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Reception policy in Barcelona. Thirty years of experiences and lessons learned

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Over the last thirty years, Barcelona has undergone one of the most profound and rapid demographic transformations in its history due to the arrival of a steady influx of migrants from both non-EU and EU countries since the early 2000s. According to the municipal register of residents on 1 January 2020, 27.8% of the people living in the city were born in a foreign country. In 2000, the percentage of foreign residents in Barcelona was just 4.8% of a total population of 1,512,971. Many of these people arriving from other countries over the last twenty years have ended up settling permanently in the city, forming families and acquiring full citizenship. This steady flow of migrants has enabled Barcelona to maintain its demographic weight, with the city's population increasing to 1,666,530 in 2020, the highest figure since the end of the 1980s.

Over the years, Barcelona City Council's reception policies have helped to facilitate the arrival of a significant number of these people, also helping them to settle permanently in different districts, and they have now become a fundamental part of the city's identity. In this article we will talk about the historical background and the characteristics of municipal reception policy, from its inception up to the present day, without addressing matters linked to policies of coexistence, diversity, non-discrimination, and interculturality.

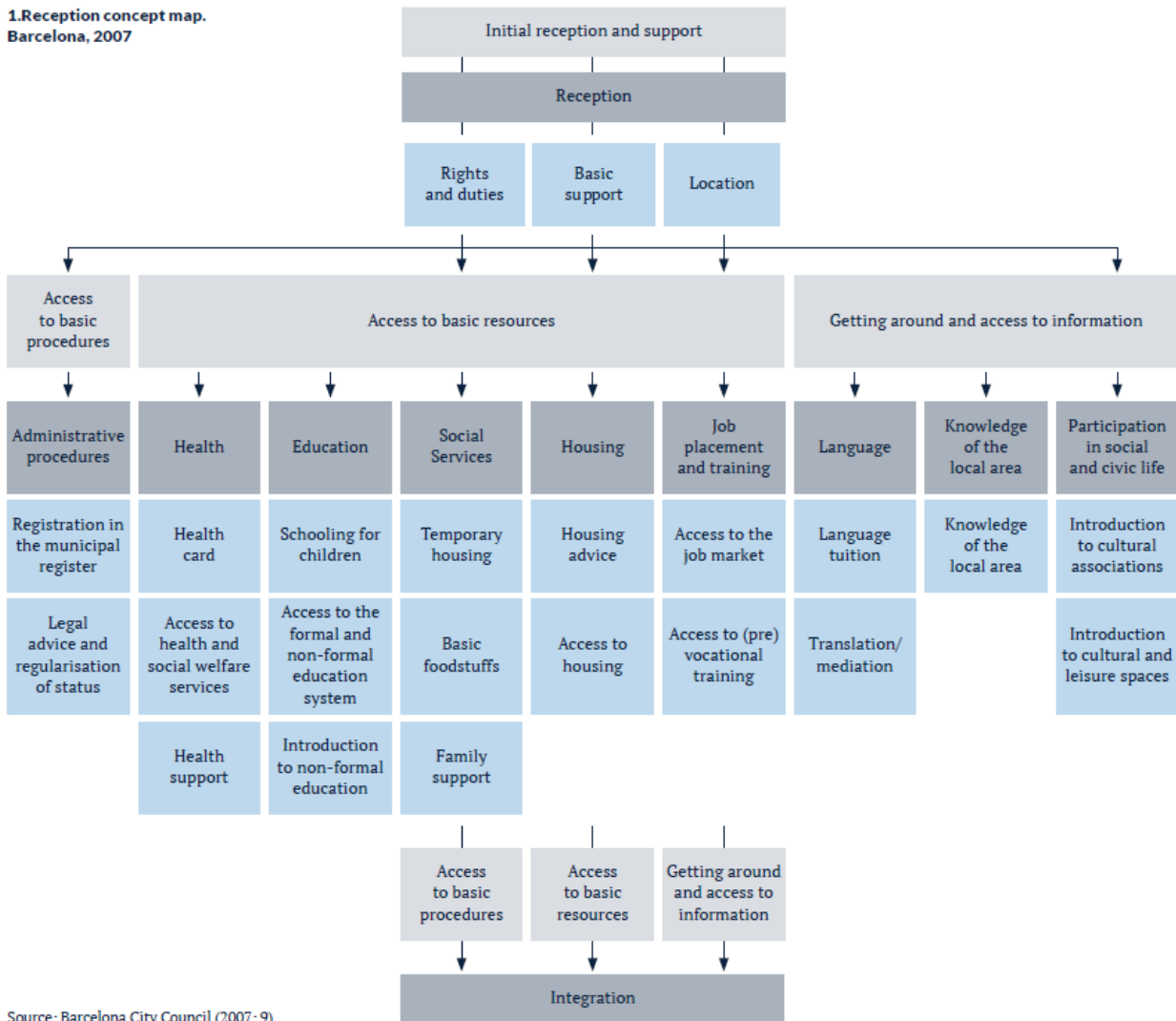
1. Definition

Even though reception policies in Barcelona were first introduced in the 1980s, with the launch in 1989 of the Service for the Care of Immigrants, Emigrants and Refugees (SAIER), we will take as our starting point some of the definitions described in Barcelona City Council's Reception Framework drawn up in 2007, as these are the concepts underpinning municipal policy that have shaped the way in which immigrants and refugees have been received over the last twenty years.

Within the Reception Framework, "reception" is defined as follows: We take **reception** to refer to the set of actions that make it possible for new arrivals to access the information and basic resources that will favour their integration into the host society. We speak of **new arrivals**, at whom reception initiatives are primarily targeted, when referring to immigrants who have recently arrived in the city and are at the initial adjustment stage, and who are therefore unaware of the social integration mechanisms available to them. This means that reception measures are directed at immigrants during a period of transition which will be different depending on the specific circumstances in each case. (Barcelona City Council, 2007: 3).

