



ASYLUM SEEKERS AND VOLUNTEERING IN EUROPE:

A transnational report based on experiences in Hungary, France and England

Executive summary

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From 2004 to the end of 2007, the EXCHANGES partnership brought together agencies in Hungary, France and England, to work on a range of issues relating to the social and economic integration of asylum seekers.

Volunteering was a key area of work for the EXCHANGES partnership. The following is a short summary of the overall programme, and the findings and recommendations of the EXCHANGES report “Asylum Seekers and Volunteering in Europe: a transnational report based on experiences in Hungary, France and England”.

The report sets out the wide range of initiatives which took place through EXCHANGES with regard to volunteering. Copies of the full report (in English only) are available from Islington Training Network (address on page 3), or can be downloaded from: www.itn.org.uk/easi.html. Further copies of this summary are also available on the website, in English, French and Hungarian.

The EXCHANGES partnership

‘EXCHANGES’ was an EQUAL Theme I transnational partnership involving three national development partnerships (DPs):

- the Formation, Accueil des Demandeurs d’Asile et Réfugiés (FAAR) DP in France
- the Empowering Asylum Seekers to Integrate (EASI) DP in England:
- the ESÉLY (‘Chance’) DP in Hungary (Munkaeropiaci orientáció menedékkéroknek)

The EQUAL Programme was a European Social Fund Community Initiative which operated across all the Member States of the European Union, aiming to to develop and test new ways of challenging discrimination and inequalities in the labour market.

The EXCHANGES partnership focussed on three key issues:

- orientation and preparation for the labour market
- capacity building for refugee community organisations (RCOs)
- language teaching and training

The issues of diversity, equality and empowerment cut across all areas of work. Each DP led on a particular issue: work on volunteering was led by the EASI DP, co-ordinated by Islington Training Network.



Executive summary

Partners developed numerous initiatives involving and promoting volunteering. In addition, there were transnational visits and conferences to enable partners to exchange ideas and experiences, and explore issues in more depth. Volunteering was addressed at a three day transnational event in November 2005 in London (held with support from the Year of the Volunteer 2005) and through subsequent meetings and exchanges in Hungary, France and England until the end of 2007.

The focus on volunteering

Volunteering was prioritised for a number of reasons. Volunteering has been shown to bring many benefits to individuals, organisations and the wider communities and client groups involved. In addition, and of great concern to the EXCHANGES partnership, access to employment for most asylum seekers is not permitted in Hungary, France or the UK.

Four key areas were identified with regard to volunteering and asylum seekers:

- volunteering and empowerment
- training and preparation of volunteers
- volunteering for work experience
- capacity building for refugee community organisations (RCOs) and others, through volunteering

Patterns of volunteering, and the social, political and cultural context, vary in each country. This enriched the experience of EXCHANGES partners, who were able to learn from the variety of approaches in each country.

Practical experience and good practice

The report “Asylum Seekers and Volunteering in Europe” (Islington Training Network, 2007) provides short accounts of a wide range of practical initiatives. These include Chechen community development in Paris; a mentoring programme in the north of England; volunteering in a Regional Labour Centre in Hungary; volunteering and learning English at a city farm in London; volunteering with a theatre group in France; the involvement of asylum seekers in a reception camp in Hungary; helping RCOs with volunteer management issues in Yorkshire.

One important experience involved the development of the EASI Advisory Group. This was made up of 12 asylum seekers, and was organised by the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit, London Metropolitan University. A primary aim was to involve Advisory Group members (who are or have been asylum seekers) in the design of services among EASI partners, so that services were appropriately targeted to meet the needs of the users. The group was also set up to empower the asylum seekers involved. This innovative initiative was central to the development of good practice in the partnership as a whole, and enabled asylum seekers to represent the EASI DP on other key policy bodies.

The findings from experiences and activities in the three countries provide guidelines for good practice (set out in Section 5 of the report).



Executive summary

Recommendations

Based on the wide range of practical experience, and on numerous other policy meetings, transnational visits and exchanges, the EXCHANGES partners have drawn up eleven recommendations which they see as key to good practice at local, national and European level. These are listed in full in Section 5.7 of the report. Four recommendations stand out:

- The EU and national governments should provide an enabling legal framework for asylum seeker volunteering. This means that volunteering should not be discouraged by cuts in social benefits for those who volunteer, or barred because of misconceptions that it is unpaid work. The right of all volunteers, including asylum seekers, to be reimbursed for volunteering expenses should be upheld.
- Asylum seekers should be eligible for vocational training and accredited learning that is part of their volunteering. EXCHANGES partners propose that a new Article be introduced within a revised EU Reception Directive to ensure that member states are obliged to assist asylum seekers with the acquisition of language skills.
- Intermediary organisations, such as volunteering centres and refugee agencies, play a key role in facilitating the involvement of asylum seekers in organisations outside the refugee sector. This role should be strengthened and properly resourced to ensure that more mainstream organisations offer worthwhile volunteering opportunities to asylum seekers.
- Non-government agencies should do more to assist the capacity building of refugee community organisations, including the provision of help with funding applications, inclusion in networks and policy-making forums, and the provision of training and support with regard to volunteer management. This should include raising their awareness of the benefits of involving asylum seekers as volunteers, as a means of building organisational capacity.

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