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CITIES AND REFUGEES: Barcelona's Message

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The images of thousands of refugees, mostly from Syria and Afghanistan, crossing the Balkans in their attempt to reach the heart of Europe, have prodded many consciences. Cities like Barcelona are no exception. While they are relatively far away from the epicentre of the crisis, they want to, and can make an effort to respond in a spirit of solidarity to these exceptional circumstances. At present, the great majority of groups represented in the Barcelona City Council are in favour of the idea of the city's becoming a haven for refugees and contributing actively towards organising a **network of refuge cities**. Any response must attempt to deal with the immediacy of the present crisis but without losing sight of the fact that this is a long-term phenomenon. Refugees will continue to keep arriving and those already here will not be able to return to their countries in the near future. Now it is time to move from words to action, and this should be carried out in four different areas.

The infrastructure for receiving asylum seekers in Barcelona needs to be improved, in particular, that providing accommodation and psychological and legal support, not to mention employment and social integration. The shortage of places for refugees is striking evidence that Barcelona is under-equipped, even by comparison with other large Spanish cities. In Catalonia as a whole there are fewer than thirty places, while Madrid has 250, a figure which, nonetheless, falls far short of the demand in recent years. The Barcelona City Council will not be alone in its response to this humanitarian crisis. As is happening in other countries (and citizen campaigns in **Iceland** and **Germany** are clear examples of this), a significant number of **people** are offering to provide succour and accommodation to refugees. Furthermore, Barcelona has a network of associations which are mobilised and ready to constitute a third pillar of this strategy of welcoming refugees. When the model for families taking in refugees is being considered, one group which should be given priority attention is that of unaccompanied minors without relatives in Europe, an increasingly numerous phenomenon in recent months, according to the NGO **Save the Children**.

The second area of response is that of finding solutions for matters closer to home. Although the figures are not nearly as high as those for other European countries like Germany or Switzerland, the numbers of requests for asylum in Spain have increased, especially from Syrians (over 1,500 in 2014, according to **Eurostat** data).

Some of them are in very precarious circumstances, for example the ever-greater number of refugees in the reception centre in **Melilla** (with more than a thousand applications for asylum, according to UNHCR some months ago) who have arrived there after crossing the land border with Morocco. If Barcelona wishes to welcome Syrian refugees, there is no need to wait until the Spanish government decides to resettle in the city some of the refugees who are crossing the Balkans into Hungary, or others landing on Greek and Italian shores every day. It could begin with people who are already in Spanish territory.

The third task is to construct municipal alliances. It is necessary to organise a bloc of big cities to persuade the Spanish government to be more generous in relocating and resettling refugees and more diligent in processing requests for asylum (which, in some cases, can take up to four years to finalise). In order to get the Spanish government to make a move, it is essential that this alliance should not be limited to what has now become known as “cities for change”, namely those in which citizen candidatures and emerging political forces have taken over positions in municipal government since the elections of 24 May. Then again, this movement should be European-wide. The image and prestige of a city like Barcelona could encourage other big European cities to join forces to come up with responses both within their own countries and on the European scale. This would mean creating a network of refuge-cities across Europe and then lobbying the European institutions. It might even entail employing a kind of pincer movement to put pressure on some exceptions among the EU member states whose responses continue to be niggardly and defensive. Ideally, the mayors of European cities should convey this message before the summit planned for 14 September.

Fourth, it will be necessary to work with other branches of the public administration. State governments alone have the power to recognise the refugee status of asylum seekers and, according to the Dublin Regulation (now in question because it has proved to be inoperative), they also have the obligation to provide basic refugee reception services for any person seeking asylum. If Barcelona, as both municipal government and society, is able to provide an infrastructure to receive refugees, it will have to work with the central government in order to resettle those who are already in Spanish or European territory. The city will also have to work with provincial governments and supramunicipal structures, especially when it comes to providing basic services (for example education, health and employment guidance). In this regard, it will have to be borne in mind that efforts made to help refugees by many small towns and even villages in rural areas could have a very significant impact. Moreover, in these small villages and towns it is easier to organise community initiatives for receiving refugees and to provide accommodation in buildings that are presently in disuse. Differences aside, they may be able to emulate some of the initiatives taken by old, depopulated rural areas where towns have worked to attract families with children to come and live there by offering accommodation and work. However, these municipalities cannot work alone and will need the big cities to oversee the project and to pull their weight.

Within this framework of “vertical” work involving different levels of government, advantage should be taken of the experience of other countries in which coordination has been the key factor in the success of their actions. According to a report published by the European network **SHARE**, Sweden and The Netherlands offer good examples of coordination between the different branches and areas of the public administration. These countries have infrastructure and a much more solid background in this kind of work, and their good practices could and should be observed and imported. Along similar lines, the European institutions and most particularly the Commission will be natural allies for any city that wishes to share this effort of solidarity and to work in concert with other European cities. Guarantees will also be needed to ensure that any new funding made available to states by the Commission to help them deal with this humanitarian crisis will be managed by people who are in charge of providing the reception services.

Barcelona is not just any European city. Not in vain did *Fortune* list its former mayor as one of the world's fifty "greatest leaders". Much has been said about the "Barcelona brand", although comments are not always favourable. Faced with this humanitarian crisis, and with the impetus of a dismayed and mobilised society, Barcelona can reiterate three of the messages which are part of its genetic code. First, it is an open, caring city. Second, it wishes to have influence on the European scale and is able to do so. And, third, it is truly concerned about what is happening in neighbouring countries in a way that goes beyond self-satisfied speeches about its status as a European-Mediterranean capital.