

FINAL REPORT

International Mayors Conference

NOW

Listen – Ask – Learn – Answer

Concerned mayors – People on the move – Experts – NGOs

January 21-22, 2016, Vienna

Patronage: Michael Häupl, Mayor of Vienna

André Heller

Large areas of our populous world are currently experiencing turmoil, chaos, fear and upheavals. Men, women and children in dozens of millions are fleeing from wars, economic and ethnic tragedies as well as natural and climate disasters. As in the case of Syria, refugee movements have already assumed the proportions of a mass migration.

To these individuals who are in total despair, painfully uprooted and seeking help to escape life- threatening dangers, the European Union appears as the number one destination in offering hope. This irresistible hope has given rise to the biggest moral, logistic and political challenge since the establishment of the European Union confronting many European countries today. It thus puts the entire EU, as a community based on solidarity and common values, to a merciless test.

We are becoming witnesses to, and players in, a game of powerful polarity between cynical cruelty versus energetic efforts by noble-hearted individuals, between hatred, agitation and contempt for the individual versus a spirit of mercy in addition to an untiring readiness to help on the part of tens of thousands of members of civil society. We are caught between the most primitive, populist stultification and disinformation campaigns, serving as a prerequisite for vote-catching in muddy waters for radical nationalist egomaniacs, and initiatives struggling to find subtle, responsible, well-balanced solutions.

In the face of this historic challenge there is a shocking lack of knowledge across all, a sense of being overwhelmed and a feeling of confusion at the different levels of various factions.

NOW, a private initiative of women and men from the worlds of science, arts, journalism, politics and NGOs, coordinated by the renowned Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue in Vienna, is circulating questions relating to the different aspects of this drama to highly skilled experts and hopes to find feasible answers thereby, being fully aware that these may well be uncomfortable.

The results of this survey will be made available as food for thought and practical stimuli for action to politicians, the media, religious communities and the largest possible number of citizens via a You Tube channel as well as through major public events.

We take the fears of the large number of European fellow citizens seriously and want to help them find practicable ways to overcome these in line with the ambitious humanitarian standards of an enlightened society guided by forward thinking wisdom in the 21st century. NOW!

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Preface: André Heller and Patricia Kahane

The idea to initiate the N-O-W conference was developed in many private conversations about the increasing cluelessness in the face of the massive refugee movement from civil war-torn Syria during the summer of 2015 and the completely erratic, nothing but reactive political actions.

We asked ourselves what we are going to say to our grandchildren when they ask: “You must have seen that something with far-reaching consequences was happening... What did you do back then?”

And we thought: “What can we do now?”

We decided to send out invitations to an international conference.

Living together takes place on a communal level, along the entire path from Syria across the first host countries Lebanon and Jordan, the transit route (Turkey, Greece, Italy) as well as the receiving countries, in our case Austria and Germany. Living space and resources are shared in camps and communities where greatly varying needs, expectations and standards meet and must be managed by mayors or camp leaders.

Therefore, we decided to invite mayors as the conference’s key players.

During the two-day conference mayors, experts, civil society representatives and refugees from affected regions were to be given an opportunity to find ways and means for a subtle refugee policy that strives for responsible and well-balanced solutions. Based on the values of democracy and human rights, this initiative was directed towards various persons concerned by providing a concrete set of guidelines.

The N-O-W conference is a private initiative funded without public money and therefore independent of party political and ideological provisions and sensitivities. We were able to focus on listening, asking, learning from each other and to see what comes out of it.

The roughly 130 participants of the N-O-W conference consisted of mayors from Jordan to northern Germany, people who had fled and those who had received them, NGOs, experts.

The major sponsors include Kahane Foundation, Kerbler Holding, Gerhard Zeiler, Austrian Federal Railways ÖBB, Verein respekt.net, as well as the many people who have helped and invested far greater amounts of time than they charged.

The objectives of the N-O-W conference: Listen – Ask – Learn – Answer.

- Listen: create collective knowledge on the situation in all problem areas: economic, social, related to education, jobs, cultural.
- Ask: the mayors each other and all others them. The mayors were to exchange information on how to solve their problems along the refugee routes.
- Learn: provide a platform for arriving and receiving persons, NGOs, experts, and not least the media to exchange first-hand information.
- Answer: the knowledge gained was intended to help “new thinking” and “new solutions” strategies. They are urgently required on all levels, internationally, across the EU, nationally, and on a communal level.

For us, it was about taking the next steps, about answers to the many topics that needed to be tackled, and about proposals on how to keep on co-operating in finding new solutions together. It was and is about ideas that enable good decisions on institutional and civil society levels, about obtaining clarity on similarities and differences, about taking on responsibility and about the question of what each one of us can contribute to achieve peaceful coexistence.

In this context, we would like to quote Albert Einstein as saying: “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”.

About the organization of the conference

The organizers – André Heller, Andreas Babler, Patricia Kahane, Elke Zuckermann, the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue – and the N-O-W conference team of moderators, headed by Ebru Sonuc, have developed a format that was to combine individual elements of a “classic political conference” with the principles and orientation of N-O-W.

The orientation of N-O-W is based on:

- Communication at eye level
- Involving, if possible, all stakeholders (“We don’t only talk about refugees, but with refugees”) and giving everybody a voice.
- Common co-creation processes as opposed to classic presentations of pre-prepared statements and short Q&As.
- Exchange of information by all about the topics that are urgent and important to them.
- Exchange of information by all about solutions and best practice examples.
- Connecting participants on all levels represented: authorities-related, professional and human.
- Connecting organizations, pooling of activities and energies.
- Developing possible next steps.
- Aiming to draw the attention of communal, national and European politicians to knowledge already obtained and successful solution models.

Conference design

An “audience” was not invited to the conference. With the exception of the technical teams and the media representatives at the press conferences all people present were conference participants.

Conference organization

- Informal meeting at the welcome dinner at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue the evening before the conference
- Inauguration of the conference with speeches from organizers, sponsors and a representative of the Mayor of Vienna (patronage)
- Three panel discussions on the escape route
- Five, simultaneously held World Café discussions (moderated working groups) following each panel
- Presentation of the working group results in plenary
- Joint meals and evening program

Agenda First Day

- Panel 1 – The Neighbours: Lebanon and Jordan, moderated by curator Viola Raheb.
- Panel 2 – On the Road – Points of Transition – Turkey, Greece, Italy, moderated by curator Hannes Swoboda
- Panel discussion with Tjark Bartels, councilor from Lower Saxony, moderated by curator Robert Misik
- Music performed partly by unaccompanied underage refugees, conducted by Marwan Abado
- Joint dinner

Agenda Second Day

- Panel 3 – Arrived? Between Asylum and Integration – Austria, Germany, moderated by curator Robert Misik
- Press conference
- Joint lunch
- Spontaneous joint declaration of mayors *)
- Presentation of the draft of the declaration of the International Mayors’ Conference N-O-W
- Conclusion and farewell

1st Panel: The Neighbours - Lebanon and Jordan



Chair

Viola Raheb, University of Vienna, Faculty of Protestant Theology, Department of the Studies of Religions

Participants

Mohammad Al Kilani, Deputy Secretary General, The Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization for Relief & Development (JHCO)

