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## Issue 14: Welcoming Diversity: The Role of Local and Civil Society Initiatives in Integrating Newcomers

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**IMRC**  
International Migration  
Research Centre

# Policy Points

Issue XIV, June 2018

## Welcoming Diversity: The Role of Local and Civil Society Initiatives in Integrating Newcomers<sup>1</sup>

Feyzi Baban, Fuat Keyman, Hande Paker, and Kim Rygiel<sup>2</sup>



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### Executive Summary

In a global context marked by growing international forced displacement and migration, societies are becoming increasingly more diverse. The question of how to live together with newcomers has become a policy issue of

<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this report was written for IPC Istanbul Policy Center, Sabancı University. The report has been edited and revised and selected parts reprinted here. Diana Thomaz, research assistant to the project “Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics” worked on the revision for this IMRC Policy Points document.

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utmost concern. While populist governments in Europe and in the US are failing to offer citizens and newcomers alternative models for living together that encourage greater ethnic, cultural and religious plurality, in this report we highlight the contributions and lessons drawn from local and civil-society initiatives that have been successful in bringing hosts and newcomers together. We explore three such cases: Riace, a small Italian village where the leadership of a mayor and his policies allowed the presence of refugees to revitalize the community; a cultural center in Gaziantep, Turkey, where Syrian refugees are able to experience normalcy as artists, writers and community organizers; and a kitchen project in Berlin, Germany, which started in 2013 by bringing refugees and Berliners together to cook, share a meal, and to socialize. We highlight the importance of a three-pronged approach to integration that combines governmental leadership, solid integration policies, and civil-society and locally-based initiatives that allow for personal interchanges between newcomers and hosts. These interchanges contribute to changing notions of who does and does not belong and are invaluable in showing where the key to co-existence lies.

## Policy Context

Forced displacement and international migration are currently reaching record highs. UNHCR's most recent Global Trends report stresses the unprecedented number of 68.5 million people uprooted from their homes worldwide by the end of 2017, 25.4 million of whom are refugees (UNHCR 2018). According to the UN, some 244 million people lived outside their country of origin in 2015 (UNFPA 2018). This context poses a policy challenge to host societies in terms of how to open their communities to newcomers and to cultural diversity more broadly. But while UN Secretary-General António Guterres urges governments to "embrace diversity as a source of strength" (Guterres 2014), we have witnessed the emergence of populist movements and governments in Europe and in the US over the past years that espouse xenophobia and racism. Emblematic examples of this can be found in the posture of Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who led the construction of an anti-migrant/refugee "eastern block", and in the election of Donald Trump and his exclusionary migration policies.

While governments have been largely failing to accommodate growing pluralism, a variety of civil society and local initiatives have also emerged with the aim of welcoming newcomers. Motivated by a desire to show solidarity with them, these initiatives demonstrate enormous creativity in imagining different ways of fostering pluralism in an environment that has largely become hostile to difference. Solidarity movements first developed in the wake of 2015, such as Germany's Welcome Culture (Willkommenskultur), Denmark's Good Neighbors/Kind Citizens (Venligboerne), and other, smaller-scale initiatives, such as art and kitchen projects. In Turkey, a country that currently hosts over 3.5 million Syrians, we are seeing similar civil society initiatives designed to help integrate these refugees.

This issue of *Policy Points* shifts the spotlight to these smaller-scale and bottom-up initiatives and the important work that they do on the ground in opening up communities to newcomers and fostering ways of living together with others from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This report focuses on a few examples of

successful civil society and locally-based initiatives, while taking into account the larger scope of leadership and public policies.

## Methodology

This report comes out of a workshop at Humboldt University, Berlin, March 15, 2018 and a public forum “Challenges and Promises of Diversity: Refugees Policies and Citizenship Politics” held, at Mercator Centre, Berlin Friday, March 16, 2018, organized by the authors.

