

## ***The Healing Effect of Gastrodiplomacy in Conflict-Affected Communities***

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*Have you ever thought of how in our daily lives we pay less attention to the origins of the stories of people who make the delectable dishes we relish than to the new restaurants we delight in discovering? As we go about our daily lives, we seldom notice problems beyond those that are immediately visible. While trying savory meals listed on the menus of elegant restaurants, the appetizer served with Syrian hummus or the fresh tuna fish marinated in Libyan olive oil or the Eritrean lentil purée with berbere spices; the histories of these countries and the stories of their people are invisible and hidden in these recipes. The first encounter with the "unknown person" occurs not in the news or in the arts, but in cafes, restaurants and at street-side food carts. We tend to underestimate the fact that we socialize best and most truly around the dining table. Whether it be between friends or strangers, gastronomy is a good facilitator for interactions. So why not use gastronomy to temper, at least in small measure, the effects of protracted conflicts and humanitarian crises? By sharing some success stories, this policy brief draws attention to how impactful gastrodiplomacy projects could be in the Syrian refugee crisis, provided only that relevant instruments are used effectively.*

*Keywords: Gastrodiplomacy, refugee entrepreneurship, livelihoods*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2000s have been the greatest challenge to the humanitarian field. The bitter result of protracted conflicts and man-made disasters caused the death of millions and displaced many others on this planet. The international community, despite various troubles, has been responsive towards the state of man-made crisis. Unlike the response mechanisms covering early-response tools including basic needs such as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WaSH), shelter, non-food items, food, health, protection, humanitarian actors are incapable to grasp well-grounded societal challenges with the limited and old-fashioned toolbox. This does not necessarily mean that humanitarian interventions are not needed or are a waste of time. Rather, the need for humanitarian actors observed in disaster and conflict settings are truly acknowledged. Nevertheless, social tension does not sometimes allow for effective responses in host countries where humanitarian crisis, particularly high refugee inflows reciprocally create resentment since there is, presumably, an ill-equipped integration mechanism or not having enough capacity to respond to crises in an effective manner. So, gastronomy, on the one hand, would provide a financial support for refugees, on the other hand, enhance the frequency of meaningful encounters among locals and displaced people in common, shared public spheres.

This policy brief outlines the background information on gastrodiplomacy and its potential impact on refugee integration. It shares promising success stories from different countries that could potentially trigger new social entrepreneurs, humanitarian and development workers to take proper action in an innovative manner. In the final remarks, the brief tries to provide some concrete and practical advice based on author's experience working in civil society, humanitarian field and social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

## **THE FOUNDATION OF GASTRODIPLOMACY**

Gastrodiplomacy, culinary diplomacy, and war gastronomy are terms used in different contexts and fields with a wide range of explanations to illustrate to what extent food could be impactful at promoting any country or community's gastronomic richness and diversity. Beyond the definition or usage of the term, it can be expanded to the humanitarian and development fields. This policy brief discusses gastrodiplomacy in the context where people who are affected by man-made conflicts and natural disasters can utilize their abilities through integration/rehabilitation by generating income for households via food entrepreneurship either in relocated or home countries.

A closer look at gastrodiplomacy briefly implies a situation of design to foster dialogue between communities through collective action taken for communal eating, thus, sharing cultural practices mutually "in the hope of improving interactions and cooperations"(Sokol, 2013). Although it is a relatively new phenomenon, such activity has been carried out for years without it being called "gastrodiplomacy". This understudied field is now becoming promising in conflict resolution and mediation as it is thought that politically polarized societies have substantial prejudices toward "others" and the only ice-breaker might be food culture. Representing the significant trend within public diplomacy efforts, gastrodiplomacy has been a key instrument that had never been thought of as a means of healing power in social cohesion and mitigating antagonisms among warring parties. However, the topic lately has become one of the most interesting cross-cutting fields that nurtured peaceful attempts. In parallel to that, the recent developments in the research field demonstrate the great efforts on how culinary values would be transformative in conflict-affected societies as nonverbal communication to connect disparate audiences (Public Diplomacy Magazine, 2014).

