



ASYLUM SEEKERS AND VOLUNTEERING IN EUROPE:

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



**“The meaning of life nearly disappeared. I saw the world in grey...
It seemed that colours had vanished. I had to work with people, to
help people, to meet new persons, to feel that my culture and my
past were not dead. I was looking for the colours I had lost.”**

Volunteer with a refugee community organisation



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Islington Training Network
3 Highbury Crescent
London N5 1RN
UK

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EASI: www.itn.org.uk/easi.html

Cimade: www.cimade.org

Menedék: www.menedek.hu

A separate executive summary is available in English, French and Hungarian. This can also be downloaded from the websites listed above.

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Abbreviations

CAFDA	Coordination pour l'Accueil des Familles de Demandeurs d'Asile
CASP	Centre d'Action Sociale Protestant
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CIMADE	Service Oecumenique d'Entraide
DP	Development Partnership
EASI	Empowering Asylum Seekers to Integrate
EEA	European Economic Area
ESELY	Munkaer Piaci Orientáció Menedékkér Knek
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EU	European Union
FAAR	Formation, Accueil des Demandeurs d'Asile et Refugies
LORECA	London Refugee Economic Action
MP	Member of Parliament (UK)
NGO	non governmental organisation
RAGU	Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit
RCO	refugee community organisation
RETAS	Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service
TCA	Transnational Cooperation Agreement



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

This report summarises the learning of the partners in Hungary, France and England that came together to form the EXCHANGES partnership, from 2004 to the end of 2007. The work of EXCHANGES focussed on the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers. This report sets out the wide range of initiatives which took place with regard to volunteering.

The EXCHANGES partnership

'EXCHANGES' was an EQUAL Theme I transnational partnership involving three national development partnerships (DPs): the FAAR DP in France, the EASI DP in England and the ESÉLY DP in Hungary.

The 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.

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.



Executive summary

Practical experience and good practice

The report 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).

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 European, national and local level. These are listed in full in Section 5.7. 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 misperceptions 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 to build organisational capacity.

Présentation synthétique

Ce rapport présente la synthèse des travaux des projets partenaires de Hongrie, de France et d'Angleterre qui se sont réunis pour former le partenariat EXCHANGES, de 2004 à 2007. Le travail du partenariat EXCHANGES s'est concentré sur l'insertion sociale et professionnelle des demandeurs d'asile. Ce rapport expose l'ensemble des actions développées sur la question du bénévolat.

Le partenariat EXCHANGES

« EXCHANGES » est un partenariat transnational du programme EQUAL (Theme I) regroupant trois partenariats nationaux : le partenariat FAAR en France, le partenariat EASI en Angleterre et le partenariat ESÉLY en Hongrie.

Le partenariat transnational a ciblé trois questions essentielles :

- l'orientation et la préparation au marché du travail
- l'aide au développement associatif des réfugiés
- l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de la langue

Les questions de diversité, d'égalité et d'autonomisation des personnes ont croisé tous les domaines de réflexions et d'actions du partenariat transnational. Chaque partenaire a été responsable d'une question particulière : le travail sur le bénévolat a été mené par le partenariat EASI et coordonné par « Islington Training Network ».

Les partenaires ont développé de nombreuses actions visant à favoriser le bénévolat. Des séminaires de travail et des conférences transnationales ont également eu lieu afin de permettre d'échanger les idées, les expériences et d'approfondir les questions traitées. La question du bénévolat a été abordée lors d'un événement transnational de trois jours en novembre 2005 à Londres (organisé avec le soutien du programme « Année du bénévolat 2005 » en Angleterre) et par les réunions et les échanges qui ont suivi en Hongrie, en France et en Angleterre jusqu'à la fin de 2007.

L'accent sur le bénévolat

Le bénévolat a été mis en avant pour plusieurs raisons. Il s'est avéré qu'il apportait de nombreux avantages aux personnes impliquées dans un travail bénévole, aux organismes et associations, aux groupes d'utilisateurs concernés et à la société dans son ensemble. Ceci alors que l'accès à l'emploi n'est pas autorisé en Hongrie, en France ou au Royaume-Uni pour la plupart des demandeurs d'asile, ce qui est une grande préoccupation pour le partenariat EXCHANGES.

Quatre domaines essentiels ont été identifiés sur le bénévolat et les demandeurs d'asile :

- bénévolat et autonomisation des personnes
- formation des bénévoles
- le bénévolat comme expérience professionnelle
- l'aide au développement associatif des réfugiés et autres groupes par le bénévolat



Présentation synthétique

Les modèles de bénévolat et le contexte social, politique et culturel varient selon chaque pays. Ceci a enrichi l'expérience des partenaires d'EXCHANGES, qui ont pu apprendre les uns des autres, à partir des diverses approches de chaque pays.

Expériences et pratiques pertinentes

Le rapport fournit un bref compte-rendu d'un ensemble d'actions pratiques. Celles-ci incluent l'aide à l'organisation de la communauté tchétchène à Paris; un programme de parrainage dans le nord de l'Angleterre; le bénévolat dans un centre de travail régional en Hongrie; le bénévolat et l'apprentissage de l'anglais dans une ferme urbaine de Londres; le bénévolat avec une compagnie de théâtre en France; la participation des demandeurs d'asile dans un camp de réception en Hongrie; l'aide des organisations de réfugiés sur les problèmes de gestion des bénévoles dans le Yorkshire, en Angleterre.

Une expérience d'importance a concerné la mise en place du groupe consultatif au sein du partenariat EASI. Il était composé de 12 demandeurs d'asile et a été organisé par l'organisme « Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit » de l'université « London Metropolitan University ». L'un des objectifs principaux était de faire participer les membres du groupe consultatif (qui étaient ou avaient été des demandeurs d'asile) à la conception des activités proposées par les membres du partenariat EASI, afin que ces activités répondent de manière ciblée aux besoins des personnes concernées. Le groupe a été également constitué pour permettre aux demandeurs d'asile de s'autonomiser dans ce processus de réflexion et de prise de décision. Cette initiative innovante a été au cœur de la mise en place de pratiques pertinentes pour l'ensemble du partenariat et a permis aux demandeurs d'asile de représenter le partenariat EASI dans d'autres instances décisionnaires d'importance.

Les résultats issus des expériences et des activités dans les trois pays proposent des démarches à suivre pour des pratiques pertinentes impliquant le recours au bénévolat (voir section 5).

Recommandations

En se basant sur l'ensemble des expériences pratiques et des nombreuses réunions, visites et échanges transnationaux, les partenaires d'EXCHANGES ont élaboré onze recommandations qu'ils considèrent comme l'essentiel des pratiques pertinentes à l'échelon européen, national et local. Elles sont répertoriées dans la section 5.7. Quatre recommandations se distinguent :

- L'UE et les gouvernements nationaux doivent fournir un cadre légal permettant le bénévolat des demandeurs d'asile. Ceci signifie que le bénévolat ne doit pas être découragé par des réductions des prestations sociales des bénévoles, ou par des empêchements dus à la perception erronée d'un travail non payé. Le droit de tous les bénévoles, y compris les demandeurs d'asile, d'être remboursé de ses dépenses de bénévolat doit être confirmé.
- Les demandeurs d'asile devraient avoir accès à la formation professionnelle et à l'apprentissage qui s'y rapporte dans le cadre de leur bénévolat. Les partenaires d'EXCHANGES proposent qu'un nouvel article soit introduit dans la version révisée de la Directive sur l'accueil de l'UE afin de garantir que les états membres soient mis en demeure d'aider les demandeurs d'asile à acquérir la connaissance de la langue.

Présentation synthétique

- Les organisations intermédiaires, telles que les centres de bénévolat et les organisations de réfugiés, jouent un rôle clé en rendant possible la participation des demandeurs d'asile à des organismes autres que ceux du « secteur réfugié ». Ce rôle doit être renforcé et correctement financé afin de garantir que d'autres organismes du droit commun ouvertes à tout public offrent des opportunités de bénévolat intéressantes aux demandeurs d'asile.
- Les associations et les organisations non gouvernementales doivent renforcer leur aide au développement associatif des réfugiés, notamment au niveau des demandes de financement, de l'entrée dans des réseaux et des forums de discussion décisionnaires sur le plan politique, de l'offre de formation et d'un appui en matière de gestion des bénévoles. Cette aide devrait s'accompagner d'une prise de conscience grandissante au niveau des organisations de réfugiés des avantages à tirer de l'implication des demandeurs d'asile en tant que bénévoles, comme moyen de développer et construire leur capacité structurelle.

Vezetői összefoglaló

Vezetői összefoglaló

Az EXCHANGES partnerség magyar, francia és angol fejlesztési partnerségek 2004 és 2007 közötti együttműködése. Az EXCHANGES munkája a menedékkérők szociális és szakképzési integrációjára összpontosított. Ez a jelentés a közös munka során leszárt tapasztalatokat foglalja össze.

Az EXCHANGES partnerség

Az "EXCHANGES" az EQUAL I. program keretén belül létrejött nemzetközi partnerség volt, amelyben három nemzeti fejlesztési partnerség (FP, angolul: DP) vett részt: a FAAR DP Franciaországban, az EASI DP Angliában és az ESÉLY FP Magyarországon.

A partnerség három fő kérdésre összpontosított figyelmet:

- orientáció és felkészítés a munkaerőpiacra
- kapacitás-építés a menekültügyi közösségi szervezetek (RCO) számára
- nyelvtanítás és képzés

A sokféleség, az esélyegyenlőség és a jogegyenlőség jelenik meg a munka minden területén. Mindegyik fejlesztési partnerség egy konkrét kérdéssel foglalkozott: az önkéntes munkát az EASI DP vezette, az Islington Training Network koordinálta.

A partnerek számos újítást fejlesztettek ki az önkéntes munka végzése és előmozdítása céljából. Ezen kívül nemzetközi látogatásokra és konferenciákra került sor, hogy a partnerek kicserélhessék elgondolásaikat és tapasztalataikat, és mélyrehatóbban vizsgálhassák a kérdéseket. Az önkéntes munka volt a témája egy háromnapos nemzetközi rendezvénynek Londonban 2005. novemberében (amely megrendezését a „Year of the Volunteer 2005” is támogatta), és 2007. végéig számos további találkozót tartottak Magyarországon, Franciaországban és Angliában tapasztalatcsere céljából.



Vezetői összefoglaló

A figyelem középpontjában az önkéntes munka

Az önkéntes munka számos okból került a figyelem homlokterébe. Kimutatták, hogy az önkéntes munka milyen sok előnnyel jár az egyén, a szervezetek és a szélesebb közösségek, valamint az érintett ügyfél-csoportok számára. Ráadásul – és ez nagyon fontos szempont az EXCHANGES partnerség számára – a menedékkérők zöme esetében a munkavállalás nem lehetséges Magyarországon, Franciaországban vagy Angliában.

Négy fő területet határoztak meg az önkéntes munka és a menedékkérők tekintetében:

- önkéntes munka és önerősítés
- az önkéntesek képzése és felkészítése
- önkéntes munka a munkatapasztalatok megszerzéséért
- kapacitás-építés a menekültügyi közösségi szervezetek (RCO) és mások számára az önkéntes munka révén

Az önkéntes munka mintái, és a szociális, politikai és kulturális háttér országonként változó. Ezt gazdagítják az EXCHANGES partnerek tapasztalatai, akik az egyes országokban alkalmazott eltérő módszerekből vontak le a tanulságokat.

Gyakorlati tapasztalat és jó gyakorlat

A jelentés röviden összefoglalja a gyakorlati kezdeményezések széles körét. Ide tartozik a csecsen közösség fejlődése Párizsban; mentori program Anglia északi részén; önkéntesek egy magyarországi regionális munkaügyi központban; önkéntesek és angol nyelvtanulás Londonban, egy városi gazdaságban; önkéntesek egy franciaországi színházi társulatnál; menedékkérők bevonódása egy magyarországi befogadó állomás közösségi életének kialakításába; a menekültügyi közösségi szervezetek segítése az önkéntesek irányításának kérdéseiben Yorkshire-ben.

Az egyik fontos tapasztalat a 12 menedékkérőből alakult EASI Tanácsadó Csoport fejlesztése volt, melyet a London Metropolitan Egyetem Menekültügyi Értékelési és Irányítási Egysége szervezett meg. Az elsődleges cél az volt, hogy bevonják a Tanácsadó Csoport tagjait (akik menedékkérők, vagy korábban azok voltak) az EASI partnerek körében nyújtható szolgáltatások tervezésébe, hogy e szolgáltatások megfelelően irányuljanak a felhasználók szükségleteinek kielégítésére. A tevékenységbe bevont menedékkérők támogatása szintén a csoport feladatai közé tartozott. Ez az innovatív kezdeményezés központi szerepet játszott az egész partnerségben a jó gyakorlat kialakításában, és képessé tette a menedékkérőket, hogy képviseljék az EASI DP-t egyéb fontos politikai szervek előtt.

A három országban a tapasztalatok és tevékenységek alapján levont megállapítások irányt mutatnak a jó gyakorlat felé (ld. a jelentés 5. pontjában).

