



REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE

"OUR RESPONSE, OUR RESPONSIBILITY"

"We need to find room for some decent places for refugees to live. We should have concentrated on a political solution... I still believe that has to be done"

Martti Ahtisaari, Nobel Peace Prize, Former member of YMCA Finland

Sept 9th 2015

"Before the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing death in conflict and hunger and are on a journey of hope, the Gospel calls us to be close to the smallest and to those who have been abandoned".

Pope Francis

Sept 7th 2015

"Europe is facing a moment of truth. This is the time to reaffirm the values upon which it was built"

Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Sept 4th 2015

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1. Introduction and objectives

Last September 1st, in the light this deep humanitarian crisis in our continent, YMCA Europe shared a declaration with its Member Movements and the global YMCA community stressing the following aspects :

- *The YMCA movement cannot remain silent as we face the worse humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II.*
- *A response to the refugees and asylum seekers crisis, shall become a priority for the European Movement and therefore for YMCA Europe and to our Member Movements according to each reality and capacities.*
- *YMCA Europe was determined to provide spaces for analyses that will lead to concrete short, medium and long term actions on all levels.*

- *This challenge cannot be understood or tackled without our joint approach to situations in our neighboring regions : Africa, the Middle East, South Asia. Therefore we will also work in order to contribute to a global response as there are examples of deep and effective work with newcomers both in Europe and in other areas of the world.*

The objectives of this document are :

1. *To summarize the actions taken by YMCA Europe since the crisis became evident in the European context.*
2. *To frame a phenomenon that asks for a concrete, unanimous and clear response from YMCA Europe putting forward actions in the short, mid and long term (*)*

() As an European network, in co-operation with the global YMCA movement, the YMCA has an opportunity to implement initiatives strongly based on our mission, historic roots and inclusive approach using our resources, tools, network and technical capacity.*

2. The reality that Europe faces

During the first two weeks of September, the situation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants has continued showing its most dramatic face. The figures and scenes that are daily exposed to the international community are combined with different positions of governments when facing this issue. Europe is clearly divided when addressing this issue.

According to a statement from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) from last September 4th, more than 300,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean Sea since January 2015 and close to 3,000 did not survive this dangerous journey. Refugees continue their journey across Europe facing chaos and indignity either in borders or along the way. There has been generosity from anonymous citizens, different civil society organizations and governments. But it is clear at this stage that Europe is failing to find a common and collective response and this fact is having a daily dramatic impact on thousands of people of all ages.

Traffickers benefit from the drama of people wanting to escape from war and hunger. Those organized gangs know that families have no other choice than risking their lives after paying enormous fees searching for safety in another land.

At this stage, during October 2015 the phenomenon continued escalating daily with approximately 2,000 newcomers arriving to our continent daily, especially through its Southern borders. Europe has experienced migration over the last decades mainly coming from the Magreb and South Saharian countries into Southern European countries such as Spain, Italy, Malta or Greece. Today migrants continue arriving from those regions and thousands are still waiting for an opportunity to enter the EU waiting poor conditions in the North of Morocco. Now we collectively experience a new drama as people arrive in Turkey escaping because their lives are at risk in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. A new route has been created in the last weeks and it goes from Turkey to Greece and from there into the Balkan region into Macedonia and Serbia reaching Hungary. Central Europe and Scandinavia are the objectives for thousands of refugees.

International law is clear when asking our different states to be sensitive to refugees and asylum seekers. However it is also true that no country can tackle this issue alone and a collective and responsible answer is needed under the frame of human rights, social justice and dignity.

UHNCR stresses that “EU member states shall implement a common strategy, based on responsibility, solidarity and trust”. This means taking measures to stabilize the situation through an emergency relief plan and then design a mid-long plan based on integration. Discussions take place currently among member states about the number of refugees and asylum seekers that each country can take and about the resources that are needed. Meanwhile the dramatic scenes in our borders are daily in the headlines across Europe. Thousands of families and individuals arriving to our borders are not finding safety and hope in Europe.

