European Economic and Social Committee
Press Release

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**EESC 2016 Civil Society Migration Prize to reward inspiring and successful examples of human solidarity**

The record number of 283 applications for this year's EESC Civil Society Prize on Migration, has clearly shown that migration and the integration of refugees continues to be a major area of action and concern for European Civil Society. The 2016 Prize will reward model and inspiring projects that represent the best of human solidarity in Europe and which have demonstrated real on the ground impact.

The EESC has shortlisted 5 applications from **Hungary, Germany, Spain and two from Greece** for the 2016 European Civil Society Prize on Migration. This year's Prize is intended to go to individuals and organisations who have distinguished themselves through their work in improving the lives of migrants and fostering their integration in European society.

The shortlisted applications include;

* a German-led project which played a role in saving up to 5,000 lives at sea,
* a Greek baker who took the initiative to distribute bread and pastries to thousands of hungry and desperate migrants in need,
* a Spanish project which literally brought thousands of local residents and migrants to the table to eat and understand each other, and
* two other projects which were pioneering in Hungary and Greece in assisting migrants and facilitating their integration in society.

A full summary of each of the shortlisted projects can be found in Annex.

According to EESC President George Dassis; "Civil society organisations have played a fundamental role in the recent migration crisis and these projects provide inspiration for us all. Civil mobilisation has the force to change the course of history and in awarding the annual EESC Civil Society Prize, I hope that these exemplary projects will inspire us all and show how, when we work together, European citizens can make the EU a better place for all."

The winning projects amongst those shortlisted will be announced in an award ceremony on 15th December at the EESC Plenary session in Brussels. Those selected will share a cash prize of 50,000 Euros in recognition for their work in order to give a much needed boost to their projects so that even more people can be helped. The Civil Society Prize, now in its eighth year, is awarded each year to an important area of the EESC’s activities. The 2015 prize was dedicated to civil society organisations working to combat poverty.

Since the start of the refugee crisis, the EESC has conducted fact-finding missions in 11 EU countries (Austria, Sweden, Greece, Hungary, Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, Malta, Poland and Bulgaria) plus Turkey, enabling EESC members to discover the reality of conditions on the ground. In its [March 2016 report](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.refugee-crisis), the Committee put forward a number of recommendations. Above all, the EU and Member States must unite in implementing a fair, common asylum system. Refugees need safe, legal routes into Europe, followed by long-term integration policies.

Further details about the 2016 Civil Society Prize are available [here](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-civil-society-prize-2016).

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*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process. The Committee has 350 members from across Europe, who are appointed by the Council of the European Union.*

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***ANNEX: Information on the shortlisted projects for the 2016 Civil Society Prize***

***Alphabetical order by name of entrant***

***Artemisszió Foundation* (Hungary),** founded in 1989, provides assistance programs for migrants and refugees, with activities aimed at encouraging the social integration of these groups (through language, jobs skills and civil rights trainings). The project "Building Bridges" is intended to become the long-life sustainable project **"Mira Community in Hungary"**, the initiative that was proposed for the prize.

The core of the program is based on a system of **mentorship** in which a Hungarian or a migrant volunteer accompanies a migrant or a refugee for a limited period, guiding him/her in every-day life in Hungary, being this person taken care of as belonging to the community, and no longer as an outsider. Besides this project, Artemisszió dedicates itself to the organization of trainings for volunteers in the mentor program, organization of trainings for volunteers in teaching Hungarian; coordination of language classes for migrants and refugees by volunteers; organization of community events and activities (house parties, common cooking, excursions) for community members; organization of open events (concerts, debates, shows); maintenance of an open community place (with shared office facilities).

***Dionysis Arvanitakis*** **(Greece)** bakes daily over 100 Kg of bread for refugees in Kos. The 77-year-old baker fills his truck and distributes his fresh bread to the hopeless men, women and children who land in Kos, soaked and exhausted. He was one of the first to assist the refugees who were arriving by hundreds every day on the island. His action inspired colleagues, citizens, hoteliers and many more to follow his example. Mr Arvanitakis knows deprivation. He left his home town in Greece as a young man and emigrated to Australia looking for a better future. In 1970 he came back to Greece with his wife and settled in her native Kos, where they started their own baking business. Why does he help refugees? His words are disarming: small children from Syria, Afghanistan show us the bread with their hands. They do not know the word for food. What man's heart can remain unmoved when he sees a small child eat the soil? EC President Jean-Claude Junker mentioned Arvanitakis in his State of the Union speech on 9 September, saying that *"Europe is the baker in Kos who gives away his bread to hungry and weary souls"*, thus honouring inspiring people who make Europe proud of its solidarity and integration principles.

**ILIAKTIDA (Greece)** is a non-profit organization based in Lesvos which has been helping cover the basic needs of refugees, migrants and their families through the work of volunteers. Families who had lost their children in the sea, devastated parents, exhausted old people on a wheelchair, unaccompanied minors who have seen their homes being destroyed getting through ILIAKTIDA's structures social, legal, medical and psychological support from professional staff. They also provide the newcomers with information about their rights as well as Greek language lessons. ILIAKTIDA's main concern and goal has been to get refugees out of camps and into local communities. Based on this concept, they have been running local guesthouses and apartments where refugees can start a new daily routine, do their shopping, cook their meals, enjoy local cultural activities, meet the locals and develop friendly relationships with them. The organization encourages migrants to work on its actions and to share their experience with the newcomers and the locals. A certain number of migrants and refugees have even found work and made the first steps of a new, independent and integrated life in Greece.

***SOS Méditerranée* (Germany)** has played a role in rescuing more than 5.400 refugees from the risk of drowning at the Central Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of its mission in February 2016. The civil society organization operates with its partner, Médecins Sans Frontières, on the MS Aquarius between Sicily, Lampedusa and Libya, one of the world's most dangerous and popular migratory routes, to complement and support rescue and search operations from Italy, the EU and other NGOs. In contrast to other rescue operations SOS Méditerranée acts not only at sea but also ashore in order to ensure and restore human rights and dignity for refugees. The European network of German, French and Italian volunteers and members aims to amplify the voices of refugees to promote mutual understanding. By organizing public events, participating in debates and giving lectures in schools, the organization wants to contribute to the public debate and relevant scientific research. As a response to the current humanitarian and political situation SOS Méditerranée is calling on political action and shared social responsibility and seeks to demonstrate the possible impact of civil society action.

***SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa* *– Gipuzkoako SOS Arrazakeria* (Spain)** was founded in 1993 to fight all forms of discrimination, segregation and isolation, based on skin colour, ethnicity or cultural background. The project "Next door family" (Bizilagunak) is a simple idea (though complex to put in practice) of organizing a meal on your own house and receiving complete strangers, in order to talk, and get the chance to know more about each other (the native and the migrant families). The project grew from 60 meals in 2012 (120 families) to 260 meals in 2015 (520 families). The Department of Social Psychology of the University of the Basque Country made an external evaluation on the project, and got to the conclusion that the perception of insecurity decreases significantly and there is an increasing trend shown in positive emotions, such as admiration towards the migrants. Small steps that make a huge difference in hundreds of families, giving the opportunity for next door families to become real neighbours!