



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

TOGETHER WE MUST SUCCEED

**Participation of refugees in decisions
that impact their lives**

Focus on the voluntary engagement of
refugees and asylum seekers in France



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– UNHCR, THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY, SEPTEMBER 2020

" I always tell myself, if we want to achieve something, we must succeed together. We cannot achieve things alone while letting others behind ".

– **CAROLINE** has been a refugee in France for 4 years. She left her career as an architect to become project manager in a social business - Kodiko - which facilitates professional integration for refugees through networking and meetings on professional and cultural codes.

"When I landed at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport, the other families had to rely on me as I spoke French. That's when I started offering my help at no cost ; I dedicate quite a lot of my time. Citizens groups also volunteer and dedicate all their time to newly freshly families. I too can help ".

– **MICHELINE**, refugee volunteer

"In Afghanistan, my mother taught me how to sew. When the coronavirus spread worldwide, I wanted to help. I wanted to make masks and offer them to you as protection in return for the protection France gave me ".

– **HAMIDULLAH**, refugee volunteer



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Participation of refugees at the core of the Global Compact on Refugees

The participation of refugees is at the core of the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Carried out together with persons of concern (such as refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons) this work aims to make refugee voices heard and promoting their direct participation in all decisions that impact their lives. In order to highlight the value of their contribution to their host community, UNHCR also encourages concrete actions to strengthen refugees' rights and foster their integration in the receiving countries.

On 17 December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a new instrument called the Global Compact on Refugees¹. Originating from the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which was adopted in 2016, this Compact was designed to improve the international response to current and emerging situations of refugees. The aim of the Compact is to ensure that refugees and host communities receive the support they need by adopting an approach which engages the society as a whole. While underscoring the importance of refugee participation, one of its objectives is to further empower refugees so that they can better contribute to the shaping of their future and of their host community.

To achieve that, UNHCR made sure that refugees were included in the process that led to the development of the Global Compact as well as to its planning, monitoring and evaluation. For several months, UNHCR's Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC) reached out to refugee communities, host communities, community leaders and government authorities to collect their advice on the Global Compact on Refugees. At the Global Refugee Forum, held on 17 and 18 December 2019, several delegates spoke strongly about issues relating to young refugees, education, livelihoods, energy and infrastructure.



France, 7 November 2019. UNHCR and their partners at the launch of "Train de la Solidarité" in Paris.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

"The participation of refugees to decisions that impact them is of paramount importance to UNHCR's efforts all over the world and is the best way to come up to solutions together. This report outlines concrete steps which will enable refugee participation in the context of France, including their engagement as volunteers. The courage, resilience and determination of women, children and men who found asylum in France enables their integration and contribute positively to the various endeavours carried out by stakeholders in the host community. Those values may also inspire each one of us".

— **PAOLO ARTINI**, UNHCR Representative to France and Monaco

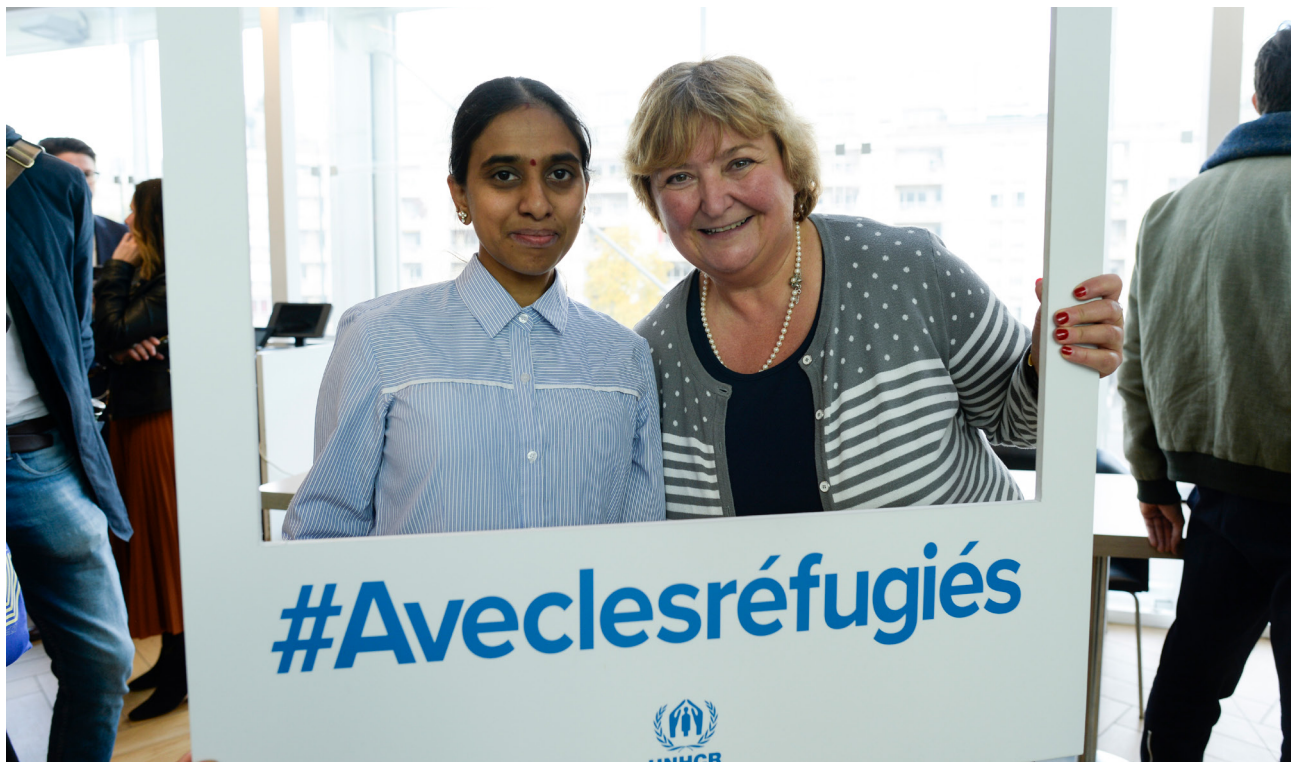
¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Global Compact on Refugees*, 2018; available here : <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>

Encouraging the direct participation of refugees in the European context

The arrival of many refugees and migrants in Europe, in 2015, initiated a strong mobilization of civil society. Solidarity networks, including those launched by refugees and migrants, were set up - sometimes in a state of humanitarian emergency - to provide essential support. Their demonstrated responsiveness and commitment were such that they became key players in the response to the plight of refugees and migrants in Europe. These networks continue to play a key role in the integration of refugees and in the creation of bonds with the receiving community.

In line with efforts to increase the participation of refugees in the decisions that impact their lives, UNHCR joined the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme to implement a European study and pilot project on the voluntary engagement of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe.

Carried out in 2019 and 2020, the project assessed the extent of refugee and asylum seeker participation in many civil society organisations, refugee-led organisations and voluntary organizations. It also generated valuable insights into initiatives and voluntary engagement of refugees and asylum seekers and their participation in the creation of solutions. Refugees played an essential role in their host communities during the Covid-19 pandemic as they went out in large numbers to contribute to the response to the health crisis. Such volunteer commitment showed how important it was to draw on the skills of the refugees living in France by offering them the opportunity to get involved as legitimate actors who contribute their talent and expertise.

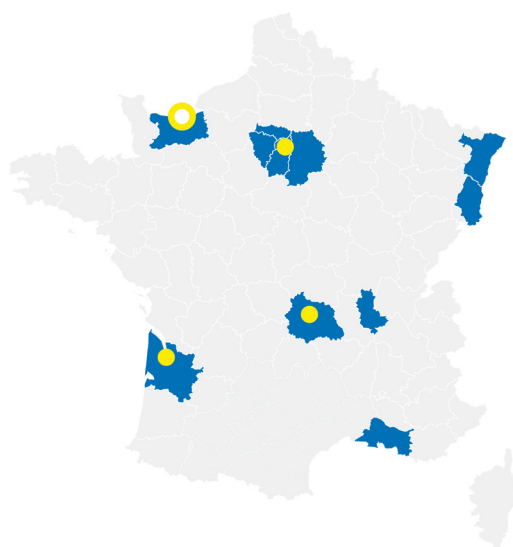


France, 7 November 2019. UNHCR and their partners at the launch of "Train de la Solidarité" in Paris.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

STUDY ON THE VOLUNTARY ENGAGEMENT OF REFUGEES

This study was carried out by the UNHCR's office in France between March 2019 and June 2020. It was based on a mapping of the most representative associations, civil society organisations and refugee-led organisations² which assist refugees and asylum seekers in 7 French geographical areas (Alsace, Bouches-du-Rhône, Calvados,

Gironde, Île-de-France, Puy-de-Dôme, Rhône). It aimed to assess the level of involvement of refugees and asylum seekers and services provided to them³ and to identify the most recurrent challenges in terms of communication and establishment of ties with refugees and asylum seekers and to suggest solutions to address them.



