

HOSPITALITY-DRIVEN RECEPTION

JRS PRINCIPLES ON RECEPTION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE

A PRINCIPLED CHOICE FOR HOSPITALITY

In the past years, the discourse on asylum and migration in Europe has strongly focused on borders and the need of discouraging and preventing people from crossing them without previous authorisation. This includes people who come to seek international protection, even if they often have no other way to do so but travelling irregularly.

Consequently, the conceptualization of models of reception for asylum seekers has also increasingly included a border dimension. This has resulted in the establishment of large reception facilities in often remote and isolated areas. Such a trend has been reinforced by the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, approved in April 2024, which puts a strong focus on the use of – mandatory – border procedures and furthers blurs the line between reception and, de facto, detention of applicants for international protection.

Also, when it comes to reception on the territory of European states, although national systems differ enormously, we can identify the trend to host asylum seekers in often large centres at the margins of where the local community lives.

The reasons are more ideological than logistical. It is true that, at first sight, it might seem easier to organize reception in large facilities, where services can be concentrated and provided to a large group of people at once. However, there are many more reasons why such systems are impractical, particularly in the long term: they tend to be expensive, they are usually unpopular and unwanted by the local population living close-by and they create dependency and stigma for the residents. In this context, the real argument for policy maker to only allow people to go and live in the community before receiving a final decision on their right to stay in the country, is that this would give them false hopes and impair the implementations of returns in case of negative decisions. Therefore, keeping them in basic facilities at the external borders, or in any case isolated from the local

community, is expected to facilitate the process of filtering out who is allowed to stay, and swiftly remove who is not.

JRS in Europe is often directly involved in the provision of reception to asylum seekers, running reception facilities within or in parallel to national systems and/or providing services in facilities run by other actors. Our experience shows us that the way people are welcomed upon arrival has an enormous impact both on their chances to obtain protection as well as on their opportunities to integrate and actively participate in the local society.

Our collective experience also teaches us that integration is a process that starts from day one and should not be postponed for months or years while waiting for a status-recognition. We also know that it takes a lot of strength and planning for people who often invested years of their lives and all their possessions to reach Europe, to decide to return voluntarily to their countries. And that accompanying them in such a process requires a relationship of trust. Such conditions can only be achieved if the needs and empowerment of people are put at the core of any reception system, in a spirit of welcome and hospitality.

It is challenging to envisage one model of reception system to be applied everywhere in Europe. Social systems and living standards are very different and often influenced by local habits and cultural traditions. We believe however, that it is possible to make a principled choice for hospitality, which implies reception models ensuring dignified living conditions, fostering autonomy and privacy and allowing close contacts with the local community. Based on this belief and on our experience, in this document we further detail what are the necessary elements for qualitative reception models.

FOUNDING ELEMENTS FOR HOSPITALITY-DRIVEN RECEPTION

For JRS, hospitality-driven reception models:

- **Guarantee a sufficient of privacy and autonomy by choosing individual / self-catering forms of accommodation above accommodations based on collective regimes**

The right to private and family-life is a human right. Therefore, accommodation conditions must allow for this right to be fully enjoyed, especially in facilities where people are living for a longer period of time.

A possible indicator to assess this is the number of people one person must share the bedroom, bathroom and other common spaces such as living room and kitchen with. Although concepts such as privacy are difficult to define objectively and can vary depending also on cultural perception, we consider that shared sleeping facilities should be avoided for people who are not family, particularly for periods of times that go beyond a few nights.

By autonomy, we mean the degree to which a person can autonomously decide about how to organise his/her day: when to wake up, when to go to sleep, when to go out and come back home, when to take one's meals, the possibility to cook etc.

A facility can provide sufficient privacy (for instance with private bedrooms and bathrooms and limited sharing of common spaces) but still be run as a collective regime when it comes to the organisation of the daily life, with fixed times for meals or sleeping hours. This should be avoided.

