

ECRE

The European Council on Refugees & Exiles (ECRE)

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Abstract in English

The European Council on Refugees & Exiles (ECRE) is a pan-European network of refugee-assisting non-governmental organisations. ECRE is concerned with the needs of all individuals who seek refuge and protection within Europe. Its main aim is to promote the protection and integration of refugees in Europe based on the values of human dignity, human rights, and an ethic of solidarity. ECRE is its membership, nearly 80 full and associate member agencies, comprising key NGOs working in the European refugee field.

Abstract in italiano

Il Consiglio Europeo sui Rifugiati e gli Esiliati è un network pan-europeo di organizzazioni non governative che fornisce assistenza ai rifugiati. Si occupa delle necessità di tutti gli individui che cercano rifugio e protezione all'interno dell'Europa. Il suo principale scopo è promuovere la protezione e l'integrazione dei rifugiati in Europa, sulla base dei valori di dignità umana, di diritti umani e di un'etica della solidarietà. Il network è formato da quasi 80 soci, tra cui alcune ONG chiave che operano nell'ambito europeo dei rifugiati.

Area: Quality of Life (employment, lodgement)

Kind-category of project: NGO network

Kind-category of actor: NGO network

Country : UK (Secretariat) but also all over Europe

Year: 1991-TODAY

5 key-words: Refugee, Integration, Assistance, Exiles, Network.

1. THE PROJECT

1.1. Description of the project

Working together always makes things much easier. Maybe that is the reason of ECRE's success. In dealing with the integration of third-country nationals in the European Union, we find many organisations and institutions which make a wonderful work but find too many limitations in relation with the information they cannot get, the fundraising they do not know how to make, the research they cannot afford and the questions they cannot answer. Since most of them share their general objectives and many of their particular aims, working together would save them the time and funding they need so much for the good development of their projects. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles is an European initiative that links those organisations whose main aim is to promote the protection and integration of refugees in Europe, and are based on the values of human dignity, human rights, and an ethic of solidarity.

ECRE's main objectives include advocating a **humane and generous European asylum policy** and by promoting the development of a comprehensive and coherent

response by the international community to refugee movements, strengthening networking between refugee-assisting non-governmental organisations in Europe, and **developing the institutional capacity of refugee-assisting** non-governmental organisations in Europe.

ECRE develops **Capacity Building Projects** in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. These projects began in 1993 (South Eastern Europe), 1996 (Eastern Europe) and 2003 (Central Europe). Although the Eastern and South Eastern Europe projects began with funding from the British Refugee Council and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these projects are currently Community funded. These projects help national member agencies with fundraising strategies and donor databases, training, project management and planning consultancies, legal information and translations. ECRE is most active in the legal area, where they have developed a legal discussion forum in refugee and asylum seeking in collaboration with Asylumlaw.org. The forum is called ELENA (European legal network on asylum) and does not only facilitate the exchange of information and experience between lawyers and legal counsellors, but also studies the implementation of national and international law relating to refugees and organises seminars on specific topics relating to refugee law, making results available to practicing lawyers.

Caritas Europa comments very positively on ECRE's results in 2004: "We consider ECRE to be a valuable source of information and a reliable partner. The organisation has built up considerable know how in the fields of asylum and integration of refugees. We strongly encourage ECRE to continue on its advocacy efforts for more humane asylum policies; one of the main points of concern for Caritas Europa."

1.2 Place and context.

ECRE was born thirty years ago in a very different Europe when people were still being forcibly exiled from the Soviet Union, arriving to Western Europe across checkpoints along the Berlin wall; Angola and Mozambique were Portuguese colonies and Spain was under a dictatorship, and organisations such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International did either not exist at all or were too small to be significant. In current Europe, ECRE's concerns focus on EU's increasingly restrictive legislation and tightening immigration controls that do not allow refugees gain access to European territory through regular means, continuously increasing the number of those who perish trying to clandestinely get to Europe by land or sea. In the 2004 ECRE annual report, Peer Baneke, General Secretary of ECRE, remains optimistic about the future of refugee assisting in Europe: "Throughout its thirty year existence, ECRE's member agencies have assisted and supported hundreds of thousands of refugees. Through ECRE, refugee agencies are united in working for real protection for refugees in Europe."

1.3 When and how long: structure and steps of the project

ECRE began its work to support refugee-assisting NGOs in their development needs in 1991. The project began with an ambitious programme of legal seminars in Central Europe and then branched out into a wide range of trainings. Parallel with these developments ECRE facilitated a gradual engagement in its networks - ELENA (European Legal Network on Asylum) and ECRAN (ECRE Advocacy Network) - in membership applications and in regional coordination mechanisms. The principles underlying all this work in Central Europe, and that which characterised the future

approach to all of ECRE's capacity building projects, was to respect the pace of NGO development and to respond to their specific and stated needs.

