

Lessons From Daniel

Michael Diedring (www.ecre.org)

There are different ways to tell a refugee story. Daniel E., is a young Eritrean who was trafficked to the Sinai whilst attempting to flee his country. After three months in which he underwent an unimaginable ordeal, including torture, he was finally released after ransom was paid by the Eritrean diaspora. He was then detained, once again, in Israel as soon as he entered the country, released thanks to the legal representation of a human rights lawyer, and was granted the chance to testify in Brussels where he was finally able to apply for and receive refugee status.

Luckily, Daniel is now in the EU, a region with high standards of protection. While a human rights success, is it the end of Daniel's story? Hardly.

Daniel is also a young educated man, friendly and curious about the world. Fluent in Tigrigna and English, he also speaks Arabic and learned a bit of Hebrew while in Tel Aviv. He had previously worked as an auditor in his home country, and intended to use his skills in a new country. Daniel was well informed of the dangers of reaching Europe, and, therefore, had no intention to come, but his story unfolded in a different manner (as is often the case when refugees are in flight). Daniel was very pragmatic and did not want to waste time looking for 'the best place' to settle. Rather, like most refugees, once he found safety his main concern was to find work.

Now, as the months pass, Daniel's enthusiasm is slowly waning given the numerous obstacles he encounters. His English skills are not relevant in Belgium. His driving license is not recognized, but he cannot afford to apply for an international version; his lack of proficiency in Dutch or French represents a considerable hurdle to re-training whilst the recognition of his previous educational and professional experience is a lengthy process. He is told that all of these processes could take up to 5 years to be finally resolved. As Daniel has good social skills, he quickly found an opportunity to work as an interpreter. Here again, he was stopped in his tracks and had to refuse an offer of employment simply because he could not afford freelance status in Belgium, which requires being employed full-time in order to pay relevant taxes. As the months pass, a question starts to formulate in his mind: Why would a country offer protection to people without enabling them to flourish as a self-sufficient human being? As his odyssey in Belgium continues, Daniel believes his only option may be to go to the U.S. where he has relatives!

Daniel is obviously an easy case to advocate for: a young resilient man, well-educated and fluent in



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English. In that sense, he is not representative of the complexities related to forced migration. However, the mere fact that labour inclusion is difficult even for someone like him shows how the situation for forced migrants is particularly dire. Daniel's situation illustrates one of the paradoxes of the protection regime in the EU. Although all national legislation complies with refugees' work rights as enshrined in international and EU law, the great majority of individuals remain excluded from labour participation. Equally paradoxical, given that refugees are granted a 'protection status,' existing evidence shows that refugees fare worse than the other legally residing migrants, and therefore face higher risks of destitution, labour exploitation or illegal working. If the stagnant labour market situation in Europe is obviously a key factor, the economic crisis has only increased an already existing gap.

Whilst the number of asylum seekers compared to labour migrants increases in Europe, this issue deserves serious attention. The provision of humanitarian aid is essential to protect the physical security of refugees, but it alone is not enough. Beyond short term needs, a comprehensive response must enable refugees to rebuild their lives and achieve self-sufficiency. Facilitating labour participation and mobility for refugees, a key indicator of social inclusion, is not only relevant from a protection point of view, but is also important for reducing inequalities,

and therefore sustaining democratic societies. From an economic point of view, denying access to formal labour markets pushes refugees either into the informal market, eroding wages for both refugees and nationals, or forces them to resort to negative economic coping strategies (e.g., prostitution, crime, begging, child labour, and dangerous exploitative work). In Member States with higher protection standards and a better economic situation, the paradox shows another face as the lack of access to labour participation means people like Daniel may remain for a long time in a situation of forced welfare dependency.

In contrast, studies show that when refugees access the formal economy, they become self-sufficient taxpayers who bring new skills and demand for goods and services to host countries, stimulating economic growth. Finally, refugees can play a role with regard to potential labour shortages within the skilled labour sector. For example, last June, German business leaders called on German authorities to significantly improve labour access for refugees and asylum seekers in order to reduce existing shortage of vocational trainees.

