

The Situation of At-risk and Displaced
Artists and Culture Professionals

ON
THE
MOVE

Volume 3
Case Studies

CHAPTER 9

Cities as Safe Havens for At-risk and Displaced Artists



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CHAPTER 9

Cities as Safe Havens for At-risk and Displaced Artists

by Jordi Baltà Portolés

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Several contemporary analyses have emphasised the role of cities, local communities and local governments as guarantors of human rights, including for migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and other minority groups. According to the late political scientist Benjamin Barber, cities arise as ‘glocal’ defenders of rights because, among other things, the defence of rights flourishes best in communities that are diverse, such as cities.¹ Other authors have also emphasised how diversity, mixing and tolerance are inherent to cities, often contrasting this with nations’ tendency to restrict diversity.² Indeed, recent years have frequently seen tensions, in Europe, North America and elsewhere, between local and national governments in debates around fundamental freedoms (e.g., LGBTQI+ friendly cities) and the welcoming of refugees and migrants (e.g., ‘Sanctuary Cities’), among other rights-related issues. It is also important to recall that cities, towns and local communities, through their cultural venues and public spaces, are frequently the spaces where cultural rights can be more directly exercised.³

This set of factors provides some background to explain why cities and city networks have become significant actors in the relocation of at-risk and displaced artists and culture professionals, either directly (as in the case of ICORN, which this chapter will address later) or through collaboration with civil society organisations and other stakeholders.⁴ The former UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna, stressed the importance of cities, stating that, by becoming safe havens for artists and cultural workers, they illustrate a spirit of generosity and inclusion.⁵ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the main global platform of local and regional authorities, has recently adopted a guiding document in the field of culture, which invites cities and local governments to provide direct or indirect support to artists and culture professionals who are at risk of being persecuted because of their work.⁶ This builds on previous

initiatives, such as the 2020 Rome Charter, which invited cities to support the work of cultural rights defenders.⁷ At the EU level, the Council Conclusions on at-risk and displaced artists, adopted in 2023, invited Member States to consider taking further measures to enhance the capacity to offer safe havens and cities of refuge for at-risk and displaced artists, and to contribute to networking for such artists.⁸

This chapter examines the role of cities and city networks in providing support to at-risk and displaced artists and culture professionals, through a description and analysis of some relevant initiatives, including [ICORN](#), [Shelter City](#) and [City of Sanctuary UK](#). Each with their own characteristics, they serve to attest a range of approaches through which cities can become safe havens.

1 Barber, B., ‘Cities as Glocal Defenders of Rights’, in van Lindert, T. and Lettinga, D. (eds.), [The Future of Human Rights in an Urban World: Exploring Opportunities, Threats and Challenges](#), Amnesty International Netherlands, 2014.

2 See e.g., Bauman, Z., ‘[City of Fears, City of Hopes](#)’, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2003; Pascual, J., ‘On Citizen Participation in Local Cultural Policy Development for European Cities’, in Several Authors, [Guide to Citizen Participation in Local Cultural Policy Development for European Cities](#), Interarts, Ecumest and ECF, 2007; and Khanna, P., [Connectography: Mapping the Global Network Revolution](#), Orion Publishing, 2016.

3 Martinell, A., ‘Cultural Life, Local Life’, UCLG, 2014 (no longer available online).

4 Jones, M., Nah, A. and Bartley, P., ‘Introduction’, in Müller, M. (ed.), [Temporary Shelter and Relocation Initiatives: Perspectives of Managers and Participants](#), ifa, 2019.

5 Bennouna, K.; Bergamo, L.; and Trifone, L., ‘[Conversation](#)’, 4th UCLG Culture Summit, Izmir, September 2021.

6 UCLG, [C21Plus: A renewed commitment to making culture central in sustainable cities and communities](#), UCLG, 2025.

7 Roma Capitale and UCLG – Culture Committee, [The 2020 Rome Charter: The right to participate fully and freely in cultural life is vital to our cities and communities](#), Roma Capitale and UCLG – Culture Committee, 2020.