- **Prioritize small-scale accommodation facilities (i.e. hosting small numbers of residents)**

Although it is difficult to point out an exact number, we agree that accommodation facilities hosting large number of asylum seekers are to be avoided even if they are constructed in a way to guarantee dignity, privacy and autonomy to residents. This because they still contribute to a certain level of segregation from the local community as well as stigmatisation of the residents that can easily be identified as asylum seekers.

Indicatively any structure hosting more than 50 people can be considered large in size. But facilities with smaller capacity can still be considered large scale if the other principles listed here are not respected.

- **Ensure the respect of human dignity and guarantees a sufficient level of comfort**

Small-size, private and autonomous housing is not per definition dignified or comfortable: houses or apartments with unhealthy conditions are a reality for many people in Europe, including forced migrants.

Although it is difficult to define what 'sufficient comfort' implies, at least conditions when it comes to health, safety, space available and furnishing of reception facilities should be equivalent to those of comparable facilities for nationals.

As a general rule, the use of former military facilities as reception facilities should be avoided because of the risk of re-trauma they pose for refugees.

- **Go beyond providing accommodation and recognize accompaniment as an intrinsic part of reception**

Welcoming people in a spirit of hospitality means going beyond providing material accommodation. The accompaniment provided to asylum seekers by professional actors as well as volunteers to access their rights and the services and to find their way within the host society must be seen as an integral part of the provision of reception. This should be provided by the responsible state authorities, through dedicated services and / or in structural collaboration with the civil society.

Integration into the local community should be facilitated from day one which includes ensuring access to adequate language and orientation courses. All measures should aim at guaranteeing private and family life and at empowerment so that persons become independent and self-reliant.

- **Strive to be tailored to the needs of asylum seekers**, this includes:
 - Ensuring a certain level of participation of the asylum seeker in the process of deciding what kind of reception he/she will receive
 - Striving to take into consideration a persons' background, i.e. age, education level, coming from urban or rural area...
 - Taking into consideration possible vulnerabilities
 - Taking into consideration a person's gender, sexual identity and sexual orientation, family situation
- **Ensure the availability of and the actual possibility to reach necessary services**, such as medical assistance and legal aid

Living in private housing and in full autonomy must not mean that asylum seekers are abandoned to themselves. Legal assistance to navigate the asylum procedure, but also more general support to understand how the host country works and access their rights (education, healthcare, support to look for employment...) must be provided to those whom need it and must be (physically) accessible, so for instance services cannot only be available to those who live in big cities. The possibility to use phones and internet should be guaranteed.

- **Are located within the local community and foster encounters with the local population**

Integration and inclusion in the host society can only be realized if asylum seekers have meaningful opportunity of encounter with the local population. Reception facilities should not segregate asylum seekers but should place them close to the local community.

PHASES OF RECEPTION AND EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The list above represents the necessary ingredients for an ideal model of reception. We acknowledge that specific situations, both intrinsically related to international displacement (such as the context of a refugee crisis) as well as beyond (such as a general housing crisis) might force state authorities and service providers to compromise on one or more of these elements for the sake of at least providing temporary shelter. However, these elements should always remain the baseline to strive to when designing a reception model.

Moreover, in several European countries, state implement models of reception 'in phases', that is models including different accommodation settings in different stages of the asylum procedure and different time frames. We do not oppose this kind of models as such. We recognize that in certain situations, operating with facilities hosting groups of asylum seekers in the same location can offer practical advantages in terms of accompaniment, such as the possibility of giving information sessions in groups, with interpreters and lawyers. This is mostly true upon arrival of groups of people of the same nationality or in the first stages of the asylum procedure. Provided that reception facilities provide a dignified standard of living, privacy and autonomy, more collective forms of reception can be acceptable in such cases. However, these should be still limited in time and with the goal of transitioning to more individual and autonomous forms of reception in the community in a second phase.

Also, as a general rule, the situations in which people must move from one accommodation to another should be reduced to the minimum. The vast majority of asylum seekers were already forced into long journey and stability is needed for them to be able to rebuild their lives. This is especially true for children, particularly when moving, also implies changing school, and should therefore be avoided.

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