The capacity building work in South Eastern Europe has been an ECRE project since 1993. The "lead agency" practice has applied to this project, with the Danish Refugee Council, the Dutch Refugee Council and the British Refugee Council consequently assuming responsibility for coordinating its activities on ECRE's behalf. An external evaluation of the work in 1998 recommended that the scope of this work was so central to ECRE's wider concerns that it should be integrated into the ECRE Secretariat as soon as practicable. This has now taken place.

ECRE commissioned a feasibility study into expanding its capacity building work into Eastern Europe in 1996 and since 1998 has been working in the region to provide high-quality and much-valued training courses, workshops, organisational support and access to ECRE networks and knowledge.

1.4 Target

Although ECRE's target are refugee assisting NGOs, and not refugees and asylum seekers themselves. The latter are the indirect target of the network, but the direct target of ECRE's member agencies. Since ECRE's help to NGOs improve their results, its ultimate (though indirect) target are asylum seekers and refugees. Also, ECRE puts a strong emphasis on the fact that assisting refugees and asylum seekers is not only beneficiary for these target group, but for the host community too. Indeed, both the host community and the refugee and asylum seeking community are considered as the two components of a same reality that must be approached from a common perspective.

1.5 Methodology

ECRE's policy work aims to demonstrate that the needs of refugees and the interests of European host states are not mutually exclusive, but can be realised simultaneously through policies which are principled as well as pragmatic. This work ranges from immediate reactions to governmental and intergovernmental policy to longer-term research and discussion projects. It is "action oriented", aiming always to make specific recommendations. It is firmly based on international human rights and refugee law.

ECRE's working methods are guided by the principle of seeking to mobilise the widest possible active involvement of its member agencies through working groups, advisory groups, regional fora and Europe-wide networks. Member agencies are encouraged to lead on particular projects of their own. ECRE welcomes memberships from NGOs working on behalf of refugees and promoting a humane and liberal asylum policy for refugees and exiles in their own countries. All member agencies are present in the Plenary Assembly and can present their own candidate for the Executive Committee.

The Secretariat, which services and represents the ECRE membership, is based in London. ECRE also maintains an office in Brussels, responsible for activities vis-à-vis with the institutions of the European Union. Interns provide vital support to ECRE's policy, legal and advocacy work, in both the London and Brussels offices.

ECRE is fertile in publications and generous with the accessibility of its results (available at ECRE's website www.ecre.org), which does not only help its member

agencies, but also benefits any institution and organisation working on refugee and asylum seeking matters.

1.6 Authors, Funding and Networks

ECRE's list of **member agencies** can be checked at ECRE's website, and includes NGOs from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia & Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA.

ECRE is **funded** by grants from Community Fund, European Union, UNHCR, European Union – Integration, The Dutch Government/UNDP, Joseph Rowntree, The Barrow Cadbury Trust, European Refugee Fund, German Marshall Fund, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Atlantic Philanthropic Foundation, King Baudouin Foundation, Belgian Government, Dutch Refugee Council, Swedish Government, Mott Foundation, and others. It also receives funds from Members' Subscriptions, Conference Fees, Sale of Publications, Other Income, and Interests.

2. COMMENTS AND HINTS FOR AN EVALUATION

2.1. Strengths

Themes

- ECRE'S notion of **Europe is not institutional, but geographical**. Since the institutional component is changeable with time and migration is influenced to a large extent by geographical variables, ECRE's membership and field of action is not restricted to EU countries, but to European countries in general. This approach to migration issues is more realistic than considering only EU member countries, and provides a possible future vision of an enlarged Europe.
- A most positive aspect of ECRE is the fact that it studies the **implementation of national and international law relating to refugees**. Since migration is an international practice, the approach to migration should also be international. If we are to understand migration within a European context, a common European legal framework is necessary. As long as such common framework is not a reality, ECRE's comparative legal research is a priceless tool for legal practitioners and institutions working with refugees and asylum seekers.
- ECRE's research **results are accessible** to everybody (not only its member agencies) at its website. In this sense, ECRE does not only help its member agencies, but also any organisation or institution working with refugees and asylum seekers that might not be eligible for ECRE membership at the present moment, but could be in the future thanks to ECRE's help.
- ECRE is also a model for **inclusive project** that strives to involve wider civil society, the political community and refugee communities in its work.
- ECRE undergoes **periodical external evaluations** of its work and develops actions according to the results obtained.
- ECRE also commissions **feasibility studies** before expanding its capacity building work, which increases its chances for success when developing it.