8 Council of the European Union (2023), [Council Conclusions on At-Risk and Displaced Artists](#), para 14.

Context, objectives and goals

ICORN – International Cities of Refuge Network is a non-governmental organisation established in 2006. The network built on the experience of the International Cities of Asylum Network (INCA), established in the mid-1990s by the International Parliament of Writers to allow persecuted writers and journalists to be safely hosted in cities, thus symbolising the role of cities as spaces of protection.⁹ ICORN, with a Secretariat based in Stavanger, Norway, currently involves over 80 cities across Europe and the Americas, which offer protective residencies to writers, journalists and artists at risk. Each city runs the ICORN programme independently, in cooperation with, and with support from, the ICORN Secretariat

ICORN's vision is that of improved conditions for freedom of expression worldwide. Its mission involves enabling cities around the world to provide safe havens for **persecuted writers and artists**, working together to advance freedom of expression, defend democratic values, and promote international solidarity.

Shelter City was founded in 2012 by non-profit organisation [Justice & Peace Netherlands](#) and it currently involves 25 Shelter Cities around the world, including 14 in the Netherlands and 11 across Europe, Africa and Latin America. It defines itself as a global movement of cities, organisations and people who support **human rights defenders at risk**, offering them a safe and inspiring space to re-energise, receive tailor-made support and engage with allies to reinforce their local actions for change. In each participating city, a network of organisations and citizens works to provide shelter to human rights defenders. Shelter City includes artists and culture professionals among the human rights defenders covered by its programmes.

City of Sanctuary UK, which started its activities in 2005, is an umbrella organisation for hundreds of community groups, local authorities, universities and other organisations that, across the UK, work to provide a culture of solidarity, inclusivity and welcome to people forced to flee their homes and who are seeking sanctuary. At the end of 2024, City of Sanctuary UK involved over 100 local groups, 73 local councils (rising to 168 when counting those that engaged in individual sessions), 915 schools, 43 arts organisations and 26 library services (involving 454 individual libraries overall).¹⁰

City of Sanctuary advocates for people seeking sanctuary across the UK, through values of inclusion, openness, participation, inspiration and integrity. While the organisation does not explicitly identify artists at risk as a target group, it acts to ensure that people can **seek safety and live in dignity**, can contribute to building better futures together with local communities, that local councils that host refugees are supported adequately, and that a fairer, faster and more efficient system is established to protect refugees and asylum seekers.

Within this context, City of Sanctuary's Local Authority Network brings together local councils that are working to create a culture of welcome, inclusion and empowerment for people seeking sanctuary. Meanwhile, Arts Stream of Sanctuary is the network connecting arts organisations that work with refugees, tell stories of migration and bring communities together. This network is developed in partnership with [Counterpoint Arts](#), an organisation that supports the **arts by and about refugees and migrants**.

⁹ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, ['Report on the Charter of Cities of Asylum. Explanatory Memorandum'](#), 1995; Shuddhashar, ['Helge Lunde talks to Shuddhashar about exile and why it is always by definition about loss, suffering, uprootedness'](#), 2018.

¹⁰ City of Sanctuary UK, [Our Impact 2024](#).

Funding and resources

ICORN relies on the support of trusts, foundations, public and private donors, and membership fees. Its main funders include the [Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation ([NORAD](#)), the [Swedish Arts Council](#) and the [Stavanger Municipality](#), with other significant contributions made by the [Sølvberget Library & Culture Centre](#), the [Fritt Ord Foundation](#), the [Rogaland County](#), the [Open Society Foundations](#). Additionally, ICORN's cities pay an annual membership fee and are in charge of covering the costs of hosting resident artists, writers and journalists (accommodation, scholarship or grant, travel expenses, visa procedures, insurance, coordination staff, etc.). The management of each city residency operates independently, and funding models vary depending on relevant legislation, local partnerships, etc.