The common reasons that explain such a gap lie both in the specific difficulties linked to forced migration and in the various obstacles to access the labour market in host societies. For refugees, the most reported obstacles are: anxiety over family

separation; poor health; the long period of inactivity; the lack of language skills; difficulty in recognition of existing professional skills; lack of a social network; and unfamiliarity with the local employment market. These specific difficulties are worsened by poor conditions in host countries, and more particularly: lengthy asylum procedures; high discrimination and xenophobia; bureaucratic barriers (exorbitant fees, complex paperwork/permitting, delay in employment); and inadequate access to vocational training, education and language training.

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The only way to tackle this issue is to address these specific barriers through targeted policies and tailored programs. This is where philanthropy can play a critical role in supporting efforts to get people into work and successfully through the integration process.

Sustain social initiatives

Labour inclusion of vulnerable groups like refugees cannot be considered a 'project'. It requires clear strategies based on a sound knowledge of the target group, adequate resources, and a multi-year sustained effort. Practitioners know that efficient labour inclusion requires that a range of other key issues be addressed at the same time, such as housing, health or family separation. All existing practices showing an impact on labour participation (yes, there are a few) share this holistic approach, and have taken place over a number of years. However, current policies and available funding have put a strain on civil society initiatives that support refugees and asylum seekers because short term 'innovative' projects tend increasingly to replace long-term programs. There is an opportunity for philanthropy to support in a sustainable manner the work local actors have and will need to undertake for years to come.

Refugee empowerment

Like Daniel, most asylum seekers and refugees do not want to be treated as passive recipients of aid. Through



their difficult migratory path, they have developed strong coping and adaptation skills. They are in a way ‘necessity entrepreneurs,’ and many try to engage in self-employment as an alternative to unemployment. While authorities rarely consider them as economic actors, philanthropy can play a role in empowering refugee entrepreneurship, taking full advantage of the resilience, resourcefulness and resolute nature of these individuals.

Advocacy

As an alliance of 87 refugee-assisting NGOs across 38 European countries, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) advocates with its members at EU and national level to protect and advance the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons. Monitoring EU legislation and practices, and collecting first-hand information constitutes ECRE’s core work for evidence-based advocacy and communication. With effective advocacy, the voices of refugees and civil society organisations that support them can directly influence and support the policymaking process. Such advocacy is critical to achieve the changes necessary at the governmental level.

Bridging

The private sector, however, remains THE key actor to engage with in order to increase refugee labour participation. Practitioners know that rapid integration is an asset for future labour participation, and therefore targeted integration measures should already begin during the asylum procedure. However, very few refugee assisting organisations and NGOs have the expertise in engaging with employers and companies. One notable exception is the Bridges Programmes, a Scottish charity that supports the social, educational and economic integration of refugees and asylum seekers living in Glasgow through ground-breaking work with employers and partners to ensure that their clients have the possible support to help them into work (if eligible), education or further training. Despite an increased interest, many actors from the private sector are unaware of who refugees and asylum seekers are, and remain therefore suspicious of a topic they primarily view as a sensitive political one. The opportunity gap for philanthropy efforts lies in the facilitation and construction of ‘public/private’ partnerships and networks to get refugees into work.

We, and our members, proudly employ refugees throughout Europe. Join us to help provide the opportunity for people like Daniel to live in dignity, and to fully contribute to our European societies.

Michael Diedring is a lawyer and accomplished rule of law / international development professional whose life was transformed by a ‘short sabbatical’ from law firm practice in the early 1990s to assist in legal reform in Central and Eastern Europe. A dual German and American citizen, Michael relocated to Europe in 1995 and over his career has worked in more than 60 countries. Michael was Executive Director of the CEELI Institute (Prague) and Director General of the Baltic Management Institute (Vilnius), Country Representative for the Baltic-American Enterprise Fund (Vilnius), and Deputy Director of the International Bar Association (London) and ABA Central and East European Law Initiative (Washington, DC). Michael earned his Juris Doctor from Syracuse University College of Law and a Bachelors Degree in rhetorical speech from Drake University.

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