The number of refugees that shall be relocated across Europe is presently over 200,000 and governmental and non governmental experts agree that we are still in the first stages of this crisis. But we shall also consider the fact that most countries that are neighbors in conflict regions in the Middle East and Africa are presently hosting 9 out of 10 refugees. Only a minority is coming to Europe. Therefore, any plan that governments or civil society organizations put in practice shall also guarantee the support to reaches those countries through cooperation for development and resources. It is a structural and global crisis.

The task that Europe faces is extremely complex and so it will be any plan that YMCA Europe develops in agreement with our Member Movements. We must avoid easy sentences, judgements about policy within states and even within our local and national YMCAs. A special care is needed when proposing initiatives that are not based on our realistic capacities, outreach and resources. We are confronted with a structural challenge with a deep impact on most European contexts, including several of our youngest democracies and in an environment of a deep economic crisis. It will require short, mid and long term initiatives combined with a strong co-operation with the public sector and other civil society networks.

3. A framework : YMCA Europe´s Strategic Plan

YMCA Europe is presently involved in a transition period between the actual Strategic Plan 2011-2016 and the consultation process for the 2016-2020 Strategy, a process that started last May during the General Assembly in Tallinn, Estonia. This fact facilitates that an agreed response to the challenge that Europe is experiencing, can easily be included in our plans as a strategic priority implemented through signature programmes based on relief initiatives and integration of newcomers.

The present Strategy clearly says that “...we live in a interconnected and interdependent world in which governments, citizens and civil society initiatives must develop a sense of belonging to the same global community”(…) “YMCA Europe must be constantly aware of the challenges of contemporary times. There are still many opportunities which we need to grasp to ensure the YMCA has a relevant and inclusive place in our communities so that we can contribute to address the needs of our young people in Europe”.

The first discussions regarding our new Strategy and the inputs received from our National Movements, working platforms and stakeholders during the past three months, are clear in terms of expectations from YMCA Europe and its leading role within the European movement. Some examples of inputs received are :

- Identify flagship programmes according to the actual social, political and economic challenges in Europe.
- Create programmes that cannot be developed by National Movements themselves.
- Bring people together as a way to contribute to peace and understanding
- Make clear statements about inclusiveness, interfaith dialogue, youth participation and other issues that affect mainly young people.
- Alignment with OUR WAY Global Strategy
- Co-operate with other public-private organizations

Key institutional, structural and programmatic elements are presently being identified and discussed among YMCA Europe's governance and technical bodies in order to design the drafts of the new Strategic Plan (2016-2020) that will be largely consulted across the movement until its acceptance at the General Assembly in May 2016. Again, this process provides the opportunity to include immediate actions and other initiatives that will be developed during the period of implementation of the Plan.

This document identifies both working spaces to define policy and collective learning, plus actions that YMCA Europe is committed to lead in co-operation with National Movements and stakeholders.

4. Communications with national/local YMCAs

A priority for YMCA Europe has been to contact those YMCAs operating in countries which are used as a transition zones for refugees (Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary). More recently also National Movements which are identified as a final destination have been formally contacted (an example is Germany and also the Vienna YMCA in Austria). Since August YMCA Europe's Secretariat has contacted those YMCAs in Europe with the following objectives :

- a. To share solidarity messages on behalf of YMCA Europe
- b. To receive input about the impact of the refugees crisis within that specific country
- c. To have information about possible impact within the local/national YMCAs
- d. To be informed about the involvement of the YMCA (or individuals connected with the YMCA) in any initiative with newcomers
- e. To identify present or future needs in the frame of YMCA work with refugees and/or asylum seekers.

5. From a core objective to immediate action

When addressing the actual refugees and asylum seekers crisis, YMCA Europe identifies the following CORE OBJECTIVE :

Inspired by its mission and using its full capacities, the YMCA shall play an active and effective role in providing a response to refugees and asylum seekers with a focus on their integration within communities in Europe

In order to reach this goal, it was critical to take a number of strategic decisions in the programmatic and institutional levels since the beginning of the crisis (since mid August to present)