For several years, ICORN had a close connection with [PEN International](#), the international association of writers. Among other things, for some years PEN International was in charge of evaluating the authenticity of authorship and artistic production of candidate writers and journalists. While such collaboration no longer exists, several branches of PEN International

are involved in local ICORN partnerships in their respective cities, and both networks collaborate in other initiatives.

[Justice & Peace](#), the organisation that manages Shelter City, receives funding from several public and private bodies. In the case of its activities in the field of human rights defenders, including Shelter City in the Netherlands, funding comes primarily from the [Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). Other contributors in 2024 included the [City of The Hague](#), the Dutch branch of Oxfam ([Oxfam Novib](#)), the [Open Society Foundations](#), and the US National Endowment for Democracy ([NED](#)).¹¹ Participating shelter cities establish their own mechanisms to support the implementation of activities.

City of Sanctuary UK relies, for its activities at network level, on a diverse range of grants and donations from foundations, trusts and other public and private sources. In 2024, the most significant sources included the [Esmee Fairbairn Foundation](#), the [Paul Hamlyn Foundation](#), the [This Day Foundation](#), the [Lloyds Bank Foundation](#), and the [City Bridge Foundation](#).¹² Local community groups and organisations have their own funding models and are encouraged to develop fundraising activities.

Target groups and conditions

ICORN offers residencies to writers (creative, non-fiction, translators, publishers, etc.), artists (visual artists, performing artists, musicians, film and media professionals, etc.) and journalists who are at risk due to their work and professional activities and who cannot continue their work or express themselves freely in their home country or

region. It provides temporary, but long-term (two years, in most cases), relocation and emphasises that it is **not an urgent response** organisation and does not offer emergency residencies.

The network does not have a specific focus in terms of age, gender or country or origin. When

¹¹ Justice & Peace, ['Financieel Jaarverslag 2024'](#).

¹² City of Sanctuary UK, ['Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2024'](#).

applying for a residency, candidates can indicate that they would like to travel **with their family** (spouse/partner and/or children under 18 years). In this case, if their application is selected, their profile is presented to the ICORN Cities of Refuge that have the capacity to host a couple or a family, as some cities can only host a single person.

Meanwhile, Shelter City provides support to human rights defenders. Artists and cultural professionals who face threats and challenges due to their human rights work, including censorship, detention, legal prosecution or imprisonment, harassment, attacks, fines and travel bans are recognised as human rights defenders by Shelter City, which affirms that ‘although the creative responses of artists are vital to uncovering human rights violations all over the world, **their role as human rights defenders is often overlooked**’, and limited protection is offered to them as a result.¹³

To be eligible for stays in the Netherlands, candidates need to be willing and able to **return to their country of origin** after three months, and be willing to speak publicly about their experience or about human rights in their country to the extent that their security situation allows. They are also expected to have a conversational level of English. Shelter cities based in other world regions may establish other specific criteria—e.g., the latest call for Shelter City Costa Rica targeted human rights defenders from other countries in Central America,¹⁴ whereas Shelter City in Rome gives priority to human rights defenders from the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁵

As noted earlier, the focus of City of Sanctuary UK lies more on the fostering of a culture of welcome and **solidarity towards asylum seekers and refugees** in the UK, rather than on the provision of direct support to artists or other individuals at risk.

Application and selection processes

ICORN receives requests for protection on a rolling basis. Applicants need to provide details about their personal and professional profile, as well as the human rights aspects which motivate their application. All information is received and handled in confidence by the ICORN Secretariat, which also researches and assesses the validity of the application in accordance with the organisation’s mandate.

