

Position Paper: Raise Your Voice With Us!

Background

From 14 to 19 November 2017, a group of 31 young adults from 16 European countries came together in Heerlen, Netherlands, for the conference “Raise Your Voice”. It was organised by International Young Naturefriends (IYNF), a network originating from the Naturefriends movement, bringing together young people under the common interests of non-formal education, care for nature, and solidarity. The activity was co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission and by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe.

Facing the recent developments regarding migration in Europe and beyond, the network dedicated the year of 2017 to finding a common approach to the topic. The conference represented the last of three international activities of the “Border-free Solidarity” year, and aimed to produce a joint position paper as a result of our discussions and debates.

The rationale for producing a position paper came from the fact that many people are being displaced from their homes, and migrating towards Europe. Although the situation of migrants in the countries where the participants of this activity came from, differs considerably, a number of common challenges could be identified. On the downside, we observed, and some of us experienced, the fortification of EU borders, and an increased hostility toward refugees and migrants since the start of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015. Nonetheless, in some instances, we could identify good practice examples in the treatment of newcomers. During the three events of this year, we collected impressions, information and perspectives from different sides, and our intention is to set down the general principles that we can all agree upon.



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Our Position Statement

The input of the group during a concluding panel conference can be summarised in the following statement:

“We believe in the equality of individuals. Therefore, we show respect and solidarity to each other. Just as nature does not follow man-made borders, we do not believe that this respect and solidarity should be limited by fences and walls.

Every individual in serious need should be granted support no matter their nationality or legal status.

At the same time, to fight the root-causes of forced migration, and to ensure respect towards other individuals, we believe that sustainable decision-making on all levels can reduce the reasons that push people to flee from their homelands, such as consequences of anthropogenic climate change, and the exploitative practices of states and corporations.

Generally, thus, we see a need for stakeholders at all levels to work towards a society built on equality, respect and solidarity.”

Countering Stereotypes

We are fully aware of the difficulties and challenges that come along with the global migration trends. In particular, arrival countries on the outer borders of the European Union are left without the necessary resources to deal with large numbers of people trying to enter their territories. This makes local people easily manipulated by right-wing politicians and scandal-seeking media, who use immigrants to stoke fear and anger over a variety of social issues. The increased presence of migrants, often from different cultures and religions, often turns out to be an easy scapegoat for the feeling of a threatened national identity, persistently high unemployment (especially among youth), and terrorist attacks, and this can lead people into supporting politicians calling for closing borders to protect national security and culture.

One should not forget that TV, radio, newspapers and political discussions are playing a big role in shaping our perception of migrants and refugees. One can increasingly observe anti-immigration rhetoric accusing refugees of abusing the social welfare systems, taking jobs from the locals, being criminals, violent or even terrorists. Mainstream media often show refugees as a homogeneous group of Muslims with common features: being extremely poor, uneducated and unhygienic, creating a distorted picture of refugees as backwards and uncivilized.

Many of the above mentioned ideas are built on stereotypes generalizing from single cases to an undifferentiated mass of “refugees” and should not be taken as reliable. We see it as a moral duty to help those in need. Solidarity is the value that connects us, both from an



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emotional point of view, considering that we help others out of respect and empathy, but as well from a legal standpoint, in which we follow the basic human rights and the idea of equality. From a more utilitarian point of view, considering that many newcomers may actually be skilled and motivated young people, we can also keep in mind that they potentially provide additional labour force in economies that are mostly ageing, thus allowing the welfare states to keep running by countering demographic trends.

Our Position in connection with IYNF Values

The basic idea of the Naturefriends movement was to make nature accessible for everyone. Interpreting this in a broader sense, we believe that the ability to live a dignified and fulfilling life is a valuable end to pursue. IYNF has three fundamental values that underpin our activities, each associated with a different color.

The **Red Color** stands for “values of solidarity, justice, democracy, peace and internationalism”, going back to the origins of Naturefriends as a working class movement. Our position on forced migration has strong parallels to these socialist roots: in both cases, the concern lies with the protection and wellbeing of disadvantaged minorities, who are vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. We believe that empathising with those in need of assistance is the humane response, and that their precarious situation calls for our support on an international level.

The **Green Color** stands for “love and care for nature, environmental experience and education”. We believe that the right to free movement on the surface of the earth is a “natural right”, which we all possess by virtue of our humanity and our common bond to nature. Natural rights, like freedom of movement, are older and more fundamental than the authority of any state or institution. Of course, governments have been interfering with this right for millennia (for example, the Romans restricted the travel of Jews), and the creation of the modern nation has legitimized states to control who can cross their borders. But our natural right to roam the earth should not depend on the arbitrary country to which we belong. We believe that the freedom of movement should be treated as a right in the same respect as the right to freedom of speech. An inspiring example on a national level is the “Allemansrätten” law in Sweden, which is the principle enshrined by law that gives everyone the freedom to roam around the country, including on private property (as long as they “don’t disturb – don’t destroy”). The general philosophy is that nature in Sweden exists for its own sake, and is the property of all: it cannot be fully owned by anyone. We believe that this philosophy should be applied to how we think of the right to roam the earth.



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The **Blue Color** is the most recent addition, and stands for youth work, including “youth participation, personal development, non-formal and experiential education”.¹ Young people having to flee their homeland are a particularly vulnerable group which demand particular consideration. Throughout the last 40 years IYNF has gained particular expertise in international and transcultural youth work using non-formal methods and experiential learning. We believe in the high potential of those approaches to increase the intercultural understanding in order to reach border-free solidarity.

