Speaking Points for Red Cross event on Sep 17: Volunteering for Social Inclusion - Rights and Access: perspectives from Social Platform, by Heather Roy, President

Check against Delivery

Thank you very much and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this seminar. I would first like to congratulate you on a successful project and I hope that this will be the first seminar of many on this topic. Your starting point today has been could more be done to increase the social inclusion of young asylum seekers and refugees in Europe? Well, the answer is clearly yes.

Across Europe more and more NGO's are developing support and services for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Europe but frankly the support available from state organisations in some countries is appalling – for NGO's and perhaps more importantly for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. I remember visiting a project for asylum seekers in Austria where I was horrified at the amount that the state thought such people could live on.

It is also really important that we do not simply see this as a legal issue and focus on the paper processes that accompany migrants of all status. Rather we need to look at this as a social question – a question which has at its heart the need to ensure well-being, access to appropriate services, access to democratic and participatory processes, equality and social justice.

Much is made of the 'them and us' scenario for migrants and that inclusion is when migrants, whether they be economic migrants, asylum seekers or refugees no longer refer to the them and see themselves as part of the us. Getting to that point is hard, let's not underestimate that – and there are both practical and political actions that are needed. Among those actions, and the one that you have focused on in your project, is volunteering - could active volunteering be the tool for inclusion of young refugees and asylum seekers? If so, what should be done in order to enable this, at a practical as well as at a structural and political level?

Perhaps we can take a little step back in time. 2011 was the European Year of Volunteering and an NGO alliance, including Red Cross, working on the development of a policy agenda for volunteering in Europe. That policy agenda notes that *volunteering has a value and an important as one of the most visible expressions of solidarity promoting and facilitating social inclusion, building social capital and producing a transformative effect on society.* This is what we know about volunteering. Voluntary organisations have been able to show for many years the effect that volunteering has on society in building a sense of the common good, of building responsibility and building social change. So the answer to your question about volunteering as a tool for inclusion is a resounding yes – and I hope that that is what you have found in your project**... BUT**

Yes, there is always a but… It is difficult to have specific statistics for refugees and asylum seekers but if were to consider all those who are in some form of migration we know that the proportion of migrants in a situation of poverty or social exclusion remains distinctly higher than that of nationals. In 2011, the risk of poverty and social exclusion among migrants surged to 46.7%, corresponding to a year-on-year increase of almost 5 percentage points. So the work to be achieved through volunteering is huge – perhaps too huge to be the sole action – and I doubt you would see volunteering as the sole action. Indeed, what we need to do is ensure that there are complimentary actions that address structural challenges as well as projects such as yours to provide practical support and opportunities.

A note of caution about volunteering though: Volunteers cannot be used a cheap alternative to replace workforce. Volunteering does not discharge policymakers and social partners of their duties of ensuring decent jobs for the active population.

It is with this in mind that Social Platform has developed a policy paper on migration that addresses both structural change and support for practical projects. For those of you who may not know Social Platform is the largest civil society alliance fighting for social justice and participatory democracy in Europe. We have 47 pan European members and we campaign to ensure that EU policies are developed in partnership with the people they affect and respect fundamental rights, promote solidarity and ultimately improve lives. We are happy that Red Cross is one of those 47 members.

Our thoughts on this topic are from an EU level perspective and we cannot speak on behalf of local experience but we can speak on the basis of the experience of our members and as a result of that experience our members have developed policy recommendations on how to guarantee migrants access to their social, economic and cultural rights in order to combat social exclusion and poverty. Recent policy developments, both at EU and at national level, appear to represent a denial of some of the most fundamental human rights of migrants and is likely to further increase the number of migrants living in poverty. The social inclusion of migrants is closely linked to their ability to access quality employment, education, further training and other services.

But the reality is that at present social inclusion strategies in many countries give comparatively little consideration to preventing and fighting (the risk of) poverty and social exclusion among migrants. This is especially evident when it comes to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, where most national action plans lack appropriate strategies and measures. (mention something about people being pushed to the margins??) Moreover, some countries have even reduced welfare provisions and access for migrants. This is all the more concerning in the context of the economic crisis and harsh austerity measures, especially in countries receiving external financial assistance, where migrants have been particularly affected by the financial cuts to social protection mechanisms and social services due to their initial vulnerable status. Ultimately the challenge for Member States and indeed some parts of the European Union is to stop seeing migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as 'second class' and ensure they have access to their rights just like anyone else. In part this could be achieved by mainstreaming the inclusion of migrants in

relevant strategies but there is also a need for specific actions such as you have identified in your project.

So what can we do? Well, to me, much of this is about rights and access... access to services, access to education and access to volunteering as well as ensuring social, economic and cultural rights. To ensure that we need to do at least the following:

- Provide necessary financial and human resources to enable service providers and civil society organisations working with people in vulnerable situations to also have the means to provide for all migrants to be empowered to participate, assist and volunteer in service provision.
- Remove existing national legislations that criminalise solidarity actions by EU citizens or human right defenders who advocate for the rights of migrants, including in particular undocumented migrants, i.e. in the areas of hosting, advising and assisting, providing material support, food and shelter (the so called 'Solidarity Crime' which is present in several countries).
- Include migrants within social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies and social investment strategies, and invest in integration policies. Attention should be paid to the Commission's Common Agenda for Integration, the principles of which should be taken into account when mainstreaming migration concerns into inclusion strategies as well as the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion as well as the Social Investment Package.
- The EU Institutions should complementary 'Monitor how member states include migrants and their families in the implementation of Active Inclusion Strategies'
- Adopt the proposal for the revision of the Council Directive on the conditions of entry and residency of third country nationals (COM(2013)151) for the purpose of scientific research, studies, pupil exchange, remunerated and unremunerated training, voluntary service and au pairing.
- Adopt a new Directive ensuring a common set of rights within a member state based on equal treatment with nationals, beyond the scope of the Single Permit Directive (2011/98/EU). This should include among others access to: social security and social protection, goods and services, working conditions, education and vocational training, decision-making etc.
- Provide support to NGO's, including NGO's self-organised by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to provide integration and inclusion programmes such as those that promote volunteering and empowerment through 'help to self-help' methodologies.
- Recognise officially and validate "hard" and "soft" skills and competences gained through non-formal and informal education i.e. volunteering - that are important for the employability of young people, for our society and for a knowledge-based, innovative economy.

Conclusions