

2016 EESC CIVIL SOCIETY PRIZE

Rewarding excellence in civil society initiatives



Migration

Improving lives, fostering integration



European Economic and Social Committee

The 2016 EESC Civil Society Prize – solidarity with migrants in the European Union

Civil society organisations have played a vital role in the recent migration crisis – civil mobilisation has the force to change the course of history.

President's introduction

Migration is one of the biggest challenges Europe is currently facing. In the last five years, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR, the number of people fleeing war, famine and poverty has rocketed. At the end of 2015, it reported 65.3 million displaced people worldwide – half of them children.

Europe is the target destination for many people seeking refuge, while risking their lives and their children's safety on the way. Their countries of origin are Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, Ukraine, sub-Saharan Africa and others. Already by mid-2016, more than 300 000 people had arrived in the EU by sea alone, while more than 3 000 were dead or missing. In 2015 the total number of arrivals was more than 1 million.

Media coverage has tended to create fear and prejudice, while some national governments have built fences, reintroduced border checks and turned away people seeking humanitarian aid. Despite the media coverage, due to the EESC's strong ties with civil society there is a recognition of the many bottom-up initiatives by European citizens who have got together and taken refugees into their homes, offered them food, clothing and other vital necessities, or given free healthcare and education.

It is appropriate, therefore, for the 2016 EESC Civil Society Prize to reward civil society organisations and individuals who have taken up the challenge of helping refugees and migrants, improving their lives and helping them to integrate into society, while preserving our basic European values of humanity and solidarity.



Throughout history, migrants have actively contributed to developing European societies economically, socially, culturally, and in terms of diversity. Now, with an ageing population, we need their skills, energy and determination. Studies – for instance by the United Nations – show that migrants contribute more to societies than they take out. But we need to change faulty perceptions if we are to halt the poisonous spread of nationalism and xenophobia, and we need to stop thinking in terms of “us” and “them”. In this respect, civil society at all levels can play a crucial educational role.

There are strong grounds for hope. From southern Italy to Scandinavia, from France to the Balkans, civil society organisations are working to defend the human rights and dignity of migrants and their families. In some countries, social partners are uniting to help migrants into the labour market. In Sweden and Denmark, for example, employers and trade unions are working together to speed up the recognition of qualifications, offer language training and mentoring, and encourage companies to employ newcomers on decent pay and conditions.

The EESC is the only body representing the interests of all sectors of civil society at EU level, and one of its main tasks is to raise awareness of the vital place of civil society organisations in a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society.

Awarding the annual EESC Civil Society Prize is always an honour and an inspiration, and a reminder of how, when we work together, European citizens can make the EU a better place for all.

EESC President **Georges Dassis**

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What the EU is doing

In May 2015, the European Commission published its European Agenda on Migration, aiming to tackle the root causes of migration. It also sets out a detailed relocation and resettlement plan to ease the burden on first-entry countries like Italy and Greece, and distribute refugees more fairly across EU states with the capacity to accommodate them. However, some national governments have failed to meet their commitments, whereas others have shown a more generous and far-sighted approach. Germany alone received 441 900 asylum requests in 2015 – more than any other industrialised country.

In March, an agreement between the EU and Turkey came into effect, although instability following the failed coup d'état has raised some concerns about the safety of refugees.

Meanwhile, the Commission has explicitly recognised the importance of local projects to aid and integrate migrants, and has promised to launch a database of best practices and success stories from different parts of Europe.

EESC recommendations

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 (link below), 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.

Civil Society organisations carry out invaluable work, often filling the gaps in public services. But they need fast access to adequate funding, as well as staff training and networking facilities.

EESC Civil Society Prize: the background

The EESC launched the annual Civil Society Prize scheme a decade ago, in 2006, to highlight the efforts of active citizens and organisations all over Europe to improve life in their communities.

The aim is to reward and encourage projects – already implemented or on-going – that have achieved real results in a different field each year. The award raises awareness of how civil society is helping to reinforce the common values that underpin European identity and integration.