Ajánlások

A széles körű gyakorlati tapasztalatok és egyéb politikai ülések, nemzetközi látogatások és véleménycserék alapján az EXCHANGES partnerek tizenegy ajánlást dolgoztak ki, amelyeket az európai, nemzeti és helyi szintű jó gyakorlathoz kulcsfontosságúnak tekintenek. Ezek teljes felsorolását ld. az 5.7. pontban. Négy ajánlás a következőket mondja ki:

Vezetői összefoglaló

- Az EU és a nemzeti kormányoknak megfelelő jogi kereteket kellene biztosítaniuk az önkéntesként tevékenykedő menedékkérők számára. Ez azt jelenti, hogy az önkénteseket ne tántorítsák el az önkéntesek szociális juttatásainak megnyirbálásával, vagy ne tiltsák el őket azon téves felfogás alapján, hogy ez nem fizetett munka. Támogatni kell minden önkéntes – beleértve a menedékkérőket is – azon jogát, hogy az önkéntes munka során felmerült költségeiket megtérítsék.
- A menedékkérők jogosultak kell, hogy legyenek a szakképzésre és az akkreditált képzésre az önkéntes munkájukkal összefüggésben. Az EXCHANGES partnerek javasolják, hogy egy új cikk kerüljön felvételre az EU felülvizsgált befogadási irányelvébe annak biztosítása céljából, hogy a tagállamok kötelesek legyenek támogatni a menedékeseket a nyelvi jártasságok megszerzésében.
- A közvetítő szervezetek, például az önkéntes munkaügyi központok és a menekültügyi hivatalok, játsszanak döntő szerepet a menedékkérők menekültügyi szektoron kívüli szervezetekbe való bevonásának előmozdításában. Ezt a szerepet erősíteni kell, és megfelelő forrásokat kell biztosítani hozzá annak érdekében, hogy az ilyen feladatot alaptevékenységként kifejtő szervezetek valódi önkéntességi lehetőségeket ajánljanak a menedékkérők részére.
- A nem-állami szervezetek tegyenek többet a menekültügyi közösségi szervezetek kapacitás-építésének előmozdítása érdekében, beleértve a segítségnyújtást pénzalapok rendelkezésre bocsátásával, bevonást a hálózatokba és a politikai döntéshozatali fórumokba, képzés biztosítását és támogatás nyújtását az önkéntes tevékenység irányításához. Ez annak tudatosítását is jelentené, hogy előnyökkel jár a szervezeti kapacitás építésében a menedékkérők önkéntesként való bevonása.



2. BACKGROUND

2. Background

This report summarises the learning of the partners in Hungary, France and England that came together to form the EXCHANGES partnership, from 2004 to the end of 2007. This section provides background on the EXCHANGES partnership and on the EQUAL Programme, of which it was a part.

2.1 The EQUAL Programme

The EQUAL Programme was a European Social Fund (ESF) Community Initiative which operated across all the Member States of the European Union from 2001 to the end of 2007. The Programme aimed to develop and test new ways of challenging discrimination and inequalities in the labour market, both for those in work and for those seeking work.

EQUAL was based on a partnership approach, enabling organisations with common interests and different expertise to work collaboratively at both national and transnational level. The programme was divided into a number of areas, called ‘themes’, each with a different focus but all with the shared purpose of identifying innovative practice, and with an underlying commitment to equality. Theme I had a focus on asylum seekers, and it is in this theme that the EXCHANGES partnership was located. More information about EQUAL can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal/index_en.cfm

2.2 The EXCHANGES partnership

‘EXCHANGES’ was the name of an EQUAL Theme I transnational partnership involving three national development partnerships (DPs) which worked together to promote the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers in Europe.

The three development partnerships in EXCHANGES were from Hungary, France and England:

- The FAAR DP in France, led by CIMADE (a national non-governmental organisation – NGO)
- The EASI DP in England, led by Islington Training Network (a London-based NGO)
- The ESÉLY DP in Hungary, led by Menedék (a national NGO)

The names of the partners making up each partnership are listed in Section 2.5.

The transnational partnership was established through a Transnational Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

2.3 EXCHANGES: aims and activities

Over a three year period, the EXCHANGES partnership piloted and shared good practice, disseminated information, and worked to develop common policies with European partners.



Background

EXCHANGES 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 development partnership (DP) led on a particular area or theme: the FAAR DP (France) led on empowerment; the ESÉLY DP (Hungary) on preparation for employment, and the EASI DP (England) on capacity building and volunteering.

In addition to practical projects, policy work and dissemination activities within each of the three countries, a series of transnational exchanges and study visits took place during 2005–7 involving partner agencies from all three DPs. These included a number of visits which enabled partners to learn about each others' work and share good practice, and three transnational conferences:

- Exchanges for an EQUAL Europe: asylum seekers and volunteering, London, 2005
- Empowerment Through Voice, Paris, 2006
- Policy Conference, Budapest, 2007

In 2007, to mark the completion of EXCHANGES, the partners published three reports on their work, including this report on volunteering. The other reports are:

- 'A Baseline Survey' outlining the changing context in Hungary, France and England
- 'Empowering Asylum Seekers to Integrate in Europe'

Both are downloadable from www.easidp.org.uk/transnational.html

2.4 EXCHANGES and volunteering

One focus for the work at national and transnational level in support of asylum seekers was the issue of volunteering. The EASI DP (England) led on the theme volunteering.

Volunteering was considered within the broader context of the main themes of the transnational work (preparation for the labour market; capacity building for RCOs; language teaching and learning). Our approach and emphasis was also influenced by the fact that most asylum seekers in all three partner countries are not permitted to take on paid work.

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 London conference set an agenda for the transnational partnership, which is set out in the box on page 17. The report on the conference (Exchanges for an EQUAL Europe: asylum seekers and volunteering) is available from: www.easidp.org.uk/transnational.htm

Background 2.5 The EXCHANGES Partners

FAAR DP partners (France):

CIMADE

Chechen Committee/Comité Tchétchénie (NGO)

Centre Culturel Franco-Tchéchéne (Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre – a newly set up RCO, supported by the Chechen Committee)

CASP – the Protestant Social Action Centre (NGO)

GRETA – adult continuing training (public sector organisation)

AFPFA – National Association of Adult Vocational Training (NGO)

DASS – Directorate of Health and Social Action (public sector organisation)

Mairie of Paris (public sector organisation)

ESÉLY DP partners (Hungary):

Menedék – Hungarian Association for Migrants (NGO)

Cordelia Foundation (NGO) – dealing with psycho-social issues

International Language School Debrecen Ltd (ILS) (private sector organisation)

Southern Great Plain Regional Labour Centre, Bekescsaba (public sector organisation)

Northern Great Plain Regional Labour Centre, Branch Office and Service Centre, Debrecen (public sector organisation)

EASI DP partners (England)

Islington Training Network, London (NGO)

British Refugee Council, UK (NGO)

Education Action International (RETAS) Leeds (NGO)

Elthorne Learning Centre, London (NGO)

Hackney City Farm, London (NGO)

Innovative Enterprise Action, London (NGO)

Islington Refugee Integration Service, London Borough of Islington (public sector organisation)

Kurdish Disability Organisation, London (NGO)

London Advice Services Alliance, London (NGO)

North of England Refugee Service, Newcastle (NGO)

Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), London Metropolitan University (public sector organisation)

Refugee Women's Association, London (NGO)

tandem communications and research ltd (private sector consultancy)

Toxteth Community College, Liverpool (TCC) (public sector organisation)

Contact details of partners profiled in this report are listed in Appendix 2.



Background

SETTING OUR AGENDA: EXCHANGES FOR AN EQUAL EUROPE – ASYLUM SEEKERS AND VOLUNTEERING

In November 2005, the EXCHANGES partners met in London for a two-day conference on volunteering. This was a starting point from which we could draw initial recommendations and explore ways forward for our in-country work programmes and transnational work. Four key areas emerged:

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

A summary of the key points relating to these four areas is set out below. They reflect the discussions and advice of four workshops, one exploring each theme. The full conference report is available from: www.easidp.org.uk/transnational.htm

Volunteering and empowerment

One workshop focused on the personal experiences and empowerment of the volunteers from the EASI Advisory Group. It explored how volunteers could empower other colleagues (especially asylum seekers) in their organisations, and what host organisations could do to better support their volunteers.

The workshop found that volunteering can and does empower asylum seekers through workshadowing, language skills, further education prospects, networking, self-help, evaluation of partnerships and generally, the ability to remain optimistic.

The following recommendations were made:

- Organisations should train their staff to support volunteers better.
- Organisations and projects should involve volunteers who are asylum seekers in the preparation of conferences and national events, and in the composition of guides, websites and other publications.
- Experiences can and should be used to raise awareness and be part of campaigning efforts to influence and challenge policy-making at transnational (EU) level.

continued overleaf...

“I came here to save my life. So now I want to help people of this country.”

Annie, volunteer at a hospital

Background

...Setting our Agenda continued

Training and preparation of volunteers

- Staff in all organisations working with asylum seekers and volunteers need to be aware of issues relating to asylum seekers and to ensure good practice in involving them.
- Volunteers often wish to and have the right to receive training but are often not allowed by law to receive vocational training or accredited training. Organisations could make use of 'grey' areas and find ways of providing vocational training for their volunteers who are asylum seekers.
- A resource pack about volunteering could be provided to organisations working with asylum seekers as volunteers, referring to rights, entitlements, the role of and support for volunteers.

Volunteering for work experience

- Project workers need to understand both companies and asylum seekers in order to place individual volunteers successfully: this requires a lot of preparation
- There is a need to develop guidelines on work shadowing.
- Adequate resources are necessary.
- Agencies should create partnerships to ensure other organisations can help to address barriers such as language.
- There should be adequate preparation of asylum seekers for the world of work.

Capacity building for RCOs and other organisations through volunteering

- The more organised RCOs become, the more success they will have – this in turn will benefit both clients and volunteers.
- Setting up an RCO is most beneficial when it is done in order to meet specific goals.
- To achieve their goals RCOs have to find resources – mobilisation of communities is an important part of the process.
- RCOs need to shift towards capacity building to be more effective in achieving their goals.

“If you stay inside you don’t know anything, you don’t know your rights, you just stay in darkness.”

Nonhlanhla, volunteer at an adult education centre

3



3. VOLUNTEERING: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

3. Volunteering: definitions and concepts

The EQUAL programme has provided new opportunities to develop and promote volunteering by asylum seekers in the EU. The partners in EXCHANGES all made volunteering one of their priority areas.

This was for various reasons. Volunteering has been shown to bring many benefits to the individuals, organisations and wider communities and client groups involved (Wilson and Lewis, 2006). 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. This places asylum seekers in a difficult and disadvantageous situation, where volunteering becomes almost the only option for people wanting to be busy, helpful or in the company of others – or wanting to practise and develop employment-related skills and knowledge.

Some of the information in this section is based on the INVOLVE project report from the European Centre for Volunteering (CEV, 2006). The INVOLVE report looked at volunteering by ‘third country nationals’ (people from outside the EU, including asylum seekers) in seven member countries. Two participant organisations in the EXCHANGES transnational partnership were also part of INVOLVE – Menedék as a partner, and the Director of tandem who worked for Volunteering England to co-ordinate the England INVOLVE contribution.

The INVOLVE report and information about the initiative is available at the European Volunteer Centre website www.cev.be and www.tandem-uk.com/involve/involve.htm. CEV also contributed to the EXCHANGES transnational conference on Volunteering, in November 2005 in London.

This section is also able to draw on ‘A Part of Society’, a UK report looking at volunteering by refugees and asylum seekers in mainstream, non-refugee organisations (Wilson and Lewis, 2006). This report was written and produced by tandem as part of the EASI development partnership. It can be downloaded from www.tandem-uk.com

3.1 Definition of terms

Volunteering refers to all the different forms in which citizens (including all legal residents) can do unpaid activities for others based on their free will and with the aim of serving the general interest of society (CEV, 2006).

Volunteering encompasses ‘voluntary action’ (consisting of both informal and formal volunteering); ‘voluntary work’ (work done in the context of mainstream or voluntary organisations, including refugee and migrant organisations); and ‘voluntary service’, which often refers to full time, but usually short term, voluntary work (normally not more than one year in duration, and most often targeted at young people) (CEV 2006).

The term ‘voluntary sector’ does not necessarily involve volunteering though it may well do. It refers to the ‘not-for-profit’ or ‘non-governmental’ sector, a sector which differs from the ‘public’ or ‘statutory’ sector, which has statutory obligations to perform certain services whether at EU, national or local level, and from the private (or ‘for profit’) sector.



Volunteering: definitions and concepts

Most, but not all, volunteering takes place in the voluntary sector. The public sector also involves volunteers, and there are occasional instances of volunteering in the private sector (in private nursing homes, for example).

Other terms may be used to describe volunteering, or work experience opportunities that are related to, but distinct from, volunteering. ‘Workshadowing’, for instance, provides the opportunity to shadow someone through their normal working day, observing the routine tasks and responsibilities they undertake. The person being shadowed might provide an opportunity for the visitor to join in with these tasks and gain hands-on experience – however, the visitor is never left unsupervised or asked to perform work that the person being shadowed would not normally undertake. Work experience is usually differentiated from volunteering, because it is more formal in its structure and requirements. It often forms part of a wider, practical training course.

Section 4 of this report has many examples of volunteering in the voluntary sector, with some public sector case studies as well.

3.2 Volunteering in France

In France, the number of adults (aged 18 or over) volunteering rose from 7.9 million in 1990 to 13 million in 2003. However, because of the French tradition of not identifying ethnic minorities in monitoring, there is no data on the number of migrant, refugee or asylum seeker volunteers.

Volunteering (‘benevolat’) mostly happens within non governmental, ‘not for profit’ organisations, but new forms of volunteering are being developed in order to strengthen the participation of citizens. One example is specific local councils for foreigners, who get involved on a voluntary basis – the councils can ensure that foreigners are consulted on local issues, and they can be a forum for the discussion of policy questions. They also help to promote intercultural dialogue.

The French preference is for foreigners to volunteer within minority ethnic organisations with links to their countries of origin rather than in mainstream French organisations. Though volunteering in principle is open to both French citizens and ‘immigrants’, the setting up of community organisations has not been easy: it was not allowed till 1981 and still can be accused of fostering ‘ghettoisation’.

“My friend said she went to agriculture class and I wanted to know what its about. That’s how I came here. I wanted to know how to grow foods in this country. I was curious to learn about that.”

