

How social entrepreneurs transform the journey of migrants

In 2015, the number of non-EU citizens applying for asylum in the European Union reached a peak: 1.3 million people (Eurostat Database) fleeing conflict or misery risked their lives to seek a better life in Europe. Five years earlier, this number was four times smaller. As this number grew, new needs for action emerged. Among them, the necessity to provide dignified living situations to those on the move, ensure their economic integration and ability to connect socially and culturally with host communities.

To address the needs emerging in such a historical context, new models ought to be built. When designing new models, one should give full attention to the best paradigm shifters: social entrepreneurs. Pioneering one reform after another, dozens of them have been reinventing every step of the migrant's journey in Europe, transforming the way migration functions locally and internationally. For each challenge they address, they build a strategy with one core principle for their action: empower migrant populations and host communities to become active agents of change. Put together and scaled, their transformative ideas can change the way western countries deal with migration and its challenges.

Transforming former victims into agents of change

Who would have thought that refugee camps, some of the most miserable places on earth, could be turned into sustainable ecosystems of innovation and dignified places of opportunity? Daniel Kerber, a German social entrepreneur took on this challenge using design thinking, one of the most efficient approaches of social innovators. Closely looking at the needs of refugees in camps and arrival centres, he created a participatory method that involves refugees themselves in the design of places that address their needs, developing innovations that enable more dignified living, while improving social interaction and economic opportunity for people on the move. So far, More Than Shelters (MTS) has impacted more than 1 million people on their migration journey. Among other projects, MTS led the creation of modifiable shelters in Lesbos (Greece) and the architectural design of the Tempelhof arrival centre in Berlin (Germany). Not only does this approach allow more efficient solutions to be built to ensure dignified living situations, it also turns those that are formerly seen as passive victims into experts and active agents of change, with enough self-confidence to positively transform their own living situations.

Assuming that refugees have much to contribute to at many levels

When some look at the migrant population as a “problem” to be solved, social entrepreneurs see migrants as people with abilities and consider them as potential contributions that can play an active role in local communities and positively contribute to society at large. With the Ubuntu Academy, the Portuguese innovator Rui Marques is seeking to unleash the leadership potential of young migrants or descendants of migrants. Through a two-year empowerment programme that follows non-formal education methods and focuses on community leadership and social entrepreneurship, Ubuntu serves as a starting block for those young people to lead projects that will positively contribute to social change. Launched in Portugal in 2012, Ubuntu is now active in 8 countries across Europe. Among many impactful projects, a group of alumni contributed to design and launch a Reconciliation Committee in Guinea Bissau.

Building long-lasting bonds

Not only do migrants need to be empowered and feel that they play an active part in their migration journey, host communities – who often see themselves as victims of public policies they can’t influence – must also feel the power of change making. Social and cultural integration requires the creation of long-lasting bonds between communities. Whether social, cultural or economic, those bonds cannot be artificially created by public institutions. Starting in France and later expanding to Morocco, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, the social entrepreneur Nathanaël Molle led the establishment of a network of both refugees and locals, committed to creating deep connections and shift society’s growing perception of refugees as merely victims or, worse, a threat. The creation of this network triggered opportunities for its members who are invited to share passions (music, art...), launch entrepreneurial ventures, share stories and build friendships that completely transform the integration process. Singa’s network grew to include more than 20,000 members in France and sends a clear message: everyone can do something to turn problems into opportunities and improve experiences of migrants in their arrival cities. It is not only possible but also necessary, and social entrepreneurs like Nathanaël Molle are paving the way.

Imagine Europe in 10 years. Singa’s community model has been replicated by other organisations across more than 20 European countries, involving millions of citizens as active tie-builders. Humanitarian NGOs and public institutions are now building hundreds of arrival centres following the participatory approach of More than Shelters. Imagine if each young person who crosses a border is now given an opportunity to lead. Joined together and scaled beyond their original national boundaries, these solutions and many others put forward by social entrepreneurs to transform the journeys of migrants, have the power to radically shift the lenses through which Europe is dealing with the arrival of refugees and migrants. Investing in their action, giving them opportunities to connect and co-create in collaboration with public and private organisations and building their capacity to scale, are key to ensuring the

ability of our societies to adapt to these population movements that are going to shape the decades to come.

Anaïs Petit

Ashoka France (www.ashoka.org/en/country/france)

Discover Hello Europe, the first Migration Accelerator led by Ashoka, connecting and accelerating citizen sector innovators around migration and refugees (www.hello-europe.eu/).