- Regions that took part in the study
- Towns and cities through which the Train de la Solidarité passed
- Towns/cities covered by INTER'ACT Tour

Between March and December 2019, consultations were carried out with 160 CSOs and 78 refugees and asylum seekers using an online questionnaire, 51 interviews and 7 focus groups.

78 PERSONS

refugees or asylum seekers for the most within the framework of individual semi-structured interviews or focus groups (7 to 16 participants).

ADVISORY GROUP

To identify civil society organizations (CSOs) that work with refugees and asylum seekers in each of the geographical areas and to better understand the local realities and dynamics.

160 CSOs

including refugee-led organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers through an online questionnaire, exchanges and interviews.

² A set of criteria was developed to identify the most representative organizations among those that provide services to refugees and asylum seekers in the 8 geographical areas covered by the study. Various criteria were used to achieve that objective, i.e., the geographical scope of the activities carried out by the organization; the proportion of refugees/asylum seekers among the volunteers and staff of the organization; the proportion and number of beneficiary refugees and asylum seekers that participated in the organization's activities; the number of refugees and asylum seekers with whom the organization can interact every month through its activities (this criterion covers both volunteer refugees and asylum seekers and those who benefit from the services provided by the CSO).

³ The focus of analysis was on the proportion of refugees and asylum seekers among volunteers and staff of the organization; the nationalities, gender and age groups that are most represented among volunteers, staff and refugees and asylum seekers; and the organization's activities in which refugees and asylum seekers are mostly involved.



France, 17 June 2020. Hamidullah (wearing a medal) is a refugee who sewed more than 700 masks during Covid-19 pandemic to support his host village.
© UNHCR/Kate Thompson Gorry

This study has a number of limitations in terms of its scope and objectives. It does not intend to suggest a national overview or a full assessment of the mechanisms set up to interact with refugee communities or to facilitate the participation of volunteer refugees and asylum seekers. Observations presented in this study should not be considered as applicable to all the CSOs assessed, as resources and modalities/conditions attached to the assistance of volunteers are quite heterogeneous and in constant evolution. The study looks into voluntary engagement as a way of facilitating the direct participation of refugees and asylum seekers in the decisions that impact their lives.

[See page 18 for more details on the methodology used for this study.](#)

What kind of voluntary engagement are we talking about?

While, at first glance, «conventional» volunteering may not appear as something that refugees and asylum seekers routinely take part in, the study revealed the existence of informal assistance networks alongside the standard networks of CSOs, as well as the substantial involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in community-based assistance. In the CSOs interviewed, volunteer refugees and asylum seekers help mostly with translation and interpretation tasks as well as in activities meant to break isolation and create social ties.

However, they do not necessarily volunteer over a longer period of time. Refugees and asylum seekers participate routinely in one-off events and activities.

Also, the study revealed that refugees and asylum seekers tend to show an increased interest in volunteering so long as the French understanding of this concept is explained to them and they are clearly informed how they can be actively involved in the dedicated CSO.

"When I landed at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport, the other families had to rely on me as I spoke French. That's when I started offering my help at no cost; I dedicate quite a lot of my time. Citizens groups also volunteer and dedicate all their time to newly freshly families. I, too, can help. Ou I, also, can give of my time".

– **MICHELINE**, refugee volunteer

It may also be recalled that, owing to the large number of civil society organizations present in France, this study focused on those CSOs that provide services to refugees and asylum seekers and on the volunteers who are active in those associations. However, it may be useful, at a later stage, to extend the study to CSOs that do not cater exclusively to refugees and asylum seekers, as well as to refugees and asylum seekers that do not volunteer in formally established associations. That would enable a more comprehensive mapping of solidarity efforts of refugees and its effect on their integration. Informal volunteering, which is used extensively in refugees and asylum seekers communities, and the engagement of refugees and asylum seekers in CSOs that do not cater exclusively for them may benefit from further research. Finally it is necessary to go beyond the scope of this study and to underline that refugees can and should of course also be encouraged to apply for positions/regular contracts with CSOs and even to leadership roles in such.



France, 08 March 2017. A village in Puy-de-Dôme opens its doors to refugees.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

Key outcomes of the study



France, 02 December 2019. Diaconat, an all-Syrian women choir sings at the Bordeaux-Saint-Jean train station while Train de la Solidarité pulls in. © UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

Volunteering contributes to the development of networks and helps individuals to learn the language, culture and conventions of their host country. While refugees and asylum seekers express their willingness to contribute to their host community, they also feel the need to make themselves useful and feel rewarded. The study identified the most recurrent challenges in terms of communication and involvement of refugees and asylum seekers.

Concurrently, the CSOs, refugee-led organisations and volunteers interviewed offered input as to what solutions could be implemented to address those challenges and, consequently, improve the direct participation of refugees and asylum seekers. One such example: interviewing refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences and wishes, and taking account of their expertise, skills and preferences.

in the development of volunteer work provides a twofold benefit, i.e., CSOs would benefit from their individual expertise and the volunteering would be a more meaningful experience as refugees and asylum seekers would apply and demonstrate their individual and collective talents. Two-way communication mechanisms are key in ensuring effective accountability towards affected populations. They secure the integrity of the stakeholders that work on refugee-focused programmes. They also serve to collect feedback from programme beneficiaries, thus strengthening their participation and enabling more effective programmes.

CHALLENGES FACED IN THE VOLUNTARY ENGAGEMENT OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN FRANCE

The participation of refugees in the decisions that impact their lives is key for the success of their integration. The ability of associations and volunteer groups to communicate and reach out to refugees is essential to ensure effective integration programmes.

"Volunteering is about learning. By reaching out to associations, you will get to know France better and better integrate".

— THOMAS, refugee volunteer

Cultural and language barriers

CSOs, refugees and asylum seekers that took part in the study listed cultural and language barriers as major challenges when communicating with refugees and asylum seekers about volunteering. Many identified the lack of information and resources as preventing access to quality interpretation services and to French language lessons (in addition to mandatory courses⁴). Adjustment to different social and cultural conventions is another challenge that CSOs, refugees and asylum seekers faced. The option for refugees and asylum seekers to choose between a male or female interpreter can be critical for them to speak freely.

Social and economic conditions

Issues relating to the conditions of living and people's access to their rights also impact the voluntary engagement and participation of refugees and asylum seekers. Lack of access to education and employment, mental and physical health needs, compounded by hardship and lack of stability that refugees and asylum seekers face, are all factors that contribute to making exchanges more complex. Finding solutions to these problems is a priority for refugees and asylum seekers as they hamper their physical and mental readiness to engage in volunteer activities. Economic and social hardships also affect individuals' freedom of movement, both in terms of mobility and connectivity, and may therefore prevent them from volunteering.

Acknowledgement of vulnerabilities

It is also important to acknowledge vulnerabilities that require special attention such as those that are related to age, gender, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation. According to testimonials, LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers do not always volunteer in associations that protect the rights of LGBTQI+ persons as they fear they would be perceived negatively by their own communities and their host community. Trauma experienced during their journey into exile may also undermine uprooted persons' self-confidence and trust in others. While many female refugees and asylum seekers do take part in volunteer activities, hurdles should be lifted to increase their participation especially in decision-making processes. Some of these women might fear being stigmatized by their communities because of their participation in volunteer activities, especially in a mixed environment (men and women), as well as outside the community. Also, mothers have less time to dedicate to volunteering. Specific arrangements should be put in place to adapt the means of consultation.

Work methods, culture and resources of associations

The CSOs that were interviewed identified another major challenge relating to their methods of work and their resources. In addition to insufficient human and financial resources, many indicated the lack of understanding and knowledge to adjust communication methods to persons whose journeys and living conditions varied from one individual to another. Also, the notion of refugee participation may not be properly understood by CSOs and thus hinder the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in voluntary work. The findings seem to indicate that these volunteers are not always invited to speak about their skills or the activities they would want to carry out in those associations. Similarly, few CSOs use refugees' feedback to fine-tune their programmes.

Socialization in the receiving country

Other challenges identified include the difficulties that refugees and asylum seekers face in terms of social integration, starting with creating social ties within the host community. Several CSOs, refugees and asylum seekers also hinted to self-censorship: some refugees and asylum seekers are concerned about the way they may be perceived by their own community and by their host community. All things that make them feel that they lack legitimacy to take part in volunteer activities. Self-censorship is even stronger where the person does not have a good command of the French language.

⁴ Refugees and any newcomers wishing to settle in France and whose level of French is below A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) are required to go to French language lessons as part of their Contrat d'Intégration Républicaine (CIR - Republican Integration Contract). The CIR is managed by the Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration (OFII - French Office for Immigration and Integration).