Yousef Al-Shawarbeh, Deputy Mayor of Amman, Jordan

Mai Aleid, Syrian activist, asylum seeker in Austria

George Antoun, Mercy Corps, Lebanon

Christian Berger, EEAS - European External Action Service

Marwa Boustani, UN-Habitat, Lebanon

Laurence Hengl, ADA – Austrian Development Agency

Udo Janz, former director of the New York office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Margaretha Maleh, Médecins Sans Frontières, Austria

Ali Mattar, Mayor of Sahel El Zahrani, Lebanon

Walid Abed Rabbah, The Jordan Response Platform for the Syria Crisis (JRPSC), Jordan

Hassan Ruhaibeh, Mayor of Um Al Jimal, Jordan

Nazem Saleh, Mayor of Marej, Lebanon

Extract

Ali Mattar, Mayor of Sahel El Zahrani, Lebanon

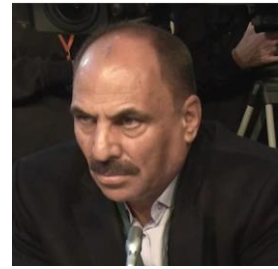
The fact that 40% of the inhabitants of Lebanon are refugees is a disaster. The country is undergoing a major economic and political crisis. Up until the Sykes-Picot agreement Lebanon and Syria were one. There is a special relationship between the two people. Since 2011, Lebanon had and still has opened its doors and Lebanese have opened their homes and their hearts to Syrian refugees. **Our resources are limited. We are sharing everything we have, but we need help to help the refugees.** We all have to develop projects with a long-term focus that will benefit all refugees, both Syrian and Palestinian.



Nazem Saleh, Mayor of Marej, Lebanon

Lebanon is a small country with a population of 5.8 million of which 1.1 million are refugees.

For Syrians it is easy to reach the Lebanon. We thought that the Syrian civil war would last for one or two months and we were successful in dealing with the initial numbers of refugees, but the numbers are still increasing. **We work 24/7 and nevertheless we cannot cope: One third of the refugees is living in tents.** We need nearly 10 tons of food every day, we cannot provide the infrastructure to ensure water supply and a functioning sewage system.



Civil society and NGOs are not very established in Lebanon. Help is needed from the international community and we miss a solution from the Lebanon itself. We realize that the refugees need help, but the Lebanese society is suffering as well. **We have become displaced persons ourselves.**

We need sustainable development plans, so that the Lebanese society and the Syrian refugees can start to see the end of the tunnel. **We want to see a generation grow up to live in a situation where there will be peace.**

Yousef Al-Shawarbeh, Deputy Mayor of Amman, Jordan

There are 450 000 Syrian refugees in Jordan and only 130 000 are registered. Jordan is facing tremendous challenges: **In many Jordanian cities, there are more refugees than locals.** We depend entirely on importing resources, **there are not enough water supplies, not enough schools.** We were faced with high unemployment before, but now Syrians are competing with Jordanians on the job market. The threat of poverty has become apparent.



For more than 70 years, Jordan has dealt with with Palestinian and Syrian refugees but now we need help. **It takes 24 years to integrate refugees into society and we want to offer the refugees a way out of their current situation.**

We have to deal with all this respecting international law, but we need the international community to assume responsibility. I ask to take action!

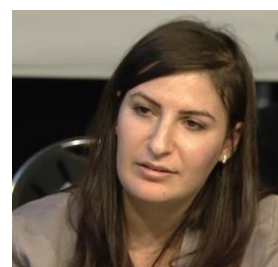
Hassan Ruhaibeh, Mayor of Um Al Jimal, Jordan

Sharing a 375 km long border with Syria, many have crossed it to come to Jordan. This is what we deal with. **We want to and have to help these refugees and this is much more important than economic difficulties.** The largest refugee camp in Jordan is in Um Al Jimal. The Syrian civil war has developed into a massive international crisis and Europe has to intervene. **Only the international community can solve this...** I believe that those who focus on a human approach will succeed in the end. I want to appeal to our European friends to support us, to provide relief to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.



Mai Aleid, Syrian activist and asylum seeker in Austria

I fled from the city of Dara'a in Syria and came to Austria two months ago. **As a women during this flight I forgot my female identity, I was just on the run.** From Syria to Lebanon, we were asked: "Where do you want to go? Do you have a boat you can cross the Mediterranean with?" We went to Turkey. The journey continued. The smugglers exploited us. We passed through Greece and Macedonia. We were transported by train and bus to Serbia. We were like fish in cans. **The only thing we wanted was to find a safe space. We took one step after the other; we had no idea what our future would look like, no idea where we would end up.**



People helped us along the way and I thank all those people, the NGOs and charity organizations that told us what to do. The state organizations did not tell us anything. In Austria, I found Project Balsam, which tries to help Syrian refugees, particularly women.

We Syrians are tired of this war. We ask for help so we can finally have peace.

George Antoun, Mercy Corps, Lebanon

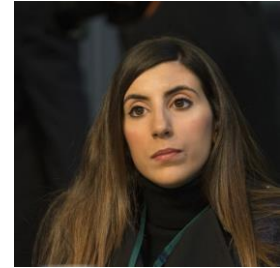
We need more transparency in dealing with the communities and the refugees. Donor communities posed problems as well. In the long run it would be more sustainable to have an improved water supply and sewage system rather than having bottled water and mobile toilets. **In our manual for better interaction with the refugees, we focus on good governance and capacity building.**



Marwa Boustani, UN Habitat, Lebanon

There are sixty million refugees worldwide. Some villages' populations have increased by 325%. Some agencies are working on the regional level, some on the level of municipalities, and we wonder how can we coordinate our activities? It is very crucial to rethink the interventions we are providing.

Politics play a key role on all levels. On the municipal level, cooperation depends entirely on the respective mayor. We need to focus on local and municipal levels to tackle problems with water and wastewater. The large number of refugees makes integration a difficult task. Local actors need to be involved to counter these difficulties.



Mohammad Al Kilani, Deputy Secretary General, the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization for Relief & Development (JHCO)

We are faced with a situation in which people see the problem but deny the facts. Consider the difference between 2011 and 2015. You see that the assistance of international organizations and donor countries was cut by a third between 2013 and 2015. I do not ask for assistance, but to look at the root cause of the problem.

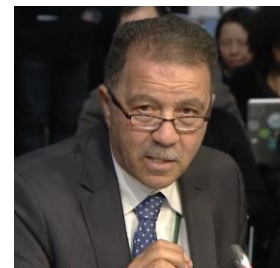
Turkey is overtaxed. In the beginning, the refugees in Turkey were helped. But today many of the 300 000 **Syrian children and youth who are in need of education cannot go to school. They are in danger of becoming a lost generation.** The Syrians would want to stay in Syria or in the neighboring countries, but they are forced to leave. When they knock at the doors of Europe, they come with the hope that the doors will be opened.



Walid Abed Rabboh, Jordan Response Platform for the Syria Crisis (JRPSC)

Soon the conflict will reach a sixth year and the host societies cannot cope. **The cut in international and humanitarian assistance is disastrous** coupled with the increasing numbers of refugees. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. We see no initiative emerging that could lead to this light.