- ECRE keeps a **good balance between income and expenditure**. This fact, together with a sound yearly funding, guarantees its continuity.
- ECRE's perspective of the refugee/asylum seeker assistance presents **both hosts and refugees as beneficiaries** of the assistance on the basis of shared interests.
- Given the **width** of ECRE, many of the programs they run can be considered good **intercultural** practices by themselves.

Methodology

- We consider it very positive that ECRE provides its member agencies with all the advantages of belonging to a network while encouraging them to keep their own **autonomy** and start their own independent projects. With this procedure, the member agencies keep their independence in taking decisions, organising activities and internal structure, etc. with the only compromise of cooperating with the rest of member agencies when necessary. Their idea of intercultural cooperation is thus based on both **respect for the particularities** of each national member agency and cooperation within a wider (**European**) frame.
- ECRE's network is **democratic**. All its member agencies have the same status within the network and the process of selection for belonging to ECRE is **non-discriminatory**. These two characteristics are positive intercultural values, since they establish the basis of a good intercultural cooperation.
- Maintaining an office in Brussels, apart from the London Secretariat, is very convenient in terms of developing **vis-à-vis activities with the institutions of the European Union**. Although it might be more practical to install the Secretariat in Brussels, keeping the Brussels office is a positive alternative to moving the London Secretariat.

2.2.Critical points

ECRE finds some **resistance** from governments who want to implement more restrictive asylum policies, but they fight them back with new proposals including resettlement, a truly fair and efficient asylum system and integration. ECRE needs **more staff in Brussels** in order to be more influential in EU policies. ECRE's warning against the recent (2005) Procedures directive adopted by EU member States, according to which States are allowed to return asylum seekers to their country of origin even before the legal process to determine if they need protection is concluded, was considered by the EU Parliament, who adopted a resolution condemning key clauses of the Directive. ECRE needed to **alter its management structure** so that the GS could be more externally facing and the administrative management function would rest with another senior manager. Their executive committee was also restructured to allow for fewer people to attend some meetings - as the **cost of full meetings was very high**.

Inmigrants are not directly involved in ECRE, nor does ECRE require such characteristic from its member agencies . Perhaps positive discrimination should be considered a prerequisite both for belonging to ECRE and for being elected as a member of the Executive Comitee. In general, intercultural practices in Europe—even those that can be considered “good practices” do not consider positive discrimination as an element to be taken into account despite its general practice in countries with a large tradition and experience in dealing with migration issues, such as the USA.

Although ECRE prides of encouraging its member agencies to develop their own initiatives and restricting ECRE's activity to mainly counselling and training, it might be advisable to design common projects among the member agencies, or to **coordinate joint projects** among member agencies when such projects are similar in their objectives, target, methodology and activities. It is true that this focus might limit the member's agencies autonomy to a certain extent, but the results might also be improved.

2.3. Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project.

What is most innovative and positive about ECRE is its network structure itself (and the fact that it appeared thirty years ago, when this kind of initiatives were very rare). Other NOGs groups could also organise themselves with such network structure to save time and efforts in reaching their goals. It works as an involved advisor which proves to be more than that in helping organisations with fundraising and research (the former being too tiresome and time consuming; the second, very expensive too). It might be argued that projects such as ECRE do not directly help or work with refugees and asylum seekers, but the results of their work have both as their ultimate target. ECRE increases NGOs capacities and is an example of good intercultural experience (in the sense of working together) because it connects NGOs from different cultures and countries and grants them with enough autonomy to adapt to their particular targets and circumstances. In this sense, ECRE shows respect for diversity and a spirit of inclusion. Its pan-European approach, shows great understanding of the new (and even the future) migratory situation in Europe (reconfiguration of borders) and thus designs more effective strategies from a wider perspective.

3. OTHER COMMENTS

Christopher Hein, Director of the Italian Council for Refugees reflects on the relevance of ECRE's work and its effectiveness: “The continuous link between ECRE's EU offices and CIR, as a national member organisation, allowed us to promote a European approach to one of the greatest problems in the refugee field in Europe: the modalities of arrival of asylum seekers within the EU and to try to overcome what has been perceived to be only a national concern for far too long.”

4. LINKS

ECRE's website, including links to its member agencies, NGOs and legal resources:
<http://www.ecre.org/>

ELENA discussion forum

The European Legal Network on Asylum/Asylumlaw.org discussion forum for asylum lawyers around the world, providing opportunity for the exchange of country of origin information and details of legislation, case law and practice in different countries.

<http://www.asylumlaw.org/forum/>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

<http://www.unhcr.ch>

Inter-governmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia

<http://www.igc.ch>