

Policy briefing

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Refugee beneficiaries of the HC on their arrival at Fiumicino Airport in Rome being welcomed by Sant'Egidio staff. © Sant'Egidio

Humanitarian Corridors: safe and legal pathways to Europe

SUMMARY

The Humanitarian Corridors (HC) initiative offers vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers (henceforth refugees) safe and legal access to protection on Italian territory. Launched in 2016, the project was a response to the growing number of individuals dying in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach mainland Europe and the lack of existing legal migration routes. The HC programme operates with full cooperation from the Italian state, but is not state funded. The initiative is entirely financed by a private sponsorship scheme outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Italian government and three religious organisations which proposed the original project and committed to fund it. In March 2017 the French government signed a similar HC agreement proving that this is a replicable model that can now be adapted to suit other countries in mainland Europe.

Findings

- **A proven replicable model for countries in mainland Europe** offering vulnerable refugees, irrespective of their religious or ethnic background, safe passage
- A private sponsorship programme built on a partnership model that involves government bodies, religious organisations and civil society, but **no state funding is required**
- **Fewer opportunities for human traffickers and smugglers to exploit vulnerable refugees** by offering alternative means of transport and safe and legal access to protection in Europe
- **More effective integration into local communities** through the volunteer networks of sponsoring organisations rather than the traditional migrant centres which isolate migrants from the community
- **Quicker asylum claim resolution** (reduced to as little as six months as opposed to the average of two years)
- **Improved perceptions of migrants by the general public**, through emphasis on the personal stories of those involved and their plight – helping to reverse formerly negative perceptions
- The HCs programme is a successful **example of religious engagement in foreign policy** proving that religious leaders and communities can productively partner with governments in foreign policy-making

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This policy brief provides an overview of the Italian Humanitarian Corridors initiative, aiming to contextualize its viability as a replicable model for other European countries and further the discussion of how governments can engage religious communities and civil society to create new partnerships to address the global refugee crisis. The briefing is the result of a collaboration

between the University of Sussex and the Community of Sant'Egidio. The research benefitted from a policy dialogue on the topic convened by the *Religions and International Relations* Initiative of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISPI on 13-14 March 2017 and follow-up discussions and interviews with relevant stakeholders involved in the Humanitarian Corridors facilitated by the Community of Sant'Egidio.

For more information, see <http://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/refugee-crisis-role-religious-actors-17131>

AUTHORS

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What are Humanitarian Corridors (HC)?



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THE HC INITIATIVE IS AN INNOVATIVE AND AMBITIOUS MODEL FOR HUMANITARIAN VISAS THAT:

- prevents exploitation by human traffickers
- integrates refugees directly into local communities with support from volunteer networks of sponsoring organisations
- is the result of an inter-religious collaboration between Catholics and Protestants and a partnership between a secular government and religious organisations

HCs aim to provide a rapid response to the large numbers of refugees arriving in Europe, allowing the most vulnerable refugees to gain access to humanitarian visas and subsequently, safe passage to Italy and the possibility of applying for asylum on arrival. The policy applies to all people in vulnerable situations, regardless of their religious or ethnic background and was developed in collaboration between the Italian government and several religious organisations. The governmental side includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Ministry of the Interior, whilst the non-governmental side consists of a partnership between the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church. Through this agreement, signed in December 2015, the Italian government agreed to issue 1,000 humanitarian visas over a two-year period (2016-2018) to Syrian, Syro-Palestinians and Iraqi refugees who mostly resided in Lebanon. This has since been expanded with the opening of a new HC from Ethiopia to Italy and the launch of a French HC initiative.

Once in Italy, beneficiaries are distributed throughout the country and supported by volunteers during the integration process. Since its launch, individuals have been placed in seventeen regions and seventy cities in Italy. The effectiveness and success of the initiative in integrating refugees is linked to the fact that newcomers are supported throughout the legal process and, instead of being placed in centres, are immersed directly into the local communities that support them. Volunteers help them to fully

integrate into Italian society by teaching them Italian, facilitating their children's schooling, and supporting them with health issues and finding a job. The HC initiative has sought to change the public perception of migration in Italy. Communication with the wider public around the project has emphasised refugees' personal stories which help the public understand their precarious situations and highlight the fact that refugees are not a threat, but people in need of protection. Interestingly, mainstream media has mostly presented the HC initiative as a powerful message of solidarity to people across Europe, reinforced by Pope Francis who has lauded the initiative on numerous occasions and the Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni who described it "as part of the package of necessary actions to respond to the refugee crisis".¹