## **GASTRODIPLOMACY AS A GREAT CATALYST**

Let's think about a group of displaced people who had to come to an unknown land due to ongoing clashes or natural disaster which unavoidably kept them away from their homeland. What would it be best options for those who have to cope with troubles faced over the relocation in host community? Consider the fact that they have lost what they had by that time including physical assets such as house, tools, farming machines, cows, goats and/or financial assets like salaries, savings or remittances. It is obvious that people in as such circumstances have to apply for various coping mechanisms to fight for survivals. The only asset remained for victims is human capital encompassing skills, knowledge, and ability to work. This is the story of more than 3.5 million Syrians who had to come to Turkey in waves just after armed conflict spread over whole Syria. Over seven years, despite all challenges and obstacles, the majority of self-employed Syrians are doing the best things they can do in the host community: Making food and selling them in the market.

In 2017, Building Markets of Turkey conducted a market assessment of 230 formal Syrian businesses operating in Istanbul and Gaziantep (Uçak et al., 2017). The numbers surprisingly illustrate that Syrians have founded over 6,000 businesses since 2011. According to this report, Syrian-led, Istanbul-based companies generally engage in accommodation, food service, and administrative and support services activities and meanwhile, all SMEs both with registered and unregistered ones founded by Syrians are already estimated to be over 10.000 as of today. Syrian SMEs produce primarily food products throughout the country. Particularly, the manufacturing sector in comparison to the other sectors mentioned above, wholesale-retail trade, accommodation, and food service, produce primarily food products. Author's own personal observations gained through fieldwork in

Istanbul's most Syrian-host suburbans also demonstrate that Syrians tend to service in the food industry with a wide range of various sub-sectoral expertise such as patisserie, kebab shops, etc. in the periphery of the city of Istanbul. Even if the local engagement between Syrians and host community is still limited, transferring of ingredients, cooking styles brought by refugees are becoming more visible in daily life in refugee host cities.

The Gaziosmanpaşa Municipality in Istanbul, the World Local Authorities and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have initiated "Syrian Refugees Supporting Life Support in Peace with Local People" project (IHA, 2013). In this project, the Transition Cuisine is an environment where 50 Turkish and 50 Syrian industries come together to perform various activities. Another good success story is that Syrian women who fled the war, move a step forward to for new life in Istanbul. What they do is impressive to reflect their willingnesses and positive coping strategies in the host community. Their gastronomic value of belonging to Syria, including jams are being sold with the support of Okmeydanı Social Assistance and Solidarity Association in Istanbul. The association hosts an initiative called "Women's Refugee Cuisine" hosting eighteen women. This example is also promising to see a rapid transformation in gender roles among households in favor of women. Turkish citizen member of the association, Feride, explains it briefly:

*"Yes, they have no social life and self-confidence, they can talk to their husbands now. For example, she says "I will go", her husband no longer says "You can not go" because he knows she will go away (Gazete Karınca, 2017).*

In parallel with those above-mentioned courageous outputs, it is often observed that women's self-confidence increase. They become courageously able to express and defend themselves. In this case, the situation of which women turn into a more active participant in the public sphere is explicitly illustrated.

*“Women previously were more passive and silent. Everywhere in Syria men were leaving and women were staying in high-walled houses, gardens. Now here, women go to associations, bazaars, take their children to the school. Men only work if they can find a job, they do not have anything to do with it” (Gazete Karınca, 2017).*

We often talk about how gastronomy is impactful on people's daily routines in host communities but as seen in the previous case, it is not just about acquiring resilience in host communities as a way of getting accustomed to it but, at the same time, about how transformative among refugee families in case refugee women take a step in gaining financial income. Undoubtedly, genders role are broken as long as women join economic life as an active participant.

Examples from several countries provide multiple responses that acted to mediate potential hostility among host communities towards "others." There is a role for civil society potentially can act as a catalyst for positive interaction between host and refugee populations. Australia provides an illustration of this point. Indian students in Australia have experienced violent attacks and civil society organizations took an initiative to take the struggle in the kitchen. What they only viewed as culinary work would result in breaking social and cultural barriers and build cordial relations centered on tasty Indian cuisine. The Uniting Church initiated these inclusionary activities with the philosophy food would be a common point of human-beings as part of public

diplomacy (Rana, 2011). In Australia, people invited their close relatives and friends to Indian restaurants. This happened just after a social media activist, Mia Northrop (The Age, 2010), created a Facebook page for the purpose of bringing this issue to the table. It resulted in 17.000 who signed the campaign in order to join for this aimful action. The aim was the same as Uniting Church mentioned previously announced: Annihilating social barriers in which refugees are stuck.

