

Contribution of Ambassador Tomáš Boček, Special Representative of the Secretary General on migration and refugees, Council of Europe

Thematic discussion three on the UN Global Compact on Refugees

Panel Two: How can we support the inclusion of refugees in national systems and services?

Promoting social inclusion

Esteemed chairmen, fellow panellists, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today to share some thoughts on how we might support the inclusion of refugees. I have been asked to focus my remarks on promoting social inclusion, an issue of increasing importance in Europe as states begin to confront the longer-term challenges linked to the arrival of millions of refugees in recent years.

Social inclusion is about making all members of society feel valued and equal.

My experience as the Council of Europe Secretary General's Special Representative on refugees and migration has shown me that as far as refugees are concerned, we still have some way to go.

So how can we promote refugees' inclusion in host communities?

The first step is to remove existing barriers to their participation in society.

The most obvious barriers are discriminatory laws. Refugees should be entitled under law to access to all services and to the labour market. International standards exist, and states should be encouraged to draw on the expertise and experience of international and regional bodies,

which can review national legislation and provide examples of good practice.

Even where laws are in place to secure rights for refugees, bureaucratic obstacles often mean that these rights are not truly accessible. For example, access to services is often dependent on registration. It is therefore all the more important for states to improve the speed and efficiency of registration operations. Service providers need to be aware of the special difficulties that refugees may face when trying to access services, and take steps to minimise bureaucratic hurdles. International and regional organisations can provide support, through resources and technical expertise.

A huge barrier to participation for many of the refugees I have met is language. The Council of Europe has recently developed a toolkit for refugees designed to assist organisations that provide language support for refugees. It offers information on cultural and language awareness; guidance on language needs and planning language support; and diverse learning activities.

The toolkit has been developed for adults but could also be adapted for refugee children. Language is, of course, not the only challenge for refugee children who may have missed several years of schooling. Training for teachers can ensure a better understanding of their needs and how to cater for them. Tailored coaching to support their integration into local classes is needed; again technical expertise, including through the sharing of good practices, can be provided by relevant international and regional organisations.

Proving qualifications is also a hurdle for many refugees seeking to enter further education or the labour market. The Council of Europe has

piloted a project establishing a qualifications passport for refugees, which provides an assessment of a refugee's higher education qualifications based on available documentation and a structured interview. Initial feedback has been positive and we hope to extend the project to other countries very soon.

Aside from removing barriers to participation, steps must be taken to promote refugees' involvement in their host societies.

Host states should avail themselves of expertise offered by international and regional organisations to develop integration plans with a strong anti-discrimination component. Integration should begin as soon as possible after arrival and should be an aspect of the reception offered to those likely to be granted refugee status. States should be assisted in accessing financing for projects which enhance integration.

Municipalities play a key role; appropriate training for their staff can enhance the facilities and services they offer to refugees.

Family reunification is an important aspect of social inclusion. States should be supported to establish accelerated mechanisms for reuniting families. Civil society should be strengthened so as to provide assistance to those who may be entitled to family reunification, inside and outside the host country. Human rights bodies can provide training to officials in host countries to ensure that decisions on family reunification are compatible with human-rights standards.

Access to information is also critical. Provision of information to refugees on their rights and obligations must be an ongoing exercise. The capacity of local NGOs and other civil society organisations needs to be strengthened so that they are in a position to provide the necessary advice at all stages of a refugee's integration into the community.

The need to tackle negative media portrayal of refugees is self-evident. The creation of counter-narratives should be promoted, and exchanges of good practice facilitated. Support for practices involving the active participation of refugees would be particularly welcome.

One sensitive issue is that of political participation by refugees. Host states could be encouraged to facilitate the participation of refugees in local political life and thus give them a stake in their own communities. The Council of Europe's Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level could provide some guidance here.

It is important to remember that many refugees are children. In May 2017 the Council of Europe published an Action Plan on protecting refugee and migrant children in Europe. I have already touched upon some of the actions it contains in the course of my remarks. I invite you to consult that Action Plan, as well as our Action Plan on building inclusive societies, as possible sources of inspiration for actions at international level to help refugees.

When speaking of social inclusion, one group of children requires particular attention. A large number of the child refugees arriving in Europe are adolescents. Although they are entitled to assistance as children upon arrival, that assistance is often withdrawn the moment they reach 18 and before they have acquired the skills to live autonomously in unfamiliar host communities. They should not be denied the possibility given to younger children of working towards life goals. Special support and consideration should be provided for this often-neglected group, to ensure their smooth transition to adulthood in their host communities. This includes recognising and reinforcing youth organisations.

Finally, to identify problem areas and assess the effectiveness of responses, we need reliable and up-to-date data. Support to improve collection of statistics is required. Efficient dissemination of data is also important: regional and municipal authorities should have access to data collected at central government level in so far as it is relevant for them to fulfill their obligations towards refugees.

To conclude, in times of mass arrivals there is a tendency to focus on the immediate needs of refugees. It is important that the Global Compact give an equally prominent place to their longer-term needs. This discussion is the perfect opportunity for us to come together and share ideas. I have very much enjoyed hearing from my fellow panellists and look forward to further comments from the floor.