The research findings for the cases are based on original field research conducted by Drs. Baban and Rygiel as part of a five-year project entitled “Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics”, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This project investigates why, how and under what conditions some communities are more open to cultural difference than others; what types of projects facilitate openness to newcomers and how do citizens and non-citizens participate in these projects in ways that transform understandings of citizenship and belonging. Field research was conducted over the summers of 2015 and 2016 and in March 2017 in Berlin, Germany, Gaziantep, Turkey and Riace, Italy; and in Copenhagen in July-August 2017 and March 2018.

## Welcoming diversity through everyday activities: the role of local and civil society initiatives

In this report, we highlight three cases where networks of solidarity were formed between refugees and host communities that facilitated co-existence and integration. In the first case, we introduce the context of Riace, a small village in Italy, which was able to regain its vibrancy under the leadership of a mayor who implemented policies that supported inclusion in everyday encounters. The next case is the example of a cultural center called Kırkayak in Gaziantep, Turkey, one of the first efforts in the country to think critically about how to allow for inclusive interchanges with otherwise marginalized Syrian refugees. Finally, the case of Über den Tellerrand in Berlin, Germany, illustrates the welcome culture in Germany in action. This civil society initiative, like its counterpart in Gaziantep, has created open spaces of exchange between hosts and newcomers in everyday activities such as cooking.

## From a decaying to a thriving small village: Riace, Italy

In recent years, many small villages in the southwestern Italian region of Calabria have received refugees from North Africa. With only 1,800 inhabitants and an aging population, Riace is one of those small villages. In contrast to surrounding communities, where violence and hostility towards these newcomers has been reported, Riace has catapulted into the international media spotlight because of its successfulness in welcoming and

integrating these newcomers. In a nutshell, Riace's accomplishment largely derives from the effective combination of leadership, feasible policies that integrate newcomers, and experiences of living together. The village currently hosts 500 refugees and their presence has contributed to the revitalization of what was otherwise a decaying village.

Mayor Domenico Lucano was key to this development. Under his leadership, the town agreed to receive refugees with financial help from the EU, the Italian government and the region of Calabria along with smaller associations and charities such as ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana) (Unsgaard 2017). Lucano directly addressed the local population's fears on the impact the arrival of refugees would have in the town's daily life by adopting pragmatic and financial policies. Some of his effective policy decisions include the following:

- The funds allocated for employment projects for refugees also included the hiring of local Italian residents.<sup>4</sup> By doing this, the mayor pre-empted the appearance of competition and prevented resentment towards the newcomers.
- Mayor Lucano also established cooperatives where newcomers and locals receive job training and work together in workshops and local stores.
- He rented empty flats for the newcomers, encouraging their mixing with the local population.

Through these policies, refugees and the local population were able to work together and to live in close quarters, which created daily interactions that enabled them to develop personal relationships. As a result of these steps, the village is now revitalized. The economic activity resulting from this increase in population helped to expand existing businesses in town and inject new life into them. As one of the town's local residents, Mirella Cogocoru remarked, the arrival of newcomers enabled her to expand her bakery into a grocery store and to open a café next door. "It is good the migrants are here. The town is now full of people. Before there was nothing, no work" Cogocoru explained (National Public Radio 2016). Hence, while small in scale, Riace displays that peaceful co-existence is possible and that the arrival of newcomers does not have to be framed as a crisis if the proper circumstances and opportunities are created.

## **An open space for the newcomers: Kirkayak cultural center - Gaziantep, Turkey**

Kirkayak is a cultural center in Gaziantep, Turkey's sixth-most populous city, situated in the Southeastern Anatolian Region and less than 100 km away from Aleppo, Syria. Funded by eight private citizens and founded

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<sup>4</sup> Visit to Riace, interview with Bayram Acar, July 5, 2016 and tour with Mayor Lucano, July 6, 2016. Original field research conducted by Drs. Baban and Rygiel as part of the SSHRC-funded project "Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics."