SOLUTIONS TO FACILITATE THE DIRECT PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS TO DECISIONS THAT IMPACT THEIR LIVES

- 1** **Adopt a whole-of-society approach**
- 2** **Foster social inclusion**
- 3** **Create conditions that are conducive to engagement**
- 4** **Support coordination and information sharing between stakeholders**
- 5** **Customize communication tools**
- 6** **Promote the crucial role of social workers and volunteers in information sharing**
- 7** **Inform and explain the concept of volunteering**
- 8** **Be bold and get involved**
- 9** **Involve refugees in decision-making processes**
- 10** **Promote legitimate decision-makers**
- 11** **Take into account special needs**

1 Adopt a whole-of-society approach

To address these challenges, various recommendations emerged for the purpose of strengthening interactions between CSOs and refugees and asylum seekers. The need to foster continued and meaningful dialogue between refugees and asylum seekers and their host communities and, more generally, between all stakeholders was highlighted. Private sector, government authorities, institutions, universities, civil society organizations, volunteer groups (whether the initiatives are led by refugees and asylum seekers or by members of CSOs) ... the participation of everyone is essential to the implementation of a meaningful dialogue, as was underscored in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.

2 Foster social inclusion

This requires building awareness among refugees and asylum seekers and members of their host society about interculturality and creating opportunities for encounters and dialogue. It is also about increasing cooperation and communication between the various stakeholders and promoting an inclusive and welcoming environment.



Refugee Food Festival

In 2015, UNHCR invested in the development of civic initiatives to create bonds between refugees and asylum seekers and their host community so that the former would, eventually, have access to opportunities. UNHCR provided assistance to the creation of the Refugee Food Festival. The Festival is more than a mere opportunity for civic mobilization around the promotion of interculturality by experiencing cuisine from all over the world; it fosters the professional integration for refugee chefs in France.

France, 17 June 2018. Refugee Food Festival
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

3 Create conditions that are conducive to engagement

Most of the CSOs and individuals that were interviewed indicated that volunteering could only be considered once refugees and asylum seekers start having stable and decent living conditions. It had been repeatedly suggested to create the conditions for self-reliance of refugees and asylum seekers by addressing their essential needs and improving their living conditions. Empowerment of refugees and asylum seekers should be considered and implemented as soon as feasible to ensure their successful integration. Promoting access to employment, education and the acquisition of the French language would also foster the creation of social ties. Integration is a long-term sustainable solution for refugees⁵. Strengthening their autonomy is one of the keys objectives of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. Welcoming refugees with dignity and ensuring their autonomy as soon as they arrive in France facilitate the gradual process of their social integration.

4 Support coordination and information sharing between stakeholders

The idea of centralising information on all institutional, CSO and local initiatives was put forward on more than one occasion; the aim is to boost linkages between all associations and to better disseminate information to the target audience, i.e., refugees and asylum seekers. It is also to be pointed out that such information should be translated into the languages spoken by refugees and asylum seekers and shared both online and offline.

5 Customize communication tools

Communication methods need to be adapted so that content is readily accessible, while taking into account the specific needs and specific circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers, and also by providing translation and cultural mediation. The efficiency of visual, audio-visual and multilingual materials and aids, such as mobile applications, was highlighted. Respondents also recommended that social media, messaging, phone calls and face-to-face oral communication be used more routinely. Frequent and regular contacts are also to be considered when striving to build relations of trust with refugees and asylum seekers.

6 Promote the crucial role of social workers and volunteers in information sharing

Volunteers, social workers and other staff involved play a critical role in strengthening existing approaches to communication and creation of bonds with refugees and asylum seekers. Social workers that manage reception and accommodation centres are in direct contact with the people that use those facilities. They build relations of trust with the persons that they assist and play a key role in creating bonds of trust with the host community. Social workers' efforts may be leveraged to develop a strategic approach to promote the voluntary contribution of refugees and asylum seekers. They can be trained to disseminate information on CSOs and civic associations and on existing volunteering opportunities among refugees and asylum seekers and, thus, guide people who may be interested. Such initiatives may be carried out in accommodation centres of the national reception scheme (Dispositif national d'accueil - DNA) and in the regional directorates of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) so as to reach the largest possible audiences.

⁵ UNHCR, Vers un nouveau départ : l'intégration des réfugiés en France; September 2013. See : <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/523aefec4.pdf>



A refugee social worker helps vulnerable LGBTQI+ persons in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic

Thomas is a volunteer at ARDHIS (an NGO that advocates for the rights of LGBTQI+ to immigration and asylum). During Covid-19 lockdown period he continued to offer his help and expertise as a social worker. His testimonial underscores the critical role that volunteers play in information sharing and maintaining of ties : « I am determined to continue helping the most vulnerable people. I am committed to what I do. I am passionate about helping others ».

France, 13 June 2020. Thomas, a refugee and social worker in Paris. He helps vulnerable LGBTQI+ people in times of Covid-19 pandemic.

© UNHCR/Kate Thompson Gorry

7 Inform and explain the concept of volunteering



France, 11 October 2018. Maryam (in the centre of the photo, with her arms up) is a refugee and a head cook in France. She prepared more than 200 meals and was given a standing ovation by pupils at the Octave Mirabeau secondary school at Trévières, Normandy.

© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

"At first, I didn't understand why people volunteered in France. Then I went to the association and spent time with them. I started interacting in French; that was great! I started off as a learner then, one day, I was offered to teach French. Although I was surprised, I accepted the offer. I said «I'll try it out». Little by little, I felt like I was in a large family. That was a unique experience and I don't want to stop. I taught for 25 years in my country. Life is only meaningful when you dedicate some of your time to others."

— MIRELA, asylum seeker

Many CSOs and individuals who contributed to this study insisted on the need to inform refugees and asylum seekers, as soon as they land in the country, about the way associations work, their roles and objectives, as well as on the possibility for refugees and asylum seekers to participate as volunteers. This includes explaining the benefits that may be derived from a volunteering experience (e.g.: building ties with members of the host community and acquiring new skills, all things which foster personal and professional fulfilment).

By the same token, the interviewees felt it was necessary to clearly define the role and function of volunteers for the purpose of creating trust and confidence between volunteering refugees and asylum seekers and their community. Thus, volunteers will be able to fulfill their tasks fully aware of the rights and duties attached to their function. A clearer definition will help to prevent any kind of pressure

or expectation which might arise from a misconception of volunteering. It will also help preserve the integrity of potential volunteers. It would be pertinent to explain, both to volunteering refugees and to all those who do not have a proper understanding of the notion of volunteering in the host society, the difference between volunteering and paid work. That would clarify the concept of volunteering, which is not paid work and does not provide any additional advantages or authority, especially when providing social assistance, help in getting a job or accessing a service. Thus, a better understanding of volunteering will contribute to better manage volunteers' expectations and to mitigate the pressures that may originate from the refugees' own community.

8 Be bold and get involved

To volunteer, one needs to be informed about available opportunities and be prepared to commit oneself. In this regard, the support of volunteering refugees is critical for the creation of bonds and contacts with populations of refugees and asylum seekers. Thanks to their volunteering experience and their ability to explain the concept of volunteering, these volunteers would publicise existing opportunities and encourage other refugees and asylum seekers to get actively involved in the activities of civic associations. It is also important to take into account the profiles, professional backgrounds and specific needs of individuals so that all interested refugees may take part in activities in a safe and dignified manner, but also to ensure that their skills and interests are properly used.

9 Involve refugees in decision-making processes

Several stakeholders highlighted that the participation of refugees and asylum seekers as partners rather than beneficiaries is key, especially in decision-making processes. Indeed, such a dynamic would enable the involvement of all players, and is critical in making current projects and programmes more effective while taking account of feedback received from refugees and asylum seekers.

Refugees and asylum seekers provide useful insight to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, identify needs and offer solutions to address them. By assuming responsibility in decision-making, volunteers will see the impact of their efforts and thus build confidence in their ability to become catalysts for change while nurturing a sense of inclusion and belonging. Participants to the study pointed out the need to provide strategic and phased support to volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers so that they will get involved in all stages of activities initiated by

their civic associations, from design to implementation, bearing in mind the individual skills and desires of each volunteer. Once the notion of volunteering is clarified and understood, refugee volunteers will need to be supported in their assignment. By taking time to train them, to explain to them the cultural codes inherent to volunteering environment (how meetings are conducted, keeping to time schedules), to make them feel part of the team, before directing them to various assignments depending on needs and on their preferences, the volunteering experience will be a constructive one for everybody.

Participation of exiles: possible ways of rethinking integration, Studies by IFRI, May 2020

This study, which was carried out in the framework of the Observatory on Immigration and Asylum, was supported by 33 interviews made in 2019 with stakeholders in charge of the reception and integration of refugees. It analyses the various forms of participation used in France: from those initiatives that were introduced in the 1980s to fight extreme poverty to the ones developed recently. It maps field practices which foster participation in reception and integration schemes. And, finally, the study puts forward recommendations for decision-makers in government, civil society and private funders. Thanks to the methods and tools that the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) described in this document ("move towards...", need to change work culture, relationship to time, continuous engagement, etc.), the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for the Reception and Integration of Refugees would like to use the participation of exiles as a leverage of public policies adapted to the realities on the ground.