Victorie, Togo, volunteer at a city farm

Volunteering: definitions and concepts

The setting up of the Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre illustrates how it has been possible to overcome this apparent paradox. Although the initiative was taken by members of the Chechen community in Paris, they were soon joined by French members, making it possible to build a joint organisation and implement an inter-cultural approach. As a result, the Centre is a platform for exchanges between people from different backgrounds and origins. Members of the Chechen community can share their culture with others and with their children, and can also get to know and understand customs and culture of the host country, and become actively involved in their new environment.

“It was very interesting, I learned how to contribute to the community. There is a need for this work.”

Volunteer, Eritrea, part of a talks team

3.3 Volunteering in the UK

Britain has a strong commitment to, and history of, volunteering, and there is a sound infrastructure for volunteering.

In 2003 it was estimated that over 26.4 million people volunteered informally in some way, and some 17.9 million formally. There is some evidence that people from black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to volunteer informally, and may not label their activities as volunteering – this makes it harder to quantify and report on informal volunteering. Equalities legislation is fairly strong, and there is a government commitment for volunteering opportunities to be open to all, whether formally or informally.

For asylum seekers and refugees volunteering is promoted as a good way (often the only way) to learn more English, be involved in purposeful activity and to get experience of the work-place in the UK. Volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees do have limitations, however. Most refugees and asylum seekers are likely to volunteer with refugee agencies or within their own communities. Such volunteering is very worthwhile, but there are considerable benefits when people volunteer into more mainstream settings (Wilson and Lewis, 2006). There are numerous barriers to this taking place: partners in the EASI development partnership and other organisations are increasingly working to address this.

3.4 Volunteering in Hungary

Volunteering in Hungary differs from France and UK in several respects. The voluntary sector is still weak in Hungary because of the strict repression of social movements during the socialist period. Between 1993 and 2000 the number of employees in NGOs doubled, but despite this the sector still involved less than 2% of the active Hungarian population. As a result, a much smaller percentage of Hungarians are involved in volunteering in organisations than in most other EU countries. On the other hand, there is a great deal of ‘non-organisational’ voluntary action, which may be due to a historic mistrust of organisations or a preference for mutual support in close families/communities as a survival mechanism.



Volunteering: definitions and concepts

The proportion of recent refugees in Hungary is quite small. There are as yet few voluntary sector NGOs working specifically with ethnic minorities or refugee communities, let alone set up by them.

In 2005 a Law on Public Interest Volunteer Activities legally recognised volunteers and allowed them to sign a bilateral contract with their organisations setting out the obligations and rights of contracting parties. This law specifically named non-EEA citizens as beneficiaries of the law, irrespective of their status and nationality. EQUAL has been able to take advantage of this.

3.5 Volunteering and permission to work

Through their extensive experience of working with asylum seekers, and through other strategic contacts and partnerships, EXCHANGES partners identified the key importance of granting asylum seekers permission to work.

Volunteering has many benefits, both for the individual volunteer, the agency they are involved with, its clients and the wider community. However, it is no proper alternative to being allowed to work if they so wish. Volunteering can develop soft skills (such as team-working, time management, inter-cultural understanding) but not hard vocational skills that particular jobs need (construction, healthcare). Being able to get a job opens up many more opportunities. There is potential to meet a wider range of people and experience different working environments. Trained and professional asylum seekers can maintain their skills rather than watch them deteriorate. They have the opportunity to pay tax and be self-supporting, so costing the state less and making a contribution to the local and national economy.

Our recommendations on this important issue are set out in Section 5.7. For more information on rights to training and work in the three partner countries, see Appendix 3.

3.6 The European Union Reception Directive

In February 2003, all Member States (with the exception of Ireland and Denmark) signed up to developing an EU-wide system for hosting asylum seekers throughout Europe, known as the Reception Directive (Council Directive 2003/9/EC). They agreed to guarantee a common quality of reception, services and opportunities for asylum seekers, to enable them integrate into their new society while waiting for a decision on their application.

The Reception Directive is part of the much wider EU policy remit called the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which also includes legislative measures ensuring common procedures for requesting asylum and minimum standards for the qualification and status of persons as refugees.

The Reception Directive was one of the first legislative instruments to be officially agreed as part of the CEAS. After its official adoption in 2003, Member States had two years to 'transpose' the Directive into their national legislation. One of the EU programmes used to assist the implementation of the Reception Directive is the EQUAL Community Initiative, with one of its main themes focusing specifically on the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers.

3.7 Reception Directive Articles 11 and 12

As part of the minimum standards included in the Reception Directive, two articles refer to access to the labour market and to vocational training for asylum seekers.

Article 11 establishes that Asylum Seekers have the right to access the labour market at the latest one year after they lodged their asylum application. However Member States may give priority to EU citizens and nationals of the EEA and legally resident third country nationals for 'national labour market' reasons.

Article 12 refers to vocational training and establishes that Member States 'can allow asylum seekers to participate in vocational training whether they have access to the labour market or not' (but only if the vocational training is not linked to an employment contract).

These articles are particularly important to the EXCHANGES partnership because the EQUAL programme is concerned with the 'social and vocational integration of asylum seekers'. Articles 11 and 12 are the most relevant to this (though other articles relating more to the social dimension are also significant). Recommendations formulated by EXCHANGES on these key issues are set out in Section 5.7.

For a summary of the situation in France, Hungary and the UK with regard to Articles 11 and 12 of the Reception Directive see Appendix 3.

For more detailed information on the three different national contexts see 'A Baseline Survey', outlining the changing context in Hungary, France and England, downloadable from <http://www.easidp.org.uk/transnational.html>

“As an asylum seeker I feel the need to get involved in decision making, to participate in volunteering and join the active bodies around our communities. It is our responsibility to give back to the government, by contributing towards integration as agents of change.”

Volunteer, EASI Advisory Group

4



4. GOOD PRACTICE IN VOLUNTEERING

4. Good practice in volunteering

This section contains practical examples of volunteering from partners in EXCHANGES in Hungary, France and England.

Involvement in EXCHANGES gave partners the opportunity to try out different ways of working, to engage more effectively with asylum seekers, and to share their experience with others. The following is just a sample of the activities carried out. The examples are grouped under the four headings identified at our 2005 conference on volunteering (see box on page 17):

- 4.1 Volunteering and empowerment
- 4.2 Training and preparation of volunteers
- 4.3 Volunteering for work experience
- 4.4 Capacity building for RCOs and others through volunteering

A summary of the key learning points is set out in Section 5 along with the recommendations that EXCHANGES has developed on the basis of research, experience and policy work.

Other publications produced by EXCHANGES partners also reflect the learning generated by the programme, and provide more information on good practice and policy implications. These include:

- *A Part of Society* (Wilson and Lewis, 2006)
- *A Practical Guide on Volunteering for Asylum Seekers* (Refugee Women's Association, 2007)
- *EASI Community Health Project, Making it Work, Developing Successful Volunteer Programmes for Asylum Seekers* (Elthorne Learning Centre, July 2007)
- *Making Changes Together – The Experiences of the EASI and PRESTO Advisory Group* (RAGU, 2007)
- *Managing volunteers in refugee community organisations* (Wilson and Walker, 2006)
- *Volunteering: Asylum Seekers' Experiences* (RAGU, 2007)

See Appendix 1 for further information on these publications and how to obtain copies.

See Appendix 2 for the contact details of EXCHANGES partners profiled in this section.



Good practice in volunteering

A CHECHEN COMMUNITY LEADER, FRANCE

“I would like to see a world without borders, colourful and open. In Chechnya, I was an ethnologist: I like to observe social data. When I went to Jordan and Turkey – as a tourist – I was very shocked by the fact that the Chechen diaspora, living there for at least a century, was not integrated and remained apart from mainstream society.

“People often understand integration as assimilation. But I think it is really a shame when people have to abandon their own culture by force. Assimilation leads to misunderstanding and violence. Real integration is an exchange between several ways of thinking. So people have to keep their roots even if they live in new environments.

“Refugees are desperate when they have to leave their country. That is the reason why, when I came to France, the meaning of life nearly disappeared. I saw the world in grey; all was black and white. It seemed that colours had vanished. I began to work as a volunteer in the Chechen Committee to struggle against this feeling. I had to work with people, to help people, to meet new persons, to feel that my culture and my past were not dead. I was looking for the colours I had lost.

“I think it is the same for other refugees. For Chechen people who arrived in France as refugees it is very important to have opportunities to see each other and to meet mainstream society. Women often have no time to connect with other people, because they have to raise children. But many of them feel alone because they do not know the language, do not know the social system, social rules and behaviour. They are threatened and do not feel confident in the host society. So they do not have the means to breathe freely by themselves.

“My purpose in creating the Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre was to provide opportunities to those who had the least. For example, some women raise their children alone and they have never worked before their arrival in France. For them it is necessary to find links with their community and with French society. Gradually it is possible to develop new relationships and new skills. It works: two women, who cooked and served in our Chechen ‘café’ found jobs afterwards.

“My task was to build a team of persons involved in the empowerment of this community of poorer refugees. Together, we had to learn a lot of things about French society, new jobs, organisational management and so on. Now, we are able to help our fellow countrymen, and we can at the same time participate in French society, make this nation richer. There is a great difference between working for material wealth and volunteering, because this activity is a gift for myself and for the others. We do not live only for food and good housing.”

Issita, Chechen volunteer and community leader, France

4.1 Volunteering and empowerment

Empowerment emerged as a key theme in the work of EXCHANGES partners.

Two definitions and approaches to empowerment emerged through EQUAL (EQUAL, 2004):

- **Empowerment is the development of capacity and the opportunity for individuals and groups to play a full role in society in general, not only in economic terms but also in social, psychological and political terms.**
- **Empowerment means that those involved in the implementation of activities should also take part in the decision making.**

EXCHANGES partners found that volunteering could contribute to this in a number of ways.

4.1.1 Volunteering with FAAR and the theatre, France

The experience of partners in the FAAR development partnership in France showed how links made through non governmental organisations (which provide core forms of support and related activities) can enable asylum seekers to build up confidence and try new experiences, leading to the development of new skills, relationships and opportunities. The case study (see the box on page 29) is an example of how it is important that the beneficiary is allowed to be active in shaping their own process of integration, and to have opportunities for social and vocational integration outside the activities initially provided in the project. In this way, the volunteer can feel better informed and empowered.

In the case study, the volunteer Kristina identifies the following benefits as a result of volunteering:

- she felt she could be useful to the host society
- she could meet and share work and other experiences with people from the host society
- she got work experience in the host country
- she improved her language skills
- it enabled her to be involved in a meaningful activity while waiting for refugee status

The experience was made easier by the fact that Kristina knew the theatre company and some of the staff before she started to volunteer, thanks to her participation in the theatre workshop during the six previous months. The placement was made in a context that Kristina liked and in which she felt confident. The following factors helped make the placement a success:

- a positive initial experience of volunteering for the volunteer and the organisation they were placed with
- an open attitude and confidence on the part of the volunteer
- a supportive, welcoming attitude among staff in the different organisations involved
- good networking and links between organisations and individuals



Good practice in volunteering

Two obstacles were identified, relating to travel and language. Travelling in and around Paris can be expensive, and this could limit the volunteers' ability to take up opportunities. In addition, the lack of language skills could prevent potential beneficiaries from volunteering.

Innovation

Very few organisations in France recruit asylum seekers as volunteers. When this happens, it is likely to be on a one-off basis, as an isolated case. Kristina's story shows how volunteering can empower individuals, assisting with their integration, and bringing benefits to volunteering organisations. It also shows how initial support, such as accommodation, advice and language teaching can help asylum seekers build up the confidence and contacts they need to engage purposefully with other organisations and wider society.

This practice could be appropriate for any asylum seeker provided they have a sufficient knowledge of French.

VOLUNTEERING WITH THE THEATRE DU SOLEIL

Kristina is from Azerbaijan. She arrived in France in 2005, applied for refugee status, and was placed in a hostel in Paris by CASP/CAFDA, a member of the FAAR partnership. As FAAR activities took place in Paris, Kristina was able to become actively involved with FAAR in September 2005. She then had to move to a reception centre located in a suburban area of Paris but was able to remain an active participant of the FAAR project.

Before volunteering, she went through three four-month language course modules, taking her from absolute beginner to competent French speaker. She also benefited from legal and social support from CASP/CAFDA.

Alongside the language course she took part in a theatre workshop which started in January and ended with three public performances in June 2006.

The actress who was responsible for the theatre workshop encouraged Kristina to volunteer with the theatre company (Théâtre du Soleil). The volunteering placement was for a month, and involved helping the company with the cooking during rehearsals. Kristina readily accepted, though it meant interrupting her language course for one month.

People she met at Théâtre du Soleil then offered her another volunteering opportunity at the beginning of 2007, this time helping with translating (from Russian to French) during a theatre course for asylum seekers in a reception centre. At the same time she could also be a participant in the workshop, which she was keen to do.

Good practice in volunteering

4.1.2 Mentoring and empowerment: North of England Refugee Service, England

The North of England Refugee Service (NERS) was part of the EASI Development Partnership in England. It ran a mentoring project that aimed to redress inequalities and break down the barriers to social and economic integration faced by asylum seekers. The mentoring project matched asylum seekers with people in their local community, with whom they could develop a supportive, encouraging and trusting relationship.

NERS found the project extremely successful in empowering individuals to cope with the difficulties of being an asylum seeker, and to get involved in activities and volunteering. The organisation developed good practice in terms of recruiting, training, supporting and developing volunteers and mentors and the people they befriend and help ('mentees').

The mentoring relationship enabled the asylum seeker on each occasion to develop a trusting friendship with a person from the host community who could help them to meet their goals, improve their self-confidence, develop their knowledge of the local area and, most importantly, increase their feeling of belonging to the local community.

