

Policy pointers

Central governments should support local communities, civil society groups and NGOs in providing emergency assistance.

Local authorities can play a critical role in the response to migrant and refugee crises. But this depends on central government providing adequate support by engaging with local authorities through strong pre-planning and communication.

In Croatia, the willingness to collaborate shown by local groups and individuals should be fostered throughout the country as it enters a prolonged period of integrating refugees into society.

Looking ahead, local authorities should play a greater part in the resettlement and integration of refugees in Croatia, with responsible central government agencies providing appropriate support to cities willing to accept asylum seekers.

Migrant and refugee transit: the role of local authorities in humanitarian response

The outbreak of violence in Syria in 2011 led to protracted conflict, waves of displacement and a global humanitarian crisis. In the summer of 2015, the number of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe increased enormously, peaking in October with nearly a quarter of a million arrivals. A migration route opened up through Croatia, prompting the opening of transit reception centres to manage the inflows (see Figure 1). The magnitude of the crisis limited the role that local authorities and citizens could play in responding to such large initial population influxes. Nevertheless, affected communities quickly organised themselves, requested assistance from central authorities and provided as much humanitarian aid as they could. Now the immediate crisis is over, many local authorities can reflect on this experience and consider how, going forward, they can optimise their role in safe and effective integration of those seeking asylum in Croatia.

The Croatian experience

Many of the smaller border municipalities in South Eastern Europe confronted by large influxes of migrants and refugees face common challenges. Sudden demand for additional food, shelter and other services must be met with no additional resources and without disturbing public service provision to local communities. The Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) identified further challenges including procuring funding to expand and maintain municipal services during the crisis and establishing adequate communication mechanisms with the refugee population and local community to promote understanding and solidarity.¹

However, during this Croatian experience such challenges were managed by a quick response from the central government — for example putting in place mechanisms to reimburse initial costs that had been absorbed by local authorities. Local communities also demonstrated solidarity, perhaps influenced by the empathy shown by many Croatians in similar circumstances during the Homeland War in the 1990s. Several citizens and small local NGOs provided food, water and tea to both the refugees and the Croatian authorities working in the area.

Because Croatia was primarily a country that migrants and refugees travelled through (rather than settled in), the government decided to establish transit and reception centres (see Figure 2), leveraging

the infrastructure and public service capacity of a strategic urban area (Slavonski Brod). This de-localised the crisis in the early stages, lessening the impacts on local authorities and communities and creating economies of scale in their humanitarian response.

This approach also meant that migrants were moved quickly across the country, and were discouraged from settling (temporarily or permanently) in Croatian cities and towns.

Going forward, local authorities can consider how to optimise their role in effective integration of migrants and refugees

Centralised response and decentralised responsibilities

Local authorities had a relatively limited role in the Croatian response to the migrant and refugee crisis, but their partially decentralised competencies in civil protection (services delivered during or after conflict or disasters), utility services and other de-concentrated bodies were leveraged wherever possible. The modest involvement of local authorities was due to the centralised nature of governance in Croatia, their lack of a mandate in refugee and asylum affairs and, above all, their constrained capacities, especially in the small municipalities initially affected by the sudden influx of people.

Local authorities were not involved in decision-making processes about how to organise Croatia's response to the crisis. The timely and firm involvement of central government prevented the crisis from having an extremely negative impact on the local community. None of the representatives from municipalities or cities we interviewed as part of our research² expressed any interest in being

more involved beyond being more systematically informed of developments by the central government.

The civil protection system³ in Croatia is highly decentralised. Regional and local self-governing units have responsibilities for planning, development, and ensuring the effective functioning and financing of civil protection. While local authorities are usually directly involved in crisis management, their role during the migrant and refugee crisis focused on implementing tasks delegated by the central authorities rather than on planning and decision-making processes.

Poor communication in the first few days of the crisis resulted in confusion and uncoordinated service delivery. Such confusion could be mitigated in future by reviewing the role of central government — where it may, for example, undertake only tasks that cannot be carried out at a more local level, or taking measures to ensure continuity of action.

Role of Croatian civil society

During the initial influx of migrants and refugees to Croatia (see Figure 1), local authorities and communities provided critical resources in an ad hoc way. This contributed to the efforts of the central government and humanitarian agencies operating in their territories. As referenced above, the response from citizens in small border communities may have been influenced by a long tradition of volunteerism during past events such as the 2014 floods and the 1990s Homeland War.