To find out more, see : <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/participation-exilees-pistes-repenser-l'integration>

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs)

Refugee-led organizations (RLO) are organizations that are either entirely established and led by refugees, or have refugees in position of decision-making or directing the organization. The degree of organization and structure varies greatly among the different organizations. In France, civil society and voluntary initiatives meet these criteria and work for a better inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers within their host society.



Union des Étudiants Exilés (UEE)

Created in 2019, the Union is a non-profit association constituted in accordance with the French law aiming at facilitating access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers. The president and founder of the association is a refugee journalist. The board is composed of 5 members in situation of exile. Two employees ensure the continuity of the activities. The organization has around 80 refugee and local volunteers. Around 30% of the refugee volunteers are women.

The organisation is helping between 60 and 70 people per month by providing four types of support: Sharing reliable information (i) about higher education in France and support mechanisms for students (such as scholarships) through their [website](#) and [Facebook page](#), individual guidance (ii), collective workshops (iii) to integrate exiled into the French educational system and advocacy (iv) for improving the conditions for access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers.



Espero

Espero was created in 2016 with three environmental and social objectives: improving access to employment for marginalized persons in the areas of organic market gardening, beekeeping, managing green spaces (i), raise awareness of environmental and social issues (ii) and enhance biodiversity in Ile de France(iii). During the Covid-19 crisis, Espero and managed to launch a training program for textile artists and sign « back-to-work » contracts for 14 refugees.

Espero is a French association and has four founders, including one refugee. The team consists of four full-time staff, three of whom are refugees, and 3 seasonal interns. In 2020, 10 volunteers were engaged in a wide range of activities, changing the lives over 150 people through job/training placement and 500 more people through workshops focused on creating awareness about the importance of protecting our ecosystem.



Camila and Rania work together to facilitate access to higher education for refugees. Camila founded UniR Universities & Refugees and Rania, a Syrian refugee, is a member of the board of the NGO.
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10 Promote legitimate decision-makers

It is of paramount importance that refugees and asylum seekers are engaged as legitimate players and decision-makers and not defined by their administrative status. Their perception of the challenges experienced by uprooted people is an important perspective for assessing the needs of the public concerned and finding appropriate solutions. Refugees can and should be allowed and encouraged to apply for positions as staff members with CSOs and even to leadership roles in such. With this inclusive approach in mind, one could also work on changing the perception that CSO staff have of refugees and asylum seekers. Support may need to be extended to staff members and non-refugee volunteers who need to work on their attitudes, behaviour and knowledge to facilitate the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in their teams as fully-fledged partners. Support must be offered to volunteers and staff members and the roles of each must be clearly defined and understood by all. Other measures may also be considered: a system to alert to abuse of authority, the signing of documents that clearly define the roles of each person (terms of reference, codes of conduct). In addition, empirical knowledge often proves to be the best way of addressing volunteers' concerns; thus, the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in volunteer teams may help in changing the attitudes of staff members.



France, 11 January 2019. A French village sets the example on how to receive refugees.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

11 Take better account of specific needs

It is essential to ensure equitable access and equal opportunities of participation in decision-making for all refugees and asylum seekers, especially for those with specific needs (women, older persons young boys and girls, LGBTQI+ disabled persons, etc.). Factors such as age, gender and diversity are the source of the most diverse personal experiences. Vulnerabilities attached to these factors must be taken into account so that people may feel safe to express their opinions freely when they are consulted. A trust-based relationship must be built, and opinions must be sought in an environment where people feel safe. Different discussions may be held with different groups by factoring in intersecting factors such as age, gender and diversity to ensure that the free expression of opinion is enjoyed by all. Adjustments must also be made to cater for the specific needs of every individual. Therefore, to ensure the participation of women - and of mothers in particular - it is necessary to adapt volunteering activities to their needs by holding meetings at suitable times or by arranging for child care. Similarly, work schedules of men or of working women should be considered. Last but not least, awareness-building activities for communities may also help dismantle obstacles to the volunteer involvement of individuals.

MAPPING METHODOLOGY

A mapping exercise was carried with CSOs and voluntary organizations that provide services to refugees in 7 geographical areas of France (Alsace, Bouches-du-Rhône, Calvados, Gironde, Île-de-France, Puy-de-Dôme and Rhône). These areas were selected using accessibility criteria, with UNHCR France relying on their prior acquaintance of local actors. These helped in the mapping effort by identifying new CSOs and RLOs, disseminating the questionnaire online and organizing interview sessions and group discussions.

The outcomes served to gain better knowledge of the civic associations that assist refugees and asylum seekers in France and the level of direct participation of the latter. The answers collected also served to draft recommendations to increase the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in the civic associations that support them as well as in the decisions that impact their lives.

The study builds upon the **answers derived from the questionnaire** that was sent out to CSOs that provide services to refugees and asylum seekers in the 8 regions previously mentioned. Some of those CSOs comprised initiatives designed and implemented by refugees and asylum seekers.

The survey was then supplemented by **individual interviews carried out with professionals and volunteers** who work in CSOs that provide services to refugees and asylum seekers. Individual interviews were carried out in in the départements of Bas-Rhin (4), Bouches-du-Rhône (6), Calvados (3), Gironde (7), Puy-de-Dôme (7), Rhône (7), and in the regions of Île-de-France (16). Interviewees were professionals and volunteers who work in CSOs that provide services to refugees and asylum seekers. The aim of the project and the conditions of participation in it (code of conduct, confidentiality) were presented from the outset so as to obtain the free and informed consent of the participants. The interviews were held in the premises of the Paris office of UNHCR, in the offices of the CSOs consulted or in other venues agreed upon with the volunteers. Of varying length (1 hour on average), the interviews were semi-directive, flexible and focused on the volunteering experience of refugees and asylum

seekers in France. They would serve to gauge the level of engagement of refugees and asylum seekers in volunteer and civic initiatives, in the selected geographical areas, and to identify the difficulties that refugees faced as agents and decision-makers in activities held by the CSOs that were interviewed. The intent was also to discuss the challenges in terms of communication between CSOs and refugees and asylum seekers and to suggest possible solutions to those challenges.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were also held in the areas where the interviews were carried out. These discussions were held and conducted with special attention to age, gender, diversity and possibility for everyone to express their opinions freely and in a dignified manner⁶. The objective was to confirm the findings from the mapping exercise by inviting refugees and asylum seekers to actively contribute to the design and implementation of two (2) outreach projects of UNHCR, i.e.: INTER'ACT Tour project, aimed at youth audiences, and Train de la Solidarité#Aveclesréfugiés, which was developed on the occasion of the Forum on Refugees. Participants were identified by UNHCR with local CSOs who helped with establishing contact with interested persons. An overview of topics for discussion was provided in advance. Some discussions required the services of interpreters. At the end of meetings, time slots were dedicated to individual and confidential exchanges to address issues relating to protection.

The mapping results were then **supplemented with additional interview sessions, in June 2020, to further analyse refugees' and asylum seekers' contribution to France's response to the Covid-19 pandemic**. These interviews were carried out in 11 CSOs in the départements of Bas-Rhin (1), Calvados (1), Gironde (2), Puy-de-Dôme (1), Rhône (1), Bouches-du-Rhône (1) and in the region of Île-de-France (4). In this respect, 6 refugee volunteers were interviewed. The extension of this study during the health crisis documented a spontaneous volunteer engagement by many refugees and asylum seekers, and demonstrated the strength of their mobilization as well as the existence of mutual solidarity.

⁶ For more information on the way FGD were carried out: UNHCR, L'outil de l'UNHCR pour l'évaluation participative dans les opérations, Étape 5 : la facilitation des discussions (p. 36-42) ; See : <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/opensslpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=476b9c382>

PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE STUDY

A total of 78 adult refugees and asylum seekers were consulted, mostly through individual interviews or FGDs. Other refugees volunteering and working in CSOs also offered their viewpoints by filling out an online

questionnaire. The refugees and asylum seekers that were consulted originated from 27 countries. Some of them were granted international protection (refugee status or subsidiary protection) in France while others were asylum applicants. Among the latter (asylum seekers) some had their application processed and rejected by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides - OFPRA); therefore, their appeal application was still being examined by the National Court of Asylum (Cour Nationale du Droit d'Asile - CNDA).

Overall, 68 volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers took part in the FGDs, including 21 women and 47 men. The formation of these groups was facilitated by the CSOs that participated in the study by identifying refugees and asylum seekers interested in the project. For that identification exercise, UNHCR used the criteria of age, gender and diversity so as to secure the most exhaustive perspective and to ensure everyone aired their opinion.