Call for Action

Our position on migrants and refugees is very remote from the realities that they face today. We would like to call for civil society to change its perception of newcomers, and for decision-makers to implement policies that would promote their successful integration and well-being.

Humane conditions for everyone!

First of all, we believe that it is the duty of a state to create humane conditions for everyone on its territory. This should count not only for citizens but also for people without a legal status who are in need. This is the base of solidarity which we stand for. Every person needs to be granted the Human Rights and a life in dignity, including a place to sleep, food, water and at least basic medical security.

Change the immigration system!

It is obvious that the current immigration systems in the EU (especially the Dublin regulations²) and elsewhere are flawed in many ways; not working efficiently enough, encouraging isolationism and populism rather than solidarity and common responsibility. We do not think that one state can in the long run be able to host all people who want to enter it, on its own. It should in fact be a duty of all countries to ensure the safety of all people. For this, we need a common and realistic strategy on a regional, and even a global level. For example, large-scale organised resettlement programmes distributing people in danger to host countries according to their capacities could drastically reduce the risks for people fleeing their homeland risking their lives on the routes, and for the host country's national security. Of course, such a procedure requires an agreement of standards being offered to newcomers binding for all the host countries in this pan-European community.

¹ <http://www.iynf.org/about/structure/>

² https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en

²

https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en

Instead of simply reducing the numbers of people who are allowed to cross the EU borders, we believe that it is more efficient to demilitarise and improve the border control procedures by implementing professional medical and psychological screening and treatment.

Help newcomers to integrate!

We expect from people entering a new country to accept (though not necessarily to adopt) the local behaviour, culture and traditions and to follow the binding laws. Ensuring the successful inclusion of newcomers into civil society is, however, also the duty of the host country. One cannot expect from a person entering a society with a different language, culture, values and traditions to be able to immediately adapt fully to the new environment. Here, we call for decision-makers on national, regional and local levels for educational support, through public institutions and NGOs. Often governments primarily concentrate on measurements to improve the most practical skills for the labour market, such as language courses. For successful inclusion, however, it is crucial to also teach about local culture, customs and behaviour. Educating in this direction can reduce many misunderstandings and uncertainties. Education for intercultural dialogue is necessary not only for the newcomers but also for the local society. Especially NGOs can use non-formal education methods to enhance intercultural understanding.

Include Newcomers in Youth Work!

Since we believe that young people have a special need for support, IYNF has created *Guidelines, Tools and Methods for Working with Refugees and Migrants*, providing inspirations and concrete examples, that you can access on iynf.org. On a governmental (national and international) level, we see an urgent need to improve family reunification programmes and to enhance the psychological stability of young newcomers through professional support. Although requiring considerable initial investment, such measures would certainly result in better integration records and less incentives for radicalisation which often arise by lack of a sense of belonging.

Fight the causes!

It should, furthermore, be one of our major concerns to fight the causes of forced migration. One might argue that this should be the task of governments and international unions such as the UN (which we hereby confirm), but we also believe that even individuals can influence many of the developments in the world.

As UNHCR states³, between 2008 and 2015 22.5 million people were displaced because of climate- related disasters. You can see only in the northern part of Africa (especially sub-saharan area) that many people will have to flee in the next twenty years because of ongoing desertification. Droughts, soil erosions, floods, tsunamis and other natural catastrophes are reasons why millions of people are and will continue to be displaced every day. The most visible examples are the drought in Somalia⁴, which forced many people to

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/dr-2015-000134-som>

leave their home and the earthquake in Nepal⁵. Another recent issue is the drought in Syria, which forced already more than million people to leave their home before the war started⁶. This drought was as well one of the main reasons for the war, inciting violence and leaving people behind in dissatisfaction and despair.

In addition, many multinational companies are involved in land acquisition (grabbing) through illegal or unethical means depriving whole villages of their territory and resources.

With our very own day-to-day consumption decisions, we can influence the impact we have on such migration-driving issues. The amount of water that is needed for the products we consume, the agriculture methods that are used, the carbon dioxide emissions and the methods used by the companies can be influenced not only by laws but also by demand. We see it as a part of our environmental education to teach people to make conscious decisions. According to the definition of the 1951 Geneva Convention, climate refugees do not even fall under the definition of refugees and do therefore not receive appropriate support (New Zealand has been a pioneer in changing this, though). As well, many displaced people are only internally displaced. However, mostly the living conditions are unbearable and therefore initiatives like the Nansen Initiative⁷ try to support people who are displaced because of climate-related issues.

Re-think terminologies!

Keeping all this in mind, we urge everyone to reconsider the often unreflected use of the terminologies of “refugees” and “asylum-seekers” These terms are often not used correctly, and we also believe that they do not accurately reflect the reality displaced people face. In the official definition of the term “refugee” by the UNHCR⁸, many reasons for forced migration are not even mentioned, such as climate change or health hazards. During the conference, we discussed the term of “lifeseekers” introduced in an online campaign by the network UNITED⁹, which overcomes the problematic distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration, and the difficult differentiation by motivation. We, however, encountered controversial opinions on this idea and therefore did not adopt it in this document. We would nonetheless like to encourage everyone to use the above mentioned terms more consciously, and to think about possible alternatives.

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⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_2015_Nepal_earthquake

⁶ <http://www.dw.com/en/is-the-world-prepared-for-climate-refugees/a-41227964v>

⁷ <http://disasterdisplacement.org/>

⁸ UNHCR (1967): Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

⁹ <https://lifeseekers.org/>