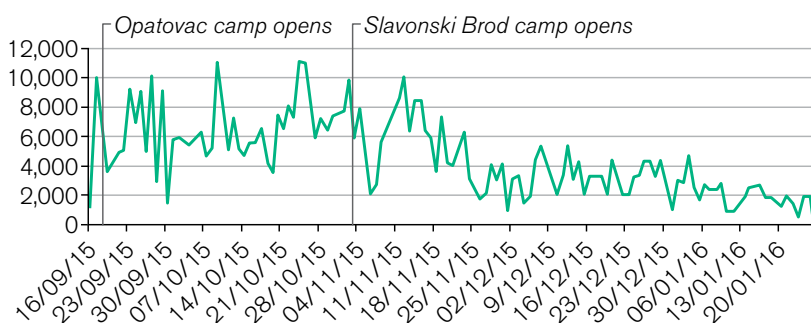
During the crisis, new regional and Croatian NGOs and grassroots initiatives emerged. These continue to fill gaps in services, particularly in the provision of language lessons. They also played a role in sensitising local communities to the arrival of new citizens as part of the EU resettlement scheme.

As those who are granted asylum become integrated into local cities and communities, attention should also be paid to continuing integration assistance programmes in municipal and urban areas, such as those being implemented at the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers at Hotel Porin in Zagreb.

Role of local authorities in resettlement

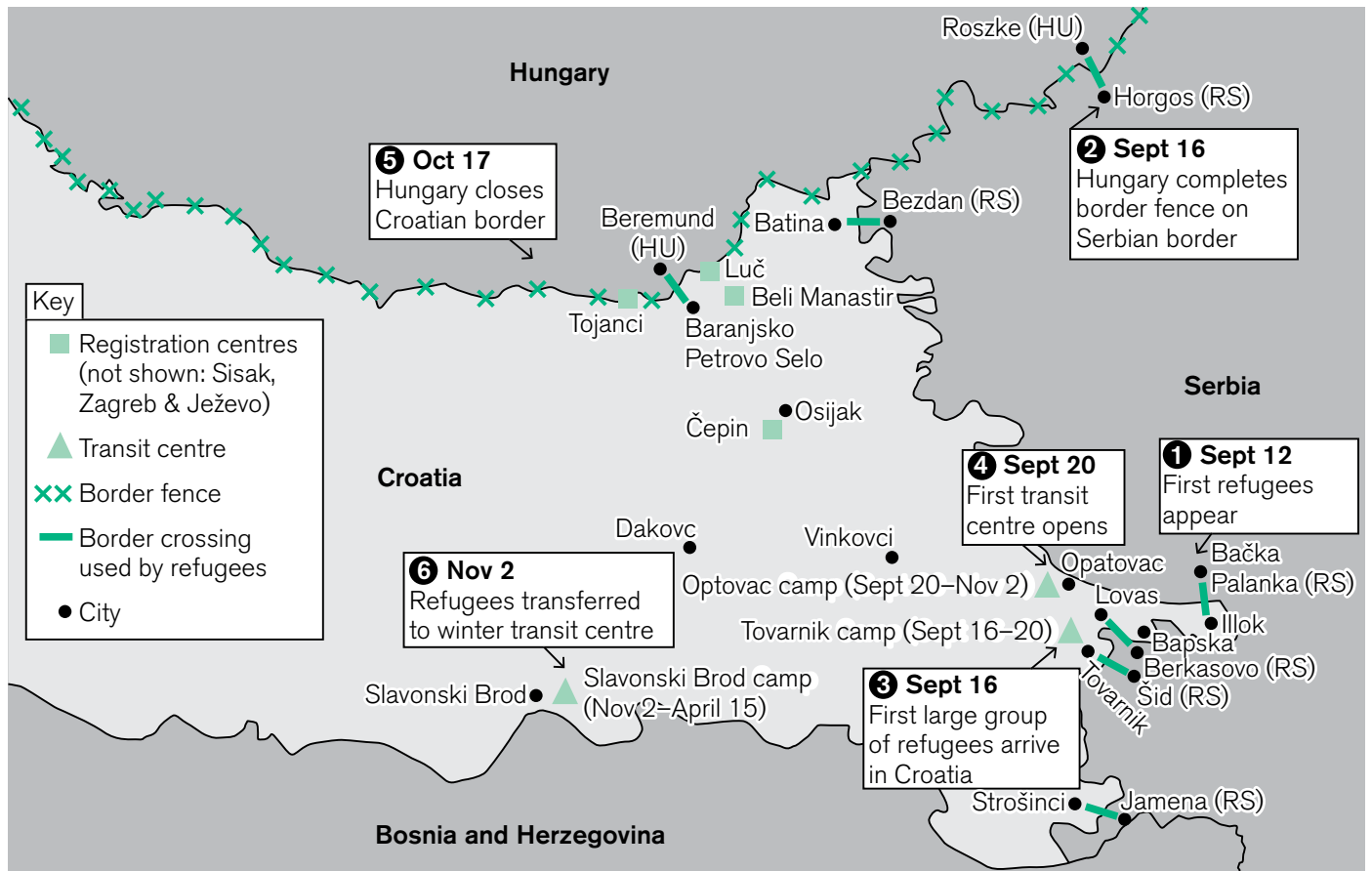
The highly centralised state response to this crisis and the lack of potential for involving local authorities to a greater extent reveal some of the broader weaknesses of local governance in Croatia. Territorial

