

Promote optimal contact against fear, intolerance and misconceptions about migrants and refugees in Europe

By Özge Bilgili / August 2019

Europe thrives for socially inclusive, reflexive and globally competitive societies. This means an open-minded Europe that is supportive of migrants and refugees and cognizant of the benefits of an increasingly multicultural, diverse and vibrant population. But is this possible if migration and integration debates are driven by fear, intolerance and misconceptions? I believe not.

I propose one simple solution to this challenge: promoting optimal contact.

65 years ago, the American psychologist Gordon Allport proposed conditions for optimal contact between different social groups to reduce intergroup prejudice and hence fear of outgroups, intolerance and misconceptions. He argued that intergroup contact should be promoted by relevant social and institutional authorities and be cooperative for common goals among individuals who have equal status. I believe these conditions indeed embrace solutions for a better future of how we deal with migration and integration issues in Europe.

I will not go into the academic literature that has proven the benefits of optimal contact; but illustrate its power with an example from a small but impactful African country where it is practiced: Rwanda.

Looking at the history of Rwanda, one may think of it mostly as a country generating refugees to other countries but in the past couple of decades Rwanda has been home to refugees from neighboring countries. There are currently about 164,500 officially registered refugees residing in Rwanda and 45% are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. What stands out in the case of Congolese refugees in Rwanda is that they have been in a protracted situation. That is to say they have been living in Rwanda for longer periods of time and their return to DRC is not likely in the short term. Recognizing this, the Rwandan government has adopted a relatively permissive policy for refugees, allowing for the freedom of movement and work. Moreover, the government has promoted a *community-integrated approach* to social services, meaning that where possible refugees and local Rwandans have access to the same services.

So in Rwanda, the government indeed gives refugees equal status by granting rights, enhances cooperative relations by allowing refugees to be part of the larger society and accordingly promotes interaction between locals and refugees in different dimensions of life ranging from economic to social and cultural.

In our UNHCR funded project on the socioeconomic impacts of hosting refugees in Rwanda, we have seen the reflections of this approach in daily interactions.

Regarding collaborative work, in the focus group discussions a local respondent nearby by Kigeme refugee camp said “*Since [the refugees] are our neighbors, we work hand in hand in businesses or agricultural activities to see how we can develop*”. Moreover, positive contact is also known to enhance empathy and may have additional benefits. For example, Rwandan parents see Congolese refugee children as good examples of resilient students who encourage their kids to study better and value the educational opportunities they have: “*The refugees’ kids inspired our children to study. They would look at the fact that they are studying hard despite their situation of being in a foreign country, and decide to attend schools.*” (participant from Kiziba). And when refugees have equal rights and status, they are more easily accepted as an integral part of the society. In our focus group discussions, it was often stated that refugees from Gihembe have small shops or hairdressing salons outside the camp that employ local people, while locals are also hired in the camps for construction projects. Locals also highlighted the revitalization in economic activities thanks to refugees: “*Since [the*

refugees] arrived here, economic activities have increased. Many houses were built and selling activities multiplied. There are different market centres which were created because of the camp.” (participant from Gihembe)

So considering the benefits of optimal contact, what role is there for each one of us, the state and the civil society to promote optimal contact and fight against fear, intolerance and misconceptions concerning migrants and refugees in Europe?

State is the sole actor that can sanction equal rights and status among migrants, refugees and host societies. State therefore is responsible for providing enabling environments where migrants and refugees can feel grounded, integrated and as part of the larger community. Providing access to equal and full rights, including those related to access to social services, work and mobility is at the heart of this goal. This approach eventually improves the lives of the refugees and migrants themselves and also benefits the society at large. Therefore, I hope that European states can replace feelings of threat and fear with welcoming efforts of support for migrants and refugees.

In my view the strength of the Rwandan approach is that it does not reinforce a distinction between locals and refugees. While in Europe we have a strong language of ‘otherness’, in Rwanda that is not the case. The European civil society can learn from this and in response continue to 1) promote access to equal rights and increased collaborative interactions between migrants, refugees and locals in different dimensions of life; 2) engage in social, economic and cultural activities at the local level that lead to knowledge exchange and empathy between different segments of the society; and 3) raise awareness against prejudice, negative stereotypes and discrimination.

As the Rwandan example illustrates, under certain conditions positive contact in increasingly diverse societies is possible, and the NGO’s working with and for migrant and refugee populations can be the facilitators of this process in light of the four principles of optimal contact: 1) Equal status, 2) Cooperation, 3) Common goals, and 4) Support by social and institutional authorities. In my opinion, this is a solid starting point to reconsider our perspective on migrants and refugees in Europe on the way of becoming socially inclusive, reflexive and globally competitive societies.



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