This friendship also enabled the mentor to learn about a new culture and gave them the opportunity to introduce their culture and their local area. The mentors used their skills, experience and knowledge to significantly improve the life of another individual. All mentors and mentees found the experience to be very positive.

“Without Claire I would still be sitting feeling depressed with no hope. Now I am at college, my English is better and I am happier and I can go where I want with my children. She is a listening ear and I can tell her when I am worried or sad and she listens and helps me to make things better again.”

Helen, NERS mentee

“Claire has made me think again about who I am and what I can do... We laugh and we talk about things and we go to visit places and she helps me to decide what to do and how I can make things happen... and I have made them happen and I am thinking what I will do next... I only wish I had met Claire a year ago!”

Helen, NERS mentee



Good practice in volunteering

MENTORING IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND

Claire was a volunteer mentor with the NERS EASI Mentoring Project. In 2006, Claire won the regional Mentoring Millennium Volunteer of the Year Award for her work with NERS.

Claire helped an asylum seeker called Helen. At the beginning of their relationship, Helen was a very shy and worried young woman who was socially isolated and struggling to adapt to life in the UK. She had fled persecution in her home country and was finding it difficult to see a positive future for herself and her two young children. Although Helen did have goals she wanted to achieve – mainly accessing a college course in health, improving her English and improving her knowledge of Newcastle – these goals seemed to her to be unrealisable dreams. Helen spent most days sitting alone in her flat in Gateshead with her two young children.

Then she was matched with Claire through the mentoring scheme.

Claire began by taking Helen on trips around Newcastle and Gateshead showing her how the metro system and bus service operated, and introducing her to local services and facilities. For example, she took Helen to local children's play facilities. This added variety to Helen's life (through enabling her to meet other local mums) and also to Helen's two children who now have exciting play opportunities and made friends.

In addition to this, Claire helped Helen to improve her English and her knowledge of British customs and culture. Helen took pride in sharing her culture with Claire, for example teaching Creole and sharing food from Sierra Leone and recipes.

But perhaps the most significant development for Helen was that she enrolled in college where she is studying ESOL and a GCSE in Health and Social Care.

NERS' experience in running the mentoring programme shows that not only the asylum seekers benefit and feel empowered. Mentors also develop new skills and confidence:

- they gain a detailed knowledge of the asylum process
- they find out about local asylum support services and strategy
- they find out about local educational courses and other services and support, according to the needs of their mentee
- they practise and develop skills of empathy, listening, communication and understanding.

The role can be a challenging one: there are few services for asylum seekers, and the area of entitlements and rights is a very complex one. Considerable patience is required, along with an understanding of boundaries and the ability to work with people who have experienced severe trauma. If empowerment is to be brought about, all this must be achieved without making the mentee overly reliant on the mentor, and there must be a sense of progression towards agreed goals.

Good practice in volunteering

VOLUNTEERING WITH THE NORTH OF ENGLAND REFUGEE SERVICE

In addition to the mentoring scheme, NERS involved asylum seekers in various volunteering opportunities. Tubi, for instance, helped with reception at the NERS office, and also went out to give talks to schools and groups wanting to understand more about asylum.

“I have always wanted to give something back to the community, which I have always done in my own country. However, being in different country and being a person under immigration control I thought that my work was completely restricted, until I received help from NERS and found that I could do voluntary work.

“When I came to England without a place to stay I never thought for a moment that I would be offered accommodation and food. It is always good for me to say thank you by word of mouth but sometimes that doesn't feel enough. The British people have had to do a lot for me to get these services. Therefore it is a great pleasure for me to give back what I have, which is my time, by volunteering. If I could I would work and pay taxes, to relieve the tax payers.

“I suffer from depression and anxiety and loss of self esteem because of what I have been through. Volunteering has lifted my spirit. It has revived me after a long time of having nothing to do. It is an eye-opener for me now I have something to look forward to knowing that I have a volunteering job to do. I feel I am getting myself back.

“My experience doing the voluntary work is even getting wider. I have had the opportunity to meet many different people with different cultural backgrounds. I have basic experience of screening clients at our reception and I am able to meet some of the client's requests. I have been involved in cultural awareness, which gave me the chance to relate the problems that made me leave my country, and my experience in England. I found that getting it off my chest was relief for me, and I gained the confidence to talk to a crowd.

“To those who may be considering volunteering I would say: it is the best way to say thank you to the community. I have nothing but plenty of time. Why not give it for a thank you and for love. There are many opportunities around our communities. Get involved, go and volunteer, meet new friends. It will make a big difference to your life.”

Tubi, NERS volunteer



Good practice in volunteering

4.1.3 English and volunteering at Hackney City Farm, England

As part of the EASI Development Partnership, Hackney City Farm and the British Refugee Council ran an innovative programme offering asylum seekers a supportive and therapeutic environment in which to learn English, to volunteer and to engage with a variety of practical farm-based activities. The farm is open to the public seven days a week: it offers an opportunity for children and adults to get up close to a range of farmyard animals. It grows crops and plants, explores 'green' ways of working, and runs special projects and activities.

Hackney City Farm and the British Refugee Council looked at new ways of addressing and supporting the multiple needs of asylum seekers. They provided a 12 week programme offering asylum seekers a course in English and community learning and volunteering based at an inner city farm. Asylum seekers had the chance to mix with others going through the asylum system, and with other volunteers and people from the local community.

Without permission to work whilst waiting for an asylum decision, this group are faced with limited options. Many are suffering from post traumatic stress and depression. Waiting, with no structure or activities in their lives, adds to this unhealthy mental state.

The programme was therefore designed to try and offer some structure and purpose for participants, by giving them the chance to be involved in a bigger programme with others, where their input had value. It provided a unique, supportive environment in which to learn, participate, integrate with others, build confidence, and put aside problems.

The course ran for four days a week. The first two days offered elementary level English. Importantly, the practical English used and required while at the farm was incorporated into the English classes. The second two days of each week were spent volunteering, helping with the daily running and maintenance of the farm (such as gardening, talking to visitors and looking after the animals).

While volunteering, participants mixed with other volunteers, staff and the general public to learn skills like pottery, textile printing, carpentry, gardening, horticultural techniques, straw bail building, recycling, and much more.

Learners had the opportunity to practice their English skills within a practical and supportive environment whilst volunteering. They were motivated to communicate with the general public and other volunteers. Embedding ESOL within the volunteering proved effective, not only in attracting learners into programmes, but in encouraging good levels of language attainment.

“This way I don’t stay at home and think about everything, my situation’.... Tuesdays and Wednesdays we have English classes, very nice, it’s very exciting.”

Victorie, Togo, volunteer

Good practice in volunteering

The project was widely publicised and marketed amongst policy makers, funders, and other community organisations. The preliminary results were presented to the Home Office Sunrise steering group, and volunteers and staff participated in events and conferences both in England and transnationally (in France and Hungary) to ensure that potential stakeholders were aware of the project activities. A short film of the project in action with comments and explanations was created and has been shown at many UK and transnational meetings and conferences.

“I don’t know anything about gardening before. Now I can make flowers and vegetables. I can look after animals.”

Benis, Democratic Republic of Congo, volunteer

Barriers and challenges

The concept of learning English and volunteering at a city farm was unusual, and initially some potential participants found it hard to understand what was on offer. Culturally, farms are often considered places where the less well off work in their countries of origin. Getting people to try out the programme could therefore be difficult.

In addition, the participants were often recent arrivals and some were dispersed by the government during the course to other parts of the UK. This could be upsetting for the other participants. It also had a negative impact on the course in relation to creating a structured and supportive environment. The team also faced regular attendance disruptions when participants had to sign at the Home Office each week or visit solicitors.

Other challenges were more practical. Winter or bad weather is not always a popular time for working out doors and attendance during these times could drop. The project tried to get around this by arranging more suitable, indoor activities while also ensuring that the participants were engaged in the same activities as other volunteers.

“It helped me for transport; it’s very, very good for that. I don’t have money, I get vouchers, not money, so I can buy a travel-card, so its better for me.”

Senait, Eritrea, volunteer

Benefits

This project was unusual in its setting (a city farm), and in the practical combination of volunteering and languages study. It involved strong partnership working between an organisation with no previous refugee expertise (Hackney City Farm) and a refugee agency (British Refugee Council).



Good practice in volunteering

The project helped the city farm through bringing in new volunteers to help with the day-to-day running of the farm. It ensured greater diversity among their volunteer team: the farm is based in a very multi-cultural part of London, and the diversity of volunteers is important in reflecting and encouraging the diversity of visitors and links with the wider community.

This was the first time many of those involved had the opportunity to volunteer with and get to know local residents. This had a very positive effect, changing local residents' and other volunteers' perceptions of this generally misunderstood section of society. In addition, participants felt empowered because they were putting something back into the community. They reported improved confidence, improved English and communication skills, and a better understanding of the host community.

The programme also showed that the activities delivered had a therapeutic affect on the participants who would otherwise be thinking about their current situation, what they had been through, and what they had to leave behind.

“Here everything was alright, we was enjoying here, we was happy here.”

Arshad, India, volunteer

4.2 The training and preparation of volunteers

Many of the EXCHANGES initiatives included in this report have an element of training for asylum seekers. Partners in all three countries found that asylum seekers welcomed the opportunity to develop new skills or strengthen existing ones, and to learn more about the host country. This had a range of benefits, not just for the asylum seeker, but for the organisations they volunteered with and others they came into contact with in their community and beyond.

A complicating issue is the fact that, while asylum seeker volunteers often want to receive training, in many cases they are not allowed by law to receive formal vocational training or accredited training, because of their asylum status. In addition, in some countries there are limitations on the kind of training volunteers can receive (regardless of immigration status): in the UK, for instance, a volunteering organisation can only arrange training for its volunteers if this specifically helps them in their volunteering role.

Nevertheless, organisations within EXCHANGES have been able to find some ways of providing training for their volunteers who are asylum seekers.

Good practice in volunteering

4.2.1 The EASI DP Advisory Group, England

The EASI Advisory Group was established in June 2005 by RAGU (the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit – a specialist agency based at London Metropolitan University), on behalf of the EASI Partnership.

The Advisory Group was made up of 12 asylum seekers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Africa, Middle East, Asian sub-continent and Eastern Europe who gave their time as volunteers. A primary aim was to involve beneficiary representatives 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, to develop their skills and involve them in the workings of the partnership.

The members volunteered their time to attend Advisory Group meetings, consultations and training as well as partnership and transnational meetings (mostly in the UK but also abroad whenever possible). All members were referred by EASI partner organisations. RAGU was responsible for coordinating and training the Advisory Group and facilitating all meetings and consultations.

“My participation in EASI Advisory Group is one of my achievements I am really proud of. It was the first platform where I got a chance to raise my voice and was heard respectfully despite the stigma of being asylum seeker.”

Volunteer, EASI Advisory Group

The level of support and training offered to the Advisory Group members recognised the vulnerable and socially excluded position many asylum seekers occupy and aimed to empower them to become skilled, engaged and confident in their role. An acknowledgment of members' existing skills, knowledge and expertise was crucial to this.

In order to develop a group that felt able to participate confidently in consultation and meetings, the group members identified other, specific skills they needed to develop, and this was met through customised training. For example, the Advisory Group members were trained in facilitating workshops as part of their training programme.

A short film about the Advisory Group, 'Having a Voice', was produced and shown at transnational and national events to demonstrate the value of the Advisory Group and the impact it had on partners' programmes and the individual members themselves. A report written by Advisory Group members and RAGU on their experiences was published in November 2007 (see Appendix 1).

“I feel glad to see other women from different countries standing for the need of their communities through direct dialogue.”

Volunteer, EASI Advisory Group



Good practice in volunteering

Benefits

As a result of their involvement, the members of the Advisory Group reported:

- increased confidence
- a sense of feeling empowered and listened to
- additional experience of working in a cross-cultural environment and of volunteering in the UK
- an opportunity to obtain a UK reference
- an increase in skills such as English language and communication, team-working, negotiation, networking, report writing, giving presentations, chairing meetings, minute-taking and many others
- a positive impact on mental health and general sense of well-being.

For members of the EASI partnership, the following benefits were reported:

- better informed programme planning and delivery and marketing, grounded in consultation
- assumptions about asylum seekers priorities and expectations challenged, programme priorities re-aligned and changes made to programmes to develop targeted practical services for asylum seekers
- contribution to partnership policy statements made by the Advisory Group
- development of a valuable model for user-involvement that can be replicated and mainstreamed in other initiatives.

Challenges

For individual Advisory Group members, the challenges of taking part varied but included:

- communicating in English at a high level (which is not the first language of most members)
- understanding jargon and specialist language consistent with partnership management and EQUAL programmes
- focussing on Advisory Group activities whilst individuals face important concerns about immigration status (Home Office interviews, court appeal hearings, reporting to immigration officials)
- juggling Advisory Group volunteering with other commitments (such as caring for dependants, studying, other volunteering),
- health issues, housing concerns and many other issues.

Such concerns were ongoing for Advisory Group members and could impact negatively on attendance at meetings and training sessions, as well as concentration and commitment levels. It was therefore all the more remarkable that attendance was fairly consistent and high over a period of two years. This can be accounted for by the value individuals place on their role and experience in the Advisory Group.

“Through the training of the advisory group I have developed various skills including writing and speaking. In particular I have been able to make presentations at various levels outside the Advisory Group as a result.”

Volunteer, EASI Advisory Group

A TRANSNATIONAL VISIT

Luse is an asylum seeker who, as a member of the EASI Advisory Group, attended the EXCHANGES transnational conference in Paris in October 2006:

“I had the opportunity to attend the Paris Conference. I felt empowered in many ways.

“First of all, due to the restrictions of movement applied to me as an asylum seeker, I experienced many hard moments, feeling almost as a prisoner. It’s beyond imagination the way this trip abroad had a positive impact on my morale and psychology.

