



Inspiration by generation

A European project for encounter and bonding between younger and older refugees

Short set-up

Introduction

The relationship between younger and older refugees in different European countries seems to be a topic of great concern to younger and older refugees themselves and to national and local authorities and service providers.¹

A European survey held in 2008, as part of the European project The Power of Older Refugees, gives the following picture.

An up-side down relationship

In the countries of origin of many refugees family ties are very important. In Europe much emphasis is laid on living independently and self reliance. The drawback is that it destroys the close knit family unit to which many refugees were used. Support of family members is lost, which can lead to inter-generational conflicts. The younger generation have had a higher education and know the system better here. In some instances, they use this knowledge of society to take advantage of the elderly. In many countries it is observed that the relationships between parents and their children are sometimes extremely conflict riddled and burdened with the experiences of having to flee an area and being persecuted. Frequently family roles are shifted in the way that children take over parental roles. This leads to tensions and misunderstanding, which makes the younger generation insecure. Although many young refugees are doing very well in school, authorities and services in the different EU member states are confronted with young refugees who drop out of school and older refugees who live in isolation.

Younger refugees who were interviewed in the Netherlands and older refugees who were interviewed in the cities of Berlin, Gent, London, and Vienna also emphasize the close relationships they have with each other. Many young refugees tell how much they love their parents and how much they feel responsible for their well being. However, they also mention critical points, like the strictness and rigidness of the older generation. Some young refugees blame the older generation for being too credulous and hold them responsible for the flight of the family. Although the relationship between parents and children often is very close, young refugees in many cases don't tell their parents not what they

¹ By younger refugees we mean:
By older refugees we mean:

are really thinking. They see the older generation both as heroes and pathetic people. Many young refugees think it is a pity they don't talk much with the older generation, for they really would like to know more about their personal history and the history of the country they originate from.

For many older refugees, the relationship with their children is the most defining factor in their life. Interviews held in Germany, Great Britain, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands show that most older refugees are very proud of the achievements of their children. The fact that children are so successful gives many of them the feeling their existence has had some meaning. In most cases they expect their children to look after them when they grow old. Although they are proud of their children and have a lot of expectations, the relationship with the younger generation is not always an easy one. The older generation often finds it difficult to understand the behaviour of the younger generation which is so different from their own experiences. They complain about bad manners and have the feeling they don't know what their children are really thinking. Sometimes they see their children suffer from the burden of the flight or are afraid to add to traumas by telling their own life stories.

The Dutch BMP foundation (Foundation for promotion of social participation) has carried out several projects in which older and younger refugees tell about their relationship and the beautiful and difficult sides of it. In addition to the interviews with young refugees held in 2005 BMP young refugees did a video-project about older refugees and made a play together with older refugees, about inter generational conflicts. In 2008 over forty older refugees in four European countries have been interviewed about their relationship with their children. In the same year representatives of national and local authorities, service providers, refugee community organisations and other organisations in eleven countries participated in a Delhi survey in which the relationship between older and younger refugees was an important subject.

Demand for an inter generational project

During the final conference of the project the Power of Older Refugees on 21 December 2008 in the Town Hall of Amsterdam participants from several European countries, asked the BMP foundation to develop an inter generational project to strengthen the bonds between older and younger refugees.

An inter generational approach is considered to be important because:

- Relationships within families are essential for the well being of both younger and older refugees;
- The chances in society for both groups will be bigger when the relationship between the generations can be qualified as an open one in which important issues can be discussed and generations are proud of each other;
- Different generations can help and support each other in coping with an outside world that is sometimes hostile. The older generation can help the younger one by supporting their efforts to develop their own identity and to seek for the best elements in both cultures. The younger generation can break through the isolation of the older generation, by giving them the opportunity to use their life experience and talents and take part in society.

Questions on a European level

The experiences in the Netherlands with programmes for older and younger refugees and the conclusions of the POR project lead to the following questions on a European level:

1. What do we know about the issues of older and younger refugees and the impact they have on their functioning in society?
2. Which methods and approaches are developed in different countries to strengthen the relationship between older and younger refugees?
3. Can the methods and programmes that have been developed in the Netherlands be of interest to refugee community organisations, other NGO's international and local authorities and professional institutions in other countries?
4. Can we set up experiments in different EU member states to develop new visions and new approaches to the inter generational question and what can we learn from the experiences in the different countries?

To find answers to the above questions the BMP foundation has, in close collaboration with its European partners, developed a European project called Inspiration by generation. Objective of this project is:

Objectives

1. Surveying what is known about the social position of younger (also unaccompanied minors) and older refugees within the member states of the EU and their relationships within and outside their families;
2. Mapping the representation of both groups in society and within the various refugee communities;
3. To make refugee community organisations, national asylum authorities, local authorities and service providers aware of the issues of different generations of refugees and the relationship between them;
4. To experiment with methods and formats which have been developed in inter generational projects in the Netherlands and other countries, in close collaboration with national and local organisations and authorities in five European countries, to create opportunities for encounter and bonding between the generations.
5. To take care of the transfer of knowledge gained in the project and develop new action perspectives for policy makers on a national, local and European level and for NGO's and professionals connected to various services.

Six tracks

In order to achieve these objectives the project consists of six separate tracks:

1. The organisation in six European cities of individual interviews and group discussions in separate tracks, with refugees between 16 and 26 years old on the one hand, and refugees of 45 to 60 years on the other hand, in order to gain insight in the images and representation they have of themselves and of the other generation in relation to their family, their community and society. At the end of this interview and discussion programme both groups compose a message to each other in which they tell their perception and their expectations of the other generation.

2. The contracting out of a journalistic essay / report on the relationship between younger and older refugees, including some portraits of individuals in both groups, in twelve European countries (including the six cities that are already involved). The report is meant to be published in a newspaper or magazine and to be of use by the and the organisation of a public discussion with representatives of national asylum authorities, local authorities, refugee community organisations and other NGO's about possible future action perspectives to improve and strengthen this relationship.
3. The organisation of a joined meeting with younger and older refugees in which they clarify their messages and their thoughts and choose together what creative programme, in the sense of film, poetry, drama, music, painting, they want to organise in the next months.
4. The production of the creative programme chosen in the joined meeting of younger and older refugees in the six European cities, on the basis of a special format, developed by the BMP foundation.
5. The publishing of a book with text and images based on the twelve journalistic reports and material gathered during the organisation of the six creative programmes of older and younger refugees.
6. The organisation of a European conference in Amsterdam on the position of younger and older refugees, the relationship between them, the impact on society and ways to strengthen this relationship in a positive way. During this conference the results of the different parts of the project *Inspiration by generation* will be presented and discussed.

The results of the project as a whole are discussed in a publication which is interesting for policy makers on a national, local and European level, for Refugee Community Organisation and for other NGO's.

The whole project will last 18 months and is planned to start in September or October 2009.