It is important to bear in mind the fact that the 2007 plan - which remains largely valid today - is structured around three distinct areas. These were the forerunners of what was subsequently to become the Reception Law in Catalonia: firstly, access to basic procedures such as registration in the municipal register of residents and legal advice on regularisation of status; secondly, access to basic resources (health, education, employment, social services, culture, etc.), and thirdly, help with getting around and getting to know the local areas (language support, social and civic participation). The concept map drawn up was the following:

1.Reception concept map. Barcelona, 2007



Source: Barcelona City Council (2007: 9).

In defining “reception”, the concepts of *accommodation* and *integration* are used¹.

However, in the reception concept map, the goal of the process is stated to be “to facilitate the integration” of the person from another country who has just arrived. Today we certainly would not use the word “integration” due to its assimilationist connotations, instead we would choose other terms such as *inclusion* (Sanahuja, 2019). It should be remembered that the Barcelona Interculturality Plan was drawn up later, in 2010. The Barcelona Interculturality Plan defined an intercultural model that informed all municipal policies - including reception policies - and it

1. The term “*accommodation*” was first used by the academic Ricard Zapata Barrero (2001), who uses it to refer not only to the sociological process of “integration”, but also to the relationship of immigrants with institutional structures and the way that these structures and public authorities view immigrants.

highlights three elements and key principles: equality of access, recognition of diversity, and interaction between new arrivals and other city residents. The base document lays the foundation for the subsequent application of reception policies.

2. Key aspects of reception policy

Migration cycles are closely related to periods of expansion and contraction in the economic cycle, both in Spain and within the city itself, and also to the political crises and wars that drive people from certain countries towards Europe. A current example is the political and economic crisis in countries like Venezuela and Colombia. Other factors affecting the flow of migrants into the city are demographic evolution and immigration legislation².

The Base Reception Plan document indicates a series of principles such as temporality, mainstreaming, social cohesion, diversity, participation, and equality. Below we will highlight the most significant aspects which reach beyond the Plan itself, and that have shaped reception strategies over the last twenty years.

2.1. Inclusion of persons in irregular situations

In contrast to what happens in many European countries, in Barcelona, right from the beginning, people in irregular situations have been included in reception policies.

In Barcelona's 2007 Base Reception Plan, the following is clearly stated: [...] Reception is aimed at all newly arrived immigrants, regardless of their legal residency status, with the most socially vulnerable receiving the most support. [...] The vast majority of newly arrived migrants in Barcelona aim to regularise their legal status in order to be able to settle and work in the city and enjoy the best possible living conditions. (Barcelona City Council, 2007: 4).

