

Strengthening society with refugees

by

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Overview

The refugee issue has been a major source of concern in Europe for a number of months, generating fear and preposterous ideas, and posing important political challenges. Refugees are continuing to flee war zones and countries under dictatorships. Faced with this surge in asylum seekers, France's response has been merely to suggest unsatisfactory administrative and social solutions for the refugees. The refugees have to spend an unacceptable amount of time waiting for their dossiers to be processed and often, when they are finally granted legal refugee status, they have to put up with a totally diminished social and professional situation. If only we were to change our state of mind, stop seeing them as a threatening mob, and to recognise them as people who can contribute to the common good in their host country, then everything could change. This is what SINGA, an innovative company in the social economy sector, demonstrates over and above the wildest dreams of its young co-founder.

Report by Pascal Lefebvre • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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I was lucky enough to live abroad almost all my life because my father worked for the French Research Institute for Development (*Institut de recherche sur le développement* – IRD) on water-related problems. I was born in Brazil and grew up in Mali. Later, I lived in Thailand where, at the age of 14 and as part of my catechism classes, I lived and worked for several weeks in a camp for Karen refugees. This amazing experience gave me my first glimpse of human rights violations committed by police officers on the Karen population, and made me very aware of the refugee problem. Later on, I lived in Sri Lanka which for twenty-five years had been ravaged by civil war resulting in a massive exodus of the civilian population. I worked there for the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and remained committed to helping displaced people.

I became deeply involved in humanitarian work after the tsunami hit this region in 2004. The day after it struck, like many other expats, I committed myself to helping relief operations. This was when I realised the amazing work which is carried out in the field by NGOs. I was also aware of some ridiculous situations in the area of aid relief such as the supply of boats which were ill-adapted for fishermen who did not know how to use them. This kind of situation is the result of centralised programming carried out thousands of miles away which is often more dependent on available funds than real needs in the field. Similarly, I was struck by the fact that a great deal of emergency work is carried out without a clear, long-term vision. When hundreds of volunteers leave, some regions which rely on them for their economic survival collapse because their main source of income has disappeared.

After I passed my International Baccalauréat (IB) examination, I decided to continue to work in the humanitarian aid sector. I was an intern at the very influential British NGO ‘Save the Children’. I came across violent situations during this time, and realised that humanitarian work was not for me, even though I still have limitless admiration for those who are involved in this work on a daily basis, sometimes risking their lives. Nonetheless, I still wanted to find a job which would be meaningful for me.

I came back to Paris to study for a Master’s in International and European Law specialising in international security and defence. The course I followed at the *Institut d’étude des relations internationales* (ILERI) was very interesting. Half of these Masters graduates go on to work in arms sales and the other half, in humanitarian associations. After graduation, I was lucky to find a job straightaway, and started working in Syria in a refugee camp near Aleppo. However, because of the civil war there I returned to France, and like many other young people, started looking for work. In the end, I found an internship at the Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights (*Organisation marocaine des droits humains* – OMDH). My job was to solve legal problems and act as a mediator for sub-Saharan refugees. Many had left in order to travel to Europe, but they ended up in Morocco and had to live under very difficult conditions. They were not legally allowed to work, but could not be extradited because they were protected by the UNHCR. However, they were allowed to create their own companies and to benefit from micro-finance subsidies granted by the United Nations. About forty of these refugees were funded in this way, but not one of them was able to make a living from this activity. My work consisted of helping them with day-to-day matters and problems linked to prevailing racism and the lack of motivation of the people who were supposed to be helping them.

I realised that most NGOs had a very restricted view of refugees, and that the money the NGOs received merely served to give instant ‘first degree’ solutions. As far as I was concerned, this only solved half the problem. Of course, one can help someone open a halal butcher’s shop, but if one is unable to change potential clients’ views about the butcher, they will not buy their meat there. In fact, in traditional refugee aid programmes, we did not take the host society into account.

The definition of a refugee

Often in the media, the term 'refugee' is used to describe diverse situations, and as a result, it loses its meaning. Quite recently, in the collective mind, the vision of the refugee has become blurred or unidentified; he is a person in a mass of people advancing in a potentially threatening way towards our country. Images of crises, wars and misery which are relayed by the media and politicians produce this very negative view which is shared by many. There is therefore a problem of perception among the populations of host countries, and this is heightened in developing countries where the effects of the crisis are even more profoundly felt than in the developed world.

In France, refugee status is recognised by the *Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (OFPRA) in Article 1A2 of the 1951 Geneva Convention which states 'the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

Once this status of refugee has been granted, these people benefit from state protection and, having signed a Reception and Integration Contract (RIC), then receive a ten-year, renewable residency permit. Before being granted this status, they have to go through a very complex procedure, sometimes lasting more than two years, during which they are not allowed to work. During the asylum request procedure, they are constantly questioned about the reasons for their request by the OFPRA or the *Cour nationale du droit d'asile* (French National Court for the Right of Asylum) which reviews appeals from decisions made by the OFPRA. For many refugees, this waiting period is extremely destabilising and has a very strong negative impact on their subsequent ability to integrate into French society. They are very isolated during this time and are either confined to reception centres for asylum seekers, or sleep rough on the streets or in squats with illegal migrants, despite the fact that France is legally obliged to provide asylum seekers with accommodation. There are only 25,000 places available in French reception centres for the 80,000 asylum seekers who await placement.

After my internship in Morocco where the situation had become too difficult for me to be able to act according to my convictions, I returned to France. I met up with Guillaume Capelle, a colleague who had done the same Master's degree as I had. He had experienced the same sorts of situations as I had in Australia. Regardless of one's location in the world it seemed that the barriers to refugees were the same in varying degrees.

Difficult barriers to cross

Language is one of these barriers. Curiously, in France, language is not considered to be an important factor compared to other countries like Germany. To avoid 'needlessly' spending money during the 400 hours of training which is theoretically given to refugees, the French administration judges it necessary to give just a simple language test to people requesting refugee status. As a result, most of them do not have access to the one skill which is most important for them to build a new life and to work in France. They are consequently confined to jobs which do not require knowledge of the language and therefore do not correspond to the refugees' qualifications. Some refugees, even ten years after their arrival in France, still do not know how to speak French because they have only been able to do odd jobs since their arrival. It must be very frustrating for them to hear people say that the reason that they do not speak French is because they do not want to integrate into French society... These circumstances often weigh heavily on their children who have been educated in French schools since their arrival in France, and who then act as intermediaries between their parents and the rest of society.

Educational degrees which do have no similar equivalent in France or are not recognised by the French system are further examples of barriers which are insurmountable because resuming studies after a certain age is very complicated for refugees. This situation leads to a reduction in professional and social opportunities, and has a very negative psychological impact on refugees. Many think that France will not give them the opportunity