

Safe Passage

„Safe Passage“ is a project of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) to respond to the ongoing migration and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. Thousands have lost their lives in search of protection and security in the past years. The project connects local work in border monitoring with political advocacy for a humane asylum and migration policy.



Monitoring

The Southern European project partners carry out border monitoring at the Southern external borders of Spain, Italy and Greece. Search and rescue, disembarkation as well as initial reception of refugees will be observed. On the one hand, such monitoring is aimed at improving knowledge. Border monitoring contributes to collecting facts on the situation at the Southern borders of Europe and to disseminating these across Europe. The information will be put at the disposal of church media through a media package. On the other hand, in humanitarian crisis situations as currently in Greece, tasks arising in the fields of first reception, food security and counselling shall be supported quickly.

In all three countries – Spain, Italy and Greece – border monitoring has started. A European Conference „Deaths at EU external borders – there are alternatives!“ was held in Rome, 23-24 February 2015 to raise awareness about the different situations in the respective countries.

Advocacy

Activities in the different locations are linked to advocacy work at European level. Advocacy is carried out at a crucial moment of European migration policy in order to establish safe and legal pathways for those seeking protection.

Advocacy is currently focussed on the "Agenda for Migration" of the European Union, which mentions some of the legal access avenues to Europe. CCME together with other European Christian organisations, Caritas Europa, the Catholic Bishops' Conferences in the EU - COMECE, the International Catholic Migration Commission ICMC, Jesuit Refugee Service JRS Europe, Eurodiaconia and the Quaker Council for European Affairs, proposed a "toolbox" for safe and legal avenues to Europe.

Apart from discussions with European Commission and European Parliament (own initiative report on migration and report on Mediterranean) CCME and other European Christian organisations have taken contact with the (future) EU Council Presidencies from Luxemburg and the Netherlands.

Requests

On the one hand, the requests of the project refer to concrete situations at the various locations, and, on the the other. they refer to a common European migration policies. They include the following issues:

- Establishing and maintaining, preferably civilian, search and rescue operations at sea with a rather wide scope;
- Reception conditions for persons seeking protection, at least in line with EU minimum standards, and access to asylum procedures;
- Considerable increase of places for the resettlement of refugees from different crisis regions to European states;
- Suspension of visa requirements for refugees from war areas and dictatorships like Syria and Eritrea;
- humanitarian visa for refugees from crisis regions:
- more flexible and generous opportunities for family reunification for refugees;
- mutual recognition of positive asylum decisions within EU and Schengen member states;
- fair sharing of responsibility for refugee reception between EU member states, inter alia and relocation and reception of refugees from Greece and Italy to other EU member states.

Future activities

Border monitoring will continue to be of crucial importance. First experiences have shown that monitoring contributed to concrete improvements in the areas mentioned. Implementation will be done to the degree that financial support to the project allows.

Legal counselling with a focus on family reunification

Through a pilot project, activities for family reunification will be strengthened in Greece. The number of persons having access to asylum procedures and receiving a protection status there has doubled compared to last year, while reception conditions remain catastrophic. At the same time an ever increasing number of persons coming from neighbouring conflict zones need international protection. Among these newly arrived there are many particularly vulnerable. At the border points there is only limited access to asylum procedures, integration prospects remain rather limited. The xenophobe environment for third country nationals is rather likely to deteriorate.

There is no state run legal aid system for asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, and only few civil society actors offer services to this target group, often financed by the EU or UNHCR. Numerous refugees could travel on to relatives in other EU countries in line with the family unity rules of the Dublin III regulation, if relatives can be traced and communication on these cases between authorities of states can be activated. In view of the dramatic economic condition of the country, an intervention seems particularly urgent. The legal advice and social work of the Ecumenical Refugee Programme of the Church of Greece shall therefore be enhanced with additional staff so that individual cases can in larger numbers be effectively treated. Thus Safe Passage offers a concrete contribution to addressing the refugee crisis.

Information

With increased experiences in border monitoring, reports from the monitoring stations will be published. This should take the form of regular information as far as possible, e.g. a newsletter. A media pack with information on the situation at the Southern borders of Europe is being elaborated and will be updated and complemented regularly. It will also be considered if film elements could be used for sensitisation.

Advocacy among churches, towards EU and European states

Direct communication with churches in Europe will be ensured through various seminars and visits. This will also provide for better networking between the various initiatives of churches. Together with churches in Europe it will be investigated how a meeting of eminent church representatives could contribute to greater visibility of churches' requests. CCME and the project partners will also consider if a broader public initiative (e.g. a signature campaign) in 2016 could support the project aims in a meaningful way.

The institutions of the EU will continue to be the main target of political advocacy of the project. In view of continuing discussions, it will remain necessary to repeat the political requests for safe and legal pathways into Europe. The debates initiated by the European Commission will offer ample opportunities for this. As mentioned above, CCME is already in close contact with upcoming Council Presidencies and the European Parliament regarding these aims. This will positively influence the lobbying opportunities in the coming months, if not years.

Migration and refugee policies are on the political agenda of the EU as well as of its members states, and the states which are signatory to the Dublin and Schengen conventions. Therefore advocacy is also needed at national level. The Safe Passage project enables churches to engage in national policy processes based on the monitoring of the external borders as well as the toolbox for refugee protection.

Coordination

CCME will coordinate the project internally, but also ensure the networking and where possible cooperation with similar projects.

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