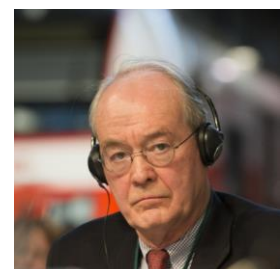
We have to adopt a different approach: Children are children, irrespective where they come from. Austria, Syria, or Jordan. Children are children and they need to go to school. We have to create equal opportunities. **We have to consider the refugees as an opportunity for the society in Europe as well.** Host societies who understand they cannot just go back to business as usual will be able to do so.



Udo Janz, former director of the New York office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Civil society provided the first response to the crisis. One of the major surprises in 2015 was that the arrival of refugees was not stopped by the onset of winter. Their number is increasing. The root causes of the conflict have not changed. People flee if there is no other opportunity than flee at least their home region, if not their home country.

UNHCR sees how the neighboring countries have helped. Due to the cut in expenditure, programs are stopped, the education of an entire generation is lost and it will be difficult to catch up on that.



Christian Berger, European External Action Service (EEAS)

60% of the refugees are without education, 15% with secondary education. We need to integrate the refugees so their lives can normalize. **Jordan has changed its policy and is moving away from refugees being a burden to seeing the situation as a win-win for the refugees and the country.**



Laurence Hengl, Austrian Development Agency (ADA)

We need to focus on the lost generation problem and educate the children. We need to see refugees as opportunities. Europe in the past has strongly benefited from immigration and refugees and we need to look at that. **In every single person there are stories and abilities.**



Margaretha Maleh, Médecins sans Frontières, Austria

The people have to be supported. Many suffer even more on their flight than they did in their home countries. We hear shocking stories of what happens to them on their long route to Europe, especially in terms of traumatization.

We must safeguard the flight route and ensure that refugees are treated with respect and dignity; we must ensure that medical assistance is available.



Viola Raheb, Chair

- There can be no permanent solution without a political solution. Only a political solution can help solve the humanitarian crisis. It is necessary to develop a vision of peace for the Middle East.
- There is a need to take a new look at the suffering, who refugees and asylum seekers are and who they can be. We need to see them as opportunities; they can enrich our lives.
- It is significant to activate communication and cohesion, interaction between host society and refugees in order to strengthen help and assistance.
- Although the mayors have talked about burdens, they all indicated they are willing to help, to support the refugees.



2nd Panel: On the Road – Points of Transition – Turkey, Greece, Italy



Chair

Hannes Swoboda, politician, former Member of European Parliament

Participants

Luigi Ammatuna, Mayor of Pozallo, Italy

Firat Anli, Co-Mayor of Diyarbakir, Turkey

Kristof Bender, ESI – European Stability Initiative

Erkan Erenci, City Council Member in charge of the Refugee Camp Diyarbakir, Turkey

Spyros Galinos, Mayor of Lesbos, Greece

Giorgios Kyritsis, Mayor of Kos, Greece

Manfred Nowak, Professor of International Law and Human Rights, University of Vienna, Austria

Möstafa Noori, Afghan Activist, asylum seeker

Harun Öztürkler, Economy advisor at Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), University of Kırıkkale, Turkey

Lefteris Papagiannakis, Athens City Council and President of the Athens Council for Immigrants, Greece

Christine Schörkhuber, Activist, Artist and Musician, Austria

Ahmet Türk, Co-Mayor of Mardin, Turkey

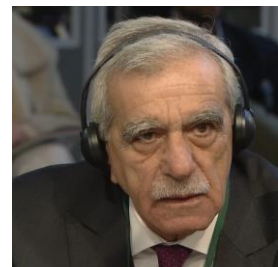
Manolis Vournous, Mayor of Chios, Greece

Extract

Ahmet Türk, Co-Mayor of Mardin, Turkey

When the internal conflict in Syria broke out, Turkey was concentrated on restraining regime critical groups. And the more time passed the more refugees came, more than 2 million refugees are now in Turkey. Our Kurdish people did a tremendous job and supported refugees. **The Turkish government did not take any measures to help the Ysidis, we as mayors tried to support these people. The Middle East is exploding.** Kurds are oppressed. The fights between the Kurds and the Turks might well escalate, so that Europe will have to cope with ten times more refugees.

To prevent this from happening the EU has to do a lot, everyone has to do their part.



Firat Anli, Co-Mayor of Diyarbakir, Turkey

We held out our hands to help but now we need help from others. We have imposed curfews, possibilities to attend schools are limited, our goal is to discriminate no one. **I have to criticize the EU who is prepared to outsource these issues to Turkey in exchange for money. These people are suffering because of big power games. We all share this misery. We dream of coexistence.** We have been refugees too.



Erkan Erenci, City Council Member in charge of the Refugee Camp Diyarbakir, Turkey

In Turkey municipalities differ from European ones. If the mayor is in opposition to the government, he is faced with limited financial resources. **We should concentrate on combating the causes of flight.** When the Arab Spring started expectations were high, it seemed possible to see democracy in the region, but the dictatorships returned.



Harun Öztürkler, Economy advisor at Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), University of Kırıkkale, Turkey

Turkey absorbed about 2 million refugees, no identity checks were carried out, they were simply admitted. Now 1% of the GDP is spent on refugees. The impact on the economy is tremendous. **There are 3 elementary needs: food, health, accommodation. Modern slavery is the major tragedy. 700,000 child refugees live in Turkey, we have to give them a perspective and education.** What has to be given priority? Education because if not, there will be a lost generation.



Spyros Galinos, Mayor of Lesbos, Greece

Thank you very much for the opportunity to raise my voice to put an end to the crime of trafficking people who are forced to flee. My island has to shoulder 75% of this problem. **550.000 people have arrived in Lesbos because they wanted to escape and they were longing for hope.** We try to help with the little things we have. But we need to speak about the routes refugees have to take. Collaboration with Turkey is key and if the political registration is not done in Turkey, responsibility has to be taken by the EU. Europe must join forces: you can't just leave Turkey and Greece on their own. **Every country should receive refugees according to their capacities. And if we are not able to end this war, we at least need to stop the trafficking of refugees.**



Giorgios Kyritsis, Mayor of Kos, Greece

I'm a Socialist, I'm a rebel when it comes to human rights. We can't close down Europe, we have to show solidarity with those who seek help. Kos is a small island with 17.000 inhabitants and last summer we took in 12.000 refugees – in one single day. There are European countries who refuse to take any. The problem is not the Greek border– no other country has such a long maritime border as Greece. The problems come from the countries of the refugees and from the route they have to take. It is terrible to see people drown, **we got accustomed to the smell of death, but it is intolerable to get used to this.** If Europe continues to close its eyes to this problem, then the idea of the EU will implode.



Manolis Vournous, Mayor of Chios, Greece

We have to deal with something we haven't dealt with before. Day after day the coast guards saved the lives of thousands between Turkey and Kos. There are lots of people who undertake every effort to make all this possible, registration, the municipality, volunteers provided food, clothing, water since April. **The best solution of all is peace in Syria, but tomorrow there may be other countries where people flee from.** The most important assistance is to provide help in Syria.