HCs are completely self-funded by private sponsorship and the organisations that have promoted them through fundraising, such as the Waldensian Church's Eight Per Thousand campaign. The Italian state bears no financial responsibility for the initiative. The Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church cover all costs associated with hosting refugees. This includes legal assistance, hospitality and accommodation, economic support for the transfer to Italy, and support throughout the integration process. Furthermore, money that is not paid to human traffickers and smugglers can be used in other ways to support the refugees' new life in Italy. HCs have recently received strong support from the UNHCR High Commissioner.²

¹ Interview with Paolo Gentiloni on the occasion of his welcome of the first group of HC beneficiaries, Rome 29 Feb 2016, <http://www.repubblica.it/ultimora/24ore/migranti-gentiloni-a-ue-no-muri-ma-corridoi-umanitari/news-dettaglio/4626099>

² <http://www.vita.it/it/articolo/2017/05/24/filippo-grandi-le-ong-un-bersaglio-sbagliato/143495/>; <http://www.vita.it/it/articolo/2017/05/24/filippo-grandi-le-ong-un-bersaglio-sbagliato/143495/>

How do Humanitarian Corridors operate?

OVERVIEW

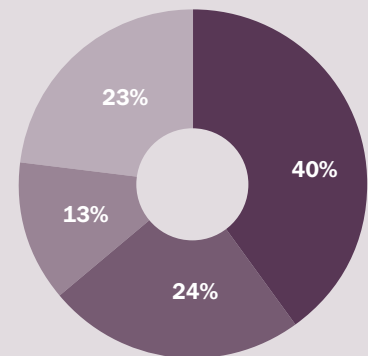
The HC project provides support to individuals in vulnerable situations, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. An advantage of this approach, complementary to refugee resettlement, is the speed with which refugees are identified and issued with humanitarian visas, allowing immediate travel to the host country. This requires detailed international collaboration to identify those who can benefit most from the programme. The Italian government also requires robust security checks. The identification process for refugees to receive protection in Italy involves the following procedures:

THE PROCESS – OVER SIX MONTHS

- 1 A list of potential beneficiaries is initially prepared by a sponsoring religious organisation such as the Community of Sant'Egidio, which works in partnership with local actors and the UNHCR in the informal camps and shelters; this is done through direct contacts and a permanent presence of their staff and volunteers in Lebanon and Ethiopia and through calls for action coming from local non-profits in contact with people in need of international protection.
- 2 The sponsoring organisation prepares a list of potential beneficiaries, selected according to UNHCR resettlement submission categories: Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs, Survivors of Torture and/or Violence, Medical Needs, Women and Girls at Risk, Family Reunification, Children and Adolescents at Risk and Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions.
- 3 Multiple interviews are held with potential beneficiaries to assess their situation and identify priority levels (emergency/urgent/normal). Each individual's circumstance is initially checked by representatives from the organisations involved. They are then given a security check, first by the Italian embassy in Lebanon, including a biometric identification photo procedure, and then by Lebanese security.
- 4 The lists of potential beneficiaries are shared with the Italian consular authorities of the countries involved to allow monitoring by the Ministry of the Interior.
- 5 This list is screened by the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation subsequently carry out necessary controls to issue visas and a laissez-passer travel document for those without passports.
- 6 The Italian consulates in the countries concerned then issue visas with limited territorial validity in accordance with Article 25 of the Visa Regulation (EC), which provides for a Member State to issue humanitarian visas when considered necessary on humanitarian grounds, for reasons of national interest or because of international obligations.
- 7 Before departure, awareness sessions are held in line with the International Organisation for Migration standards for Pre-Departure Orientation Programs. Key priority messages focus on the cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic aspects of the European traditions, culture and society.
- 8 Once beneficiaries have received a humanitarian visa, their flight is booked to Rome, where they are met by volunteers and supported through their asylum application. All costs, including accommodation and support are met by the organisations involved, not by the Italian government.
- 9 On arrival at Fiumicino airport in Rome, refugees request international protection. From there they are placed in different communities throughout Italy. Local police departments are responsible for processing their refugee status claim. All claims are then presented to the Territorial Commission to confirm their ongoing international protection.
- 10 Beneficiaries receive decisions about their asylum claims within six months, as opposed to an average of two years for refugees who enter Italy in other ways. De facto their request for international protection is accelerated, as authorities know they come with HC and that they have already been screened. So far, 100 percent of the beneficiaries have been granted international protection.
- 11 When granted refugee status, the Territorial Commission begins proceedings that allow refugees to receive their permit of stay for asylum from local police departments. The permit of stay for asylum is valid for five years and can be renewed on expiry.

BENEFICIARIES OF THE HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS INITIATIVE:

To date, 2000 refugees have benefitted from the Humanitarian Corridors programme, of whom 1,500 are selected and come from Lebanon (1,000 to Italy and 500 to France). The remaining 500 will come from Ethiopia and will travel to Italy.