Figure 1. Daily number of arrivals in Croatia



Source: based on figures published on the Croatian Ministry of the Interior's website.⁶

Figure 2. Chronology of the crisis and the municipalities affected



Source: based on Croatian Ministry of the Interior (2015).⁷

fragmentation, combined with a lack of joint service provision among local authorities, limits the way local authorities can contribute in humanitarian emergencies and complicates frameworks for communication and cooperation.

The ability of local authorities to act, essentially mirrors their competencies and resources within the existing decentralised framework. Enhancing the role of local authorities in humanitarian emergencies and third-country refugee resettlement would require institutional reforms or mechanisms ranging from shared services to re-grouping functions, or long-discussed administrative and territorial reorganisation.

As Croatia implements the EU-agreed relocation/resettlement scheme for 550 people (or more), different local government competencies will need to be strengthened and brought into play. Various social services such as education (including pre-school education for children and language training for adults) and primary health services that are decentralised to the municipal level will play an important role in

the safe and productive integration of asylum seekers.⁴ Local governments and their NGO partners in Croatia have numerous Roma integration initiatives from which lessons can be learnt and experiences applied to accommodating asylum seekers and those being relocated and resettled through EU agreements.

Box 1. Drawing on existing resettlement programmes

One example of an innovative way for local authorities to participate in resettlement is through the regionally based Strategic Migration Partnership scheme currently being implemented in the UK. Under this scheme, local authorities willing to participate in resettlement must ensure that they have adequate infrastructure and that strong partnerships between local and regional bodies, service providers, NGOs and the community are in place. Once accepted into the scheme, the central government directs a portion of the overseas aid budget to the local councils.⁸ Further research could explore whether such a scheme might be applied in Croatia and identify relevant central bodies and partners to implement a similar programme. Croatian cities and municipalities could benefit from access to information about other European resettlement programmes (such as that in the UK) and could, in turn, contribute their own unique experiences and lessons in exchange.

Support for host cities

Cities that demonstrate political willingness to welcome asylum seekers should be supported by central government, NGOs and local communities, and mechanisms for central–local dialogue should be used or created to facilitate a dialogue on internal resettlement. Several cities in Croatia with a large number of national minorities and a history of multi-culturalism already have strategies and policies in place that

see refugees as an asset to urban development.⁵ National resettlement schemes should consider how to integrate mechanisms that identify and support cities with an interest in hosting new refugees (see Box 1).

Maren Larsen, Elma Demir and Maja Horvat

Maren Larsen, Elma Demir and Maja Horvat are research affiliates with the Institute for International Urban Development.



Knowledge Products

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This paper is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Urban Crises Learning Fund. The fund is part of DFID's Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves IIED and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Contact

Diane Archer
diane.archer@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

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This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government.



Notes

¹ NALAS (2015) 'NALAS Statement on Local Governments facing the challenges and impacts of refugee crisis in South East Europe.' Zagreb, October 2015. www.nalas.eu/News/Statement / ² Larsen, M, Demir, E, Horvat, M (2016) Humanitarian responses by local actors: lessons learned from managing the transit of migrants and refugees through Croatia. IIED, London. pubs.iied.org/10795IIED / ³ Civil protection systems are national defence/emergency systems that aim to protect citizens from natural disasters and armed conflicts. / ⁴ Piteša, I (2016) Personal interview. International Organisation for Migration Croatia Country Office, Radnička cesta 41/7, Zagreb. April 12, 2016; Otmačić, V (2016) Personal interview. United Nations Children's Fund Office for Croatia, Radnička cesta 41/7, Zagreb. April 14, 2016. / ⁵ See Rijeka's Bid Book for European Capital of Culture 2020. / ⁶ Croatian Ministry of the Interior's website www.mup.hr / ⁷ Ministry of Interior (2015) *Migration Crisis in Croatia – Overview*. Zagreb, October 21, 2015. www.mup.hr/UserDocImages/topvijesti/2015/listopad/MIGRATION_CRISIS_CRO_OVERVIEW.pdf / ⁸ Local Government Association (2016) www.local.gov.uk/refugees