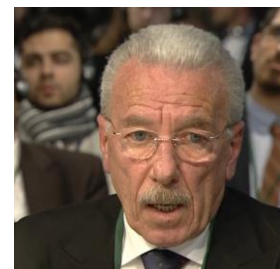
Lefteris Papagiannakis, Athens City Council and President of the Athens Council for Immigrants, Greece

In 2015 more than 800.000 people entered the Greek territory. Greece is not an immigration country, only since last year do we have a Ministry for Immigration. There are no special services or bodies that deal with refugees. **The EU policy is to put Greece under pressure to do more with less funds and to pass the problem on to Turkey.** But we have to understand the dimensions of this problem: either we cooperate in Europe or Europe will be destroyed.



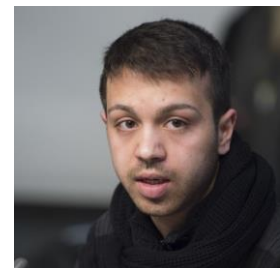
Luigi Ammatuna, Mayor of Pozallo, Italy

Don't call these people refugees, they are humans who have dignity and the right to be treated like humans. Those who want to reject refugees don't realize the drama they went through: I would like you to sit on a bench and watch pregnant women and children coming longing for solid ground. **If the EU fixes numbers of refugees: Who is prepared to step on their hands when they finally climb onto the harbor wall? I think you wouldn't want to be in their place.** Thousands of unaccompanied minors reached us. Parents put their children on boats knowing they might drown but still taking the risk because they want them to have a better life if they happen to arrive safely. The EU has a tremendous responsibility towards stopping the war.



Möstafo Noori, Afghan Activist, asylum seeker

I'm from Afghanistan, I have been living in Austria for three years and my application for asylum got approved. In Afghanistan we have had war for 38 years, millions of people were murdered. People left their homes to find a safe place. We must not forget: **Flight is the last resort for a human being, no one wants to leave behind his/her home, family and friends.** Now I live in a private home with other young people, I became part of the Austrian society. We are all pursuing the same goal: We want to be treated as human beings.



Christine Schörkhuber, Activist, Artist and Musician, Austria

At the beginning of this migration movement it wouldn't have been possible to handle the situation without the volunteers. There would have been a huge humanitarian disaster.

People must not be robbed of their dignity. This can be only be achieved through cooperation with the refugees. We need sustainable long-term structures. **Many refugees help other refugees. They build bridges. This is the strength in this crisis.** I don't believe a fence at the border is pursuing European values.



Manfred Nowak, Professor of International Law and Human Rights, University of Vienna

We have already witnessed that with the current situation of closing borders etc. we shift the problem to other states and eventually it will reach Greece again. **In the long run we will see a humanitarian crisis in Greece, the hotspots will become detention camps, whole islands will be filled with refugees who have to stay there.** We have to make sure that the refugees will be distributed across European countries. What is important is to offer these refugees economic perspective.



Kristof Bender, ESI – European Stability Initiative

Building fences, closing borders: I think outsourcing is not a happily chosen word. The plan to bring refugees directly from Turkey to Europe is as credible as taking thousands of refugees from Italy to Central Europe; that means: not credible at all. Trust is a big issue and there is a lack of trust. On longer term we need a common European policy, but it will not come in time now, we need to do it alone. Leading countries need to take the initiative. Refugees could be taken by plane directly from Ankara. That demands communication with Ankara. This is only a sketch but it's ambitious. It's difficult but I can't see any other way to control the Schengen border.



Hannes Swoboda, Chair

- The drastic actions taken by Turkey against the Kurds have resulted in a highly explosive situation and could trigger a new migratory movement towards the West any time
- Passing reaction and responsibility on to others in exchange for financial compensation could backfire
- Solving the Syria conflict and establishing peace in the region are imperative
- Priority must be given to the topics child refugees, child labor, modern slavery and people smuggling
- Greece is unable to cope with the administrative and financial burden
- Closing borders, building fences and walls will only lead to alternative escape routes
- Europe must manage to distribute the people who have arrived in all member countries



3rd Panel: Arrived? Between Asylum and Integration - Austria, Germany, Sweden



Chair

Robert Misik, author and journalist

Participants

Nour Alsoliman, Syrian Filmmaker, asylum seeker in Austria

Andreas Babler, Mayor of Traiskirchen, Austria

Georg Bürstmayr, Human Rights Lawyer, Austria

Michael Chalupka, Diakonie, Austria

Jürgen Dupper, Mayor of Passau, Germany

Erich Fenninger, Volkshilfe, Austria

Peter Hacker, Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW), Austria

Reinhard Hundsmüller, Arbeiter Samariterbund, Austria

Andreas Minnich, Councillor, Korneuburg

Dieter Posch, Mayor of Neudörfel, Austria

Laura Schoch, Chairwoman, Bundesjugendvertretung (National Youth Council), Austria

Klaus Schwertner, Caritas Vienna, Austria

Mahsa Ghafari, Flucht nach vorn, Austria

Extract

Andreas Babler, Mayor of Traiskirchen, Austria

We must ask one central question: What are the expectations, hopes and abilities of the people who have arrived. This information forms the basis of how somebody wants to participate in society, which should be their society, too.

It is therefore necessary to enter into a dialogue from the very start. In addition to funding, a change of thinking is called for, away from the problem-centered approach that currently dominates the media discourse. In Traiskirchen as well as in other refugee hostels help is provided by support organizations. However, on a daily basis, the people are left to themselves, we need to institutionalize scanning processes and resources.



Jürgen Dupper, Mayor of Passau, Germany

It's time to take action: What can we do for those that will stay with us in the long term? It goes without saying that we want to help people in need, but now it is about offering them a good home. I advise being more composed. We have experienced so much and all of a sudden everybody is becoming hysterical. **I rather live in a country into which millions of people flock than in a country which millions of people flee.** Germany has been a country of immigration ever since World War II.

In the 1960s, the so-called guest workers immigrated to Germany. Their integration failed in many aspects. I hope we have learnt from past mistakes. Having said this, we do have a stable democracy and a decent economic structure.



Peter Hacker, CEO Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW) and Refugee Coordinator of the City of Vienna

By a rare pooling of resources of public funds, social organizations and civil society we managed to provide accommodation for 650,000 nights' stay for refugees. Hundreds of accommodations were created in four months, which proved a great challenge even for the largest organizations.

Now we are reworking the processes on a structural level. The number of asylum applications is high, we have, however, already accommodated many more refugees than, for example, during the Balkan crisis. The mood in the population is still positive. It will be important to link this emotion with objectives. We want people who come to our country to accept our values and understand the rules of the game. The clear message is: **It will be demanding to cope with the situation, it will not resolve itself, but it is certainly feasible.**



Dieter Posch, Mayor of Neudörf, Austria

In Neudörf we have achieved that the population is not hostile towards people who move in. Our community has been upholding this culture as a guiding principle even before the refugee debate. We have always conveyed to our population that everyone who is here at least deserves respect and acceptance. It makes no difference where somebody is from. It is not a given that persons in search of protection also plan to stay. People who are fleeing their country cannot choose the place they will end up in. And we cannot tell somebody to stay at a place where there is no hope. **Integration does not equal "memorizing the Lord's Prayer". One must be able to also live the *res publica*, to have the opportunity to participate actively in society.**



Andreas Minnich, Councilor, Korneuburg

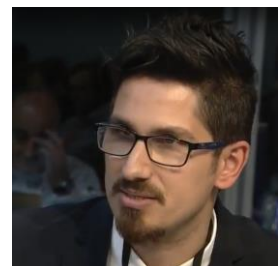
The overwhelming willingness to help, which has been there from the very start, has triggered a new "we feeling". We have established a separate platform to sound out the best routes of help, such as providing living space, donations in time, settling visits to the authorities. We were able to convince many retired teachers to help teach German on a voluntary basis. The cultural differences pose a problem for integration. It is important to convey that people arrive on time for their German classes and that in school girls take part in swimming and biology classes as well.



