



## Nations Have Been Terrible At Welcoming Refugees. Should Cities Take Over?

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Last year, Spain pledged to take 17,680 people from the influx of refugees into Europe, as part of a two-year plan from the EU to redistribute 160,000 refugees entering the Union. And yet in March this year it had only relocated 18 people. But while Spain's right-wing president Mariano Rajoy was renegeing on his promise, the mayors of Madrid and Barcelona, Spain's biggest cities, couldn't wait to help.

Ada Colau, Barcelona's activist mayor, has called the Spanish government "immoral" for its refusal to help refugees. Catalunya, the Spanish province of which Barcelona is the capital, has offered to accept 4,000 refugees directly, but the Spanish federal government has blocked the refugees' entry. More than a dozen Spanish cities have discussed setting up a network that allows residents to volunteer their homes to refugee arrivals.

Similar situations to Spain's have played out around the world. In the United States, major city mayors coming together under the banner Cities United for Immigration Action have urged the Obama administration to accept more refugees, even as other state and local governments pledged to shut their doors. And in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, where more than half of the population are immigrants and the city is run by the nation's first Muslim foreign-born mayor, the city has welcomed refugees and migrants with policies that aim to quickly integrate them into the city's fabric and cut through red tape.

Cities are uniquely placed to offer services to refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants and to tailor those services depending on the precise needs of both the new arrivals and the local community. For instance, an industrial city can work with its private businesses to put skilled workers in factories and plants. Auckland, which receives the majority of New Zealand's migrants, did this with its Opportunities for Migrant Employment in Greater Auckland (at least until it was shut down in 2012, due to lack of funding). Until then, the program worked with large private companies, such as Vodafone, to offer paid internship and mentorship opportunities to bring migrant labor into the workforce. "Municipalities have a clear advantage in handling day-to-day matters," says Hansjörg Walther, of advocacy group Open Borders, ranging from housing and supplying people, teaching languages, and facilitating community engagement.

In the U.S., cities cannot enact immigration legislation, but they can change the laws to make life easier for immigrants of all kinds. If a city doesn't know a person's immigrant status, it is not obliged to pass any information on to federal agencies, or to apply the laws to those people. In 1985, Chicago made itself a "sanctuary city" by mayoral order, declaring that all residents would have fair and equal access to municipal benefits, opportunities, and services—regardless of legal status. Today it runs the New Americans Plan, created in 2012, which continues Chicago's efforts to attract immigrants, and therefore bolster its workforce and economy. For example, Chicago's city colleges don't ask students for their documentation status. The city also works with the private sector to integrate migrants. McDonald's "English Under the Arches" program teaches workers English to help them advance within the company. There are a few dozen sanctuary cities and counties in the U.S., including New York, Detroit, Houston, and Los Angeles.

A city can actually still currently do a lot to help refugees, even when the national law explicitly prohibits it, says Walther, including providing medical services, advice, and food without asking questions. Municipalities, especially in the U.S. where they have freedom in migration policy matters, could also refuse to enforce laws or cooperate with federal immigration enforcement authorities.

### **NEW WAYS OF THINKING ARE NEEDED**

For cities to really take the lead in addressing the refugee crisis, however, new structures and ways of thinking need to emerge that further empower cities. For example, *Financial Times* economics editor Chris Giles writes that cities would need more funding to take responsibility for refugees. He advocates matching "the right to reside" with responsibilities to provide public services, so cities could determine their own residence policies and also keep tax revenues from migrants who live there. (Of course, not all cities want to welcome refugees, and are more beholden to the local politics of voters who oppose immigration.)

State-based visas are another way to hand responsibility to cities. Instead of issuing work visas at the country level, which offers no control over where people end up, state-based visas could direct immigration to the states, or even the cities, that want it.

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These more directed visas could bring significant advantages to both the cities and to the migrant workers. "A state-based visa program would create a temporary work permit that would allow participating states to manage the flow and regulate the quantity of temporary migrants who want to live and work within their border," write Brandon Fuller and Sean Rust for the CATO Institute, a think tank. Legal migrant workers would only be able to work in-state, but only until granted full citizenship.

Canada already has its successful Provincial Nominee Program, which allows provinces and territories to nominate immigrants to be granted a work visa, but in the U.S., individual states are having to fight for change. In 2015, California assemblyman Luis Alejo introduced a bill that would create a guest visa for unauthorized immigrants already working in the state. "If California wants change in immigration policy, we as state officials must stand up and lead," he said at the time. The bill, which would have affected up to 550,000 unauthorized immigrants, was defeated,

despite strong bipartisan support. Texas has also introduced such bills, and in Detroit, Governor Rick Snyder is working for 50,000 employment visas, also known as the "Detroit Visa." There are other, more radical possibilities for dealing with refugees. Activist group Refugee Cities proposes special-status settlements that fall somewhere between a refugee camp and full integration. Because proper integration could take generations, held up by national and local politics at every step, Refugee Cities suggests just making the camps better. Camps like Zaatari, in Jordan, are already starting to resemble cities in many respects. In these settlements, "refugees would be legally allowed to engage in meaningful, dignifying, and rewarding work," instead of existing in a limbo where, even when entrepreneurial refugees start beneficial businesses, they live with the uncertainty of operating outside the law.

For many of us, our identities are tied more to our cities than our countries. People are more likely to self-identify as Londoners or New Yorkers than as English or American, and that's only partly because they might not be English or American. As the country as a concept becomes less relevant in a world where we commune and trade using the internet, cities seem like the natural unit for managing civilizations.

"One could imagine that, over time, cities would trump nations as a reference point," says Walther. "That could also mean that they become more independent and pursue their own policies also regarding immigration."