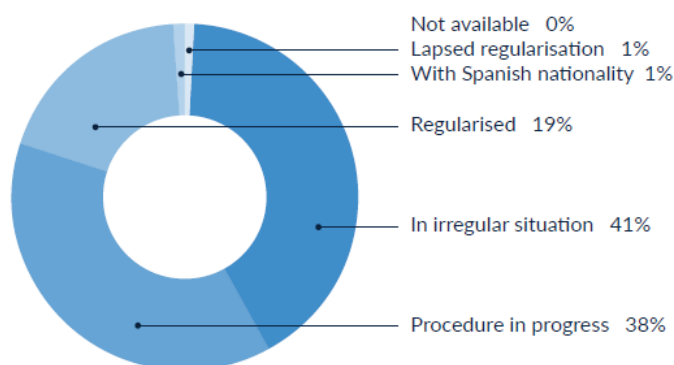
One of the most significant historical characteristics of migratory flows in the whole of Spain and more specifically in Barcelona, is irregularity. On arrival in Barcelona, most people are in an irregular situation, as the annual reports of the Care Service for Immigrants, Emigrants and Refugees [SAIER] testify.

Often more than 50% of those using their services are in an irregular situation. However, in the last report presented by SAIER, corresponding to the year 2020, the percentage of people in an irregular situation was as high as 80%, including all those receiving support with the process of obtaining their residence permit.

If the aim is to create inclusive policies for all those who arrive in the city, and more than 50% of those people are in an irregular situation when they arrive, it makes no sense to exclude them from reception policies. The various municipal governments, led by different mayors, have all shared a human rights-based approach to policies, considering people first and foremost as human beings, regardless of their legal status.

2. The entry into force of the Aliens Act in 2005 led to the regularisation of over 700,000 people throughout Spain, which presented a challenge to local councils. Barcelona City Council set up an *ad hoc* mechanism to process requests for "retroactive" registration in the municipal register in order to provide proof of arrival in the country, and so make it easier for migrants to process their request for a residence permit. Over a four-week period, the facility set up at the Casa del Mig in the Parc de L'Espanya Industrial dealt with tens of thousands of people, many of whom were able to regularise their status.

Graph 1. Legal status of SAIER users. 2020



NB: In 2020, a total of 19,001 people used their services.
Source: Barcelona City Council. SAIER report 2020.

The experiences of the majority of Barcelona residents who are of immigrant origin, many of whom now have Spanish nationality, reveals that they spent a minimum of three years in an irregular situation before receiving their first temporary residence permit. They later renewed that temporary permit, finally obtaining a permanent residence permit. Depending on their nationality or country of origin, they then applied for, and eventually obtained, Spanish citizenship.

In 2017, the City Council approved the *“government measure to facilitate access to regularisation, and prevent lapsed regularisation”* (Barcelona City Council, 2017). This was a landmark achievement: for the first time, the local government of a major European city had established a public policy aimed specifically at migrants in an irregular situation explained in an open, straightforward way. It consolidated the policies regarding migrants in an irregular situation that the City Council had implemented in previous years, bringing them together for the first time in a single document and elevating them to the level of municipal policy.

2.2. Specialisation versus normalisation

Reception policies and services have always been understood as specific and temporary, related to migration and the legal status of "Foreign Person". Legal status as a Foreign Person involves certain obligations that are specified in Organic Law 4/2000, of 11 January, on the rights and freedoms of foreign nationals in Spain and their social integration. The idea underpinning this law is that people progressively gain autonomy, achieve legal stability, learn Barcelona's official languages (Catalan and Spanish), find work, get a stable job, and build their lives in the city of Barcelona like any other local resident. The historical approach of municipal policies is the principle of normalisation, which is clearly defined in the 2003 Municipal Immigration Plan:

“The Plan's fundamental aim is to provide support for people within the framework of existing services, without creating parallel structures. However, it is necessary to be aware of the differing needs and diverse situations of each of the people who want to integrate into Barcelona society. Normalisation policies imply guaranteeing access to municipal services for all city residents. Normalisation [...] entails guaranteeing access to and use of the city's basic services, [...] rethinking existing services in order to respond to new social phenomena, and restructuring the range of available services in line with new needs and demands. (Barcelona City Council, 2003).

This is one of the ground rules that all municipal services and departments have adhered to for years: not to create parallel systems for people of foreign origin, but to integrate them into the services aimed at the population in general. This has meant that municipal services, facilities, and programmes have had to adapt, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to the changing structure of Barcelona's increasingly diverse population. Although the response has generally been a positive

one, not all services and facilities have adapted to the socio-demographic changes stemming from immigration from outside the EU over the years.

2.3. Participation

Another distinctive feature of the reception policies implemented in the city of Barcelona is the participation of wider society in developing them, including immigrant associations themselves. The city's main reception service, SAIER, was set up in 1989 as a result of a recommendation by the organisations within the Municipal Social Welfare Council, specifically the Refugee Working Group.