Nour Alsoliman, Syrian Filmmaker, asylum seeker in Austria

Many asylum seekers must wait for years. It would be wise to integrate people from the very start. The majority of people from Syria that arrived in 2015 are now living in this "waiting loop". Our generation does not have the future dreams or "American dreams" of our fathers. **The dreams of our generation are "just" basic human needs and to be perceived as humans.**

The current integration process is neither effective nor sustainable. Between 2004 and 2007 I volunteered in a Syrian refugee camp. Now I find myself in such a camp in Europe. When decisions are made that touch the lives of others, things should also be seen through their eyes.



Erich Fenninger, CEO Volkshilfe, Austria

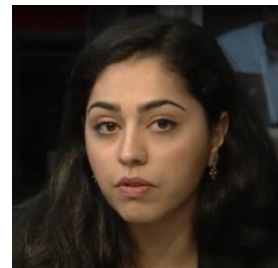
Which Europe do today's refugees enter? One that started to abolish the welfare state 30 years ago. The welfare state was the tool that substantiated the slogan "no more war and fascism". This is based on the participation and involvement of all people. **Europe no longer exports the participation success model, instead Europe has started to import the "model of the poor and rich".**

Europe must fight the battle of all nation states to receive refugees, quotas must be controlled by transparent financial transfers. We are out of touch with goodwill and human rights. It is absurd that 40 % of Austrian municipalities have not received any refugees.



Mahsa Ghafari, Flucht nach Vorn, Austria

It is our aim to give young people and children having fled their countries access to needs that goes beyond their basic needs. Unfortunately, ever so often, these young people hardly have the opportunity to take part in recreational activities in a situation where it would be vital for them to process traumatic experiences. The group that we support is often referred to as "the weakest link of society". I don't particularly like this expression as these people are kept weak by being banned from working. They are a part of society in need of protection. **The forced unemployment equals torture, especially for people who have so much to process.**



Willingness to help and voluntary work are important, but we must not forget that these people have compensated many things that should have clearly been obligations of the state.

Klaus Schwertner, General Secretary Caritas Wien, Austria

We have learnt a great deal of new things. This was possible, for example, in Vienna because everybody co-operated: the Austrian Federal Railways ÖBB, the City of Vienna, civil society. We are witnessing a renaissance of civil society. **If 2015 is the year of the welcoming culture, in 2016 we need a welcoming structure. "Double integration" – It must be possible to enable people to arrive successfully and on the other hand we must not forget that there are people in Austria who are also in need of help – we need a double integration strategy.**



I would wish that mayors would appear on TV more often because they discuss things soberly and objectively. **In the municipalities we actually live what top-level politics conduct pseudo-debates about.**

Georg Bürstmayr, Human Rights Lawyer, Austria

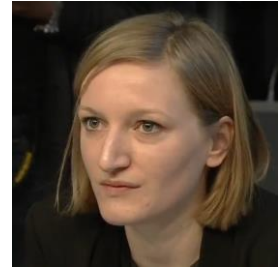
In the EU and in national legal systems we have fully differentiated rules about what all refugees must not do, but hardly any rules that help them integrate faster. This calls for improvisation. Therefore, it seems all the more important not to forget that improvisation can and should be guided by rules. **A basic principle of every legal system is human dignity, and in times of uncertainty this principle must apply even more so.** This creates safety, a prerequisite to maintain human dignity. The term has two sides to it: on the one hand, it is about maintaining human dignity, thereby preventing torture or degrading treatment. But it is also about people, who degrade others, inevitably having to lose self-respect. I try to maintain the dignity of people so as to keep on respecting myself.



Laura Schoch, Bundesjugendvertretung (National Youth Council), Austria

We carried out the first qualitative study on the actual reality of life of unaccompanied minors by conducting a survey with 70 participants. We asked young people about their desired housing situation and other needs in refugee hostels, shared apartments and private accommodation. 87 % of the surveyed, for example, wish to get a minimum of privacy, a locker for their personal belongings. **If we fail to tackle the needs of these youths right now, we will lose them, and they will become tomorrow's new poor.**

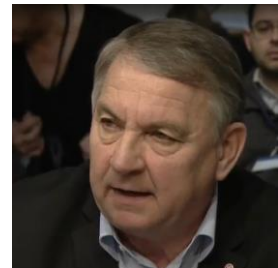
Tightening the asylum law is not acceptable from a children's rights and human rights perspective.



Reinhard Hundsmüller, Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund, Austria

I appeal to you: **Tell our government in your press conference what has happened here and that it should focus on its genuine duty – not to react, but to govern.**

If people who have fled their country stay in Austria they must learn German. Different ethnicities living together in large camps poses a danger which can be counteracted by providing employment. Guided by the advice of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria we held a celebration at Christmas which proved a great success. We managed to recruit athletes and firemen, and made an effort to enable 400 unaccompanied minors a graduation from high school. Thank goodness, refugees have access to skilled trade.



Michael Chalupka, Director Diakonie, Austria

There are two opposing scenarios: on the one hand, the state as a solidary commonwealth and people who want to take action; and on the other hand an Austria that is supposed to appear less attractive, and refugees as hammock-lazing lemmings. This, however, makes Austria not only less attractive for refugees, but in general. **The mental overload takes place predominantly in the minds of the ruling parties that cannot cope with right-wing populism. That's the actual limit.**

We need more information, counseling and legal advice as well as a program for the construction of houses.



Robert Misik, Chair

- If 2015 was the year of the welcoming culture, in 2016 we need a welcoming structure.
- The people who have arrived must immediately get the opportunity to integrate themselves: language, education, verifying and acknowledging trainings, access to the labor market and affordable housing
- The situation is a challenge, but with a solidary society and the co-operation of all players it is feasible.
- In the municipalities we actually live what top-level politics conduct pseudo-debates about



Highlights from the “World Cafés”



Trauma, Resilience. Finding spaces. Strengthening strengths.

- Information along the migratory trail, coordination between different actors
- Tracing service for missing/lost people
- Wrong picture about Europe as “paradise”. Experienced immigrants should collect, share and publicize correct information.
- Mental health: forms of non-language based therapy, group therapy.
- Involve and empower educated therapists, psychologists from refugee communities and second generation immigrants.

The topic of arriving in different contexts

- We need a welcoming culture that gives people their dignity back.
- Access to resources such as education, housing, securing opportunities for self-support
- Participation at eye level, people must get involved, everyone can be a part of society.
- The receiving society must change its approach, we must create spaces for a critical debate.
- We must create opportunities for people to actively take part in the community they are in. For this we need the expertise of people arriving here.
- More German courses that are more differentiated as well.
- Improved information on rights or support for refugees, regular payments.