The competition is open to any civil society organisation officially registered within the EU and acting at European, national, regional or local level, as well as individuals.

In 2016, the EESC received 284 applications from 27 countries – the highest number ever. Members of the evaluation committee – three EESC members and an external evaluator – made a shortlist of finalists, which was then submitted to the selection board consisting of the enlarged EESC presidency and the secretary-general.

The evaluators looked for innovative projects bringing real benefits for migrants in areas such as:

- Offering emergency relief;
- Providing social support, housing and health services;
- Giving practical support and advice;
- Fighting xenophobia, racism and discrimination;
- Combating exploitation and promoting mutual respect and tolerance;
- Raising awareness of rights and obligations and empowering new arrivals;
- Providing education and training for third-country nationals and receiving communities;
- Highlighting the positive contribution migrants make to European society.

The evaluation committee applied a range of criteria, assessing the initiative's success in serving its target audience and raising awareness of the facts about migration, as well as its long-term impact and sustainable contribution to community well-being. The winners must not only be innovative, creative and unique, but also involve migrants themselves, and offer an inspiring example for others to follow.

The prize ceremony took place on 15 December 2016, with the EUR 50 000 award shared between the winners and runners-up.

In previous years, awards have gone to a range of projects and initiatives to combat poverty and social exclusion, support Roma communities, promote sustainable lifestyles and green jobs, encourage networking, education and campaigning, and to defend the interests of young people.

Further information

2016 EESC Civil Society Prize:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-civil-society-prize-2016>

Refugee crisis – EESC fact-finding missions and strategy report:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.refugee-crisis>

Refugee statistics from UNHCR:

<http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

UN:

<https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/infographics>

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1

1st prize: Artemisszió Foundation

Artemisszió Foundation is a Hungarian volunteer organisation that was founded in 1988 to provide assistance to migrants and refugees and support their social integration by providing, for example, language teaching, vocational training and information about civil rights. Its flagship project, *“Building Bridges”*, aims to offer migrants and refugees a safe place where they can build personal relations with the host society. The programme is based on a **mentorship system** whereby a volunteer – of either Hungarian or migrant origin – accompanies a newly arrived migrant or refugee for a limited period of time, guiding them in everyday life and taking care of them as a member of the community, instead of treating them as an outsider. Alongside this project, Artemisszió organises training courses for volunteers involved in the mentoring and language teaching programmes, social events and activities for the whole community such as parties, cooking sessions and excursions, and events which are open to the general public such as concerts, debates and shows.

Its flagship project, *“Building Bridges”*, aims to offer migrants and refugees a safe place where they can build personal relations with the host society.

Currently, *“Building Bridges”* involves some 60 refugees – mainly young people aged 20 to 35 – and twice as many volunteers at any given time, but the idea is to open up the existing community and develop a larger-scale, long-term project called the *“Mira Community in Hungary”*. Artemisszió does not rely on government funding as it considers the project’s independence to be essential for its success, but is open to funding from private and non-governmental public bodies to finance its ambitious vision, which the organisation describes as follows: *“We are looking forward to having a real, heterogeneous community, made up of third country nationals, EU migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and Hungarians, whose legal status does not define their place in the group. Mira is a community not only for migrants, but for everybody living in Hungary who believes in solidarity and togetherness.”*

MORE INFORMATION:

artemisszio.blog.hu

2

2nd prize: **Dionysis Arvanitakis**

What man's heart can remain unmoved when he sees a small child eat the soil?

Dionysis Arvanitakis bakes over 100 kg of bread every day for refugees on the Greek island of Kos, just two and a half nautical miles off the coast of Turkey. The 77-year-old baker fills his van with bread and pastry and goes on a round handing them out to the hopeless men, women and children who land on Kos, sea-soaked and exhausted. He was one of the first to assist the refugees who were arriving on the island by the hundreds every day. His actions inspired colleagues, citizens, hotel owners and many more to follow his example. Mr Arvanitakis knows the meaning of deprivation. He left his hometown in Greece as a young man and emigrated to Australia in search of a better future. In 1970, he returned 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, Iraq and 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?"* European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker praised the Greek

baker in his annual State of the European Union address on 9 September. Imploring Europeans to *"remember well that Europe is a continent where nearly everyone has at one time been a refugee"*, Juncker paid tribute to Arvanitakis by stating 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.