It was launched in collaboration with the Red Cross and the ACSAR Foundation, with the Information Centre for Foreign Workers (CITE), the Barcelona Bar Association (ICAB), the Association of Information and Communication Media (AMIC), and the Centre for Linguistic Normalisation (CNL) joining them in subsequent years. The first Municipal Reception Plan and the Barcelona City Reception Guidelines (2007) were drawn up in a very participatory way, with input from a network of 160 organisations working on reception in the city. There are many organisations in Barcelona that began to work on the reception of immigrants before the City Council itself did. Among these pioneers were the Bayt al-Thaqafa Foundation, led by Teresa Losada, the CITE, and the Ibn Batuta Sociocultural Association.

Barcelona City Council has implemented and financed countless reception initiatives, providing funding for associations in all of the city's neighbourhoods which has made it possible to create a far-reaching territorial network. The creation of the Language Co-ordination Platform, the Network of Social Entities for Legal Advice (XESAJE), and more recently the entities that work in the Nausica shelter programme, are examples of participating organisations.

The Municipal Immigration Council, established in 1997, has also played an important role in monitoring municipal action with regard to reception. One example that stands out is the document prepared by the organisations within the Municipal Council of Social Welfare, entitled "The 67 proposals of the Barcelona Municipal Immigration Council" (Barcelona City Council, 2014), which was drafted to support the inclusion of migrants within the framework of the 2014 Aliens Law, and which proposed a series of changes in the interpretation of the existing regulatory framework to that end.

2.4. A Local responsibility

Reception, although very much determined by the legal framework of the state, specifically by the Aliens Law and the Asylum Law, is fundamentally a local responsibility. People entering the European Union or Spain end up heading for a specific place where they hope to find housing and work, and eventually to settle. The first point of contact with the local government is through the application for inclusion on the municipal register of residents. People gradually establish themselves in a neighbourhood, they find work, send their children to school, join associations, and so on - it is essentially a local process.

Finally, it should also be noted that the Aliens Law led local governments to become more deeply involved in the management of migratory flows by creating "housing availability reports" for people who wanted to begin the family reunification process, and "social roots reports" for people in irregular situations who have lived in the city for three years and who wanted to access an extraordinary work permit. These two reports became compulsory in 2006, and this led to the creation of the Technical Office for Immigration, later to become the Directorate of Services for the Care and Reception of Immigrants which ended up taking over existing services such as SAIER and the translation and intercultural mediation service that had historically come under the umbrella of the Social Services.

2.5. Registration in the municipal register is key

The initial contact that municipalities have with foreign-born people - immigrants or refugees - who arrive in our towns and cities is generally through the citizen services offices when they request

registration in the municipal register. The municipal register of residents, regulated by the basic law on local government, is defined as a *de facto* register of the people resident in the municipality. This law considers registration in the municipal register of residents a requirement for everyone who lives in a particular municipality, regardless of their legal status. Therefore, the City Council has the obligation to register everyone who is actually living in the city.

The same law grants registered residents the status of “member of the local community” and as such, also grants right of access to municipal services and facilities. Additionally, there are a whole series of state and autonomous community laws that generally refer to the municipal register of residents to determine right of access to important services, such as the health and education systems. So being on the municipal register guarantees equal right of access to a multitude of services, facilities and programmes that are available for all residents, including people in an irregular situation. Furthermore, due to its public nature, the municipal register also provides a way of demonstrating how long a person has effectively been resident in the country, something that is extremely important under immigration law when it comes to obtaining an extraordinary residence permit on the basis of “social roots”.

For this reason, the city of Barcelona has always been at the forefront in terms of active registration policies, policies that have interpreted the basic law on local government in a way that allows all those living in the city, including people in an irregular situation, access to registration in the municipal register. A paradigmatic example of this is the registration of those who have no fixed abode, which makes it possible for people who have difficulty in proving their place of residence to register via the “report of knowledge of residence”, making inclusion in the municipal register and therefore access to services possible.

3. Legal advice

One of the key elements of reception policies is legal advice. A major concern for migrants is how to access information on regularising their situation and getting a residence permit. The main objective of legal advice in reception policies is to provide guidance for people in an irregular situation, to enable them to navigate the labyrinth of legislation on foreign nationals and the complexities of dealing with public administrative bodies and their first residence permit.

Another aim is to help people to renew their residence permits and avoid lapsed regularisation. People who find themselves in irregular situations are in a very precarious position, often being forced to work illegally and frequently under exploitative conditions. Their irregular administrative situation shapes their lives, making a normal life impossible for them as they are afraid of being detained or deported from the country under immigration legislation. For this reason, most of the effort in terms of legal advice has been aimed at helping thousands of people to escape from this limbo.