Life as a refugee: the individual gets lost in the term „refugee“

- The terms “culture” and “identity” must be viewed critically because they can be used to represent a group as homogenous or to determine belonging and to serve as reasons for exclusion.
- Integration means making cultural compromises as well.
- It is easier for younger people since education, career choice, etc. still lie ahead of them. Adults have a more difficult time to tie in with where they left in their country of origin.
- “Lose your way while waiting” – Uncertainty about one’s own situation can lead to resignation.
- People who arrive here should have a voice from the very start and be able to have a say in how the society lives together. A patronizing approach is not helpful here.
- Local politics deliver proposals such as value courses – we must strive after these values, but it can only happen at eye level and in a continuous discourse.

Women refugees, gender roles, gender images

- Differentiate: Migrants have different values and needs.
- As asylum seekers not only men, women too find themselves in a state of conflict and develop inferiority complexes. Open communication and expressing one’s point of view clearly, alongside patience, are important factors in dealing with the conflicts faced by the newly arrived.
- Open communication about sexual abuse is indispensable, silence only leads to more insecurity (see Cologne incident).
- Not all young male refugees are testosterone-driven individuals.

- Self-empowerment of women
- It cannot be expected of all women to emancipate themselves from their husbands. But the rights they have as individuals living in Austria must be communicated and known to them.
- Newly arrived persons should receive counseling from those who have been living here for some time, and through this exchange get an opportunity to help themselves.

Fight reasons for fleeing rather than escape routes

- Gather background information on the funding and supply of weapons for various states, economic and political interests.
- Peace negotiations are essential, wars must be ended as quickly as possible.
- Direct investments in Syria's surroundings, in Lebanon and Jordan, and in local programs.
- Create jobs in refugee camps.
- Enable attendance at school and education along the entire path.
- Improve legal status of refugees in neighboring countries (e.g. Afghans in Iran).
- Ban on export subsidies for foods.
- Use European tax on financial transactions to cover costs of the current refugee situation.

Education/training

- Gather information on asylum, language learning options, classes, university access, which should be communicated from the very start.
- Self-empowerment: establish a secure framework for refugees within which they can demonstrate their skills and talents before they "take lessons".
- We need more informal ways of integrating refugees in the European labor market.
- Integration is not possible without language skills. Basic language classes should be available free of cost and paid by the respective governments.
- Individual and flexible access of learning a language for the various groups of refugees with an eye to their varying socio-cultural backgrounds. We need concepts to create awareness for cultural differences.
- Create networks: using the knowledge and experiences of already integrated migrants to help the newly arrived

Concerns and expectations, refugees and the labor market

- We must create legal frameworks that enable refugees to enter the labor market faster. Stagnation and inactivity are a sad reality for refugees, even for highly qualified ones.
- Competency assessment and recognition/nostrification of relevant trainings (certificates, diplomas) of persons entitled to political asylum and eligible for subsidiary protection are important.
- Voluntary work advances integration and language acquisition. Building bridges between volunteers and those that have a work permit. The Red Cross, for example, offers voluntary work.
- Access to education/apprenticeships is a bridge for steady employment.
- Placement platform offering supply and demand of internships and minor employment (not in excess of 300 euros per month).
- Basic classes on Austrian law.
- Temporary asylum is an obstacle to education or employment.
- Labor market integration of refugees and persons eligible for subsidiary protection requires free access to the labor market.

The power of language in stirring up fears and violence

- The use of language can highlight differences, creating increasingly more negative images: migrant, refugee, asylum, detainee, etc.
- Language shapes people's approach by unequivocal judgment. Often words such as "crisis, problem" are used when we might as well say "situation" or "phenomenon" without automatically conveying a negative assessment.
- The media stir up emotions through language and images.

- Not being “allowed” to talk about an incident (see New Year’s Eve in Cologne) fuels concerns and fears.
- Institutionalizing negative terms, such as unwillingness to integrate, which was introduced by the right and adopted by the left, unfortunately, has found its way into common language usage.
- Essentially positive terms, such as “welcoming culture” and “do-gooder”, come to have a negative connotation.
- Language is both a requirement (for entry, stay, job) and an obstacle (lack of language classes), which can result in gate-keeping.

Civil society: from overload to sustainability

- We must maintain the continuity of voluntary work. We must avoid discouragement that results in giving up voluntary commitment.
- Transparency and networking: exchange between Austrian and international organizations.
- Aid organizations should co-operate and not compete against each other.
- Existing knowledge must be effectively documented, institutions for knowledge transfer are needed!
- We must professionalize processes. Voluntary initiatives should get in touch with experienced organizations to avoid mistakes and to profit from each other. Co-operations have a stronger presence.

Is it possible for refugees to contribute to society and in what ways?

- Ensure self-organization from day one - e.g. “Refugees for Refugees” - experienced refugees help newcomers.
- Collect skills from day one - creation of some kind of skill data base (AMS or the like).
- Match skills with companies, establish new jobs for refugees.
- Employment of skilled work - legal social work in communities in accordance with the asylum seekers’ skills, establishment of Micro businesses, urban gardening and collective agriculture.
- Connect residents and newcomers - “BürgerInnen Versammlung” / wisdom councils, where refugees and citizens can contribute in how to improve the living conditions for all people, also cultural activities.
- Language, education, schooling and free university concept.

What if...? Suggested solutions

- Put the skills of persons who have fled their home country to best use.
- Create housing projects together with refugees including collective agriculture.
- Participation from the very start: perceive and accept the needs of people outside the state apparatus, interests, and the desire to take part in society.
- Election of refugee representatives that promote self-organization, refugees who organize refugees, help for self-help.
- Proper and readily available native language psychological care
- Willingness to help should be structured, for example, by implementing suitably structured, supported and co-ordinated buddy programs
- Citizens’ assemblies held together with refugees.
- Educate people through “refugee ambassadors” who have fled from their countries or work in refugee relief.
- Primary care and fast labor market access.
- Language classes from day one without financial or administrative barriers.
- Access to education, recognition of diplomas.
- Assess resources and skills of refugees and determine added value. Refugees should be able to participate, empowerment must take place from day one.
- Solutions of local municipalities should also be heard, accepted and applied by governments and international organizations.

Summary of major insights:

Mayors:

- Mayors should be able to convey a sense of security and the feeling of being able to handle the situation, and act accordingly rather than call the next higher-level authority. This will make the local population feel safe.
- Be close to the goings-on and visible for citizens (for example stand at the port when boats arrive)
- Be calm but determined and simply do what needs to be done.
- From the very start, involve all institutions possible (parties, administration, church, police, state levels, federal government) and bring about a preferably unanimous decision in the local council to commit oneself to asylum seekers within one's municipality and to provide accommodation. In doing so it is important to involve the local representatives of the political parties.
- Gather information on the activities of local and international NGOs, individual local aid projects and donors.
- Regular meetings with organizations and donors to inform them about current needs and to seek their support and individual contributions.