Taking into account age, gender and diversity criteria

Applying the criteria of age, gender and diversity when forming the different groups was essential. The aim was to ensure that specific groups (LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities) were not excluded and to identify challenges and solutions taking into account the diverse needs while strengthening refugees' capacities. The identity of refugees and asylum seekers who took part in this study is not divulged, in the interest of protection and in compliance with the rules explained to them during the interactions. Their informed consent was required in accordance with the policy protecting the personal data of persons of concern to UNHCR⁷, which was applied for all exchanges carried out. Also, it is to be pointed out that the volunteers that were consulted were clearly informed that they were not to expect to receive any support or care in exchange for their contribution. As far as possible⁸, the AGD approach was also integrated in the way the discussions were organized so that each participant could air their opinion, especially in sub-groups where they could feel comfortable to make their voice heard.

⁷ For more information on the protection of personal data of people under UNHCR care, see : <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/open-docpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=5bf7c99c4#:~:text=La%20confidentialité%20des%20données%20personnelles,lors%20du%20traitement%20des%20données.&text=personnelles%20doivent%20être%20rangées%20et,des%20moyens%20de%20communication%20protégés>

⁸ In the absence of disaggregated data, the study faced challenges to ensure the representativeness of all refugees and asylum seekers in France.

PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES IN UNHCR'S OUTREACH AND ADVOCACY PROJECTS IN FRANCE

Consulting refugees : focus groups



France, 13 December 2017. A French scholarship scheme brings hope to Syrian refugees.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

The mapping exercise was complemented with refugees and asylum seekers consultations, both individually and in groups, with the aim of putting into practice the recommendations previously mentioned in UNHCR's activities in France requiring the support from volunteers. Focus group discussions were held with refugees and asylum seekers who took part in the design, development and implementation of the two projects, i.e., INTER'ACT Tour and Train de la Solidarité #AvecLesRéfugiés. The overall aims of these projects are to create dialogue opportunities between refugees and asylum seekers and their host communities and to promote volunteering and participation of refugees. Also, they serve to establish strong partnerships with the various stakeholders (municipalities, private sector and civil society) in order to expand opportunities offered to refugees to be part of action and decision-making.

In parallel, refugees identified during the consultations, took part in advocacy activities on the occasion of the first Global Refugee Forum, which was held in December 2019, and on the 2020 edition of the World Refugee Day.

Volunteer refugee participation in UNHCR's outreach projects in France

The participation of refugees is at the core of UNHCR's outreach projects in France. In each project, volunteers expressed their wish to engage with the public and were then brought in taking into account their skills or the activities they wanted to carry out. One of the aims of these projects was to create opportunities for refugee volunteers to engage with their host community.

Showing genuine interest in the tasks assigned to them, participants in the focus group discussions said that they were proud of showcasing their talent, sharing their culture and the success stories of other refugees. They were driven, on one hand, by the need to tell the reasons for their departure from their countries and their presence in France and, on the other hand, to present themselves as individuals with a specific history, culture and journey.



France, 16 December 2019. The Solidarity Train arrives at Bordeaux
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES IN UNHCR'S OUTREACH AND ADVOCACY PROJECTS IN FRANCE

SOLIDARITY TRAIN



France, 28 November 2019. Solidarity Train starts its journey in Paris.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

53 refugees and asylum seekers pledged to participate in the development and implementation of the Train de la Solidarité#Aveclesréfugiés, a project designed by UNHCR, the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for the Reception and Integration of Refugees (DIAIR) and SNCF in partnership with Sanofi Espoir and Generali-The Human Safety Net foundations, Fondation SNCF and the City of Paris⁹. Le Train de la Solidarité left Paris for Bordeaux then Clermont-Ferrand. It reached Geneva for the convening of the first Global Refugee Forum (12-18 December

2019), one year after the historic adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees.

5 refugee volunteers, from 5 different French cities, were initially consulted on the design of the 2 cars earmarked for the exhibition and the programming of one "conference" car. They also provided input on the idea of holding cultural and artistic activities in train stations to showcase the talents of refugees.

Visitors admired portraits, listened to testimonials, and were encouraged to better understand the causes and consequences of forcible displacement in the world. The exhibition also outlined actions carried out to receive and integrate refugees in France, upcoming plans and the possibility for everyone to help. The «conference» car served as a venue for a rich programme of discussions, debates and film screening.

Interested volunteers among refugees then helped in performances both in train stations and on board the Train in all the cities that were visited. Some of them seized the opportunity to showcase their talents in floral creation workshops, exhibition of paintings and other art performances. They welcomed visitors aboard the Train and provided information in stations. They also provided logistical support throughout the event together with volunteers from host communities. The experience offered an opportunity for exchanging and sharing.

Contribution of Volont'R programme participants to the Train de la Solidarité

In Paris, Bordeaux and Clermont-Ferrand stations, activities carried out inside and around the Train were supported by 40 members of the Coop'R d'Unis-Cité programme.

- 8 in Paris
- 20 in Bordeaux
- 12 in Clermont-Ferrand

Coop'R is part of Volont'R, a national scheme supported by DIAIR and the Agence du Service Civique. It brings together 1,500 young French citizens to work for refugees and 500 young refugees doing community work. Coop'R programme puts together groups of 10 French citizens and 10 refugees coming from other CSOs or larger nationwide programmes.

The volunteers developed key messages, gained knowledge and specific examples on forcible displacements and on the importance of solidarity; all things which enable them to speak to wider audiences on these issues.

⁹ See more : www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/le-train-de-la-solidarite.html

INTER'ACT TOUR : MEETINGS WITH YOUNG AUDIENCES #AVECLESRÉFUGIÉS



France, 11 October 2018. Maryam (in the centre of the picture with her hands up), a refugee and head chef, prepared more than 200 meals for pupils at the Octave Mirabeau secondary school at Trévières, Normandy.

© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

Since 2017, the département of Calvados, the city of Bayeux, the Bayeux-Calvados-Normandie Award, UNHCR France and its partners, local CSOs, refugee volunteers and the school's teams work together to offer pupils in middle schools a unique experience¹⁰. During one whole week, the team in charge of the project and the refugees involved spend one day in each participating school to bring a new perspective on forced displacement and inform their young audiences on how important solidarity is when addressing forced displacement:

- In morning sessions, together with a UNHCR member, the refugees shared their experiences in classrooms.
- At lunchtime, a refugee cook prepared a full menu, on site, with the help of the canteen staff, for the pupils on half-board.
- In the afternoon, refugees and the project team presented a wide range of activities to the pupils: virtual reality tour, guided tour of an exhibition and workshops on a variety of themes (including musicians, rappers, journalists, cooks, illustrators, athletes). This awareness week offered opportunities for the young Normans to exchange views with the refugees and the latter answered their questions and got their message across.

33 refugees took part in the three editions of INTER'ACT Tour as facilitators, speakers and cooks in the secondary schools.

In preparing for the 2019 edition and to consolidate the project, UNHCR France held two group discussions in Marseille and Caen. 16 refugees and asylum seekers contributed ideas for the content of testimonials and workshops that will be proposed to youth. They discussed various ways of approaching the issue of forced displacement with the pupils, the most relevant topics to engage on with French young audiences and what it means for refugees to share their personal stories. During the INTER'ACT Tour week, volunteers shared their testimonials in classrooms and facilitated workshops where they shared their talents and passions with the youth.

Besides increasing awareness among youngsters, this project favours interactions between refugees and host communities, for better local integration. By identifying refugees who settled in Calvados and inviting them to speak and facilitate workshops in schools - in collaboration with teachers, pupils, parents and local associations - the project gives those refugees a role in their host community by highlighting shared values and experiences and creating an intercultural dialogue for the benefit of all.

¹⁰ For more information, see : www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/le-train-de-la-solidarite.html

Syrian duet teaches rap to French pupils

Rappers Yaser and Mohamed set up a band called 'Refugees of Rap' in 2007 in Yarmouk, a suburb of Damas where Palestinian refugees live. Resettled in France in 2013, the two brothers joined UNHCR-France in 2017 to raise awareness on forcible displacement through their music. Since 2018, the band works specifically with young audiences. They hold writing workshops for pupils and appear in events organised for high school students.

"It is important for us to speak to pupils and students in general to explain to them what is going in Syria, the refugee crisis and why so many people left their country. At the same time, we want to show them that you can resist, express yourself and get your message across peacefully, through art and music."

— MOHAMED

Refugees' voluntary participation in UNHCR's advocacy projects

Refugee participation in advocacy efforts is also essential. Mindful of the rich contributions that refugees make and of the need to involve them in the decisions that impact their lives, UNHCR France worked with many volunteers during the 2019 World Forum on Refugees and on the World Refugee Day (2020). The participating refugees expressed their satisfaction for having been invited to contribute to those events and to share their perspective on forced displacement.