Legal advice also addresses other more complex matters that often affect Foreign Persons, for example disputes related to the custody of minors when mixed couples separate, support regarding the process of applying for citizenship, and for those seeking family reunification. From the very beginning, this has been a key aspect of Barcelona’s reception strategy, and it has been supported by the CITE, one of the organisations with the most extensive experience in providing advice to foreign workers in Catalonia - and the ICAB, as well as by other entities.

4. The Barcelona strategy

What follows is a brief description of the programmes, services, and facilities that comprise the city’s reception strategy, and that are the responsibility of the Directorate for the Care of Migrants and Refugees. The strategy relies on an extensive centralised service, such as SAIER, in order to create a city-wide network (SOAPI, the Support and Guidance Service for Migrants), and on the reception entities located in all the city's neighbourhoods that provide complementary services and that receive municipal financial support thanks to certain agreements (Xarxa 9 Barris Acull,

Apropem-nos del Poble Nou, and the Coordinadora d'Entitats del Poble-sec) and a call for applications for subsidies.

Additionally, there are other reception services, such as the New Families programme, for people starting the family reunification procedure, the Language Learning Strategy via the CNL (for Catalan) and the network of organisations that comprise the Language Co-ordination Platform (for Spanish, literacy, and Catalan).

Other public services such as the health and education systems have their own reception strategies, including services such as reception classes. The range of services provided has varied over the years.

4.1. SAIER (central service)

Since 1989, the deep public commitment to reception policies has been evidenced by the creation of the single centre providing multiple services in response to the specific needs of foreign migrants in the city of Barcelona. Today, SAIER is defined as a service that supports all forms of human mobility, both in terms of arrivals (immigration, refuge), and departures (assisted voluntary return and emigration).

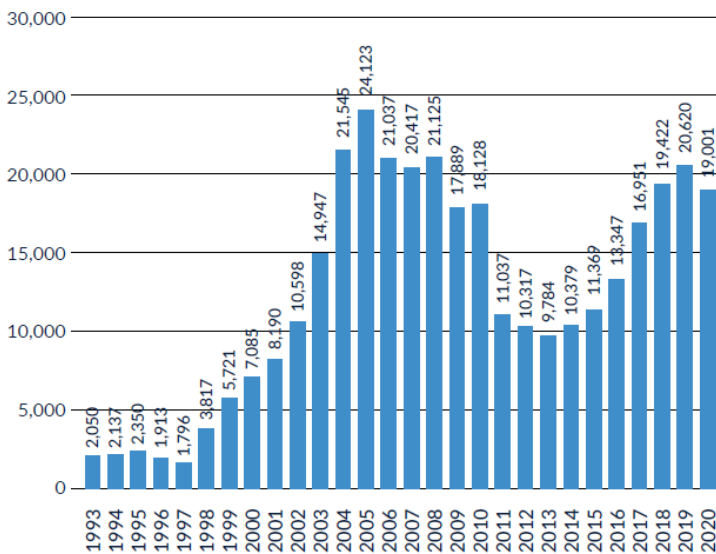
It started out as a small centre located on the ACSAR association premises on Avinguda del Paral·lel, working alongside the Red Cross. Over time it has joined forces with other entities specialising in the management of diverse aspects of migration, and has grown considerably. Today it occupies four spaces: two more on Carrer de la Font Honrada, and the new space that houses the front office on Carrer de Tarragona, opened in 2019).

SAIER has a large front office that assesses the needs of the people who come seeking support, referring them to the specific specialised services that will be able to help with the issues identified. For example, simple legal consultations are referred to the CITE, which deals with renewals of residence permits, matters concerning social roots, etc. More complex queries are dealt with by the ICAB. Requests for Catalan courses go to the CNL, located at SAIER, where the person can be signed up for a course. Applications for asylum are referred to ACCEM, the Spanish Catholic Migration Commission Association, which replaced the ACSAR Foundation, (the Catalan Association for Solidarity and Assistance for Refugees) in 2016. Requests for employment advice, together with matters of validation or recognition of qualifications are handled by AMIC. Requests for assisted voluntary return are dealt with by a dedicated desk at the SAIER front office itself, which also offers a translation and interpretation service and psychological support. The social care function of the Red Cross within the SAIER framework should also be noted.