In many instances, our argument validates that positive interaction can open dialogue channels between host communities and refugees through food culture. There are various good practice examples providing solid bases to understand how it might create sustainable income generation and decent work while enhancing the social resilience of communities. For instance, by far, Germany has been the most refugee-hosted country among other European countries. The numbers of registered asylum seekers in Germany were high particularly by the end of 2015 which was around 890,000, although numbers gradually dropped in following years (in 2016, 280,000; in 2017, 186,644). Ever so, Germany has been welcoming country where refugee-friendly groups established solidarity networks arguing new tools and instruments for refugee integration.

Giving a well-grounded example from Germany, it is, in Berlin, the Kitchen Hub that facilitates positive interactions between refugees and locals through meals (Pawlicki, 2015). They create a place of coexistence and mutual exchange, where refugees are not only welcome but also become active in shaping urban space. The questions being asked through designing the Kitchen Hub would give us some ideas on how cleverly Berliners approach refugee inflow into Germany: How can integration work to the advantage of both, new and old neighbors? How can the potentials of refugees as new urban actors be mobilized in order to co-produce a more inclusive and socially sustainable

neighborhood? Another good example is from the United States. In New York City, the startup Eat Offbeat provides job opportunities to refugees cooking and delivering Syrian cuisine to New Yorkers (The New York Times, 2018).

Conflict Kitchen London, makes a great effort to put the issue on the table (Thevathasan, 2017). In collaboration with other stakeholders including Grub Club and Monikers Restaurant, it has been serving dishes, particularly from Burma, Jordan, and Peru. Until that time, people by which those restaurants are used, have no awareness or their awareness would have been limited since none of them really cares or knows of how those cuisines were selected and by which criteria that makes this selection meaningful. Conflict Kitchen, fortunately, makes it topical issue via food entrepreneurship aligned with a social purpose.

### **FINAL REMARKS**

The policy suggestions, particularly offered for specific stakeholders, can be classified into four parts. Each of them includes sector-specific policy recommendations as, on the ground, humanitarian response and development programs are being carried out by as such actors mentioned below.

### **Donor Institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations**

Lack of well-designed interventions has been the major failure in mid and long-term sustainable livelihood projects. Undoubtedly, short-term projects and expectations over immediate impact anticipated through implementations are still major concerns of donor institutions i.e. United Nations agencies and consequently of international non-governmental NGOs whose main aim is to see the impact in short time and in an effective manner. However, it is also extremely important that beyond vocational training and job creation in pickling, sewing, hairdressing most vulnerable groups i.e. people with disabilities, women, and youth should be

covered by programs aiming at offering them decent work conditions and a base to encounter with the local community. As often said, food makes different communities closer and gastrodiplomacy projects play a critical role in cross-cultural understanding. That's why, integration projects must rely not only on language courses, vocational training and so on, as INGO and others do but also on eating and drinking habits and culinary richness by providing in-kind and in-cash support for Syrian-led SMEs.

The tricky point in job placement or job referral through the implementations run by INGOs and UN agencies is that majority of those placements and offers are made by gender roles. Syrian women are often placed in unreasonable sectors and fields in which local community doesn't want to work. We should keep in our mind that only 18 percent of Syrian women have been working in Turkey. The rate was only 16 percent in Syria prior to the war. Therefore, although it is unrealistic to prevent Syrian women from working in the jobs of reproducing gender roles, employment in new business areas involving innovation and transformation and their skills development can be targeted. This is only possible when requesting gender equality-sensitive applications from implementing partners and asking them to address this challenge. For sure, this will be a considerable step ahead in problem-solving related to refugee resilience.

### **Municipalities**

Although there are different municipal structures, the municipalities are among the most visited and encountered institutions by refugees. As mentioned, according to Turkey's Municipality Law (2005), article 13, everyone is a citizen of his own country. Fellow citizen has the right to participate in municipal decisions and services, to be informed about municipality activities and to benefit from the help of municipal administrations. It is imperative that



the humanitarian aids are presented on conditions that will not harm human dignity. The municipality conducts necessary work on the development of social and cultural relations among the citizens and the protection of cultural values. Measures are taken to ensure the participation of universities, professional organizations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations and specialists in the form of public institutions (Turkey's Municipality Law, 2005). From this point of view, the concept of refugee food festival would be one of the most useful, fantastic tools ever-used so far. Because most significant weakness of any integration projects is that refugees are not visible in communities due to the fact that urban planning creates visible and invisible barriers that isolate refugees and locked them in their very own small habitus. Hence, beyond traditional festivals, attention would be paid to tailor-made festivals where refugees are able to express themselves with gastronomic values and it, thus, accelerates the smooth integration of refugees. Alongside festival programs, catering services, food tasting events, cooking shows and workshops would positively contribute to refugee response policies.