THE GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM



Switzerland, 17 December 2019. Aya, a former refugee, speaks at the World Forum on Refugees.
© UNHCR/Mark Henley

The first edition of the Global Refugee Forum was held in Geneva on 17 and 18 December 2019. One year after the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees¹¹, government authorities, international financial organizations, business leaders, humanitarian and development institutions, refugees, CSO and RLO representatives convened to look into the situation of refugees and identify ways and means of achieving the aims of the Global Compact to ensure a better protection for refugees and to contribute, in a more concrete manner, through financial, material and technical assistance and also in terms of resettlement of refugees.

The Forum¹² provided the opportunity to snap a commitment from the entire community in favour of refugees and the communities which host them and, in

particular, innovative contributions in support of their long-term integration. Six priorities were identified, i.e., education, livelihoods, energy and infrastructure, shared responsibilities, protection and solutions such as resettlement.

Some 3,000 people, including 70 refugees, attended the Forum. The latter played a key role both during the preparation of the Forum and by participating in it. The Forum showed how important it was to involve refugees in decisions that impact their lives.¹³

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly, Global Compact on Refugees, 2018 ; available here : <https://www.unhcr.org/dach/ch-fr/nos-activites/le-pacte-mondial-sur-les-refugies>

¹² For more information about the Forum, see : <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/2019-forum-mondial-sur-les-refugies>

A summary of the first Global Forum on Refugees may be accessed here : <https://www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/5e9ff41c4>

¹³ For more information, see : <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/press/2019/12/5df3500910/lancement-dune-conference-mondiale-refugies-geneve-sortie-dune-decennie.html>

The Global Refugee Forum as seen by Yasin



France, 07 November 2019.
© UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

Yasin Abdi Jama was a medical doctor in his country. He came to France in 2017 as a refugee. Founder and chairman of Le Réseau des Exilés, he attended the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019. During the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic, he offered his community leadership skills and his medical expertise to his host community in response to the health crisis. He recalls his participation to the Forum and what he learnt from it.

1. What did you learn from your participation to the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 ?

I felt that the Forum was an opportunity to shed light on the plight of refugees all over the world. Many people are left with no choice but to flee their countries as they find themselves in very difficult situations over which they have no control. I felt I had to speak about refugees, migrants and all these issues.

2. What has struck you the most ?

To me, that was a golden opportunity to talk about refugees' journeys, the situation in France and about projects. I felt I had to seize the opportunity to speak for those who have no voice, who cannot share their stories. It's important to represent them and to speak about their situations.

I also took part in the meeting on resettlement as well as in the event organized by IGAD

(Intergovernmental Authority on Development) on a comprehensive regional response for refugees.

3. What are the main issues to the integration of refugees ?

The first one is housing but also food and means to learn the language. In my opinion, these are the 3 most important issues for a refugee landing in a country. And for students, how they can resume their studies. As for professional, the issue is finding a job.

4. What about access to information ?

Information is an issue which cuts across all the other ones. Getting to know local people, to further one's studies, finding a job. There are lots of associations that propose activities and information for refugees and asylum seekers. But when I interact with people, they don't seem to be well informed. Information is not centralised. Sometimes, you have people who have been around for 3 years and they still don't have all the necessary information.

5. What is the impact of your experience in this Forum ?

The Forum motivated me to continue working with my team on project so as to enhance our impact... It is important to contribute to the efforts of public authorities, of UNHCR and of the private sector, and to do our bit as refugees.

6. What are your current projects ?

With our association, Le Réseau des Exilés, we help other refugees to create their own projects and associations. We already have one project dubbed "Translation Support" (Traduction solidaire) and we launched a new project called Panjea with the aim of creating educational activities in the languages spoken by the refugees. The idea is to work with professional translators and pay them for their work. We continue to work with social entities (CAF, etc.). The lockdown has been a tough period for everyone. At present, I work with Aurore Association. I am paid (facilitator) to develop programmes and activities for lone minor refugees. I also work quite a lot for Caracole of which I am the chairperson.

World Refugee Day

On the occasion of the World Refugee Day, UNHCR France organised on 20 June 2020, in collaboration with DIAIR, a full day of online events to mobilize and celebrate the courage and resilience of refugees all over the world. With a rich programme of debates, musical and artistic performances and workshops, the Day's activities were designed and rolled out with the help of refugee volunteers under the fitting theme of:

"Everyone can make a difference. Every action counts."

Initially mobilized in the national Covid-19 response, a group of 11 refugee volunteers contributed to the design of the 2020 edition of the World Refugee Day. Other refugees also got actively involved in the various activities on the programme of the Day. Using video material, they recalled the messages of the 2020 WRD: celebrate the engagement of refugees in national response against Covid-19 pandemic, keep up the momentum created during the pandemic, mobilize and enhance solidarity when responding to humanitarian crises, and think ahead bearing in mind the social and economic impacts of Covid-19 pandemic. Some volunteers took the floor in the panel discussions together with representatives from the private and public sectors and civil society organizations. They shared their views on the resilience of refugees¹⁴, in the face of the health crisis, and on hosting refugees in France¹⁵, the idea being to put in perspective the outcomes of the Global Forum on Refugees which took place in December 2019 in Geneva. Other volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers showed their commitment by describing how they put their tailoring skills at the service of their host community, by producing masks during the pandemic¹⁶. A workshop dedicated to poetry was also held. The idea was to tell the journey into exile and the bonds that should bring together host communities and refugees through art and culture. All the remarks offered depicted the daily lives of the volunteers and conveyed the messages they wanted to share, to showcase their talent, expertise and sense of solidarity.



World Refugee Day - HCR and Diair - poster



¹⁴ See : https://youtu.be/1_3LtySkK5w

¹⁵ See : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJ-R2z1mRI8>

¹⁶ See : <https://youtu.be/uzqHft7iDcg>

For more information, see : <https://www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/news/stories/2020/7/5f1ac8b04/a-pessat-villeneuve-un-jeune-afghan-se-porte-volontaire-pour-coudre-des.html>

POETRY : BRIDGING CULTURES

Set up in 2016 by Margault Ménard, Poeshir is a poetry workshop where six students, including Leen Youssef, from Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne university meet. After reading and discussing poems taken from Georges Pompidou's *Anthologie de la poésie française*, student refugees then write poems in French on any topic of their choice. The aim of the workshop is to produce a collection of poems reflecting the emotions, concerns and passions of the contributors.

Leen came to France as a refugee in 2017. She has always enjoyed poetry that she defines as a practice which "refines the soul". She started writing poetry when she joined the workshop. Writing, which she values as a therapy, is part of her integration process and learning of French language and culture. Most of her poems reflect her life experiences.

At the 2020 edition of the World Refugee Day, Leen shared her first poem with the public:

FREEDOM

I want to run on
the streets, without
being followed.
I want to speak loud,
without fear.
I want to be proud of
myself, without
being judged.
I want to share my views,
without hurting
anyone. And above
all,
I want to scream
"Freedom" and feel
the walls of prison
fall apart.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF REFUGEES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC



France, 17 June 2020. Hamidullah (sporting a medal) is a refugee who sewed more than 700 masks during Covid-19 pandemic to support his host village.

© UNHCR/Kate Thompson Gorry

" Refugees are a vulnerable section of society. But they also show strength in these trying times. "

– ALEXANDRE, Department Head, CeCler association (Puy-de-Dôme)

" I wanted to make masks and to provide you a protection, just like France did for me. "

– HAMIDULLAH, volunteer, CeCler association (Puy-de-Dôme)

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic that has hit the entire world over the last few months, many solidarity initiatives have been deployed to help the most vulnerable and the people impacted by the health crisis. Many refugees and asylum seekers joined these expressions of solidarity, providing a valuable contribution to the assistance efforts of citizens and volunteers. The role that these people played and continue to play in response to the pandemic goes to show how important refugees and asylum seekers volunteering is for their host community.

While it is still early to analyse the phenomenon, it is appropriate to draw the first lessons in terms of inclusion and participation of refugees.

The coronavirus-related lockdown and restrictive measures adversely impacted communication with refugees and asylum seekers. Some of the existing challenges were exacerbated. Faced with this emergency, CSOs and government institutions that work with refugees came up with innovative solutions to pursue exchanges, often on advice given by refugees themselves. During this period, refugees and asylum seekers also showed their ability to act spontaneously in order to express their support to their host community in more than one way.

Innovation in times of emergency: key contributions of refugee volunteers in information sharing and for maintaining social bonds

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the enforcement of lockdown and the need to communicate remotely had an impact on interactions between refugees and asylum seekers and host communities. Challenges relating to language barriers increased. Many stakeholders, including UNHCR France, pointed out the difficulty that people who do not have a good command of the French language experience during video conferences or phone calls. In a context of isolation imposed by the lockdown, language barriers were also a major challenge for the academic support of refugee children.