“I had the opportunity to express myself and to tell my personal experience in front of a respectable audience. It was a valuable remedy for my loss of confidence.

“Finally, I met asylum seekers from different countries, exchanged experiences with them and made contact with several organisations working in the refugee sector in France and Hungary. I made a friendship with a colleague from France – we are still in contact.

“Returning to the UK, my confidence built up, my morale on top, I started hunting for a job and found one. In fact I realised that I was able but simply not confident. This event was a great example of the multiple ways EASI can empower someone.”

NATIONAL AWARD FOR VOLUNTEER LEARNER

FB was a volunteer member of the EASI Advisory Group. She also took part in RAGU’s Volunteer Placement Portfolio. In May 2007 she was presented with an Individual Learner Award at the Adult Learners’ Week Awards. The Award was in recognition of her contribution of nearly all her time to a variety of organisations that benefit from her skills and knowledge as well as her energy. This achievement was seen as even more significant in view of the barriers and difficulties she faced as an asylum seeker, with very limited access to learning and without permission to work.

As part of the citation it was stated that her “enthusiasm and commitment, combined with her remarkable positivity and sense of humour in the face of considerable difficulties is profoundly inspiring.”

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.2.2 Training for Chechen community volunteers, France**

Through partnership working between CIMADE and the Comité Tchétchénie Paris (Chechen Committee) a range of training was made available to Chechen volunteers wanting to be involved in the development of their community and in building their own skills. In particular, CIMADE, a French organisation working on public awareness of foreigners' rights and asylum reception alongside the Comité Tchétchénie (Chechen Committee), provided training in French language, in management, public relations and other issues. In partnership with local people, the volunteers set up the Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre. French volunteers gave French lessons to the Chechens taking part.

A series of events, conferences and training opportunities have enabled the volunteers to build up their skills and get involved in new initiatives.

A CHECHEN ASYLUM SEEKER VOLUNTEER IN PARIS

Z applied for asylum in France in 2004 with her daughter. She has a son in Russia. She joined the FAAR EQUAL project in January 2005 as a volunteer in the Franco Chechen Cultural Centre. She was involved in a number of events such as conferences, parties, restaurant activities, and training. In December 2006, she became co-manager of the Chechen restaurant.

At the beginning she was very active with Chechen people but she did not talk a lot with French people. It turned out that she had had no opportunity to learn French language properly, and the project was able to address this. Gradually she managed to communicate and to speak with French people. She held a very successful party with her new French friends for New Year in December 2006. In order to get this event ready she was taught accountancy using the 'Excel' programme on the computer.

After this, she led the Chechen 'café' team. They held a twice-monthly Chechen dinner in the community associations' restaurant in Paris. Thanks to her experience with the Centre and training, she was able to explain to each customer both Chechen cuisine and Chechen habits. In April 2007, she was proposed as a teacher of Chechen cuisine in the Muslim Cultural Institute in Paris.

Z's experience is an example of how volunteering in a multicultural setting can be an asset, not only for the empowerment of individual asylum seekers and refugees, but also for other volunteers, clients and communities. The training and experience they gain helps them make a contribution in many ways, and can encourage other asylum seekers to get involved.

Good practice in volunteering

4.2.3 Asylum seekers' public speaking and advocacy course, England

This initiative was run by RETAS – Leeds (Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service) as part of the EASI Development Partnership. It provided volunteers with a short training course, which prepared them to deliver training sessions on the facts about asylum and to give personal testimony to young people in informative teaching sessions at schools.

The training included:

- presentation and public speaking skills
- preparing speeches
- using PowerPoint
- the importance of advocacy
- giving persuasive testimony
- teaching skills
- refugees' and asylum seekers' rights and entitlements
- dealing with question and answer session
- how to influence your audience

The training for volunteers prior to the school visits provided well-structured preparation for speaking on a difficult and sensitive topic. It helped the participants to understand the context and perimeters of the project. It gave them useful skills and relevant information, and enabled them to place their more personal experience into a broader setting, giving them an opportunity to influence public attitudes and overcome misinformation.

“It was informative, challenging... I now have something to say with confidence out there in the community. I gained new skills in PowerPoint, and presentation skills. I think that the course was delivered really well. I will definitely go into schools to tell my story.”

Volunteer, RETAS talks team, Zimbabwe

“I went into schools and spoke to children about my experiences in Yemen and why I am here... It was good to tell people that asylum seekers aren't homeless criminals or poor people who come here for economic reasons. I think that this was a great thing to be part of because it gave me the opportunity to speak out and defend myself within the community... I cannot go up to people in the street and tell them about my story...”

Nahla, volunteer, RETAS talks team, Yemen

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.2.4 Volunteer portfolio development, England**

RAGU is a specialist refugee unit based within London Metropolitan University. As part of its activities in the EASI DP, it designed an innovative English Language and Communication Skills course for asylum seekers called 'Producing a Volunteer Placement Portfolio'.

During the training asylum seekers considered:

- the benefits of being volunteers
- what they wanted to gain from volunteering
- the meaning of reflection and how to write a reflective diary
- language skills, backed up by graded language materials
- how to conduct organisational research and interviews using tape recorders
- how to use a tool for a self-evaluation of skills
- the rights and responsibilities of the volunteer and the organisation
- how to complete the Volunteer Placement Portfolio

The course aimed to prepare asylum seekers for volunteer placements by working through a folder of materials with six distinct units. When completed at the end of the placement period, the folder became a personal portfolio that fully documented the asylum seekers' placement experience.

**“There is very good material inside the portfolio
– useful ideas, very educational.”**

Volunteer, portfolio training

The completed Volunteer Placement Portfolio contains:

- placement research
- a reflective placement diary
- a personal skills audit and action plan
- documents evidencing the student's placement and examples of work

The course addressed the problems related to asylum seekers being excluded from the UK labour market. Their exclusion not only means their skills cannot be used or developed but they also experience a loss of identity, self-esteem, social isolation and exclusion. Without a work environment, the opportunity to develop language skills is also reduced.

“The English used was simple and clear.”

Volunteer, portfolio training

Good practice in volunteering

The portfolio is designed to demonstrate UK work experience to employers, the lack of which is a recognised barrier to employment for refugees. Asylum seekers should be more able and confident to discuss their skills and experience with future employers, should they be given permission to remain in the UK.

Benefits and challenges

Participants found the course an empowering experience, as they analysed the skills they had to offer and those they wished to develop for use in future employment. They have improved communication skills and vocabulary and increased self-confidence, leading to a more successful integration into the host society. Importantly, the course prepared them to be able to present their skills to employers: they can fully and effectively describe their UK voluntary experience. Employers should benefit from having potential employees who have an understanding of the UK labour market, work systems and culture.

The courses were aimed at students with intermediate or upper intermediate English: the first challenge was to recruit students at this language level. The second challenge was whether, post-training, the students might still require tutorial support to complete the Volunteer Placement Portfolio. The third challenge was encouraging students to complete the portfolio after the training had ended.

Innovation

The portfolio concept is well established. However, this project was innovative in its application to volunteering and the situation of asylum seekers. It seeks to use the portfolio concept to fully maximise the benefits of the volunteering experience for the participant. One innovative way it did this was to incorporate into the portfolio a unit on how to write a reflective diary.

Through carefully designed content and structure, the course encouraged students to engage with the placement organisation and stretch their language skills. The activities prepared the students with the information and communication skills they need to get the most from the experience; the process of working on the portfolio developed the students' language skills, boosted their confidence and importantly helped prepare them for the world of work.

“It improved my English skills.”

Volunteer, portfolio training

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.3 Volunteering for work-related experience in mainstream settings**

Many refugees and asylum seekers volunteer, but most do so within their community, or as part of a refugee organisation they know and trust. This volunteering has great value. Far fewer go on to volunteer in other, non-refugee organisations, and yet such volunteering is likely to have many benefits – for the volunteers, for the organisations that take them on, and for the communities or clients they serve.

In order that volunteering could help asylum seekers prepare for the time when they might have permission to work, EXCHANGES partners encouraged and helped people to volunteer in non-refugee settings. The case studies in this section show the different ways in which this could help people prepare for employment.

However, volunteering cannot be a substitute for paid employment, and the benefits of employment to individuals, communities and society as a whole.

Based on their experience of working with this vulnerable group, all EXCHANGES partners advocated strongly that asylum seekers should be permitted to work. However, given national policies preventing this, volunteering was the only option allowing asylum seekers access to and understanding of the workplace.

4.3.1 Volunteering in a Regional Labour Centre, Hungary

As part of the ESÉLY Development Partnership, a Hungarian Labour Centre offered opportunities for volunteering in the public sector: this had benefits both for the individual (through the work experience they gained) and also for the organisations concerned, through developing their capacity and awareness.

The main aim of the programme was to involve asylum seekers as volunteers in a public sector organisation. It was innovative because this approach had not been taken before in the public sector in Hungary. The idea emanated from the volunteering examples and ideas shared at the EXCHANGES transnational conference in England, organised by the EASI DP (2005).

According to the Hungarian Act 86 (2005), an employer financed by a state budget is authorised to take on volunteers. The Labour Centre therefore received permission from the relevant Ministry to work as an official ‘employer’ of volunteers, and was registered in the database.

The volunteering opportunity was advertised among the asylum seekers who took part in the first EQUAL training in Hungary. Out of many applicants, four people were selected, with the help of the reception centre social worker. The volunteers were given placements in different departments (such as information technology, customer services and child care). They each signed a contract that defined the roles of beneficiary and ‘employer’ and included confidentiality clauses (these were written in both English and Hungarian). The initiative aimed to match skills with needs, and provided participants with travel money, internet and phone facilities in the office and a reference.

Good practice in volunteering

The mainstreaming strategy included promoting this project transnationally (in Paris and Malmo, Sweden), writing up case studies and publishing articles in Labour Review and local daily newspapers. The scheme was also profiled in the INVOLVE report published by CEV (CEV, 2006).

Benefits and obstacles

From the volunteers' perspective, the experience enabled them to get information about a public administration system, to practise and develop Hungarian language skills and to get to know more about the Hungarian work place. They reported that their integration into Hungarian society was made easier. They could demonstrate they were useful participants in society, and this led to an improvement in their self-esteem. They were also able to develop their own networks and pass their knowledge on to other asylum seekers living in the reception centre.

From the employers' side, they were able to learn more about asylum seekers and the problems they face, and this enabled them to better prevent and handle discrimination. The initiative was low cost, proactive and was a means of capacity building: it added value to the work being done by meeting human resource and staffing shortages. It enabled the Labour Centre to give a better service to refugee and immigrant clients. Working alongside volunteer asylum seekers helped motivate the work force. It decreased prejudice and supported tolerance and social cohesion, and was in line with the equal opportunities and diversity strategies of the Hungarian government.

The main challenges included legal obstacles to starting the process; communication problems; lack of knowledge about life and systems in Hungary; challenges as to how to find the appropriate volunteers and then to find the best area for the volunteers to be part of.

Innovation

This was a highly innovative project. The Labour Centre was the only one in the country involving asylum seekers as volunteers. The process and the method took advantage of new legislation permitting the opening up of the public sector to volunteers (Law No. 139 /1997 on Asylum and Law No 86/2005 on employing volunteers).

There is scope for expanding this scheme within Hungary: the knowledge and methodology is transferable to other public administration agencies. With appropriate dissemination, the scheme will help to develop a standard methodology for psychological support within the refugee programme; it could also help with the training and employment of refugees with volunteer experience, particular with regard to certain roles such as counselling and social work.



Good practice in volunteering

4.3.2 Volunteering in the public health sector: Elthorne Learning Centre, England

One of the roles of the Elthorne Learning Centre (ELC) in the EASI Development Partnership was to deliver a Community Health Mentoring and Volunteering Programme for asylum seekers.

The participants were able to take part in a training course introducing them to health care and the health system in the UK, and looking at volunteering and routes to employment. This was followed by an optional volunteer placement in the health sector. Some participants volunteered in hospitals, others helped in care homes or took on placements with community health charities as outreach workers.

Asylum seekers are a hard to reach community. They are often unaware of the services available, and of their rights and responsibilities. Likewise, there is widespread confusion among health service providers as to the entitlements of asylum seekers, and legal issues regarding asylum seekers access to public funds. As a result, access to services is often blocked. Through involving both asylum seekers and health service providers, the programme aimed to provide accurate and useful information and to help overcome these barriers.

The course included the following topics:

- the social and economic factors that affect health and well-being
- how an individual's personal experiences affect their definition of health
- how community health is affected by cultural, social and economic factors
- how health services are delivered to the local population
- the resources and opportunities available in the community to support health and well-being
- the potential for community action on health
- recognition of the potential for community involvement within the local health service
- the principles and values that underpin community development.

The students were assessed by building portfolios, which included projects, worksheets, learning materials and written work by the students. The course was accredited by the Open College Network: as this is a UK network, students who were moved or dispersed could continue at another institution.

“The skills we learnt included being in a group, listening and concentrating, having more confidentiality and accountability. We also learnt teamwork, counselling, caring for clients who are really depressed and confused, and communicating with people who cannot hear, but can talk. What I liked most about the activities was to get some friends and to be together as a family.”

Sarah, Uganda, volunteer at Mildmay HIV Hospital

Good practice in volunteering

Elthorne Learning Centre used its strong links with refugee community organisations to ensure the course and volunteer placements were appropriate for the participants.

Barriers and benefits

The need to secure Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for volunteers was problematic, particularly with regard to identity documents.

However, the programme had many benefits. Volunteering successfully provided the asylum seekers with UK references, work experience and the development of existing and new skills. All the participants said they found it easier to access health services and understand written texts through improved vocabulary. Students clearly internalised many of the aspects of their health training. When questioned about their learning at various points in the course they were able to demonstrate increased knowledge about health issues and the health system.

