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European Policy
DIALOGUE FORUM

Helping Migrants and Refugees Volunteer

Executive Summary

Volunteering can aid the integration of migrants and refugees in many ways. It can open doors to education and employment, which is important for economic integration, and it can lead to new friendships that are important for well-being and social integration. Importantly, volunteering also offers opportunities for local people to get to know the new members of their community through, among other things, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, fostering new relationships and local cohesion.

Despite the individual and societal benefits, there are currently many individual, organizational and systemic barriers hindering the participation of migrants in volunteering in their local communities. These include little appreciation of the importance of volunteering, limited knowledge about local volunteering opportunities and a lack of contact between migrants and local groups and organizations.

Overcoming these barriers requires efforts from a variety of actors. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue are among the tools that some of these actors are using. It helps stakeholders explore each other's opinions and experiences of volunteering and reduces misunderstandings and prejudices, facilitating the increase and strengthening of migrants' participation in volunteering.

Because of their position and influence over how public policymaking processes are carried out and who is involved in them, local and national policymakers are among the most important actors when it comes to ensuring better participation. In addition, because of their resources and influence at the local and national levels, religious organizations, congregations and leaders are also in important positions to help facilitate these changes.

The Network for Dialogue
POLICY BRIEF #4

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The Network for Dialogue

Empowering Interreligious and Intercultural
Action for the Social Inclusion of Refugees
and Migrants.



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Key Recommendations:

— National policymakers should:

- Recognise volunteering as an asset contributing to refugees and migrants obtaining citizenship.
- Embed volunteering in integration policies and action plans.
- Offer grants to organizations and groups that offer volunteering opportunities for migrants.

— Local policymakers must:

- Value the benefits of volunteering for integration and social cohesion and the skills, experiences and ideas migrants bring to their community.
- Link migrants with suitable volunteering opportunities that are mutually beneficial and that value all volunteers.
- Fund local migrants' and refugees' volunteering opportunities.

— Religious organizations, congregations and leaders must:

- Raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering.
- Encourage volunteering organizations and groups to address the needs of all members of their community, including migrants.
- Encourage their own congregations, leaderships, organizations and networks to explore, promote and value diversity within their own volunteering opportunities and build new relationships.

— All policymakers and religious organizations, congregations and leaders should:

- Use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations with stakeholders.

This policy brief was developed for and further discussed at the 3rd European Policy Dialogue Forum on Refugees and Migrants in Lisbon, Portugal, on 19-21 October 2021, organised by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), the Network for Dialogue and the European Council of Religious Leader/Religions for Peace Europe (ECRL/RfP), and supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

Introduction

The participation of migrants in volunteering in their local community

Though the percentage of people that volunteer varies across Europe, it is recognised that by sharing their skills and expertise, volunteers make valuable contributions to their local communities¹. It is important to highlight that many refugees and migrants² carry out vital and often unrecognised volunteering activities within their own religious or ethnic groups, but this brief focuses on the volunteering refugees and migrants do in organizations and groups with people from other religions or ethnicities in the local community. The work migrants carry out while doing this kind of volunteering has both a direct impact (for example, raising funds or cleaning a local beach) as well as a more indirect impact as research has shown that it aids the integration process and ultimately contributes to community cohesion³. However, migrants currently face many barriers to volunteering in their host communities and a wide range of approaches and actors need to be involved to overcome these barriers. Policymakers can help increase the participation of migrants in volunteering because some of these barriers are government related. Religious organizations, congregations and leaders play an important role in breaking down barriers to volunteering and intercultural and interreligious dialogue can be used to facilitate these changes.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:

Goda Grannar in Stockholm

*Goda Grannar*⁴ is an interfaith integration project that was set up by the local Swedish church in Södermalm, Stockholm's Mosque and Islamic Relief Sverige, in 2015. The project has provided a range of services to thousands of migrants, aiding their integration into the local community⁵. One participant described how volunteers from

1 Some of the important benefits of volunteering are identified in this study: Mateiu-Vescan, R., Ionescu, T. & Opre, A. Reconsidering Volunteering: Individual Change as a Result of Doing Good for Others. *Voluntas* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00247-0>

2 This report includes refugees in the category of migrants for the sake of simplicity. Migrants and refugees may have different legal statuses at various stages that may hinder their ability to work for pay or to volunteer.