The digital divide, which was already wide before the pandemic, was exacerbated. Many uprooted persons did not have access to electronic devices or to an internet connection. Some lacked digital literacy to be able to use these tools. To address these issues, UNHCR France contributed to the national strategy to fight the digital divide considered by the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for the Reception and Integration of Refugees (DIAIR), also by facilitating the participation of refugee volunteers in that exercise.

"Access to quality information can save lives. It is important to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are given reliable information in their language(s) and that they are oriented to suitable solutions. During this health crisis, many volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers played a key role by communicating and maintaining the social ties with the most isolated persons."

— CÉLINE SCHMITT, Spokesperson for UNHCR-France and External Relations Officer

A VOLUNTARY CONSULTATION GROUP HELPING UNHCR TO RESPOND TO THE CRISIS

As early as March 2020, to address the Covid-19 pandemic, UNHCR launched a collaboration effort with the French government, NGOs, municipalities and refugees, in the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees. It ensured that refugees were fully involved in that collaboration. To that end, UNHCR mobilized their existing network of volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers. 40 volunteers heeded the call and chose to contribute their ideas in the search for solutions to the challenges faced by their own communities and host community. An advisory group was then set up to look into issues such as information sharing, maintenance of social ties, employment and mental health. The group was tasked with the provision of official and reliable information that the volunteers may then share around them. Meetings were held remotely, taking into account the personal situation of each participant. To facilitate interactions, a simultaneous interpretation service was offered in English and French during those online meetings and bilateral exchanges were held to ensure the participation of all, including individuals who did not have access to internet or who preferred other means of communication (telephone, email, etc.). Once the lockdown was lifted, UNHCR continued to cooperate with those refugee volunteers that were involved in the working group and who hold regular exchanges on various topics.

To address the obstacles that they identify, CSOs and RLOs tend to increase their online interactions and thus benefit from the input of the refugees they consult. Some of them adjusted to the way refugees and asylum seekers used online communication tools (social networks, audio messaging through WhatsApp) to share information. These means were used after consulting with refugees and asylum seekers. The latter shared their views on the most suitable communication channels and conveyed information within the refugee community. Thanks to the support of these volunteers, communication between CSOs and people that needed support became smoother, thus reflecting how effective peer support mechanisms were. While these solutions helped disseminate information in these times of health emergency, training in the use of digital tools remains a major issue especially for dealing with administrative formalities.

Volunteers among refugees and asylum seekers that were approached by UNHCR proposed ideas for possible solutions and the contribution they wished to make using an online form. Three themes were pre identified: (i) share information on administrative formalities and schemes of

interest for refugees; (ii) provide support by translating available content; (iii) help in activities to strengthen social ties and mitigate isolation. Volunteers helped disseminate information, translate online forms on [Réfugiés.info](#), an online platform launched by DIAIR, and assist with telephone calls, as well as distribute food and provide psychological support, thus offering their skills and experience to those in need.

The response to the pandemic was an opportunity to underscore the importance of informal volunteering in refugees and asylum seekers communities. Also, besides their contribution to the work of CSOs and RLOs, many more refugees and asylum seekers provided material help (running errands for those around them, for instance), advice on administrative procedures or psychological support through their social networks.

IN CLERMONT-FERRAND, A SYRIAN TEACHER OF ENGLISH HELPS HER PUPILS AND SHARES HER EXPERIENCE WITH THE MUNICIPALITY DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

A Syrian refugee and teacher of English in Clermont-Ferrand, Rabab supported her students, colleagues and neighbours during the Covid-19 health crisis. She also offered her experience to the municipality who sought her advice regularly. [Her testimonial](#) is a reminder of the essential contributions that refugees made in these times of crisis, and in particular in situations of emergency :

"This is the first time that I feel am like anyone else since I was relocated to France. We are all equal in the face of this virus."

Municipalities play a key role in encouraging refugees who so wish to participate by helping their host community and vulnerable people. Frontline fighters against the pandemic, mayors and cities are able to roll out a response that includes all of their residents, regardless of their language or administrative status. Thus, during the Covid-19 pandemic, municipalities played a key role by ensuring that everyone had a fair access to information, health services and other forms of social and economic support, including housing. By sensitizing everyone to the situation of refugees, in the spirit of the Global Compact, a more efficient and fast response to the effects of the crisis may be deployed. By giving refugees the opportunity to participate actively in combating Covid-19, by making use of their skills and know-how and through an enhanced solidarity amongst all residents, municipalities are able to consolidate the positive effects of the efforts made.

France, 18 June 2020. A refugee and teacher of English, Rabab took part in the response deployed by the city of Clermont-Ferrand, during the Covid-19 health crisis.
© UNHCR/Kate Thompson Gorry



Engaging with the host community : refugees mobilize their civic spirit and skills

"Volunteering enriched my inner life."

– **HONORINE**, volunteer & asylum seeker

Furthermore, the volunteering of refugees and asylum seekers extend beyond support to other refugees and asylum seekers and their communities. Many of them extended their help to their neighbours by offering moral and material support to the people that are most at risk of contamination. Refugees expressed their solidarity by providing their expertise, time and talent. As they wanted to give as much as they received, to express their gratitude and to make themselves useful, they showed solidarity in times when their own host communities were weakened.

Whether they were doctors, teachers or cooks, many contributed their support to those around them. Some used their tailoring skills to compensate the shortage of masks, others gave a helping hand in farming where it was needed, and young volunteers supported older ones who had hosted them and who now found themselves in a situation of vulnerability. Many refugees demonstrated the strength of their resilience and the power of their civic engagement.

EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS PASSPORT FOR REFUGEES

Launched in 2017 by the Council of Europe to help Member States to assess the qualifications of refugees and facilitate their integration, the [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees \(EQPR\)](#) enabled refugee health professionals to participate in the fight against Covid-19. While it is not a substitute for the necessary professional certificates and licences, it does help the authorities speed things up by providing some of the background needed. Provided at no cost, the assessment is carried out either remotely or on site by professional assessors from national qualification recognition centres that are part of the EQPR project. The assessment is made up of a written questionnaire and, if the application is accepted, it is followed with an interview with two professional assessors. By opting for the inclusion of refugee health workers in the fight against Covid-19, France extended the possibilities of access to the interviews which, at present, are open to all refugees and asylum seekers who have qualifications in the health sector.



REFUGEES PUT THEIR MEDICAL EXPERTISE AT THE SERVICE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN FRANCE

As from the outbreak of the pandemic, refugee health practitioners joined the efforts deployed to save lives. The testimonials of Mohamed and Yasin, two doctors from Libya and Somalia respectively, highlight their readiness to put their expertise to use for the benefit of their host community. Since then, Mohamed left metropolitan France to support health services in French Guyana to respond to Covid-19 pandemic.

"I am ready to help anywhere in France."
— Mohamed

"In challenging times, the language barriers can be quite frustrating. We want to help."
—Yasin

Libya, June 2016. Before he came to France, Mohamed worked as a general practitioner in a Tripoli clinic.
© UNHCR/Mohamed Saleh

SYRIAN RESTAURANT OWNERS SUPPORT COVID-19 FRONT-LINE HEALTH CARE GIVERS

In many French cities, Covid-19 pandemic led refugees to volunteer and act in support of their communities. In Orléans, Sousana and Nabil, a Syrian chef and co-owner of a restaurant, offer a weekly buffet for frontline health workers.

"When you can help others, do not hesitate to do it."
— Nabil



France, 16 June 2020. Nabil and Sousana, owners of Narenj restaurant in Orléans, cooked for the health workers of their city during the lockdown period.

© UNHCR/Kate Thompson Gorry

CSOs INCLUDE THE PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES IN THEIR PROJECTS

Meetings held at the mapping stage of the project made it possible to identify many CSOs whose practices inspired the aforementioned recommendations. CEDRE, an offshoot of Caritas France in Paris and Fondation COS Quancard in Gironde shared their experience on the volunteer involvement of refugees. Also, Clermont-Auvergne University in Clermont-Ferrand opted for a similar approach within the framework of a European project aimed at working on the integration of refugees on campus. Besides these testimonials, which reflect only one part of what is being done to promote the participation of refugees, the rich mobilization of refugees and asylum-seekers can be seen in the practices adopted by many other CSOs.

CEDRE : The mobilization of people in exile must be a priority



CEDRE (Support centre for refugees and asylum seekers), an offshoot of CARITAS in Paris, focuses exclusively on hosting and supporting exiled persons. Since 2017, the centre placed mobilization among its top priorities.

In 2017, CEDRE staff members and volunteers discussed the issue with the people they hosted. That led to the outlining of new perspectives for the centre's actions; "mobilization of exiles" emerged as one of the priorities to focus on. Supporting exiles extended beyond reflection on strategic issues as it proved quite useful at the implementation phase. The participation of uprooted people in the centre's activities came in gradually. A balance had to be struck between availability, wishes and skills of those people and the needs of the centre. Having taken in the life experiences of exiled people, some of the people that were supported by the centre were assigned to reception tasks then to advocacy. "It was very helpful to have people who are able to explain things as they had experienced them in their own lives", says Marion Casanova, support officer at CEDRE.