The organisation receives more applications than the number of residencies it can offer within its network; for instance, after the change of regime in Afghanistan in 2021, ICORN received approximately 1,000 applications from that country, whereas it can only host approximately

20 people at risk per year. To determine which candidates are given priority, relevant **criteria include the severity and vulnerability** of their cases, the ability to cross-check the evidence provided, geographic and gender balance, as well as the ability to find cities that would be able to host them. When a candidate is approved as deserving ICORN support, they will be proposed to available Cities of Refuge. Typically, cities establish additional, specific criteria for selecting artists from among the different candidates proposed by the ICORN Secretariat. Some cities have a small steering committee to make the decision or, after local technical services examine the profiles proposed and provide their advice, leave the final decision

13 Shelter City, ‘[Artists & cultural professionals](#)’.

14 Shelter City, ‘[Shelter City Costa Rica abre su period de convocatoria - 2025](#)’, 26 March 2025.

15 Shelter City, ‘[Shelter City Rome](#)’.

in the hands of the mayor or other relevant decision-makers.

Shelter City publishes two **annual calls for residencies** for stays in the Netherlands: a call published around March/April for residencies held between September and December; and another one launched in August/September for stays between April and July of the following year. Shelter Cities in other countries manage applications directly, with varying regularity and similar waiting times (for instance, the latest call for Shelter City in Costa Rica, which opened in March 2025, was meant for stays between June and December 2025). Among the criteria that may guide the decisions are the added value

of a stay in a Shelter City, as well as gender, geographic and thematic balance. Individual Shelter Cities outside the Netherlands may establish additional criteria. For instance, Shelter City York, a programme managed by the University of York's Centre for Applied Human Rights, in the UK, provides fellowships for human rights defenders at risk who can engage in human rights research or in a writing fellowship. As a result, the application process involves prior nomination by a recognised civil society organisation or an intergovernmental organisation working in the field of human rights, and the assessment process involves analysing candidates' ability to engage in research and writing work.¹⁶

Types of support provided

The standard duration of an ICORN residency is two years. The organisation emphasises that it provides temporary support, rather than being a refugee organisation.¹⁷ For the duration of the residency, the hosting city provides appropriate furnished accommodation for the resident and, where applicable, their family; a scholarship or grant for the period of the ICORN residency, the amount of which is agreed between the city and the ICORN Secretariat, in accordance with local living costs; access to public services in the country and city of residence; travel expenses related to relocation, for the resident and their family, from their country of residence to the City of Refuge (as well as departure arrangements at the end of the residency); and fees for visas, passports and other necessary documentation. It also helps residents in obtaining a visa and a

residence permit in the host country, provides them with appropriate working conditions and support during the stay, health and residential insurance for the resident and their family, and access to services to learn the language of the host country. The hosting city also supports the building and **developing professional networks and opportunities** during the residency, at local, national and, where possible, cross-border level.

The terms and conditions of ICORN residencies vary from city to city. However, in addition to the aspects outlined above, in all cases the City of Refuge helps the ICORN resident in practical matters, including finding accommodation, signing up for language learning, finding legal support, etc. A handbook¹⁸ published by the Swedish Arts Council for ICORN Cities of Refuge

16 Shelter City, '[Shelter City York: Nominations for Fellowships](#)', 21 January 2025.

17 An exception to this is Norway, where ICORN residents have historically been included in the refugee resettlement quota approved by the Parliament and granted refugee status as a result. This also makes it easier for the 26 Cities of Refuge in Norway to host residents who do not hold a valid passport (but who can be recognised as refugees) and to travel with their families, as relatives are also considered refugees and their costs are more easily covered. The reduction of Norway's refugee resettlement quota in 2025 has significantly limited the ability of Norwegian cities to host ICORN residents. See ICORN, '[Norway's 2025 refugee resettlement quota is full: What does it mean for ICORN's work?](#)', 30 July 2025.

