

Street papers play vital role in refugee relief

BY LAURA SMITH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Last year alone, more than 1.2 million refugees entered Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Many of them arrived to the doorstep of a street newspaper or magazine just like Street Roots. As a result, street papers are in a unique position to tell the human story of Europe's refugee crisis.

This was the consensus in Athens when delegates from street newspapers around the world discussed how the growing crisis could affect street papers - and how they can show solidarity with those already working on the front line in Greece. It was the focus of a panel discussion during the International Network of Street Papers global summit in June.

Given the scale and complexity of the crisis, the topics raised covered the subject on a humanitarian, management, political and emotional level. One of the main conclusions was that the current refugee crisis is a global issue that not one country - or street paper - can face alone. Street papers can also play a vital role by putting a human face on the issue to encourage solidarity and understanding within communities.

"[In Athens] we are doing what we can, but we cannot do it alone," said Lefteris Papagiannakis, Athens Deputy Mayor in charge of Migration and Refugees.

"This is a black and white issue. We either move on together or we close up shop. We are 28 countries and are facing a very complex situation. Right now we are failing."

Papagiannakis' small team co-ordinates efforts between the city and NGOs to support refugees in Athens. One such response is the Eleonas Refugee Camp.

"The situation is not yet stable and will get worse for all of us. You cannot stop people fleeing crisis. It is like trying to hold water. It overflows," Papagiannakis said. "The way we are acting is a dead end. We need to be brave and open to discussing common and cohesive refugee-friendly policies across Europe."

Lesvos Solidarity is a network of NGOs campaigning for better refugee living conditions and support on Lesvos - the tiny island destination for many who make the perilous boat journey across the Mediterranean. Volunteer Effie Latsoudi travelled from Lesvos especially to attend the INSP Summit.

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- LISA BOLYOS
EDITOR OF AUGUSTIN, AUSTRIAN STREET NEWSPAPER

She gave delegates a harrowing account of the suffering she witnessed when refugees began arriving in 2006.

"We saw conditions you couldn't imagine," Latsoudi said. "You had families who had lost loved ones in the sea. There was no space in the cemetery

for the dead. We had to use a shipping container at the hospital for a morgue. It was obvious we had to help and do something," she said. "I think Europe has two faces. It's amazing the number of people who want to help and show solidarity. Then you see Europe politicians saying 'no we don't want them, take them back'."

INSP board member Paola Gallo is the managing director of Swiss street paper Surprise. A quarter of Surprise's vendors



Lefteris Papagiannakis, Athens Deputy Mayor in charge of Migration and Refugees discusses response to refugee crisis.

are refugees. She admitted her country is one of many in Europe not doing enough to help.

"Half of people applying for asylum in Switzerland are turned away. We decided in next five years want to accept 3,000 people from Syria. It's nothing to what is needed," she said. "We need to do more. We have to care about the people, the human beings. Integrate them as soon as possible and make them part of society."

This is a mission many street papers have already embraced, including Austrian paper Augustin. Editor Lisa Bolyos has campaigned for the rights of refugees for many years. She said roughly one third of Augustin vendors are refugees, mainly from Africa.

"I live right at the border between Austria and Hungary, the border my father crossed as a refugee 60 years ago. Every day we see people crossing. We know there is a lot of homelessness among these refugees," said Bolyos.

She added that street papers can help rekindle the initially welcoming and celebratory attitude Western Europe first showed towards refugees. Positive editorials

and campaigns can help, such as Augustin's current collaboration with young refugees to secure them free public transport in Vienna.

"We are responsible for this. As a network of journalists and social organizations we need promote the idea of welcoming and inclusion," Bolyos said.

Street papers have a long history of giving the marginalized a voice, starting with their own vendors. Greek vendor Mike Samolis told the panel more must be done to inform and put a human face on the escalating refugee crisis. Samolis sells Shedia in Athens. He was once mistrustful of refugees coming to Greece, but living beside Syrian refugees in an Athens homeless shelter has changed his opinion.

"I have [refugee] friends who are scared to go out because they will be attacked. We have to explain to people all over Europe that they are people like us. We have to tell them why they risked their lives to come here," he said. "Three years ago I didn't want them here. Now I spend 24 hours a day with them. When I meet them and hear their stories, now I understand."

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