SAIER was created within the domain of the Social Services, and in this sense has provided complementary services for certain groups of people. For example, it is SAIER that grants access to the state's refugee care programme. All those making a formal application for asylum in Barcelona and who want to enter the State care programme have to do so through the Red Cross at SAIER. SAIER also offers support to homeless people from non-European countries who have been in Barcelona for less than two years and have no local roots.

Between 1993 and 2020, a total of 347,105 people received support. The evolution in the numbers over time reveals a pattern that links to the number of arrivals in the city, and to economic cycles.

Graph 2. Number of people using SAIER. Evolution 1993-2020



Source: Barcelona City Council, 2021.

4.2. Support and Guidance Service for Migrants (SOAPI)

The Support and Guidance Service for Migrants (SOAPI) is a reception service that operates within the framework of the technical services of the ten districts within the city.

The origins of this service can be traced back to the group information sessions that were organised at the Besòs Social Services Centre. Located in a neighbourhood with a high percentage of immigrants, at the beginning of the 2000s the centre decided to hold group information sessions addressing issues such as employment rights, immigration law, registration in the municipal register of residents, etc. In 2007, the Immigration Directorate decided to conduct a pilot scheme in the Poble Sec neighbourhood, organising two-hour group sessions where more detailed information was provided. The inspiration for this initiative was the experience in the Besòs neighbourhood, but the information provided focused not only on immigration issues but also on matters related to the city, access to basic resources, etc. This pilot programme was conducted in collaboration with the Coordinadora de Entitats del Poble Sec, which was responsible for identifying people who would benefit from such services. The experience was deemed a positive one, and the decision was taken to set up a programme for all districts of the city, which would be directly managed by the Immigration Directorate.

Today, SOAPI's main function is to provide information, guidance, support, and advice on general and specific matters related with territorial organisation, basic resources, rights and duties, learning the official languages and immigration law, as well as other topics considered useful, for the immigrant population in the districts. This aim is being approached in three ways: Firstly, through regular information sessions that are always held at the same place and at the same time, mainly at district level; secondly, through information sessions held at the request of specific services, entities, facilities or groups and which take place on their own premises, and finally, through individualised consultations offered to people needing information on a particular procedure, or who need to go into some other aspect in greater depth.

In each district of the city there is a reception service agent working side by side with the rest of the district's professionals who is in charge of the regular information sessions, group sessions and individual consultations. The facilitators in each district have highly detailed knowledge of the local resources that people are generally referred to.

SOAPI has also been responsible for ensuring compliance with Catalonia's reception law, fulfilling local government obligations since 2015. This means that it is the body that teaches the module focusing on knowledge of the local environment: the C modules of "Knowledge of Catalan Society". This is a fifteen-hour training programme on the content prescribed by Law 10/2010 on the reception of immigrants and returnees to Catalonia (historical and geographical environment, rights and duties, main immigration procedures, etc.).

4.3. Family reunification

Taking advantage of the powers conferred by the LOE Regulation of 2004, and given the obligation to issue a "housing report" for family reunification purposes, Barcelona City Council decided to create the New Families programme, which offers support throughout the family reunification process to all residents who want to bring their children, husbands, or wives over from their countries of origin.

All those wanting to initiate the family reunification procedure need to request a report on the availability of suitable housing from the City Council in order to be able to proceed. This mandatory administrative procedure presented a unique opportunity to make contact with all who were seeking family reunification in Barcelona. The scheme first started out in the Horta district, supported by the technical structure within the district. From 2008 onwards, the scheme was gradually extended to other districts, eventually covering all areas of the city.

The New Families programme provides support and guidance to all families who have begun the family reunification process in Barcelona. The programme works with the whole family, both the adults who are in Barcelona who have applied for reunification and the rest of the family who want to join them who are currently in their country of origin, whether they are spouses or children. The programme offers a meeting space where they can find out more about city services, schools, and local associations. In addition, the programme also works to make the reunification of the family members who arrive and those who are already in the city an enriching and positive experience.

The programme also addresses aspects such as the gender perspective, for women either joining, or being joined by, their husbands. One of the programme's highest priorities is to incorporate children and young people reunified with their families into the education system. A great deal of effort is made to work with both families and schools to achieve this end. One of this programme's most successful initiatives was the launch of the "*A l'estiu, Barcelona t'acull*" project that each summer takes around 150 girls and boys who have arrived in the city under the family reunification scheme and helps them to prepare for their new lives, helping them to get to know the city better and to settle into the local community before starting school in September.

4.4. Translation and mediation services

The Translation and Intercultural Mediation Service was launched in 2002, and aims to support all municipal service professionals who work with the immigrant population. This service is divided into three parts: the Translation Service, the Interpersonal Mediation Service, and the Community Mediation Service.