Mainstreaming came through the links with health organisations: the programme created an awareness of asylum seekers as a potentially valuable labour resource with important skills, including language and communication skills which enable them to bring comfort to patients. The volunteers provided support, time and enthusiasm to organisations which did not otherwise have the capacity to provide additional care services. It also contributed to the capacity building of refugee community organisations that engaged in the placement activities, as it provided them with volunteers with outreach skills, knowledge of services and an understanding of how cultural and social factors affect health.

“We learned the role of rehabilitation for patients with mental health through being a support worker.... It is important to learn rules about health and safety, food handling, hygiene, office practice and management, confidentiality and managing emergency and road safety and managing aggressive clients.”

Elizabeth, Zambia, volunteer at Mildmay HIV Hospital

“I support the clients on their day to day health and hygiene including washing, taking medication and general supervision. I have learnt how to communicate with the residents and how to cope with their behaviour.”

Helena, Tanzania, volunteer at a private care home, caring for mental health patients



Good practice in volunteering

PAN AFRICAN SEXUAL HEALTH CHARITY: OUTREACH VOLUNTEERING

The Pan African Sexual Health Charity runs outreach activities in two North London boroughs, working with African and Caribbean women in particular. They distribute leaflets about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and they also work on issues relating to female genital mutilation (FGM). They link up with teachers, community retailers and others to raise awareness of sexual health. The project is based at the offices of Ethiopian Community Centre in UK, and usually has around 20 volunteers.

The Elthorne training provided a solid basis for a volunteering placement with this charity. On the training, for instance, students looked at how to prepare outreach sessions. They worked in groups to devise a list of resources, and looked at practical arrangements and the kinds of people they would meet and interact with. Tirhas volunteered there for two months, after completing the Elthorne training course:

“I have built confidence to talk to people and developed my communication skills and listening skills, and meeting different people. We were distributing leaflets, condoms and talking to people about HIV awareness on the streets, in Ethiopian hairdressers, in pubs, libraries, and Eritrean restaurants.”

Tirhas, volunteer

4.3.3 Volunteering outside the refugee sector: a report by tandem, UK

Tandem is a UK-based organisation which has worked extensively on issues relating to volunteering and asylum.

As part of the EASI DP, tandem produced a handbook on volunteering by asylum seekers into organisations outside the refugee sector. Through extensive networking, the project identified a widespread need at organisational and policy-making level for more information about this area of volunteering, the kinds of barriers that exist and the ways of overcoming or changing them, and where you can go for help.

The project therefore explored case studies of non-refugee organisations where asylum seekers were volunteering, including an environmental agency, a charity shop, a hospital, school governors, and residential volunteering with young people with disabilities. It produced a report documenting these, titled *A Part of Society*, which was published in July 2006, and launched at the Science Museum in London (Wilson and Lewis, 2006).

The report aims to share learning and good practice with volunteer managers, policy makers, refugee agencies and others, to promote greater diversity and inclusion on volunteering. In addition to describing the case studies, it lists key UK policy and legislation, and it summarises the learning of the volunteers, managers, policy makers and others under five headings:

Good practice in volunteering

getting started

recruitment

volunteering outside the refugee sector

leaving volunteering

follow on

It also includes lists of useful agencies and resources.

Influencing policy and practice

Some recommendations from 'A Part of Society' have been passed to other initiatives, including the review conducted by the Criminal Records Bureau, and the Commission for the Future of Volunteering. The EASI DP and the wider EXCHANGES partnership are active advocates of issues relating to volunteering and the right to work. It has therefore been possible to disseminate the report more widely, and to target policy makers at different levels, through EASI and EXCHANGES networks and initiatives.

However, at a policy level, the significant changes that need to take place are difficult to achieve. These include:

- inclusion of key asylum documents on the lists of forms of identification recognised by the Criminal Records Bureau
- the position of the UK government that integration begins only when an asylum seeker is given leave to remain
- continuing lack of awareness that asylum seekers are allowed to volunteer
- lack of appreciation of the key role played by volunteer managers in building diversity
- additional barriers faced by young asylum seekers.

The handbook was distributed widely to refugee and non-refugee organisations through EASI and other networks, and it can be downloaded from the tandem website (www.tandem-uk.com/vol_asylum.htm). At EASI events in England, and at other conferences, there were opportunities to raise issues, run workshops, and talk to people about their work and the findings of the handbook. There was very positive feedback from volunteer managers and others across the UK.

“I don’t want to be apart from society – I want to be part of it.”

Zhila, volunteer, Maryhill Citizens Advice Bureau

“I recommend it to a lot of people – I tell them we can get new skills, I explain that its not just for the British. The staff and volunteers are all nationalities’

Tina, volunteer, Volunteer Centre Westminster

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.4 Capacity building through volunteering**

The term 'capacity building' is used to describe the building of knowledge, competence, structures, resources and other factors that can help individuals and organisations to develop and work effectively and efficiently to achieve positive results.

For the EXCHANGES partners, capacity building was a key component, not just in ensuring the success of the various projects they ran, but in working towards sustainability and dissemination at the end of the EXCHANGES programme.

The following are examples of some of the initiatives where volunteering played a key part in building capacity.

4.4.1 Centre Culturel Franco-Tchéchénie, France

The Centre Culturel Franco-Tchéchénie (Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre) is a refugee community organisation (RCO) and, through its capacity-building links with the longer-established Chechen Committee, it is also one of the partners in the FAAR Development Partnership.

In the French context it was important to FAAR that at least one of their partners should be an RCO. The involvement of the Cultural Centre was facilitated by CIMADE, a French NGO specialising in public awareness of foreigners' rights and reception of asylum seekers, and one of the FAAR partners. CIMADE also works at community level to help people to take part in community integration through RCOs. Through its work with the Chechen community it has developed a model of self help involving close partnership between French and Chechen people.

The Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre began involving Chechen asylum seekers as volunteers in 2003. That year, the number of Chechens arriving in France was very high. The organisation was also meeting highly committed individuals, both Chechen and French, who wanted to take part in Chechen integration in France. Their involvement as volunteers has played a key role in developing successful and innovative practice.

The first task was to enable a Chechen volunteer team to begin activities: the training for this was set up the Chechen Committee and CIMADE. The Chechen team was trained in the French language, in management, public relations and other issues. Gradually, they became autonomous: the emphasis was on enabling people to help themselves and to integrate step by step. The training given to the Chechen team also helped ensure they were able to work closely with the French people in the organisation, and with other individuals and agencies.

CIMADE's support was important because, at the beginning, the Chechen asylum seekers involved in the Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre were not aware of French legislation, and did not speak French. This lack of knowledge was a significant obstacle. French volunteers gave French lessons to their Chechen colleagues when it was not possible to find places in CIMADE's French classes. They looked for new partnerships and financial support, and made the public aware of the Cultural Centre activities and needs. Leading the activities together, French and Chechens were able to set up a really mixed organisation.

Good practice in volunteering

In addition, French participation in the Cultural Centre built capacity in various ways. It gave Chechen volunteers more time to set up events by themselves, and they organised regular activities such as language lessons, dance lessons, cooking activity. This was very motivating, because people were able to act speedily, retaining a greater connection with their community.

Chechen volunteers were free to adopt their own, familiar management rules with their community. This increased efficiency. At the same time, they were working with French people, in order to begin their integration in the host society.

This work had a particular importance because the Chechen community in Paris was so newly-arrived. The way the organisation was set up probably had an influence on the development of the community in France.

FROM VOLUNTEERING TO EMPLOYMENT AND LEADERSHIP OF A COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Issita is a Chechen refugee with three children. She arrived in France in 2002. She joined the Chechen Committee, and through this began to organise parties with her Chechen friends. At the beginning, they cooked Chechen food and organised dancing: things they could do easily before they learnt to speak French. Soon, Issita became the leader of this group of Chechens and French volunteers.

The group became more and more autonomous and progressively the idea of creating a new and independent association arose. Together, they worked on a project to develop a Chechen restaurant. They held conferences on cultural and political issues. They received journalists, writers, human rights defenders, and scholars. In November 2004, Issita managed to organise – with Amnesty International – an afternoon gathering in the Place Trocadéro in Paris for about 1000 people. This event gave her confidence in community action in France.

Issita formed links with French voluntary association partners and began to work (two years after she got refugee status) in a French association for asylum seekers' families (CAFDA), which is a member of the EQUAL FAAR partnership. The Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre's participation in the FAAR partnership was initiated by her, following on a proposal put forward by CIMADE. The Chechen Committee joined FAAR in order to get management advice and support, and especially, to take advantage of CIMADE's experience of the French voluntary sector environment, so that they would be in a position to help build the Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre.

In 2005, Issita became president of the newly-formed Franco-Chechen Cultural Centre. She took part in all significant FAAR meetings, including meeting all transnational partners on several occasions, in Paris and London.

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.4.2 Volunteering in a reception camp, Menedék, Hungary**

Menedék is a non-profit organisation, independent of the government. It works to represent migrants (including asylum seekers), acting as an advocate to raise awareness and alter attitudes in the majority society, political and administrative bodies and the media. It promotes integration and builds partnerships with others working towards similar goals.

Menedék became involved in capacity building through volunteering as part of its work at the Debrecen reception camp for new-arrivals. This came about when one asylum seeker approached them wanting to volunteer (see the box on page 52). Others followed, also wanting to give their time and to help. This in turn began to enrich the work of Menedék, bringing in new ideas and highlighting unresolved problems.

As a result of this, and in the framework of a European Refugee Fund project, Menedék set up several community programmes at the Debrecen Reception Centre in 2005. After the end of the project, they had to cut the programme back because of a lack of capacity and financial support. However, asylum seekers who had been involved in the programme felt empowered to look for ways to carry on with the community activities.

The involvement of volunteers at the camp proved to be one of the most useful solutions to the various challenges of running community initiatives. There were some local volunteers in place (Hungarian students teaching the Hungarian language for the participants of the EQUAL project), but the inclusion of asylum seekers as volunteers was key. It meant that successful leisure time programmes for different groups at the reception centre continued to run, with special attention to children. Language and computer skills are essential for people who hope to secure work, so training in these was offered to adults.

The outcomes and impact of the activities suggest that volunteers, through their ideas and commitment, can bring diversity and interest to the everyday lives of people living in the camp. Asylum seeker volunteers have the advantage of closer contact with and knowledge of the target group. As residents of the camp, they can help service providers to understand asylum seekers' problems better, and also to find the right response.

Thanks to the work of the asylum seeker volunteers, more and more people living in the camp were motivated to leave their room or the camp and choose useful and profitable ways of passing the time. This helped people overcome some of the mental health problems caused by their flight into exile and the inactivity of life in the camp.

Obstacles and innovation

Obstacles have included:

- a lack of regular communication and cooperation between the volunteers and colleagues of the Association
- personal problems of the volunteers (including psychological problems or a negative decision in the asylum procedure)
- lack of technical equipment
- lack of funding
- communication and language problems

Good practice in volunteering

- lack of interest among the target group
- Menedék colleagues not showing interest in the volunteers' ideas (or not having enough time to do so)
- mismatch of volunteers to roles
- ensuring equal treatment of all volunteers: impartiality

It was sometimes a challenge to find appropriate volunteers (and handle those who were not the right ones – in one case by finding another kind of activity, so as not to lose their enthusiasm).

The initiative was innovative because it was an entirely new way of working. Nothing similar had taken place at a reception camp previously. Though Menedék had regularly worked with Hungarian volunteers, and occasionally with volunteers from within the camp, it had never done this systematically, as part of an organised programme. The initiative led to new insights and developments in other areas.

VOLUNTEERING IN A HUNGARIAN RECEPTION CENTRE

In January 2007, a 22-year-old Bangladeshi man arrived at the Debrecen Refugee Reception Centre. Soon after, he contacted the Menedék Association and, once he knew more about the organisation, he offered his help on a voluntary basis.

In cooperation with Menedék's social workers, he regularly led programmes for children living in the refugee centre, where he ran a computer course, handicrafts sessions, play-clubs and other activities. The programmes took place in one of the reception centre buildings. He used the sessions not just to teach computer skills or different games – he also talked to them about behaviour and customs. Menedék staff reported that this kind of personal development helped build up a well-functioning, cohesive community.

In addition to the children, he also helped Menedék's adult clients to use different computer programmes. Thanks to his enthusiasm other residents joined to his voluntary work and Menedék was enriched by the new ideas and greater awareness of unresolved problems.

**Good
practice in
volunteering****4.4.3 The EASI Advisory Group and capacity building, England**

The EASI Advisory Group was co-ordinated and supported by RAGU, the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit based at London Metropolitan University.

The primary aim of the Advisory Group was to involve asylum seekers in providing advice and consultation to EASI partners on their programmes. Through training and different forms of support, Advisory Group members were able to advise on the needs and issues of asylum seekers and to inform the EASI partnership's policies, to influence change on the empowerment and integration of asylum seekers.

EASI partners were aware that in many cases beneficiary consultation takes place too late or at a level that has little eventual impact on the proposed project. From September 2005 on, therefore, Advisory Group members regularly attended and participated in EASI partnership meetings and attended specialist training from September 2005. They were consulted by EASI partners on the activities and services developed and delivered by them through the EQUAL programme. The Advisory Group was also consulted on the policy concerns of the partnership. Its work addressed the general lack of meaningful consultation and involvement of beneficiaries in the design of programmes.

The Advisory Group members carried out thirteen consultations with EASI partners in the last two years of the EXCHANGES initiative. They attended and chaired partnership meetings, attended conferences and delivered presentations both in the UK and in Europe. From May 2006 the work of the Advisory Group was mainstreamed through London Refugee Economic Action (LORECA). LORECA is operating as a discrete unit within the Equality and Diversity team at the London Development Agency (LDA). It works in conjunction with the Mayor of London's Board for Refugee Integration (BRIL), on education, training and employment issues.