1. Two specific communications were circulated across the movement emphasizing the need for an answer in the local, national and international levels
 - August 12th – To all European NGS's (copy to YE Executive Committee and YE Staff Team)
 - September 1st – To all European NGS's, (copy to YE Executive Committee, Staff Team, WAY and Global Staff Team). Reactions to this communication were received from different National Movements, YE partners and Area Organizations
 2. Join YMCA Netherlands' initiative to hold an International Conference on Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Netherlands, March 11-13, 2016) with the following objectives :
 - Exchange of experiences. Identifying good practices; obstacles and training aspects
 - Developing new initiatives and new co-operation in YMCA work for refugees and asylum seekers on all YMCA levels in Europe
 - Discussing follow-up actions within the framework of YMCA Europe.
- A communication about the Conference (joint initiative YE and YMCA Netherlands) was sent to all European National Movements with a specific survey on the refugees and asylum seekers topic and interests from the Movements regarding the Conference.
3. YMCA-YWCA Staff Conference. Helsinki, Finland. September 23-27, 2015
 - In the light of the crisis, the programme was adjusted and the first keynote focused on migration, refugees and asylum seekers.
 - Over 100 participants (all staff members at local, national and international levels) attended the Conference
 4. Area Secretaries Community of Practice
 - On conference held on September 8th, an agenda item about the refugees crisis was included. Area secretaries identified this topic as highly relevant for all Areas Organizations. High interest for participation at the March 2016 Conference was shown by the Area Secretaries
 5. YMCA Europe's Executive Committee. Cluj, Romania. October 9-11, 2015
 - Specific agenda item on this topic was included and full agreement on taking this issue as a priority within YE Strategy and actions
 6. YE 4th National General Secretaries Forum. Rome, Italy. November 23-25
 - Agenda item on refugees and asylum seekers has been included. YMCA Italy will provide an expert representing an international organization to lead a presentation and workshop on this topic. Discussion and agreement about pan-European approach and joint steps
 7. Recruitment process for a YE staff position in Brussels
 - "Advocacy, Projects and Fundraising Officer"
 - Call for applications sent on September 10th (deadline October 15th)

- Advocacy work/projects with a focus on migration, asylum seekers and refugees will be relevant elements in the recruitment of candidates
8. Materials about approach and experience of YMCA USA on work with newcomers and immigrants were shared with YE Secretariat
 9. YE President and Secretary General members of the Global Committee led by the World Alliance of YMCAs (including at the moment the African Alliance of YMCAs and Middle East YMCAs). The perspective is that North American, Latin American and Asia-Pacific Areas are also involved in this Committee). The first meeting took place in Litomyšl, Czech Rep. On November 4th.
- 6. Basic needs and potential areas for YMCA response**
(For discussion with NM and stakeholders)

A number of basic needs have been identified below. We also add a number of questions that shall contribute to a realistic approach to key aspects such as basic emergency relief and further integration of newcomers.

a) Access to basic needs

Focus on countries used as transition ways for refugees (Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary)

Needs : Shelter, food, potable water, sanitation and clothing

- Are the YMCAs in those countries able to contribute to these needs?
- Is the YMCA community in Europe able to provide those needs in cooperation with the mentioned YMCAs?
- What is our internal capacity to co-ordinate this process?

b) Accommodation

On a mid-long term bases in those countries that are potential objectives

- Are local and national YMCAs able to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers in their facilities (hostels, guest houses, camp facilities, private homes)?
- In cooperation with public bodies and following the legal regulations in each country, how many local YMCAs can commit to actually accommodate newcomers?
- Which profiles can those YMCAs host (families, young people, only adults, women, men)?
- How can those costs be fully covered?
- YMCA Germany has taken key steps forward in this process providing accommodation facilities in recent weeks

c) Provide guidance on legal status and achievement of official documents

In co-operation with authorities, facilitating the access to services (health, education)

- Do YMCAs have human resources on a volunteer and staff level in order to provide this support?

d) Identify individuals with special needs

Profiles : unaccompanied children, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, pregnant women.

- Are our YMCAs prepared to face these needs through specific human resources and facilities?

e) Education

With a focus on children and young people (including language learning)

- Can our YMCAs provide this service?
- Are our YMCAs open to diversity from the cultural, social and religious perspective?
- Non formal education opportunities?

f) Jobs and opportunities for personal development

Identifying skills and connecting them with the local market

- Can our YMCAs respond to this need?
- What are our relations with the local market?