2

2nd prize: **ILIAKTIDA AMKE**

ILIAKTIDA is a non-profit organization based in Lesbos which has been helping cover the basic needs of refugees, migrants and their families through the work of volunteers. Through ILIAKTIDA, desperate people – such as a devastated family who had lost their children at sea, an exhausted old man in a wheelchair fleeing his worn-torn country to seek reunion with his son in Germany, unaccompanied minors who had seen their homes destroyed – have received practical help from volunteers together with social, legal, medical and psychological support from professional staff. ILIAKTIDA also provides the newcomers with information about their rights as well as Greek language lessons. Its 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 their own 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 into a new, independent and integrated life in Greece.



Its main concern and goal has been to get refugees out of camps and into local communities.



MORE INFORMATION:

iliaktida-amea.gr

2

2nd prize: **SOS MEDITERRANEE**

We do not want to stand idly by, as every day men, women and children drown in the Mediterranean.

SOS MEDITERRANEE (Germany) has helped rescue more than 5 400 refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of its mission in February 2016. Operating in partnership with 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 search-and-rescue operations carried out by Italy and the EU as well as by other NGOs, it was established in Berlin by the German merchant ship captain Klaus Vogel and the French humanitarian project manager Sophie Beau in May 2015. In contrast to other rescue operations, SOS MEDITERRANEE acts not only at sea but also ashore in order to ensure and restore human rights and dignity for refugees. This European network – including German, French and Italian supporters – aims to amplify the voices of refugees to promote mutual understanding. Klaus Vogel explains: *“For us it is not just about saving lives, but also about publicising the situation of refugees and highlighting the effects of European refugee policy.”* SOS MEDITERRANEE also organises public events, participates in discussions and gives lectures in schools to contribute to the public debate and to relevant scientific research. In addition, it carries out educational work among refugees. In response to the current humanitarian and political situation, SOS MEDITERRANEE is calling

for political action and shared social responsibility and is seeking to demonstrate the possible impact of civil society action. As Klaus Vogel puts it: *“We do not want to stand idly by, as every day men, women and children drown in the Mediterranean. The sea must not become a grave. It doesn't matter where they come from or where they are going.”*



MORE INFORMATION:

sosmediterranee.org/?lang=en



2nd prize:

SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa Gipuzkoako SOS Arrazakeria

2

SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa – Gipuzkoako SOS Arrazakeria (Spain) is a branch of SOS Racismo located in San Sebastián. It was founded in 1993 to fight all forms of discrimination, segregation and isolation based on skin colour, ethnicity or cultural background. The organisation, which consists of 11 workers, 86 association members and 112 volunteers, aims to combat racism, intolerance and xenophobia and promote human rights through awareness-raising, training and education, information, assistance and advice programmes, documentation and the promotion of voluntary work.



The project proposed for the prize is called **“Next door family”** (Bizilagunak) and is based on an idea that is very simple (though complex to put into practice): a native household welcomes a migrant family into their home for a meal so that they can talk



and have a chance to learn more about each other. How can a native family be persuaded to let strangers into their own home – a place where they usually invite only their closest friends? SOS Racismo made it possible through their mediators/facilitators, and the positive outcomes have been enormous.

The project has grown 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 carried out an external evaluation of the project and came to the conclusion that it significantly reduces the perception of insecurity and increases positive emotions, such as admiration, towards migrants. Small steps that make a huge difference in hundreds of families, giving the opportunity for families living next door to become real neighbours!

The project reduces the perception of insecurity and increases positive emotions, such as admiration, towards migrants.

MORE INFORMATION:

<http://sosracismo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MEMORIA-2015-Gipuzkoa.pdf>

<http://sosracismo.eu/convivencia/>



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