The Advisory Group, in their capacity as the LORECA Reference Group, carried out policy consultations in specific areas for LORECA concerning statutory policy on status and access to ESOL, and access to local government provision.

In the field of capacity building, the Advisory Group ensured that the activities delivered by EASI partners were more appropriate to meeting the needs of asylum seekers. This led to better engagement with asylum seekers as clients and as volunteers in a range of projects.

Good practice in volunteering

MAINSTREAMING : LORECA AND THE ADVISORY GROUP, ENGLAND

From May 2006, the work of the EASI DP Advisory Group was mainstreamed through London Refugee Economic Action (LORECA).

Development objectives: these included a commitment to building the capacity of Advisory Group members to engage in policy debate.

Activities: These included agreeing Terms of Reference and consultation on policy issues including the impact of the five year limit on refugee residence, local government best practice on refugee employment and the impact of rule changes in the provision of teaching English as a Second Other Language (ESOL).

Training: has included sessions on the London policy environment; presentation skills; giving and receiving effective feedback on policy.

Evidence from these consultations have informed:

- the Mayor's Board for Refugee Integration in London (BRIL)
- LORECA Policy Briefings – disseminated to network of statutory, private, voluntary/community and refugee sectors
- LORECA policy interventions
- London Development Agency programmes – mainstreaming equality and diversity

Reasons for working in this way:

- a commitment to user involvement to inform policy and practice
- it helps LORECA to understand the human impact of existing policy and practice
- it develops credible policy and practice interventions
- it gives 'voice' to refugees and asylum seekers in the context of a hostile environment to asylum and integration
- it builds the capacity of refugees and asylum seekers to engage more effectively in civil society

Challenges

The challenges for the coordination of the group were:

- this was an innovative activity from which RAGU was learning and evaluating on a daily basis
- individual Advisory Group members experienced many other priorities in their lives and this sometimes compromised their capacity to engage in the Advisory Group



Good practice in volunteering

- it was important to work in ways compatible with the varying demands on Advisory Group members' time, while also sustaining their interest and motivation
- communicating appropriately (for example not all AG members had access to email)
- it was necessary to explain the complicated systems and jargon used within the EQUAL programme in simple language
- ensuring attendance at meetings could be challenging because, as the group became more empowered and informed, many members developed additional volunteering commitments

Innovation

The EASI Advisory Group was innovative in that it was not just a beneficiary group that was consulted by organisations from time to time: the group members were actively involved in the work of the development partnership through regular participation in partnership meetings and working groups. Their involvement was both about the personal development of the individual Advisory Group members as well as the building the capacity of the partnership.

The customised training programme was designed in response to a needs assessment of the Advisory Group members carried out by the AG members and the RAGU coordinators. The training was tailored for the group, to support and develop their consultative role, taking into account their situation as asylum seekers. The training was another innovative dimension of the project

The Advisory Group model could be replicated in other EU countries as well as in the UK. It could also apply to other types of user-group where beneficiary participation is key to the delivery of services.

“The feedback from the Advisory Group allowed us to redevelop and market the course so that participants felt valued being a volunteer and helping other people. The initial impressions of the group were very useful – it showed us what the initial impressions and concerns would be of our target audience.”

Refugee Council, 2006 (for RAGU internal assessment)

“As a result of the Advisory Group we went with a different approach that was reinforced by their recommendations. We had everyone working as a team to develop the social enterprises, with no distinction between paid staff, volunteers, refugees and asylum seekers. It was very satisfactory for all participants.”

Innovative Enterprise Action, 2006 (for RAGU internal assessment)

4.4.4 Building the RETAS talks team, England

RETAS – Leeds (Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service) ran a training course to develop a volunteer talks team. It also arranged public speaking engagements for them. The project enabled RETAS – Leeds to build its capacity to raise public awareness.

The underlying problem the course aimed to address was the need to provide sound information and counteract some of the myths about asylum in the public arena. It set out to enable audiences to come to compare the media version of asylum with the real facts presented by people seeking asylum in the UK. Audiences could then make better informed decisions as to how to treat asylum seekers and refugees. It was hoped that some people at least would change their attitude, talk to those within their immediate sphere of influence and take action towards positive change.

The project also aimed to:

- build the self confidence of volunteers
- help them realise the issues being addressed are common to all asylum seekers
- develop good advocacy/public speaking skills
- enable volunteers to contribute towards attitudes
- empower participants by building their awareness of the role they can play in bringing about change

The course acted as an empowering tool to equip volunteers with skills to deliver presentations in schools. It covered topics such advocacy and public speaking and presentation skills. Volunteers were able to share their experiences of speaking in public about such a sensitive topic.

The project arranged for participants to speak in schools. This approach was taken because it provided a structured environment, and because speaking at a school enabled the project to reach a wider community (parents, friends and relatives). It was easy to incorporate the presentations into class-time as there is a demand for speakers relevant to curriculum topics such as geography, and wider issues such as immigration, citizenship, diversity and other issues.

The project has the potential to be rolled out nationally or transnationally. As a result of the project, individuals came forward to offer help or request school visits. In addition, more was achieved for asylum seekers in terms of petitions to government, meetings for politicians (see the box on page 57), advocating for better financial support for asylum seekers, and generating positive media publicity.



Good practice in volunteering

SCHOOL STUDENTS MEET AN MP IN A UK ASYLUM CAMPAIGN

In July 2007, a dynamic group of Year 8 (age 12–13) students from Featherstone Technology College, Pontefract, met their Member of Parliament (MP) John Trickett to advocate for a fairer government policy towards asylum seekers. The students were inspired after meeting William Jidjou, an asylum seeker from Cameroon who spoke to their class about his experiences as an asylum seeker. William's story, and his experiences since coming to the UK, galvanised the students into action and they wrote to John Trickett, created posters and created a PowerPoint presentation to show the MP.

John Trickett MP said:

“I am delighted that as part of the school's Citizenship programme young people are gaining an understanding of international issues and the social impact this has on each of us as global citizens.”

William, a member of the RETAS talks team said:

“I am very surprised and touched that the children have responded in this way to my talk and the way they feel and share my story. The most important thing for me is to challenge the way people look at asylum seekers. Some people are very kind, but many, if you tell them you are an asylum seeker, turn you away.”

“Despite the stress I am going through I want to help people understand that an asylum seeker is a human being in a lot of difficulty who wants and needs a safe place. I never chose to be in that situation, I am not here through choice. I'd like to thank the children for all their support and their campaign.”

Good practice in volunteering

4.4.5 Managing volunteers in RCOs, Yorkshire, UK

Tandem ran a short-term training and support project focussing on managing volunteers in refugee community organisations (RCOs). This set out to help RCOs in one region (South and West Yorkshire) through providing them with training, consultancy, resources and networks around volunteering and general capacity building. Through this, tandem enabled them to improve their volunteer management practices, to build up links with other agencies, and to draw in more volunteers.

Refugee community organisations rely on volunteers – community members who give their time and skills for free. However, they often struggle to recruit and keep volunteers, and may lack the skills or capacity to manage volunteers well. Management difficulties can cover a wide range of areas, including access to funding; contact with volunteer centres and others; understanding of volunteer roles, support and supervision; and other issues.

The training and support worked well. There was a high ratio of trainers to participants (three trainers to ten participants) which was highly valued. Importantly, two of the trainers were themselves refugees with considerable insight into community volunteering. Tandem set out to build the skills of these trainers during the project, and this was also achieved. Participants also valued the opportunity to meet funders and learn about making funding proposals.

The project found that there are considerable barriers to developing volunteering in RCOs:

- they have to deal with trauma and crisis among asylum seekers, and this makes it difficult to take stock or plan
- they have limited or no funding
- they often do not have premises
- they rely on volunteers – sometimes just a few activists at risk of burn-out
- they do not have the capacity to manage, and sometimes lack experience in this area
- there is limited awareness of the value of volunteering in the community
- RCO managers may have limited knowledge of wider volunteering practice, organisations and resources
- new asylum seekers can volunteer, but may be very vulnerable and have particular needs for support

The project not only helped Yorkshire-based RCOs to develop and practice volunteer management skills. A short report and evaluation was published, enabling tandem to share findings with other agencies. This was also distributed through the EASI network. The report, 'Managing volunteers in refugee communities' is available at: www.tandem-uk.com/vol_asylum.htm

5



5. MAIN FINDINGS

5 Main findings

This section summarises the benefits of volunteering, as identified by the three development partnerships in EXCHANGES. Challenges and solutions are set out in each of the case studies in Section 4.

5.1 Volunteering and empowerment

Volunteering can empower asylum seekers because it:

- builds confidence
- gives people access to information and networks
- helps build new skills and strengthens existing ones
- strengthens language and communication skills
- provides insight into the host country's culture and society
- gives people experience of organisations and work cultures
- can enable people to build their own community organisations
- can help them find practical solutions to other difficulties they face
- can provide structure and purpose
- can help build overcome isolation, and enable asylum seekers and members of the host community to work side by side and learn from each other, enhancing social cohesion

Another element of empowerment involves disseminating information out to the wider community. Most EXCHANGES projects had an element of public awareness built in to them, and often asylum seekers were given the opportunity to reach out to different audiences. Several examples are included in this report. There were also attempts to gain coverage in the media, to counteract the normally hostile portrayal of asylum seekers. These had varying degrees of success.

5.2 The training and preparation of volunteers

EXCHANGES partners found that training brought benefits not just to volunteers, but also to the organisations they volunteered with and to others in their communities and beyond. 'Preparation' for volunteering was also valuable, and could include preparatory visits, initial conversations and interviews, reading material and other information.

The following benefits of training were identified for asylum seekers. It can:

- help them understand and fit in to their new organisation
- help them understand what volunteering is, and how to get the most out of it
- develop new skills that help them in their volunteering role



Main findings

- enable people to strengthen and share existing skills and knowledge
- help with language development and learning specialist language and jargon relating to the area in which they volunteer
- help asylum seekers be involved at advisory and strategic level
- assist with personal development and enable people to gain accreditation and qualifications that are recognised in the host country
- help people gain employment.
- enhance communication with the communities volunteers serve

Likewise, EXCHANGES partners found training for volunteer managers (or information-sharing sessions) could help them involve refugees and asylum seekers in ways that are useful to the organisation and fulfilling to the individual. In some cases, it helped that staff or volunteer managers had a basic understanding of the asylum system.

5.3 Volunteering for work experience in mainstream organisations

Many EXCHANGES partners helped asylum seekers to find volunteer placements outside the refugee sector.

For asylum seekers, this area of volunteering had various benefits. It:

- gave them experience of different work settings and cultures in the host country
- enabled them to develop language and communication skills
- promoted understanding and integration
- helped people feel they were 'giving something back' to the host society
- helped them look at ways into work, and gave them access to advice and job references

The placement organisations also reported benefits:

- increased capacity
- greater diversity and meeting equal opportunities targets
- improved service delivery
- increased understanding among staff and volunteers
- better access to vulnerable client groups

However, it was clear to EXCHANGES partners that volunteering cannot be a substitute for work, and that the greatest benefit to individuals and society would come from allowing asylum seekers to undertake paid employment. In this sense, while volunteering could provide valuable experience and preparation, it was often taken on as the only option available to people barred from working. EXCHANGES partners have campaigned to change this counterproductive situation.

Main findings 5.4 Capacity building through volunteering

EXCHANGES partners found that volunteering can be a key component in building capacity in a range of initiatives and organisations.

The involvement of asylum seekers as volunteers can:

- bring new ideas to an organisation
- increase understanding of the asylum system and the needs of asylum seekers
- help draw new client groups to the organisation, or expand existing ones
- help with the development of strategy and policy
- enable the organisation to consult with user groups
- help asylum seekers with the development of their own community organisations

5.5 Volunteering and good practice

The following are some of the ways to achieve good practice in all areas of volunteering, based on the experience of EXCHANGES partners:

- networks and partnership working between organisations are key
- volunteering and empowerment can be facilitated by organisations, but the volunteer must be enabled to find key information to make choices
- social and vocational benefits of volunteering must be addressed
- free access to appropriate training should be available
- training should be based on a careful assessment of needs, goals and existing skills and knowledge
- evidence of learning and volunteering experience helps both the trainee and potential employers/volunteer placement organisations
- support with language and communication skills is key: language tuition can be separate or 'embedded' in the volunteering context
- travel and other expenses must be covered
- appropriate supervision and support, including mentoring, can help asylum seekers into rewarding volunteering opportunities
- refugee and placement organisations must be sensitive to the additional pressures and reporting requirements asylum seekers face
- volunteer organisations must be able to deal with endings: whether someone is ready to move on in their life, or because they are suddenly dispersed or detained
- placement and refugee support agencies must help volunteers with progression, whether into training, volunteering or work
- support must be offered with job search (looking for vacancies, interview preparation, references etc)



Main findings 5.6 The limitations of volunteering

Despite its many benefits, partners in EXCHANGES also recognise the limitations of volunteering.

Volunteering by asylum seekers is largely confined to the refugee sector unless specific initiatives, such as those under EQUAL, are available. Other organisations are often uncertain as to whether and how they can involve asylum seekers as volunteers. Asylum seekers with limited financial resources are restricted in their ability to travel, and are also often unaware of the options and possibilities. Forced dispersal can cause disruptions.

There are numerous other barriers to meaningful involvement in rewarding and developmental volunteering opportunities. Accessing such opportunities is largely dependant on social and information networks. For example, an asylum seeker with an interest in education will be better placed to volunteer in a school if they have children attending. Part of the reason relates, in the UK, to the Department of Children, Schools and Families guidance on safeguarding children. Schools are encouraged to follow more rigorous checks on volunteers who they do not know.