"that helps us fine-tune our approach and feeds our discussions because a colleague who experienced exile can sometimes explain things better". Experience has shown that

time is of essence if exiled people are to be initiated to the notion of volunteering. CEDRE team recommends that, before anything else, it is important to share the correct definition of what volunteering means; that it is not a paid job and that volunteers should not expect a payment in return. This first step lays the foundation for a fulfilling experience for the volunteer, and prevents suspicions that can arise among other participants that volunteering may be used to derive some personal gain. This would also enable volunteers to explain their role to their own refugee community and thus prevent any misconception which might be traced to an incorrect understanding of what volunteering is all about. The team at CEDRE clearly defines the organization and operation of volunteering assignments: training sessions to be attended, participation in meetings, and the need to respect schedules. Conversely, the team undertakes to support the volunteers in their missions, to train them, to ensure continuity, and to help them solve any problem that might arise in the context of the volunteering task. That also means that volunteering missions may need to be adjusted to the individual profiles of those volunteers. CEDRE team adjusted working times to ensure that volunteers' cultural traditions are being taken into account. To alleviate the financial burden faced by volunteers, the team decided to allocate some financial help to those volunteers who live in very precarious conditions. While the sum of money is to cover transport and meals and is limited to the days when the missions are carried out, it should in no way be construed as a remuneration for the volunteering activities. Also, voluntary activities are carried out in a total volume of two days per week so as to leave free time for refugees to get involved in other CSOs. Designed as a springboard to promote the engagement and integration of exiles in their host community, CEDRE involves the persons in the entire process (from design to implementation) so that the latter may build self-confidence and gain useful experience for their future career path.

Fondation COS Quancard: Working in co-construction with refugee volunteers



Fondation COS QUANCARD manages a CPH (temporary accommodation centre) and a CADA (reception centre for asylum seekers) in Gironde region. By empowering the persons hosted as fully-fledged actors and by valuing their skills, the foundation promotes their integration through peer support and experience sharing.

In 2016, the professional team at COS Quancard started developing a solidarity hub ("Pôle Solidarité") in the association. The hub was created with the help of volunteers, most of them being refugees and asylum seekers who offered their assistance. Today, 40% of the volunteers in the hub are refugees and asylum seekers. Many activities were designed and implemented, in a co-construction spirit, with refugee volunteers. They attend meetings and take part in decision-making. Whether it is editing and translating a newsletter or facilitating information workshops, refugee volunteers play an active role as interpreters, cultural mediators and experts, thus contributing their personal experience. They assisted in the drawing up of a "Refugee guide", with the help of the association, they also lend logistical support when relocating to a new apartment, give language courses to members of their host community and provide professional mentoring for other refugees and asylum seekers.

The capitalization of refugee engagement is placed at the heart of the system. Volunteers are made to sign a "volunteer charter" which contains a set of rules on a wide range of issues, including the duty to respect confidentiality. Certificates are issued for them in recognition of their skills; which may prove useful for their future journey towards integration. Volunteering helps refugees and asylum seekers

to regain their confidence, practice the French language, meet people and offer their contribution. Anne Rouffi, deputy director and head of the Integration Hub, explains why it is important to have exchange mechanisms in place between volunteer refugees and the professional team, without paying attention to the status of the individual. "If indeed many want to contribute, that doesn't happen by chance. We see them as partners, people of experience; we take the necessary time to build trust and we give them the space needed to be creative and to take initiatives", she adds. "They say that the relationship is important to them. That it is important that they are trusted; that helps them take off. For that to happen, they need to be shown respect. It's important for them to be involved, to fit in the hub as partners." In exchange, the association benefits from the skills and outlook of volunteer refugees. They bring in a different way of looking at things and knowledge that serve to further improve the systems already in place.

Her CSO also offers the possibility to help in other volunteering assignments managed by other associations. The association would like to raise awareness on reception issues by sharing their experience and demonstrating that it is perfectly possible to associate refugees at all levels, especially by including them in steering committees. Anne Rouffi reiterates the need to support CSOs in their efforts to receive volunteer refugees: "It should not be superficial, that refugees remain assigned to menial tasks." The point is about sensitizing CSOs and helping them to value and promote the contribution of refugees so that volunteering become mutually enriching.

Clermont Auvergne University: Integration of refugees in the university community



Identifying lecturers among refugees is a key issue, in the words of Cécilia Brassier-Rodrigues, UCA director of communication and information: "They ask themselves many questions about legitimacy: 'Why me? I'm not better; I didn't do anything better than others'. They need that someone approaches them; it's about creating a relationship of trust". The management team at UCA was assisted by local CSOs when searching for candidates. "There's got to be an approach to mobilize them and to convince them there is room for them." Accompanied by referent lecturers, refugee teachers who participated in the project shared their knowledge and expertise with their students.

By roping in lecturers from the refugee community, we give them the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and to promote a different approach leading to a better understanding of the situation of refugees. These lecturers offer novel ideas that benefit the entire teaching staff and, thus, bring diversity to educational programmes. This is also an opportunity to build bridges between their culture and the culture of their host community, to facilitate their integration and to foster mutual understanding. "They want to prove their worth to the French society, that they can do things, that they are eager to integrate and to show other refugees that it is possible to integrate in France. They want to share their testimonial with both audiences and to be of service to others", adds Cécilia Brassier-Rodrigues. This project showcases the critical role that refugees play in intercultural communication and highlights the importance of an overarching approach that involves the entire community in support of the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

Over the last two years, Clermont-Auvergne University (UCA) spared no effort in promoting the integration of refugees and Ruffy intercultural dialogue through its [projet "coLAB - Un laboratoire pour de nouvelles formes de collaboration"](#). This Europe-wide project aims at promoting encounters and exchanges between refugees and host communities within academic institutions in order to foster a better understanding of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers and to develop inclusive practices on campus.

In 2018, Clermont-Auvergne University joined other European universities such as Haute Ecole Galilée and IHECS Academy (Belgium), LUMSA (Italy) and the London University of Arts (UK) on the coLAB project. Implemented as part of the [programme "Faisons vivre une culture démocratique et inclusive à l'école \(DISCO\)"](#), which was designed by the European Union and the Council of Europe, this project aims at opening the doors of universities to refugees as lecturing staff.

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Definitions and Key Resources

COMMUNICATION WITH UPROOTED COMMUNITIES : A KEY ELEMENT IN PROTECTION

For UNHCR it is of paramount importance to work in partnership with the people under their care in all stages of their programmes, from design to implementation. It is about recognizing the resilience, abilities, skills and resources of refugees and asylum seekers and to leverage them to provide protection and solutions, and also to support the specific objectives of the community. This approach is not limited to a single function or a specific area of work; it must inform and guide all the staff at UNHCR and their partners in their work with refugees and asylum seekers. For this approach to succeed, it is important to understand and take into account the political context, the host community, gender-based roles, community dynamics as well as protection-related risks, concerns and priorities. Furthermore, UNHCR need to recognize their facilitating role, their limited capacities and resources, the temporary nature of their presence as well as the long-term impact of their interventions. Working with communities will help these to prevent social problems and to directly handle such problems when they occur, rather than waiting for and expecting external actors to come in and shoulder responsibilities. This is an approach that supports refugees and asylum seekers in reinstating cultural models that are familiar to them as well as supportive structures. Indeed, the aim is to strengthen the dignity and self-esteem of uprooted people, and to empower all actors, so as to work together to help members of the community to exercise and enjoy their human rights.¹⁷

FOR MORE

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TAKING INTO ACCOUNT AGE, GENDER AND DIVERSITY CRITERIA

FOR MORE

UNHCR, Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, 2018; See :
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TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Transparency refers to the "provision of accessible and relevant information to stakeholders and enabling them to assess procedures, structures and organizational processes." That requires that refugees and their representatives are informed about the mandate, policies and capacities of UNHCR and be open about what the Organization can contribute bearing in mind their potentially-limited human and material resources. That would enable refugees to make informed decisions on their priorities and the outcomes they could reasonably expect. Their participation must not be limited to some aspects only; it must be guaranteed throughout the entire process.

Accountability is a process by means of which an organization commits to meet the needs of different stakeholders and to balance them out, in all its decision-making processes and activities. It also refers to the process that leads to the fulfilment of that commitment. Example: when providing protection, UNHCR personnel and their partners need to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers can participate actively, that they are informed about protection-related risks, and can follow the progress achieved in addressing such risks. Accountability infers an awareness as to the rights and duties of everyone, and building the capacities of representatives to discharge their functions (e.g.: community representatives, local and national authorities, UNHCR personnel and their partners).¹⁸

FOR MORE

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