

## **„Doers of the Word“ – Working for Refugees in Europe**

*On 1 June 2010, the Initiative of Christians for Europe (IXE) held a colloquium in Brussels on “Migration – a challenge for the European Union and for the Christians of Europe”. In one of the panels, JRS Europe’s Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer Stefan Kessler gave a presentation of the organisation’s activities. Below is his speech as it was later put into writing.*

Before going into details of our activities, let me start with a little story:

The Jesuit Refugee Service runs a small project in Morocco, most notably a kindergarten and a place for migrant and refugee women to meet and help each other. Among these women was a lady from West Africa, let’s call her Mary. She has a baby daughter and had come together with child and husband to Morocco for finding a way to get to Europe. While they were all together, life was not easy but manageable. In summer last year the husband was imprisoned on the charge of having used a falsified banking card. The life of Mary and her baby suddenly became extremely difficult. Not only had Mary to organise the day-to-day survival of herself and the child, but also to find money for buying everything her husband needed in prison: Food, clothing, linen, telephone cards, etc. And as neither she herself nor her husband had any documents, Mary was not able to go herself to prison for visiting her husband, but had to pay someone else for going every second week and bring to the husband what he needed. In the first time, the young woman could rely on the help of friends. But with month after month passing by and nothing happening in the case of the husband, friends began to turn their backs toward Mary. Finally she asked JRS for money so that she could at least pay some outstanding bills and the rent for the apartment. She also asked for legal advice on how to get a verdict in her husband’s case. The colleagues were able to give some money and the advice. But at this moment, her husband was released from prison – not into freedom, but into the hands of the “police de la migration clandestine” who prepared to deport him to Oujda and from there to Algeria. Mary came again to JRS and desperately asked for help: She urgently needed money for paying the police in order to avoid her husband’s deportation. But unfortunately our budget had been overstretched and we had no money to share.

Two days later Mary came again to JRS as usual and with a big smile on her face: Her husband was now with her and the baby. But once more she had to beg for money: All the money the colleagues had given her had been spent for paying the police officers. And the bills were still outstanding ...

I tell you this story because in their draft Stockholm Action Plan, the European Commission envisions the conclusion of readmission agreements with Maghreb and Mashrek states such as Morocco, Algeria and Libya. What they forget to mention is that migrants and refugees are NOT safe in these countries. Quite the contrary, they are living there in limbo, without any real perspective. Many of them cannot go back to their countries of origin – for several reasons -, they are not allowed to enter Europe, and they are not welcome in the countries of transit. Even refugees who are recognised by UNHCR are left without any assistance. The racist attitude of many natives in Maghreb countries towards sub-Saharan Africans prohibits the latter from entering the labour markets. Additionally, they are in hands of corrupt and arbitrarily acting authorities. And if you read the testimonies JRS Malta has collected from refugees who had come via Libya, you see that there migrants and refugees are in immediate danger of detention, torture and arbitrary deportation (see [www.jrsmalta.org/Do%20They%20Know.pdf](http://www.jrsmalta.org/Do%20They%20Know.pdf)).

Therefore, if the European Union builds a Common European Asylum System, they must also give access to it!

Mary's story also gives a case example of what the Jesuit Refugee Service is doing. Our mission is to accompany and to serve forced migrants and refugees, and to advocate their cause all over the world. In Europe, we focus on three main topics, that is, detention of migrants prior to their forced removal, destitution, and the "externalisation" of protection.

In many countries across the European Union and beyond, JRS staff and volunteers visit detention centres. Next week, we will hold a conference on detention of vulnerable asylum seekers where we will present the findings of a research project in which JRS and other organisations conducted interviews with about 700 detainees in 21 EU Member States. One conclusion from the analysis of the big amount of data is that detention can cause severe harm to the physical and mental health of persons who are seeking protection, and that alternatives to detention must urgently be developed. (For more details please see [www.detention-in-europe.org](http://www.detention-in-europe.org).)

With regard to destitution, we have also just finished the research part of a project (see [www.jrseurope.org/publications/JRS%20Europe%20Living%20in%20Limbo%20-18-18h.pdf](http://www.jrseurope.org/publications/JRS%20Europe%20Living%20in%20Limbo%20-18-18h.pdf)). What we have learned is that across the whole European Union, there are forced migrants who are completely left without any assistance whatsoever by the Member States. This is not only true for irregular migrants, but also for some groups of asylum seekers and in some cases even for recognised refugees.

Currently it is not an easy political environment we are working in, just the opposite. When I hear or read how some politicians and opinion-makers discuss asylum and migration issues I begin to fear for the political consensus in Europe of respect for the human rights of everyone.

But on the other hand, at the "grassroot" level, especially when in contact with Christian communities and Church parishes, again and again we see inspiring, encouraging examples of solidarity, of charity, of people engaging on behalf of others – sometimes in a wonderful pleasant way. These people really live what is said in the Gospel: "But be you doers of the word and not hearers only." Meeting them, seeing their good examples give us the strength for going on with our work.

Thank you very much.