Volunteers are also limited in the range of vocational skills they are able to develop. The focus is often on soft skills such as communication and time management. This can be attributed in part to restrictions on accredited learning that takes place in the work place, and volunteering entitlements.

We have given some examples in this report where asylum seekers successfully get involved as volunteers in non-refugee (or 'mainstream') organisations. This is greatly to the credit of the individuals and agencies involved, and as with refugee-sector volunteering, the feedback is positive. It is vital that at European level, and through government policy and funding streams, efforts are made to support and strengthen volunteering in community organisations, the refugee sector and across many other volunteering agencies. Furthermore through the provision of training and accreditation, it is important that volunteers are helped to prepare for work. Underlying this, however, is the importance of the right to work. EXCHANGES partners are clear that this is a pre-requisite for overcoming poverty, building social and economic capital, and promoting integration and cohesion.

5.7 Conclusions and recommendations

5.7.1 Volunteering and asylum seekers

The EXCHANGES partnership supports the development of volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees. There is widespread evidence, both from the experience of partners within EXCHANGES and from other agencies and researchers, of the range of benefits that volunteering can bring for individual asylum seekers, the organisations that involve them, and the wider community.

This has been endorsed at government level. In the UK, for example, at the time of removing the work concession in 2002, the government affirmed its commitment to asylum seekers volunteering and engaging in purposeful activities. The UK government made it clear that volunteering should not count as employment, paid or unpaid (from which asylum seekers are barred at least for one year).

Main findings

As this report shows, there is much good practice already in place. However, we believe strongly that further steps should be taken with regard to legislation, policy and resourcing, at local, national and European level. We note, for instance, that there is no obligation on Member States in the Reception Directive to make any language provision for asylum seekers.

EXCHANGES partners support the message and recommendations emanating from the European Policy Forum's conference in Malmo in 2007, which looked at the minimum standards and the contribution of EQUAL to a dignified standard of living for asylum seekers in Europe (European Policy Forum, 2007).

Overall, we hope the experience of EXCHANGES and other partner initiatives will help enable and encourage the EU to develop strategies to promote and further develop volunteering in Europe, and the inclusion of asylum seekers as volunteers in roles that are worthwhile and beneficial to agencies, communities and individuals. We hope that Member States will also develop their volunteering strategies in ways that take into account the needs and potential of asylum seekers, and so impact favourably on integration.

5.7.2 The benefits of employment and integration

At present, the majority of asylum seekers in the UK, Hungary and France are prevented from working.

Although they are able to volunteer, EXCHANGES partners are concerned that excluding asylum seekers from paid employment leads to them becoming socially isolated. It also damages their longer-term chances of successfully integrating as refugees.

We also believe – again, based on our work with asylum seekers over a three year period – that integration starts at day one. The early experience of asylum seekers will have a major impact on their ability to integrate as refugees, or not. This is particularly the case with regard to getting a job and becoming part of the European economy.

Prosperous and inclusive communities cannot be built or sustained if some of their members are living in poverty. We know that volunteering is one way in which integration and inclusion can be promoted. However, we are concerned that governments risk undermining their efforts to combat social exclusion and build community cohesion if they continue to prevent asylum seekers from working.

“My English was really poor when I came for the first time. You have to push yourself to learn new words and speak English all the time – that’s what has taught me how to really speak.”

Johan, volunteer with children with disabilities



Main findings

THE EUROPEAN DIRECTIVE AND ASYLUM SEEKERS RIGHT TO WORK

By February 2005 all three Member States represented in the EXCHANGES partnership (UK, Hungary and France) had implemented the European Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003. This broadly allows asylum seekers to apply for permission to work if they have not received an initial decision on their asylum claim after twelve months (see Appendix 3 for more information on the regulations in each country).

The European Directive provides minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers. Giving people the right to apply for permission to work after twelve months is the minimum requirement placed on member states, each of whom aims to process claims much earlier than 12 months.

5.7.3 Recommendations

Volunteering and empowerment

1. 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 misperceptions that it is unpaid work. The right of all volunteers, including asylum seekers, to be reimbursed for volunteering expenses (such as travel and meals) should be upheld.
2. Upon arrival, asylum seekers should have the right to, and be informed about: a skills audit process; access to language training and access to vocational training incorporating a practical component where appropriate. Linked to this, they should be helped to understand and explore volunteering opportunities. However, it is important that volunteering remains an optional activity.
3. More programmes should provide asylum seekers with volunteering opportunities (especially European Social Fund projects targeted specifically at asylum seekers) and current good practice should be disseminated widely.
4. More should be done to raise public awareness about the benefits of asylum seekers volunteering in the community, to enhance integration, understanding and social cohesion.

Main findings

The training and preparation of volunteers

5. Asylum seekers should be helped to understand and explore volunteering opportunities. However, it is important that volunteering remains an optional activity. This should include, where possible, introductory courses, to enable asylum seekers to prepare for volunteering.
6. More programmes should be available to prepare managers and staff in organisations to work with volunteers from different backgrounds, including asylum seekers.
7. 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 Reception Directive to ensure that member states are obliged to assist asylum seekers with the acquisition of language skills.

Volunteering for work-related experience in mainstream organisations

8. Government and public sector agencies should do more to engage with and involve asylum seekers as volunteers, and in roles such as work placement and work shadowing. They and non-government organisations should also involve asylum seeker volunteers on advisory committees and governing bodies.
9. 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.
10. Steps need to be taken to ensure that volunteering provides the best experience for asylum seekers wanting to return to work or to improve their employment opportunities. This includes strengthening links between volunteering organisations, colleges and potential employers.

Capacity building through volunteering

11. 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 to build organisational capacity.

“During my placement I have improved my listening and communication skills and the ability to share my time with others. I learnt to be more tolerant and I have enjoyed working with different nationalities.”

Frank, Uganda, volunteer at a hospital



APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Useful publications

British Refugee Council, 2007, Social Exclusion, Refugee Integration and Entitlement to Work for Asylum Seekers: a policy response
Downloadable from: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

CEV, 2006, INVOLVE: Involvement of Third Country Nationals in Volunteering as a Means of Better Integration, European Volunteer Centre, Brussels
Downloadable from: www.involve-europe.eu

EASI DP, 2006, Exchanges for an EQUAL Europe: Asylum Seekers and Volunteering, November 2005 Conference Report, EASI DP, London
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Appendix 2

EXCHANGES contact details

Contact details of the three lead partners:

EASI Development Partnership UK

Islington Training Network (ITN)
Toyin Fagbemi (Director)
3 Highbury Crescent
London N5 1RN
UK
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7715 0300
Email: toyin@itn.org.uk
www.itn.org.uk

FAAR Development Partnership, France

CIMADE
Veronique Laurens (EQUAL Project Manager)
64 rue Clisson
75013 Paris
France
Tel: 01 44 18 72 68 / 06 30 82 11 02
Email: veronique.laurens@cimade.org
www.cimade.org
ESELYS Development Partnership, Hungary

Menedék (Migransokat Segito Egyesulet/Hungarian Association For Migrants)

Andras Kovats (Director)
1077 Budapest, Jósika u. 2.
Hungary
Tel: 06-1-3221502, 06-30-96457
Email: kovand@mtapti.hu
www.menedek.hu

Appendices

Contact details of EXCHANGES partners profiled in this report:

France

Véronique Laurens
Cimade
64 rue Clisson
75013 Paris
Tel: 01 44 18 72 68 / 06 30 82 11 02
Email: veronique.laurens@cimade.org
www.cimade.org

Martin Rosselot
Comité Tchétchénie Association
21 ter rue Voltaire 75 011
Paris
Tel: 0033-06-85-77-46-09

Hungary

Györgyi Antal
Menedék Association
Debrecen Sámsoni út 149
Hungary 4033
Debrecen
Tel: 0036-52-428-537

Viktoria Koncz
Northern Great Plain Regional Labour Centre
Branch Office and Service Centre
4024 Debrecen, Piac St. 42-48
Hungary
Tel: 00-36-52-513-011
Email: konczviktoria@lab.hu

United Kingdom

Andrew Lawton
Refugee Council
240 Ferndale Road
London SW9 8BB
Andrew.lawton@refugeecouncil.org.uk
+44 (0) 20 7840 4482
www.refugee council.org.uk

Bryan Lowman
Hackney City Farm
1a Goldsmiths Row
London E2 8QA
Email: farm@hackneycityfarm.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 207 729 6381
www.hackneycityfarm.co.uk

Stella Ossei
Elthorne Learning Centre
7 Elthorne Road
London N19 4AJ
Email: stellaossei@isonline
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7272 8960
www.elthornelearningcentre.co.uk

Mohammed Nasraldin
North of England Refugee Service
2 Jesmond Rd West
Newcastle Upon Tyne NE2 4PQ
Tel: +44 (0) 191 245 7311
Email: mm@refugee.org.uk
www.refugee.org.uk

Emma Saunders
Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU)
London Metropolitan University
The Learning Centre
236–250 Holloway Road
London N7 6PP
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7133 2110
Email: e.saunders@londonmet.ac.uk
www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu

Ruth Wilson
Tandem Communications and Research Ltd
21 Kingswood Avenue
Leeds LS8 2DB
+44 (0)113 266 9123
ruth.wilson@tandem-uk.com
www.tandem-uk.com

Nomalanga Moya
RETAS/EAI Leeds
335 Roundhay Road
Harehills
Leeds LS8 4HT
+44 (0) 113 240 7320
Email: noma@retasleeds.org.uk
www.retasleeds.org.uk



Appendix 3

Access to vocational training and employment: regulations in Hungary, France and UK

This section summarises the situation in France, Hungary and the UK with regard to Articles 11 and 12 of the Reception Directive. The term 'transposition' is used to describe the adoption of the Directive in 2003. 'Pre transposition' therefore refers to the regulations and procedures in place before the Directive came into force.

- see sections 3.6 and 3.7 of this report for an explanation of the Reception Directive
- see 'A Baseline Survey' outlining the changing context in Hungary, France and England, downloadable from www.easidp.org.uk/transnational.html for more detailed information on the three different national situations

France

Access to vocational training

No particular arrangement. De facto vocational training is not accessible to asylum seekers – having only short-term residence permits they cannot enter formal training / public training or education. May attend vocational and/or language training organised by associations without public funding. Hence, this is done purely on voluntary basis by associations.

Access to employment

Pre Transposition (2003)

Since 1991, asylum seekers have not been allowed to work. (In some regions permission to work may be granted based on either the employment situation in the region or the sector concerned.)

Post Transposition

Asylum seekers can apply for a work permit after one year of stay in the country. The demand for a work permit requires approval from the departmental labour office, as for any other non EU foreigner. The condition for obtaining this agreement is the fact that the national labour supply can not fill the vacancy in accordance with the job description. Hence 'de facto' the work permit is nearly impossible to obtain.

Hungary

Access to vocational training

Adult asylum seekers have access to education and training but have to pay for this, unless an organisation or institution makes the decision to finance the training from others funds.

Language training is for free for refugees (360 hour course).

Appendices **Access to employment**

Pre and post Transposition

Asylum seekers are in theory allowed to work in Hungary after one year, with a facilitated work permit. Up to that time, asylum seekers can only work in reception centres, but the chances of doing that are slight.

Work permits are issued at the employer's request to the job centre. The job has then to be advertised for 15 days, after which, if the job is still vacant, the employer must make the request again.

UK

Access to vocational training

Asylum seekers have the following access to vocational training and post-school higher education. They:

- can access higher education if they satisfy entry requirements and are able to pay fees (usually set at overseas student rate). Universities have discretion to waive fees or charge at home student rate.
- can attend further education courses if they satisfy entry requirements and are able to pay fees.
- will be charged overseas student rate in first six months.
- if asylum claim not decided after this, eligible for funding and home student fee.
- refused asylum seekers eligible for Section 4 support can access further education funding.
- eligible for funding if 16–18 years old.
- are eligible for vocational college courses which have a work placement, provided that the work part is unpaid.

Access to employment

Pre transposition (2003)

From 1987 to 2002 asylum seekers could work after a six month wait if they had not had a decision on their claim; this permission was removed immediately before the Reception Directive's process began so that immediately pre transposition:

- asylum seekers could not work for money.
- they could not work for payment in kind (eg where they are given free board and lodging) unless they had received permission from the Home Office.

Post transposition

Asylum seekers can apply for permission to work if:

- they have waited more than 12 months for an initial decision by the Home Office on their asylum claim, even if now at appeal stage, and
- the delay in the Home Office's decision was not asylum seeker's fault, or
- the asylum claim is ongoing

They must apply for permission to work from Home Office. There is no time limit for when the decision needs to be made and applications are not routinely processed.

They must receive written permission from Home Office before taking employment. They then receive a new Application Registration Card (ARC) and have the same access to employment as UK nationals.

Making it work: Asylum experiences campaign

Making it work: asylum experiences campaign focuses on tackling discrimination in the UK labour market. It is run by the EQUAL EASI Development Partnership.

The campaign advocates a government policy that actively integrates asylum seekers into the host community from the day they first arrive, and calls for support to be available to enable asylum seekers to acquire skills to prepare them for employment once they receive permission to work.

Such a policy will mean that, at the very least, asylum seekers:

- have access to English language classes from the day they arrive
- have opportunities to identify their strengths and skills and to build on their existing expertise and experience (for their benefit and that of the wider community)
- have opportunities such as volunteering in mainstream organisations and training and mentoring programmes to acquire skills and knowledge to prepare for the labour market
- have the choice and opportunity to work

The EASI Development Partnership is made up of 14 organisations. It contributes to the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers in the UK and Europe.





Further copies of this guide (English only) can be obtained from Islington Training Network, or can be downloaded from the EASI website: www.itn.org.uk/easi.html

A separate executive summary is available in English, French and Hungarian. This can also be downloaded from the EASI website.