

INSIGHTS INTO YOUTH-LED EXPERIENCES FOR LOCAL POLICY-MAKING IN MIGRATION ISSUES

This paper is part of a selection of good practices gathered from the E-LoCUM partner countries. These examples showcase successful models and mechanisms for fostering youth participation in migration-related initiatives. The initiatives described serve as practical references for youth workers, educators, and practitioners, offering real-world examples of how youth engagement can be effectively structured and implemented.

These practices are designed not only to inspire but also to encourage creative thinking about how similar models could be adapted to your own local contexts. Furthermore, the practical insights from these models will provide additional "food for thought" to deepen discussions on migration and democratic participation.

The Welcommon Centre for Refugees and the Welcommon Hostel (Greece)

- **Location:** Athens - Greece
- **Year of creation:** 2016
- **Status:** Informal (grassroots) initiative

Context and background: The Welcommon Centre for Refugees, meaning hosting, empowerment and inclusion of vulnerable refugees (9/2016 – 2/2018) was created by the social cooperative Wind of Renewal / Anemos Ananeosis to promote coexistence and dialogue among those working with refugees, asylum seekers, European young volunteers from more than 30 nationalities and ethnicities in a more inclusive framework. Together with the Centre, also the Welcommon Hostel was set up, as an innovative and inclusive hostel open to the different kinds of travellers: tourists, Erasmus, volunteers, nomads, migrants and refugees (6/2018 - 7/2024).

In 1,5 years, from 9/2016 until 2/2018, the Welcommon hosted 600 vulnerable refugees and migrants, among others 41 newborns from 22 countries. The project was not simply meant to be for the refugees but with the refugees - working with them for their benefit, as well as that of the neighbourhood and the local community. Welcommon means welcome in common, together.

Youth engagement strategies: "Empowerment through the creation of inclusive communities", a community-based model, empowerment and inclusion through building communities.

Also, the approach used entailed "to learn from each other and learn how to learn". Learning from each other is an important and interesting part of our social projects. In real life we have to be openminded and able to learn from each other.

Usually in refugee's camps the people are separated based on religion or origins. Therefore, existing stereotypes remain unchanged and the people are not supported in living and working in multicultural societies. In addition, the refugees and migrants very rarely participate there in organizing their daily life and also preparing their future.

The idea was that if they wanted to make their courses more interactive, all the participants could be at the same time “teachers” and “students”, that means “we learn from each other”, it is not a passive one-way learning process. As many people with different knowledge and skills came together through travelling, they tried to benefit from each other. The residents of the Welcommon Hostel as well as the volunteers and staff could be the teachers for a number of cases (to teach for example English or German or art or professional skills) but at the same time they could be “pupils” (to learn cooking, playing music, or learn Arabic, Farsi or African dancing or skills and capacities needed in a hostel). So, the travellers participating in the hostel’s intercultural courses could “teach” using their different skills, transferring knowledge, enhance their capacities and flourish themselves but they could also “learn”, empowering themselves, benefit from the skills and knowledge of their “students”. We have experienced all this, it is not only a theory, a good idea only on papers.

Partnerships and collaboration: The project was supported by the Development Agency of the Municipality of Athens and the UNHCR. But these agencies decided in January 2018 that refugees should be hosted only in apartments, there was no need for transition structures. The centre closed in March 2018.

Many actors of the social economy, such as cooperatives, social enterprises, work integration social enterprises (WISEs) and associations, include marginalized, vulnerable and disabled people in their daily operation and governance structures, allowing for their participation also in the decision-making of the enterprise or organisation.

Inclusivity and diversity: The idea behind Welcommon was to include the refugees themselves in organizing their life in the hosting centre and be more open to different cultures, through co-organising different language courses, tutoring, cinema, theatre and art lessons as well as visits to museums and galleries. It became one of the most innovative and creative centres for hosting, empowering and socially including refugees. The work carried out by the social cooperative was not only FOR refugees but also WITH refugees and migrants. They focused not only on help, relief, humanitarian support but also on mobilization and empowerment through doing and acting together.

they used the human capital existed in their small and multicultural communities for solving problems, teaching, supporting alone disable persons in move during their stay in our premises, stopping violence in family, protecting vulnerable persons.

Sustainability and impact: More than 440 volunteers, between them refugees and migrants, offered to each other but also to other persons (travellers or locals) a full schedule of inclusive cultural activities, music, art, comedy and film events. 440 volunteers from 2016 until today participated in our volunteering projects offering Intercultural and inclusive courses and activities open to refugees, migrants, volunteers, locals, tourists (6000 participants until today) but they also gained knowledge and experiences, improved their skills and capacities. The different kinds of residents of the Welcommon Hostel participating in the provided intercultural courses “used” the different skills and knowledge they get know from their previous education or from their home countries.

As of June 2020, even the sustainable tourism collapsed and at the same time thousands of recognized refugees and asylum seekers in Greece were left homeless in the midst of a global pandemic. Wind of Renewal decided to host a number of refugees, the most vulnerable between

them, such as survivors of sexual violence, torture and ill treatment, the elderly, people with chronic diseases, pregnant and mothers with new borne babies.

During COVID-19, the cooperative offered in Welcommon Hostel safe accommodation and empowerment courses to many homeless vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers and at the same time we hosted a number of volunteers in Welcommon Hostel. They tried to empower the most vulnerable persons of the society and turn them into leaders of their communities. At the same time although the impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions measures had a serious impact on the social cooperative (reducing -80% of its income, almost zero tourists, restriction of in person activities, need for increased and costly health protection measures etc), Wind of Renewal continued offering in the Welcommon Hostel social empowerment and non-formal education courses with the participation of refugees and volunteers. But still, during Covid-19, volunteers (few but existed), refugees, migrants, travellers, were the protagonists of organising (in safety) the activities, not only the participants.

At the end of 2024, Wind of Renewal withdrew from the management of the Hostel.

Communication outreach: The adopted social model, together with the cooperative's values and innovative approach are the strengths of their commercial communication. On 26th of April 2021, the Welcommon Hostel was recognized as the "most EXTRAORDINARY Hostel Hero" and one of the 5 "Extraordinary Sustainable Hostels" by leading Online Travel Agent (OTA) focused on the hostel market, Hostelworld. Representing Greece, Welcommon Hostel was crowned as the most EXTRAORDINARY Hostel Hero by a panel of expert travel judges and more than 20,000 votes by hostel travellers from all around the world. Since 2016, the Hostel has received 11 international and European awards, prizes, distinctions, special recognitions.