5. Language integration and the Linguistic Normalisation Consortium

Helping people to learn the local languages is one of the classic features of reception policies that generates most consensus at European level. Knowledge of the language(s) of the host society enables migrants to communicate with the rest of the population, gain more autonomy, and access work opportunities. Therefore linguistic knowledge is considered an essential basic skill for employment. By inviting people who arrive in our city to learn Catalan and Spanish, and providing the facilities for them to do so, we help them to become more autonomous and to avoid social segregation, as well as providing migrants and refugees with more opportunities.

With regard to the Catalan language in Barcelona, in the early 2000s there was a sudden change in the number of people enrolling on Catalan courses. The Linguistic Normalisation Consortium of

Catalonia was established in the 1980s with a very specific goal in mind, to give Catalan people the chance to study Catalan, an opportunity that had been denied to them under the Francoist dictatorship. This objective was superseded in 2000 by the new needs of foreign migrants. The language learning strategies involved are quite different, and it must be said that the Consortium has been hugely successful in adapting to these changing needs, offering many newly arrived migrants the chance to gain language skills immediately, and free of charge.

The Centre for Linguistic Normalisation (CNL), which is part of the Consortium, set up a registration point for Catalan courses where the need was greatest, and where a large number of potential participants were to be found: SAIER. Collaboration between SAIER and the CNL began in 2004. People turning to SAIER for support could enrol on a language course directly through SAIER itself.

The problem lay in the enrolment procedure, which was extremely rigid at that time, with set enrolment periods that generated huge queues. This was the point at which the Barcelona CNL, together with the City Council, agreed on a substantial increase in funding to create a far more flexible system, one which allows enrolment throughout the year, and a considerable increase in the provision of beginner and elementary level Catalan courses. This was the beginning of the linguistic integration strategy, which made it possible to satisfy much of the increase in demand.

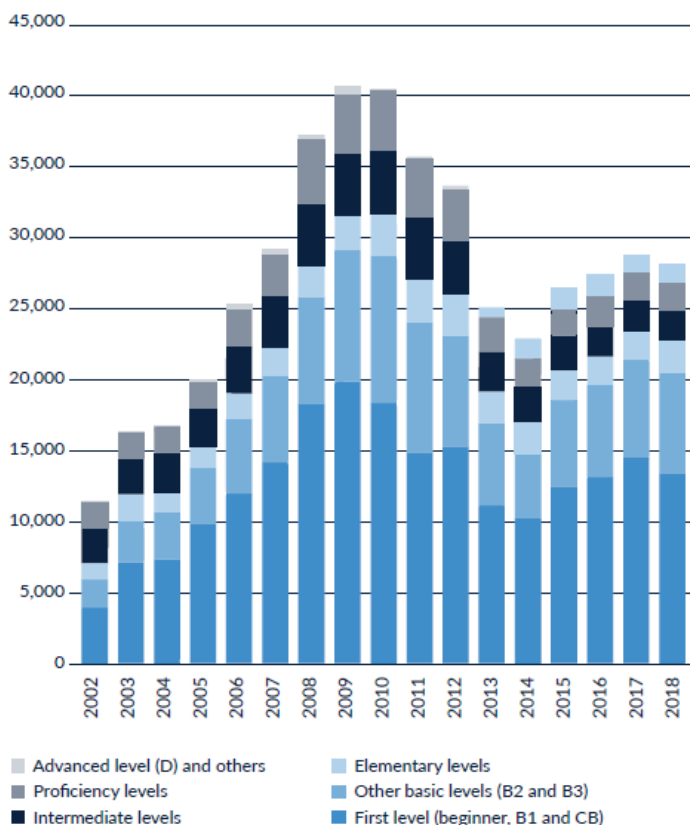
At the same time great effort was made to adapt educational materials to the very different realities of the new pupils. Thus, the CNL developed specific materials that while teaching the language also provided knowledge of the local environment.

With regard to the teaching of Spanish, within the framework of the Reception Plan the City Council set up the Language Co-ordination Platform, which comprises different entities within the city dedicated to teaching language and literacy to migrants.

The many organisations involved in facilitating knowledge of the official languages in Catalonia, promoting the social use of Catalan through practice (going beyond language exchange), and that help people to build social relationships and gain knowledge of the local area should also be mentioned.

Some of these programmes are: the Plataforma per la Llengua language pairings, the programmes run by the Linguistic Normalisation Consortium itself, and those offered by the Language Co-ordination Platform of Barcelona's Reception and Support Network, among others.