18 Swedish Arts Council, [City of Refuge – A Handbook for Swedish ICORN Cities of Refuge](#), Swedish Arts Council, 2025.

in Sweden provides a checklist of tasks to be done by city coordinators before the resident arrives, as well as during their stay and prior to its completion. In the initial phase, relevant tasks include, in addition to the elements listed above, reviewing the safety analysis, reviewing available **support for mental health** issues, preparing work equipment and creating a reference group within the local cultural community for professional opportunities.

Indeed, Cities of Refuge also aim to enable residents to continue their work and build a professional network locally, nationally and internationally. In Paris, for instance, residents are hosted at the [Cité internationale des arts](#), an organisation that hosts over 300 artists every month and which some residents have described as ‘a zone of inspiration and motivation’.¹⁹ The Cité holds weekly Open Studios events that enable some residents to make their work known and network with others. In Warsaw, the first ICORN resident, who arrived in 2024, has engaged in international conferences and national events during her stay, allowing her to connect with other members of the Uyghur diaspora and engage in a broader academic network.²⁰ The profile of residents, including their professional discipline, experience and needs, are significant factors in determining the type of support provided (e.g. residents with a more academic or artistic profile, different language skills, etc.).

Human rights defenders hosted by Shelter City are provided with a safe space for three months, which allows them to rest and re-energise. During their

stay, they receive tailormade support, which may be in the form of **medical care, psychological support, security training or capacity building** to develop their expertise. They can also take part in wellbeing activities and exchange experiences, raise awareness and expand their network with new allies, including fellow human rights defenders, people and organisations.²¹

Some of the activities undertaken by City of Sanctuary UK in the arts relate to engaging with artists from refugee or migrant backgrounds and generating an enabling environment to develop their work—including by inviting them to tell their stories, including them in artistic programmes (regular seasons, dedicated festivals, etc.) and in discussion and planning exercises, or providing them with studio space, materials, use of facilities, and more.

Principles underpinning this work include the understanding that art can shape a culture of welcome and can turn empathy into action, by celebrating the contribution of people seeking sanctuary, enabling relationships of friendship and solidarity, and promoting an understanding of asylum and refugee issues, particularly when refugee voices are heard directly.²² There is also an understanding that **refugees and migrants make hugely valuable contributions to the arts, culture and society** by, among other things, presenting multiple perspectives that result in new ways of seeing and questioning, and that displacement can be both a traumatic and a transformative experience, which should be reflected in all its complexity.²³

19 Cité internationale des arts, [‘Interview with Amira Al-Sharif’](#).

20 Erkmen, R., [‘Rabigül’s Story – the story of an Uyghur woman who chose Warsaw to escape persecution by the Chinese government’](#), 2025; and ICORN, [‘Dr. Rabigül Erkmen: The Voice of the Uyghurs and the Fight for Memory’](#), 24 July 2025.

21 It has not been possible to obtain more detailed information about the support provided.

22 Grace, A. and Counterpoint Arts, [Sanctuary in the Arts Resource Pack](#), City of Sanctuary, 2019.

23 Counterpoints Arts, [‘Core beliefs’](#).

Monitoring and evaluation

Since 2006, ICORN has hosted **over 300 writers, journalists and artists**, with approximately 15-20 residencies being offered annually at present. Anecdotal experience collected by city coordinators indicates that the presence of ICORN residents contributes to raise freedom of speech and the right to work safely, and that the impact in terms of artistic careers and personal and professional development is generally positive, but highly variable depending on the individual profile and the specific setting. Being hosted by a recognised network generally enhances the

visibility of artists, writers and journalists and can contribute to raising their profile.²⁴

On its 10th anniversary in 2022, Shelter City conducted a qualitative impact assessment, including interviews with former residents. The analysis found that most participants had returned home after their stay, that they were applying improved approaches and strategies as a result of the programme, and that they felt generally **safer, more protected and better connected** to a larger community.²⁵

Challenges and limitations

The rise of **far-right discourses and anti-migrant sentiments** in many countries has been identified as a significant challenge in interviews conducted for this chapter, because of its impact both in terms of the ability of resident artists and culture professionals to feel safe in their host cities, and because of the reluctance of some cities to welcome new artists. The current climate also limits the ability of city networks and other organisations involved in temporary relocation initiatives to raise funds from third sources.