People who flee their country need:

- Concrete and verified information about what to expect on the road and in the receiving countries
- Concrete and verified information about the smuggling trade
- Protection from violence for women and children
- Special protection for children against modern slavery and child trafficking (prostitution)
- Weather-proof accommodation, food and medical care
- School education and training no matter where they stay
- Respecting their human dignity, their traditions, culture and religion
- Trauma therapy, where necessary
- Support from social workers
- Daily structure: tasks, physical activity, classes, responsibilities
- Employment: If regular occupation is not available at least provide "help to help" and the ability to contribute and implement skills
- Use of cell phones and the Internet to communicate with the families left behind

Organization in camps and communities:

- Regular exchange with refugee groups to receive exact figures on people or families that arrive or leave.
- Enable different religious and cultural groups to administer themselves as much as possible, and promote as well as actively support such developments.
- Bolster up the receiving society by creating opportunities for them to help the communities. This reduces fears and promotes the establishment of communication channels between the receiving and the arriving people.
- Form focus groups consisting of local and newly arrived representatives to solve conflicts.

People who have arrived need:

- Adequate accommodation which is not mass accommodation
- Fast clarification of procedures and statuses
- Immediate and free access to language classes for adults and schooling for children
- Fast recognition procedures for professional and academic trainings
- Person-to-person contacts with the receiving population
- Granting of facilities for the reunification with closest relatives (parents of minors, minors)
- Fast access to the labor market and subsequently faster establishment of one's livelihood in the new country

Connecting communities, NGOs and other institutions:

- Everywhere there are smaller and larger successful civil society projects and initiatives. It would be important to pool all of these valuable resources and energies and end the competition between them.
- Many problems already have a best practice solution. It would be good to connect with each other to adapt the solutions acquired already to the local needs only and end competition in this area as well.

National and international politics:

- The majority population must be provided with objectives and information supported by figures.
- A continued politically opportunist stirring up of feelings ranging from insecurity to fears among the local population will profoundly change the Europe we know today to the detriment of everyone.
- Europe is in a process of change.
- We need new ways of tackling new situations.
- The existing structures (training, labor market tools) have not been developed for such an enormous amount of newly arrived people and therefore fail to apply today.
- Overageing across all demographic statistics is reason enough for the majority of European states to receive the many young people arriving today as an opportunity for the future of Europe.

Mayors' Declaration

Something beautiful happened on the sidelines of our mutual declaration: The mayors suggested to make a mutual promise to set an example of transborder co-operation based on ethical and humanitarian responsibilities.

"With our signature, we the mayors of the international conference „NOW“ are sending a signal for transborder co-operation based on our humanitarian and ethical responsibilities."



Declaration of the International Mayors' Conference N-O-W (Vienna)

We share the awareness that we are faced today with one of the most challenging humanitarian situations since generations and that we are responsible for one another as well as for our planet.

We share the awareness that we must build bridges and find ways to uphold the cohesion at the core of our societies.

We share the awareness that we need to empathize with the distress and confusion of the other. We have to listen and ask questions, learn from one another and find answers together, to allow sustainable solutions.

With this awareness we – participants, organisers, initiators, supporters of the International Mayors' Conference N-O-W 2016 - have all met to support and assist all those who have been abandoned, attacked, and have come to the limits of their strength.

Encouraged by new friendships and encounters, enriched by the sharing of experiences and with the new knowledge coming from very diverse communities we are today more than ever convinced:

This crisis can be overcome.

We therefore declare:

In view of this humanitarian catastrophe we urge for diplomatic and security policy actions to bring an end to war and conflicts. We urge for a safe and secure environment in those countries people have to flee from.

We share the awareness of the urgent need to establish safe and legal escape routes to Europe as to avoid dangerous situations on the journey and to put an end to human trafficking.

Therefore it is essential that EU-Missions and embassies facilitate the granting of visas. Equally urgent is the creation of hotspots (adequately supported financially and professionally) to enable efficient and fast registration of human beings seeking refuge.

We call upon all those who think and feel as Europeans to endorse and stand for regulations living up to humanistic values. Therefore we ask for a speedy distribution of the refugees, taking into consideration their deep longing for stability and taking into account the resources of the hosting communities. A fast integration would allow refugees to become fellow citizens as well as strengthen those who one day want to return to their home countries.

We share the awareness that even the best diplomatic efforts will not be able to put a stop to wars in the near future. Therefore we are urging for immediate humanitarian help in Syria's neighbouring countries. We must not abandon Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece and Italy in this utterly challenging situation. In addition Turkey needs support from the international community in finding a viable solution with its Kurdish citizens so as to avoid a next wave of refugees.

We share the awareness that the first months and years of a successful integration process are crucial. It is essential to provide accommodation, education, sharing of European values and work opportunities. Education and schooling of children and young adults is essential.

We share the awareness that with the arrival of newcomers a great number of citizens fear for their safety, their jobs and accommodations. We therefore believe in the necessity of an open discussion of how to recreate the view that Europe is and will be a place of wellbeing and stability for all. We should not forget to always mention the silent relentless efforts of local communities, neighbourhoods, civil society and the hard working mayors.

In these past days we have learned a lot from the experiences of different communities and can outline plausible paths to facilitate responsible and balanced refugee policies on the local, regional, national and European level.

We shall report in more detail in a final document.

We share the awareness that we can never solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Therefore we address

- The citizens already committed to contribute to solutions
- The political stakeholders
- The European public at large:

We are all connected in this obligation. We are all in this together.

“Waste no time” by Robert Misik

While national and international politicians are mouthing off, municipalities and cities are doing the real work: Experiences of an international mayors’ conference.

By Robert Misik*

It was almost a kind of magical moment when mayors from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Austria took to the stage in the vast workshop halls of the Austrian Federal Railways ÖBB at Vienna’s Spittelau and somewhat strangely solemnly signed a piece of paper. It was not more than a scrap of paper, a so-called “Wisch” as we say in Vienna, with just a single sentence on it. “With our signatures, we, the mayors of the international conference NOW, are sending a signal for transborder co-operation based on our ethical and humanitarian responsibilities.” Conference co-organizer, André Heller, was visibly touched by the manifest of a “mutual will”, as he called it. Because it was the mayors themselves who, after two days of intensive encounters, said they did not want to leave without sending such a message – a sign, a self-commitment.

“It rarely happens that a journalist wants to applaud at a press conference,” a reporter twittered.

In January, the N-O-W conference brought together roughly 150 people around the world for two and a half days in Vienna. The general topic was the refugee situation. The conference originated in an idea by André Heller who stated in August the previous year that we must do “something” – something that is “somehow beneficial” in view of rash European politics and also in view of a European public that increasingly acts according to the NIMBY (not in my backyard) principle: Dear Lord, please make the influx of refugees move to my neighbor, not in my direction. The “something”, developed by a handful of people, gradually became a more concrete idea supported and hosted by the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, Patricia Kahane and the Kahane Foundation, funded by affluent private patrons, and not least by the ÖBB that provided the large hall at Spittelau.

The fundamental considerations were: It is about time we involved affected people from the different stations along the refugee route in a direct conversation – people from neighboring states of the war regions, people from the “transit countries” and people from the destination countries; refugees themselves, private volunteers, big international NGOs, experts, but above all mayors from the individual regions. Because the people on the ground are the ones who are doing the real work. They are the ones faced with new and often unexpected challenges on a daily basis and who must find practical solutions. And what’s even worse: Top-level politics, on a national level or across Europe, even interfere with their work, for example, by creating a mood that stirs fears and conflicts through party wrangling and alarmism.