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in 2010, Kırkayak's original aim was to organize cultural events, but the arrival of about half a million Syrian refugees to a city of two million people made the cultural center extend its reach. Kemal Vural Tarlan, one of the founders of Kırkayak, explains that when Syrians started arriving in the city in 2011 there was very little awareness about refugee issues in Gaziantep and there was no civil or institutional infrastructure to address their needs or their relationships with the local population. "We had no idea about who Syrians were, let alone the idea of thinking about how we might live together with these newcomers. We needed to understand them - we needed to give them a voice to tell their stories", he stresses.<sup>5</sup>

In order to allow Syrians to share their stories with the local population and create connections among hosts and newcomers in a respectful environment, Kırkayak opened its doors to exhibit the works of several Syrian artists, encouraging them to use the center for social and cultural events. They also organized a kitchen project bringing Turkish and Syrian women together. This project goes beyond food and cooking as it also creates a space for gathering where participants can learn to relate to one another through literature, food, music and stories. Creating shared experiences and learning about and from one another are principal objectives at Kırkayak through which they try to create a space where Syrians and Turks interact as equals.

Kırkayak's art exhibits, concerts and kitchen project are significant because they allow Syrian refugees to reclaim their dignity and experience normalcy as artists, writers and community organizers. This is in sharp contrast to the reality of general marginalization and isolation Syrian refugees face in Turkey. They have no official status in the country other than a "temporary protection" status and many of them live in extremely precarious conditions. More importantly, Syrians live parallel lives in many Turkish cities, with very little interaction with local populations.

Tarlan describes the work of the cultural center as creating an "open space" where Syrians are no longer refugees, strangers, non-citizens or outsiders but are equals who can interact with others without the stigma of always being identified as "the Other".<sup>6</sup> This not only contributes towards establishing the status of Syrians as part of the community but also plays a crucial role in their successful integration into the Turkish society.

## Serving open-mindedness: Über den Tellerand project - Berlin, Germany

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is commended in international circles for her initial leadership in response to the arrivals of hundreds of thousands of refugees in the summer and fall of 2015. Her call of "we can do it"

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Kemal Vural Tarlan, Gaziantep, October 27, 2016. Original field research conducted by Dr. Baban as part of the SSHRC-funded project "Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics."

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Kemal Vural Tarlan, Gaziantep, October 27, 2016. Original field research conducted by Dr. Baban as part of the SSHRC-funded project "Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics."

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“wir schaffen das”) was an important moment for rallying the German public to open its doors to refugees,<sup>7</sup> particularly Syrians, at a time when many European countries closed their borders. Leadership and solid policies that assist newcomers in making new lives for themselves, however, need to be complimented by positive experiences of exchange in which newcomers and locals can have opportunities to meet and to get to know one another. It is here where civil society initiatives can provide platforms and new spaces and opportunities for exchange and relationship building.

As central manifestations of Germany’s Welcome Culture, civil society initiatives that welcome refugees into their communities range from flat sharing projects to cafés providing employment to newcomers. One such important initiative is Über den Tellerand, which literally means “looking beyond your plate,” an expression meaning open-mindedness. Über den Tellerand is a non-profit kitchen project established in 2013 in the chic Schöneberg district of Berlin, where refugees and ordinary Berliners came together to cook, share a meal, and to socialize. As one of the founders, Rafael Strasser explains, we are trying to create “a platform where refugees and ordinary people come together in a relaxed environment, cook and share food and socialize as friends do, and more importantly establish friendships as equals.”<sup>8</sup>