Graph 3. Evolution of students on CNL Catalan courses.
Barcelona, 2002-2018



Source: Linguistic Normalisation Consortium, 2018.

6. Reception and refuge: the growing importance of refuge and the increase in complexity

Historically, most of the new arrivals in the city of Barcelona have been economic migrants. Although since the 1980s there had been a constant flow of refugees and asylum seekers - at that time primarily from Latin American countries with totalitarian regimes such as Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship - in percentage terms, numbers were very low. For example, in 2012, the number of asylum seekers among the users of SAIER's services was 304 out of a total of 10,317 people. This means that asylum seekers represented just 3% of all those seeking support from the city's most important reception service.

Another fact that resulted in lower levels of municipal involvement in dealing with refugees was the city's own lack of legislative authority in this area. The Spanish state also has jurisdiction over legal matters concerning refugees, and also over the establishment of a comprehensive support programme for asylum seekers in Spain. The Geneva Convention, together with various European norms, makes it mandatory for Spain to provide a refugee support programme which covers housing, subsistence, and a pathway to autonomy while awaiting a decision on an asylum application. This programme was managed by the Spanish state through the Ministry of Employment, in collaboration with various third sector organisations such as the Red Cross.

All this changed radically in 2015, when the refugee crisis in Europe as a whole helped to put into perspective the realities of refuge in Spain and in Barcelona. In 2020, the number of people applying for asylum supported by SAIER was 44% of the total of 19,001 people who used their services. Most were from Colombia, Venezuela and Honduras.

In 2015, in the midst of the refugee crisis triggered by the war in Syria, and in the face of the failure of European countries to take action, Barcelona approved the "Barcelona, Refuge City" plan. The

aim of the plan was to prepare the city to receive refugees, to provide them with the assistance and all the services required in order to guarantee their rights, and also to demand that states should respect humanitarian law at the most basic level.

The "Barcelona, Refuge City" plan was conceived as a city-wide policy that aimed to involve the range of different municipal departments and services, and also the wider society - local associations and the citizens themselves. Part of the plan was directly concerned with welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. One of the main initiatives to grow out of this was the Nausica comprehensive support programme. This is a programme that complements State controlled programmes; it guarantees housing, job placement, legal advice, psychological support, etc., and currently has the capacity to accommodate around 150 people.

7. Conclusions

The breadth of experience gained over the last thirty years has given a perspective on how important reception policies are, and on the needs and requirements of people who are newly arrived in Barcelona. Many of the policies introduced in Barcelona have served as a model for other municipalities in Spain and in Europe. For example, when the city of Milan established a large centre to provide multiple services for new arrivals, the inspiration for the project came from SAIER.

From the technical point of view, knowledge has been gained with regard to what works, and what does not, particularly in terms of key aspects such as facilitating access to the municipal register of residents and legal advice. Irregularity has also been identified as a fundamental aspect of vulnerability, one that needs to be combated and placed at the centre of policy interventions. However, a more systematic evaluation is needed, as the results of the policies implemented need to be studied. For example, do we know if we have managed to avoid the creation of a society that is more segregated along the lines of differences in ethnic origin? There is also a need to understand what the population of migrant origin thinks about the reception process, from both an institutional and a civic point of view.

In practical terms much has been achieved, for example thanks to the legal advice provided by municipal services and by the organisations within the reception network, thousands of people have managed to regularise their situation and embark on the path towards normality, and thousands have gained access to knowledge of the Catalan and Spanish languages free of charge. Moreover, the perception of immigration as a problem in the city of Barcelona has remained at very low levels for years³, although recently openly xenophobic political stances have emerged with a high profile in the media.

In contrast, there are still some groups suffering extreme residential exclusion, such as people living in makeshift settlements across the city, the vast majority of whom are foreign-born and in an irregular situation. The number of young people aged between 18 and 25 who are on the streets has risen in recent years, and they now make up 22.3 % of the people who use the preliminary reception centres for the homeless in Barcelona (Sales, 2019). We therefore need to ask ourselves whether or not we have achieved a society where there is less discrimination. Do people of migrant origin, a significant proportion of whom have been living in Barcelona since 2000, have the same opportunities as the population as a whole? Do they have representation in the city's public domain? Have all citizens taken on board this socio-demographic change and what it means for the city?

These are questions that need to be answered in the coming years, and that will no doubt be the subject of future articles.

3. In the most recent municipal barometer published in December 2020, only 2.2% of citizens identified immigration as one of the city's "problems", placing it in twelfth position.

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