urban poverty and deprived neighbourhoods, the question is whether the theme of migration and refugees should additionally be considered as a cross-cutting principle under the category of ‘Inclusive Cities’.

3. Questions to the Ministers

The Presidency would like to discuss with Ministers responsible for Urban Policy the following issues as part of the discussion on priority themes for the EU Urban Agenda:

1. What are the main challenges for cities with regards to the migration and refugee situation? How can the EU better coordinate its own actions (funding, regulations, and knowledge exchange/research/data) in order to support and facilitate the actions of cities?
2. How can the migration and refugee issue be best treated in the framework of the EU Urban Agenda?