

Barcelona against the state: Defending the rights of people to seek refuge



Author: Juan Carlos Triviño-Salazar¹

Picture: Juan Carlos Triviño-Salazar

Summary of the case

In the context of the 2015 European Refugee Crisis, Barcelona City Council stood out as an example of a local government that was committed to championing a welcoming approach to refugee reception. Such commitment translated into an official narrative and actions by the city on the topic. This drew the local government into conflict with the Spanish national government's restrictive and security-based view of migration, the backdrop to which was the European Union's agreement to relocate refugees across its member states. As a result of this situation, Barcelona has had an undeniably positive role in promoting cities as places of refuge not only in Spain but in Europe and globally. The local government put together a message used by other cities to remind states about their human rights obligation to provide asylum and support for vulnerable people. Not only that – the local government, based on the capacity it built up over time on migration and integration, was able to reach broad consensus with local actors on the direction that refugee reception should take while garnering support on national, European and global scales. However, its inability to bring the national government on board hampered the reach of Barcelona's initiatives. The conflict between Barcelona and the Spanish government derived from each side's interpretation of their obligations: the former insisted on its human rights duties; while the latter insisted on their exclusive authority on this matter. Moreover, for Barcelona, it was absolutely necessary to coordinate policy based on a co-productive and collaborative framework; but for the Spanish government, policy coordination was understood as a top-down exercise where cities were expected to follow the work done nationally and in areas previously directed from the capital city Madrid.

How to introduce and explore the case

The case of Barcelona can be introduced as one where a local government can take action to defend the human rights of migrants and refugees, even without being legally obliged to do so. Such a stance speaks about the role of local governments in confronting the central government's quasi-absolute control over the terms of entry for migrants and refugees. The case of Barcelona demonstrates how policy entrepreneurs such as the mayor and local officers within the local administration took bold decisions even in conflict with the national government. In doing so, the city advocated for true multi-level governance dynamics in a framework where the Spanish government and the EU set the tone for the City Council's engagement with the topic.

Key concepts and tools

There are three concepts that may help to situate the discussion, and which are defined here:

¹ Barcelona Institute for International Studies (IBEI)

- Policy entrepreneurs: this refers both to organisations (such as local governments) and individuals within organisations, who are working as advocates of policy change and while providing innovative policy responses (Mintrou and Norman, 2009). Their emergence involves disruption to the established way of doing things (Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt, 2020).
- Intractable policy controversies: this refers to social problems the definition of which is inherently contested by policymakers (Schon and Rein, 1994; Hoppe, 2011). This means that the origin of the problem and therefore, its solution have different interpretations that produce tensions and conflicts among different actors. Migration-related issues have traditionally been considered as intractable policy controversies as there is no agreement on the origin of related problems and the potential solutions (Scholten, 2013).
- Multi-level governance (MLG): this is a concept that describes power relationships at local, regional, national and supranational levels (vertical dimension), across multiple state and societal actors (such as local governments on the one hand, and on the other, non-governmental organisations, trade unions, business representatives, among others) (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). This situation commonly develops in different policy sectors where different actors intervene in the policy decision-making and outcomes. It is assumed that MLG will generate dynamics of coordination and cooperation among actors. However, as this case study shows, the reality is that dynamics of conflict are also present, and can generate separated and fragmented outcomes across different levels.

Application

Briefly review the case, perhaps starting with ‘what would you do if you were the mayor of a city confronting a similar situation’. The facilitator can present the case of Barcelona, its main dilemmas and challenges.

The facilitator can suggest linking this case to the participants’ own contexts by identifying areas where cooperation and coordination with the central government and/or non-state actors are difficult to achieve. This can be linked to other policy areas not necessarily linked to migration – for instance, climate change, public security, poverty alleviation, among others.

Sources

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