At a more micro level, the **mental well-being** of resident artists and culture professionals can often become a challenge for host cities, which do not always have the relevant resources to support it. On a related note, some interviewees noted that, along with focusing on displaced artists' ability to pursue their work and develop professional networks, it was also important to create an environment in which they could

make friends and **develop more informal relationships**, something which may sometimes be neglected. Other challenges identified by programme coordinators include the ability of recently arrived artists, writers and journalists to navigate the local cultural scene, particularly in large cities; and the specific challenge for residents whose work is largely language based (e.g., writers, journalists) to pursue their careers in a new environment, particularly where their knowledge of the local language is limited.

Some interviewees noted the critical importance of considering, from an early stage, the end of the residencies, and how support can be provided to maximise the opportunities for hosted artists and culture professionals **once their stay comes to an end**. There is a recognition, among some programme managers, that, even if efforts in this respect are made, they are frequently insufficient, despite a number of successful stories.

²⁴ Based on interviews conducted for this research, as well as information available on the ICORN website.

²⁵ DBMresearch, *Shelter City: Exploring the impact of a decade of temporary relocation experiences*, Shelter City, 2022.

A final reflection concerns the risk that networks providing temporary relocation abroad contribute to the **'brain drain' of countries in the Global South**. In this respect, some interviewees underlined the need to give priority to relocation in countries and regions near beneficiaries'

original location, whenever possible, and the understanding that hosting artists and culture professionals abroad is not a goal in itself, but rather a means to protect them and enable them to live and work.

Considerations for city-led support programmes

Organisations like ICORN emphasise that, despite an increasing number of applications from artists and culture professionals in need of support, existing resources and learning from the past make it necessary to particularly attend the *qualitative* aspects of hosting, rather than primarily the *quantitative* number of artists hosted. In this respect, **building the capacities of local coordination teams**, including the staff in charge of welcoming and facilitating the stay of artists, is a critical requirement, which needs time. This is an aspect that could be considered in future initiatives in this field.

In addition to knowledge-sharing and advice provided by network secretariats and peer cities abroad, the existence of national **networks of cities** is also a significant factor, both among ICORN (e.g., national networks of cities in France, Norway, Poland, Sweden, etc.) and Shelter City (e.g., Dutch Shelter Cities) participants, which could also inspire developments elsewhere.

One final recommendation raised by some interviewees concerns the need to better **connect existing networks of temporary relocation initiatives** as well as those active in the arts and culture. This could simultaneously contribute to broadening the opportunities for at-risk and displaced artists and culture professionals at the end of their residencies, developing the skills and capacities for programme managers through peer learning, and enhancing the visibility and understanding of the situation of those at risk and the need to provide them with support.

In addition to the networks and organisations covered in this chapter, this recommendation could be particularly useful for other networks like On the Move (through the At-risk and Displaced Arts Workers working group and the organisations involved in it), other Creative Europe-funded networks, UCLG, and other city, human rights and cultural networks. In this respect, the range of examples presented in this chapter could provide inspiration to scale up this type of support and connect better the networks and support mechanisms for artists and culture professionals at risk.

About the Author

Jordi Baltà Portolés works as a freelance consultant, researcher and trainer in cultural policy, sustainability and international cultural relations. His areas of interest include cultural diversity, local cultural policy, cultural rights and the relationship between culture and sustainability. He is an advisor on culture and sustainable cities at the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a member of the UNESCO Expert Facility for the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and regularly works with other organisations, including Trànsit Projectes and On the Move. Jordi teaches at the MA in Cultural Management of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and Universitat de Girona (UdG) and at other graduate and postgraduate programmes. He holds a PhD from the universities of Girona and Melbourne.

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