Über den Tellerand has been greatly successful and expanding its activities. The project began as a “kitchen hub”, offering a monthly cooking class that was co-taught by a German and a newcomer acting as guest chefs, teaching a group of about 12-15 people to cook a meal which they would then share together. These cooking classes led to the desire for the “kitchen hub” to also become a community space to bring people together for other activities like yoga, basketball and soccer, again often co-led and organized by both native-born Germans and newcomers. The project has grown even further, and, among other initiatives, it now encompasses a kitchen hub in over 30 “satellite” cities, and the creation of a mobile kitchen on wheels (a kitchen in a trailer or container) that can travel across the country to smaller, and often more rural, locations where there may be fewer opportunities to meet newcomers. As stated in their website: “By bringing newcomers together with their host communities, we aim to create a sense of belonging as well as reduce stereotypes and prejudices on both sides. These efforts contribute towards the creation of a more united, inclusive and open society.”<sup>9</sup>

## Key research insights

Based on the cases described above, and various others in different European countries, our findings indicate that to be successful, integration requires three levels of intervention:

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<sup>7</sup> Chancellor Merkel used this phrase in a speech on August 31, 2015 (see Stack 2017). Although the number touted by the government and media was frequently 1.1 million, the actual number of refugees taken in over the course of 2015 was smaller, at about 890,000 (see Noack 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Rafael Strasser, Berlin, Feb 18, 2016. Original field research conducted by Drs. Baban and Rygiel as part of the SSHRC-funded project “Living with others: Fostering cultural pluralism through citizenship politics.”

<sup>9</sup> Über den Tellerand website: <https://ueberdentellerrand.org/en/>

1. **Leadership from the government:** Without the positive tone set by a governmental leadership it becomes very difficult to create policy and civil society environments that are open to welcoming newcomers. Examples of this are found in Angela Merkel’s “we can do it” stance in the middle of the European refugee crisis, but also, in a much smaller scale, in mayor Domenico Lucano’s efforts in convincing the local population of Riace to welcome refugees into the community. In Turkey, the Turkish government’s decision to open its borders to enable some 3.5 million Syrians to temporarily settle in Turkey was also important in this regard.
2. **Meaningful integration policies** such as access to housing, education, health, language acquisition, and employment etc. Both in Germany and in Italy, municipalities played a key role in providing assistance and services to refugees. Mayor Lucano’s strategy of including locals in his policies was particularly effective in attracting political support for his integration measures and in preventing resentment towards the newcomers.
3. **Civil society initiatives** geared towards fostering interaction between local and newcomers (Baban and Rygiel 2014, 2017). In the Turkish case, despite the fact that the Turkish government opened its door to provide temporary protection to Syrians, the lack of overall coordination between the national government and municipalities, in addition to the ad-hoc and frequently changing provision of support, makes Kırkayak’s role that much more significant. Even in Riace and in Germany, successful integration and welcoming newcomers can only occur in situations where locals and newcomers have opportunities to get to know one another. Everyday interactions and grassroots initiatives that provide the spaces to bring together hosts and newcomers contribute to changing notions of who does and does not belong. These experiences are invaluable in showing where the key to co-existence lies.

## Policy recommendations

- Our research indicates that not-withstanding the need for effective state policies, civil society and citizen initiatives should be incorporated within the policy-making process. A balance needs to be struck between top-down and bottom-up relations, paving the way to a better collaboration among diverse actors ranging from governing elites to grassroots initiatives.
- As in the case of Riace in Italy as well as Gaziantep in Turkey, interlocutors varying from municipal mayors to local respected figures can play a key role in facilitating social cohesion and should be included in the policy-making process.
- As the cases of Kırkayak in Turkey and Über den Tellerrand in Germany show, civil society involvement with the refugee issue is of utmost importance in finding sustainable ways to ensure co-existence, conviviality and social cohesion. More attention needs to be paid to these and similar best practices.
- Open spaces and practices that enhance co-existence need to be diversified including various art forms and artistic exchange.

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- Donors and policy-makers need to include local populations as beneficiaries in programs and projects to ensure their acceptance of the newcomers not as competitors but as equal members of a community.
- Educational policies that offer language skills to newcomers are key for successful integration since not speaking the host society's language can impede communication in everyday life and hinder job prospects.

## Resources

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