AGE OF BENEFICIARIES

- over 30 years old
- under 10 years old
- aged 10-18 years old
- aged 18-30 years old

As of June 2017, of the 802 refugees who have already arrived in Italy:

- 417 (52 percent) are female and 385 (48 percent) are male
- More than 98 percent are originally from Syria, with a small percentage from Iraq (Nationality: 783 Syrians, 13 Iraqis, 6 Syro-Palestinian)
- 795 have come from Lebanese informal camps and shelters, 4 from Iraqi-Kurdistan and 3 through Greece
- The majority of them, 70 percent, are Muslim (with a minority of Christians, most of whom are Syrian-Orthodox (some Chaldeans and Melkites)

How can Humanitarian Corridors be replicated?

HOW THE HC MODEL HAS SUCCEEDED AND EXPANDED

The HC initiative was created as a pilot programme that would require replication to have any real impact on the larger humanitarian context it seeks to address. The HC pilot is already expanding. In just over a year since its launch, Italy will extend this approach to Ethiopia (in partnership with the Italian Catholic Bishops' Conference), where 500 individuals (Eritreans, South-Sudanese and Somali refugee and asylum seekers) will be selected to travel safely and legally to Italy. The initiative has also been adopted by the microstate of the Republic of San Marino which has already welcomed five people.

Moreover, an agreement signed in March 2017 between the French government, the Community of Sant'Egidio and other Catholic and Protestant organisations in France will allow for the opening of a new HC for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon to travel to France, though without the offer of humanitarian visas. Although the programmes differ in some respects – France does not utilize Article 25 of the Visa Regulation (EC) in their agreement, but gives a “long term D visa”, which is strictly for asylum and specific to France – France's adoption of the HC initiative proves that it is replicable. During the agreement signing ceremony, former French President Hollande said, “*this initiative proves that productive partnerships between a secular republic and religious organisations are possible, and even desirable*”.²

HCS OFFER A POSITIVE AND ACHIEVABLE OPTION FOR GOVERNMENTS

The Italian HC initiative has clear goals: to save lives, combat trafficking, support safe and legal passage to Italy, encourage full integration and provide a viable model for other European countries. However, there is no single model for HCs. While the HC initiative prioritises and is rooted in the creation of safe and legal ways to enter Europe, the approach can apply various legal measures, as is evident in France's recent adoption of the programme. Furthermore, each country, while working within a certain legal framework, decides how to manage local, national and international collaborations, as well as reception and integration efforts. The HC initiative is a viable model for Europe because it is flexible in its approach, but tenacious in its vision to create stronger, more humane societies and to actively resolve the current and ongoing refugee crisis. This initiative also confirms the current trend of expanding the role of religious engagement in foreign policy. The HC Initiative concretely shows how religious leaders and communities can help governmental and nongovernmental organisations to build peace and tackle humanitarian problems in the context of the current crises.

HCS OFFER A POSITIVE OPTION FOR EFFECTIVE REFUGEE INTEGRATION

Countries can adopt and adapt the HC model to make it work within their own political, economic and cultural realities. The approach arises from new and established collaborations between religious, cultural, governmental and nongovernmental organisations. The key issue is trust across these relationships. This has allowed a sensible, more practical solution to emerge, uniting communities and undermining the sense of disempowerment that the language of ‘crisis’ encourages. The EU has failed to propose anything sufficiently radical or new to adequately address this reality. New approaches, such as the HC initiative, are practical ways to work within the existing legal and political frameworks and to fill the gaps within them. HCs provide collective, innovative and effective solutions to the urgent humanitarian need at Europe's borders. The project is easily replicable in other EU countries to make a real contribution to the collective effort.



² <http://en.infomigrants.net/post/159037082580/france-opens-its-first-humanitarian-corridors-to-middle>

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact Dr Fabio Petito (FPetito@sussex.ac.uk) for more information on this policy brief and Dr Monica Attias (monicaattias@gmail.com), Community of Sant'Egidio, for more information on the HC Initiative

'Humanitarian corridors are open: From Italy a signal of hope for Europe', a summary of the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the promoting organisation with the Italian government, see <http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/1165/langID/en/itemID/756/Dossier-What-are-the-humanitarian-corridors.html>

Video on the HC initiative (including testimonials of beneficiaries), see <http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/11676/langID/en/Humanitarian-Corridors-for-refugees.html>

'Humanitarian Corridors', presentation on the webpage of the Directorate General for Political Affairs and Security, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, see http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/temi_globali/diritti_umani/i-corridoi-umanitari.html

Dossier on the French Initiative of HC, including the text of “Le Protocole d'accord pour la mise en oeuvre d'une opération d'accueil solidaire de réfugiés en provenance du Liban (couloirs humanitaires)”, see http://www.protestants.org/index.php?id=23&tx_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=3846&tx_ttnews%5Byear%5D=2017&tx_ttnews%5Bmonth%5D=03&cHash=ada9707504