Especially the mayors from the most affected crisis areas have the feeling that nobody actually cares about their problems. Therefore, it was fairly difficult to make some of them come to Vienna. Frustration rules. Lebanon received 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and these are only the official figures, reports Ali Mattar, mayor of Sahel El Zahrani. “Now, 40 percent of Lebanon’s population is made up of Syrian refugees. It’s a disaster. We can’t cope with this on our own. Help us to help.” Hassan Ruhaibeh, the mayor of Um Al Jimal, tells of water shortage and ecological catastrophes due to overflowing sewers. Nobody knows the name of his village, but almost the entire world knows the name of the refugee camp close to his village – the Jordanian refugee camp Zataari with 100,000 inhabitants.

“We have become used to the smell of death,” says Manolis Vournous, the mayor of Khios in the Aegean, and Spyros Galinos, the mayor of the neighboring island of Lesbos said: “I don’t care if I do the entire work myself, if I register all of the refugees on my own and organize the initial reception on my island, but please bring them to me on normal ships so we can get rid of the criminal smugglers.”

Luigi Ammatuna, the mayor of Pozzallo in Sicily, added that he would like to invite everyone in favor of closed borders and isolation politics to sit on a bench at the port of Pozzallo and take a look at the people coming out of their rubber dinghies, completely soaked. Then these people should tell the drenched people to return or to literally stamp on the fingers of refugees who pull themselves up the quay wall. He would be curious to know who would have the heart to do such a thing, Mr Ammatuna concluded.

In the three central rounds of talks affected people from the various regions reported on the daily challenges and about practical solutions. The reports themselves and listening to each other were already important enough. In each of the central panels refugees themselves got a chance to speak, not only for show purposes, but also because it was important to the organizers that the knowledge and expertise of refugees take effect. It is them who become experts out of necessity. "I understand that many people in Europe are tired of the refugees, but we are also tired, tired of war, tired of seeing no future," said Mai Aleid, a Syrian who has been living in Vienna for four years, in a moving statement about her escape across the sea and Balkan route.

Mayors, refugees, aid organizations – against all challenges, in their respective sphere of action – they all are not only faced with problems, but they made one or the other experience and developed solutions to problems which we can mutually learn from. That was the very idea of the conference as well as getting to know about best practice examples.

In workshops predominantly practical solutions were discussed, and mayors, aid organization representatives, volunteers, local politicians as well as refugees led discussions completely at eye level.

A number of topics kept resurfacing:

- For people who flee their country it is important to get hold of information. Information equals food supply, and it is just as important as eating and clothing. Fleeing one's country means being exposed to extreme stress, especially when the refugees have had traumatizing experiences. If somebody doesn't know what is happening to them a second traumatization takes place. The lack of information is a topic along all stations of the escape route, both in the transit regions ("Where am I? How do I move on?") and the final arrival ("What's going to happen with me now?" What do I have to do to bag an asylum procedure or a language class?").
- A separate aspect of lack of information is about social practices. While some political players demand that "refugees must learn our values" with a wagging finger, which is often uttered in an aggressive commanding tone, the lack of such information is something that many refugees address themselves: that they have to struggle to learn how the receiving society "works". In this regard one of the participants said: "How do the rules work? How do the "hidden" rules work?", which meant nothing else but: way of life, mentalities, common practices, and also how authorities really work. In short: Such "value lessons" – even if one does not have to call them that – are desired by the refugees themselves. "Compile brochures, books, upload videos on the Internet which explain all of this in different languages". This was, for example, a suggestion that was made by the refugees themselves. "It can't be taken for granted that these people will be familiar with our traffic rules," the mayor of Traiskirchen, Andreas Babler, pointed out.
- Communities and aid organizations often cannot cope with the situation because they are confronted with large groups of people that want to have their problem solved as fast as possible, and it is often difficult to communicate with them due to the language barrier. Politicians, aid organizations and refugees present also reported about well-functioning examples where refugees – who have good English or even German skills – themselves very soon became active for the aid organizations, either by taking over management tasks or the role of the "cultural translator" in large refugee accommodations, or by helping to take care of a number of scattered housing groups in more rural areas. Such forms of self-organization mitigate potential conflicts, provide relief to aid organizations and communities, and offer individual refugees a task instead of passively waiting to be taken care of.

- Tjark Bartels, a councilor of a district in Lower Saxony, reported about efforts from the first days onwards of employing doctors and medical staff among the refugees at least as nurses. “Isn’t it absurd to let these people just sit around.” Meanwhile there are initiatives launched by Syrians in Austria that want to prevent all Syrian doctors to move on to Germany. “We have a lack of statutory health insurance doctors, so it would be absurd not to make an effort to keep these people here,” said an Austrian Syrian who presented the initiative.
- “Waste no time!” was a motto of sorts that kept on resurfacing. Refugees who have been waiting for their first interview with the asylum granting authorities for months often have nothing to do; they sit around bored and idle. If they had some sort of energy they are losing it here at the latest. “That month in which I just stared at the wall was almost the worst month of my life,” says Ammar Zammar, a telecom technician from Syria who came to Vienna in September 2015. Integration and qualification would, for example, work much better if German classes were offered from day one.
- Many participants reported that our school systems are too inflexible. As children of school age, children below 14 enter regular schooling while children above 15 are faced with a career as a “problem kid”. They usually have no access to normal schools, they can at best hope for education in evening classes – and in real life only if they put in a lot of energy.
- Qualified people also lose their qualifications if they are forced to stay idle over long periods of time. “If we are not allowed to work then please at least offer unpaid internships in which we can improve our qualifications and which brings us in contact with an environment in which it becomes easier to learn German at everyday work”, somebody proposed. Fonds Soziales Wien offers such internships in a pilot project. Such efforts must be expanded.
- The word “refugees” evokes an amorphous mass. In reality the people come from different countries, for different reasons, and they belong to different religious, ethnic and other groups and in particular to different social classes, are from the countryside or urbanized regions. The refugees are reduced to their existence as refugees and homogenized as part of a “refugee wave”. However, there is of course a variety of problems that need different solutions. If faced with difficulties in dealing with unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan a journalist from Kabul suggested as a practical approach: “Our society is very tribal, and the elders are respected. Seek the help from older, integrated Afghans as authority figures if there are problems – the kids will listen to them.”
- Practitioners and experts alike agreed that there is no one-size-fits-all solution in education or professional qualification either. We need fast competency assessments for the respective individuals. “We have established case conferences at which we have a look at each and everyone,” reports Jürgen Dupper, the mayor of Passau in Bavaria.

The NOW conference itself was only the kick-off for other, to begin with smaller workshops. Various decentral activities are further planned to strengthen exchange about things that work well. “We see migration as an opportunity because we can organize immigration in our communities through good politics,” said Tjark Bartels, a councilor from Lower Saxony. “I will never have this opportunity again. We no longer talk about closing down schools and abandoned properties are suddenly off the cards, too. Of the billions of euros this will cost 90-95 % will go directly into our national economy, and if I manage to get the integration bit right, it is an investment in the future.” Mayor Dupper from Passau presented his view in a simple formula: “I rather live in a country into which millions of people flock than in a country which millions of people flee.” And his counterpart Dieter Posch from Neudörfel phrased the fundamental understanding in his municipality, which has a twenty-year history of refugee migration, even more pointedly: “If you are here, then you are one of us.”

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International Mayors Conference N-O-W

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