3 Banulescu-Bogdan, N. (2020) Beyond Work: Reducing Social Isolation for Refugee Women and Other Marginalised Newcomers. Transatlantic Council on Migration. https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/TCM-Social-Isolation_FINALWEB.pdf

4 <http://www.goda-grannar.se/>

5 Lyck-Bowen, M. (2019) A Multireligious Approach to the Integration of Migrants in Europe: An Examination of Migrants' Views on and Experiences of Taking Part in Multireligious Integration Projects, *Border Crossing*. London, UK, 9(2), pp. 79–96. <https://journals.tplondon.com/index.php/bc/article/view/823>

migrant backgrounds improve the quality of the services, *“There are also translators who help ... you ... feel comfortable, that people for example, it is like you know them from before. It is not like you go down and meet a person and feel like you are a stranger, no. It is like you are one of them, they are so nice and wonderful”*.⁶ Another refugee also shared that volunteering in Goda Grannar’s café had helped her make new friends in the local community and hence aided her integration⁷.

The project leader, Fredrika Gårdfeldt, echoed these observations, *“We always say that we don’t help others we help each other ... cooperation is important. Those volunteers that have another background than me, they have other competencies, they speak other languages, they know how it is coming to a new country, they know how Sweden works and they can share that with others in their own language”*.⁸

The former project leader, Kikki Högdahl, also highlighted how they are using interreligious dialogue to build bridges between migrants and local volunteers, *“There are many things we have learnt about each other; we have taught each other what Christmas means and what Eid means and about what happens in the mosque. We also talk about family issues”*.⁹

Current challenges to the participation of migrants in volunteering in their local communities

The barriers to volunteering that migrants face include:

INDIVIDUAL:

- Needing to prioritise other responsibilities such as paid work, education and caring for family members or being unable to pay expenses linked with volunteering such as transportation costs.
- Lack of familiarity with, and experience in, volunteering or lack of confidence and perceived lack of required language skills, education and other skills. There is no network of people to introduce migrants/refugees to the idea of volunteering, including what it requires and connecting them to a suitable organization/group.
- For asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants, there is uncertainty and anxiety about their future in these local communities, and fear that engagement will result in deportation.

6 Interview with refugees and migrants taking part in Goda Grannar’s activity, Autumn 2018.

7 Interview with refugees and migrants taking part in Goda Grannar’s activity, Autumn 2018.

8 Interview with Fredrika Gårdfeldt, July 2021.

9 Interview with Kikki Högdahl, December 2016.

ORGANIZATIONAL:

- Lack of contact to, or knowledge about, the skills and experiences of local migrants, lack of intercultural and interreligious competencies, and lack of targeted outreach programmes enabling contact.
- Prejudice and resistance to changing the composition of the membership of the organization and the way it is running. This includes not appreciating the skills, experiences and ideas migrants bring, a lack of opportunities for migrants to further develop their skills and influence volunteering activities and fearing the consequences of involving asylum seekers and migrants without legal status.
- No childcare facilities and consideration of gender roles (concerning issues such as travelling alone on public transportation, working in mixed gender environments etc.) hindering the involvement of migrant and refugee women.

SYSTEMIC:

- Legal barriers making it cumbersome for some groups of migrants (such as asylum seekers or migrants who receive social benefits) to volunteer. As an example, in the Netherlands, though asylum seekers are allowed to do voluntary work, the organization the asylum seeker wants to volunteer for must obtain a volunteer declaration form from the Dutch Employees Insurance Agency and the work must be of social value, non-profit and unpaid¹⁰.
- Lack of acknowledgement of the important role volunteering can play in integration, including: lack of a developed integration policy that embeds volunteering with incentive for organizations to engage volunteers; lack of a coordinated approach to encourage volunteering; and a lack of a targeted volunteering infrastructure including information about where and how to participate.

“Being a Peer Educator has helped me grow stronger inside, use my skills and make new friends from different backgrounds and cultures”.

”

Ugandan refugee volunteering for the British Red Cross' Peer Educator scheme.¹¹

10 Dutch Council for Refugees (2021): Country Report: Access to the labour market. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/netherlands/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-labour-market/#_ftn5

11 In this project migrants help and support other migrants and refugees who have just arrived in their host communities. Supporting refugees and asylum seekers to feel at home the UK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vMhbhPn8Hw>

The importance of the participation of migrants in volunteering in their local community

The importance of volunteering for integration and social cohesion lies in the significance of social capital, which can be defined as the sum of ties among citizens, both the informal and formal interpersonal networks they create, and the shared feelings of social belonging, trust and reciprocity. There are two kinds of social capital – “bonding”, which refers to building relationships between the migrant or refugee and other people from the same religious or ethnic group and “bridging”, which refers to building relationships between the migrant and the host community. Bridging is particularly important because it can lead to new opportunities such as education and employment and it can aid social inclusion and cohesion, since local people and migrants get to know each other which can counter negative narratives and stereotypes. Regardless of whether migrants volunteer with members of their own group or the wider host community, volunteering also offers migrants opportunities to further develop their skills and gain experience to help them gain employment.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:

SINGA

SINGA,¹² which means “connections”, started as a citizen movement in France but now operates in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium and the UK. SINGA aims to create opportunities and spaces where refugees, migrants and people from the local host community can meet and cooperate on issues that matter to them to improve awareness, change perceptions, encourage dialogue and foster cultural enrichment. SINGA’s volunteering activities focus on a wide range of issues including sports, music, arts, languages and food. SINGA aims to enable refugees and migrants to participate actively in society, not just as participants but as co-creators of local projects. SINGA’s projects strive to share leadership and they do not distinguish between volunteers and beneficiaries, focusing instead on all participants being members of the local community and thereby avoiding pitching migrants as “them” and the local community as “us”. In Belgium, SINGA volunteers have organised more than 1,300 events, where participants have been able to gain new skills and get to know each other¹³.

11 In this project migrants help and support other migrants and refugees who have just arrived in their host communities. Supporting refugees and asylum seekers to feel at home the UK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vMhbbPn8Hw>

12 <https://singafrance.com/>

13 <https://en.singa-belgium.org/activites>

Recommendations

Across Europe, involvement in volunteering differs in terms of the importance local people place on being involved and the degree to which they engage in more informal activities in their local communities or more formal activities through organizations and groups. Consequently, the degree to which migrants can volunteer in their host communities also varies. It is not therefore possible to come up with one approach or model that can be applied locally or nationally to increase and strengthen participation. However, it is possible to identify some recommendations that policymakers and religious organizations should consider.

How policymakers at the national level can help increase and strengthen the participation of migrants in volunteering in their host community:



Legal provisions: national policymakers should ensure that migrants, regardless of their status or social situation, have the same legal right to volunteer in their local community as citizens. National policymakers should also consider volunteering as an asset, helping migrants obtain citizenship.



Integration policies: national policymakers should include migrants and refugees in relevant policymaking processes. They should also ensure that volunteering is recognised, valued and embedded in relevant integration policies and action plans supporting the integration of migrants and refugees from the moment they arrive. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue should be used by all stakeholders to explore how this can be done most effectively considering the national and local context.



Funding: national policymakers should set up governmental programmes that offer grants to organizations and groups that create volunteering opportunities for migrants. This programme should include cultural training for both volunteers and host institutions¹⁴.

How policymakers at the local level can help increase and strengthen the participation of migrants in volunteering in their host community:



Valuing volunteering: local policymakers should recognise and value the benefits of volunteering for integration and social cohesion and the skills, experiences and ideas that migrants bring to their communities that can enhance volunteering.

14 An example of programming in this respect includes SINGA, <https://singafrance.com/>

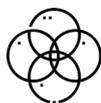


Encouraging and supporting volunteering: local policymakers should use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to encourage all people in local communities, including migrants, to volunteer. This can include activities such as designing and implementing local campaigns aiming at highlighting the many benefits of volunteering and setting up mentoring schemes for new volunteers. Local policymakers should also develop programmes aimed at linking migrants with suitable volunteering opportunities that are mutually beneficial and where all participants are valued and involved in co-creating activities. Local policymakers should also help ensure that these volunteering opportunities facilitate intercultural and interreligious dialogue among migrants and other members of their host communities. Finally, local policymakers should help fund local volunteering organizations and groups.

How religious organizations can increase participation of migrants in volunteering:



Encouraging and supporting volunteering: religious organizations should raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering, including the spiritual rewards supported by religious teaching and intercultural and interreligious dialogue, to encourage migrants to volunteer in their host communities. Religious organizations should also use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to help connect migrants with volunteering opportunities, and act as mentors if needed, encouraging migrants with volunteering experience to become mentors.



Encouraging people to value diversity: religious organizations should encourage volunteering organizations to address the needs of all members of their communities, including migrants. They should also encourage their own congregations, leadership, organizations and networks, as well as other local groups, to use dialogue to explore, promote and value diversity within their groups and build new relationships. This should include valuing the skills, experiences and ideas of migrants and consider them as equitable partners and co-creators of volunteering projects. They should also use intercultural and interreligious training and dialogue to help make all stakeholders in volunteering conscious about the needs of migrants.

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Also available from the Network for Dialogue:

- **Policy Brief #1:** Supporting Teachers in the Use of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Inclusive Education for Refugees and Migrants
- **Policy Brief #2:** Building Trust Through Dialogue in Local Communities: A Key Ingredient for Social Cohesion
- **Policy Brief #3:** Reshaping Narratives on Migration Through Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue
- **Policy Brief #5:** Engaging Migrant and Refugee-led Organizations in Policymaking in Europe
- **Policy Brief #6:** Ensuring Migrant and Refugee Children's Access to Formal Education in Europe
- **Overview Document #1:** Overview Document on Policy Brief #4, #5 and #6



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