In addition, establishing steering committees at a national and local level may also be beneficial. These steering committees can determine in which regions food production areas will be most suitable in terms of cost and benefit by conducting needs assessment. Then, Syrian refugees can address commercial aspects by benefiting from their gastronomic values. The municipalities may also prepare relevant requests for tender on the basis of multilingualism in the native languages of the refugees such as in Arabic or Kurdish within the boundaries of the district. For example, Syrian companies, especially those operating in the field of gastronomy, can follow tenders without language barrier.

### Governments

Track 3 Diplomacy has been a forgotten point of any attempt related to engagement at community level between refugees and host communities. According to the definition of United States Institute of Peace's Glossary, Track 3 Diplomacy means;

*People-to-people diplomacy undertaken by individuals and private groups to encourage interaction and understanding between hostile communities and involving awareness raising and empowerment within these communities. Normally focused at the grassroots level, this type of diplomacy often involves organizing meetings and conferences, generating media exposure, and political and legal advocacy for marginalized people and communities.*

The overwhelming majority of attempts in conflict resolution have focused on Track 1 and Track 2 Diplomacy, which prioritize state-to-state level and informal meetings among adversary groups (Mapendere, 2006). Fortunately, with the substantial contribution of Johan Galtung to peace studies, we all agree that peace does not mean having a land with no conflict or having no conflict does not necessarily mean a complete peace. Hence, many peaceful initiatives require diplomatic attempts among people who potentially tend to emerge hostility for any reason. With regards to state approach, nothing would be more disruptive than potential adversary would possibly do and if we are thinking of how people freely and deliberately come together and enjoy with their differences, the answer would be peaceful coexistence. Governments should prepare an action plan in response to the refugee crises on the basis of public diplomacy. Initiatives taken by refugees in food sector would be a good starting point for such diplomatic attempts.

It also creates at some level an acceptance among decision-makers to make food-based diplomatic attempts visible in legislative bodies.

Talking on regulations for a work permit, the limitations in hiring refugees are regulated with provisions issued by relevant state authorities in host communities. For instance, in Turkey, incentive mechanisms ie., social security coverage, reimbursement of work permit fee, etc. are extremely helpful for potential employers in recruiting Syrians under temporary protection. In collaboration with some UN agencies and also with ILO, there have been some successfully implemented pilot programs in Turkey and Jordan which resulted in awareness-raising in the region among employers to obtain work permits easier. In Jordan, regulation on work permit procedures was modified in 2016 and agreed to issue work permits for Syrians free of charge for a while. Lack of proprietary rights, problems with opening bank accounts and receiving financial services, implementation of legislative arrangements properly, restriction on Syrians movements for domestic and international travels are other fundamental topics that are restrictive for Syrians. These have to be reconsidered through a better response plan since these efforts consequently will facilitate establishing companies in food sector by Syrians.

### Private Sector

Private sectors became a great partner of government and civil society. Particularly, after UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) announced in 2015, relevant stakeholders, governments, civil society and private sectors were open to greater collaboration on 17 strategic goals through 2030 Agenda. Within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, many social, environmental challenges can be solved by interaction with the private sector, civil society and public sector partnerships within the scope of 17 SDGs. Many of whom have strategic planning over the course of becoming more

responsible actors in private sector associated with shared value paradigm for better future, is gradually getting a higher proportion of responsibilities to solve frequently seen environmental and social challenges by directly collaborating with social enterprises. Although social entrepreneurship ecosystem is relatively a new phenomenon, social impact creators would entirely change the rule of the game. They are more compact and quicker to take rapid action on any circumstance within a limited time. So, social enterprises can put food productions of Syrian entrepreneurs on sale based on the needs of medium and large-scale companies. Even, large-scale production for private sector targeting sustainable and responsible sourcing is not a dream for refugee-run enterprises and inclusive businesses to be scaled-up. While competition in the market grows fast and intensely consolidates, distinctive character for doing business would be the social inclusion of vulnerable groups for which social enterprises generate benefits. In this regard, quickest and most effective way is gastronomy to actively involve in the market for refugees.

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