

The cost and the return of refuge

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Taking in refugees has a cost. They must be housed, fed and cared for, and sometimes helped to establish themselves. These expenses weigh on public finances and on the institutions of welfare. They also provoke resistance among the inhabitants, who fear competition and rising prices.

Refuge also yields a return. Skilled refugees bring expertise that makes it possible to develop new industries or improve existing ones. Merchants bring commercial networks that open up new markets. Capitalists bring funds that finance economic activity. All of them, in time, pay taxes and duties. And their descendants become active citizens who enrich the economic and intellectual life of the city.

The Geneva experience suggests that the return on refuge depends on several conditions. The first is the city's capacity to integrate the newcomers into its economy, by giving them access to trades, credit and the market. The second is the existence of welfare institutions capable of supporting the most vulnerable during the period of settlement. The third is the complementarity between the skills of the refugees and the needs of the local economy. The fourth is political stability, which allows refugees to invest for the long term.

Worked example. A refugee family arrives in Geneva with capital of 5,000 livres and the skills of a watchmaker. For two years, it receives assistance of 300 livres from the Bourse française. The father then opens a workshop that employs four journeymen and exports its watches to Italy and Germany. Twenty years later, the workshop has trained some ten apprentices, the family has acquired bourgeois status and invested part of its earnings in foreign annuities. The initial assistance, set against the jobs created, the skills passed on and the capital accumulated, appears as a highly profitable investment for the community. The figures are fictitious; they illustrate a pattern that Geneva's economic history has often observed.

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Contemporary Geneva knows similar debates about skilled immigration, international organisations and multinational companies. The cost of reception – pressure on housing, on infrastructure, on public services – is visible and immediate. The return – jobs, tax revenue, influence, innovation – is often more diffuse and slower to materialise. The history of the Refuge is a reminder that this return can be considerable, provided that the institutions allow for successful integration.

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