

This report was compiled by Teresa Sofio, ERASMUS + Trainee at the Centre of European Volunteering (CEV), from the University of East Anglia. The report is based on information gathered in academic articles online. This is a study on the social integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe, and to fill the gap in the literature about how volunteering impacts their process of integration.

VOLUNTEERING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE

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Executive summary

Since the middle of the 2010s, the influx of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Europe has become a heated topic of discussion in the western community. Issues like budgeting, country allocation and integration have been on the news since the increase of rates in which migrants are reaching Europe since 2015. This report is on the social integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe, and to fill the gap in the literature about how volunteering impacts their process of integration.

This report is built on qualitative data gathered through two interviews with members of NGOs that are active in the field of study, and is complemented by a literature review. It focus on Europe in general, and more precisely in the cases of Portugal and the United Kingdom. It concludes that, as governments have limited budgets: NGOs have a key role in promoting social integration; that the first impact for newcomers should require a multi disciplinary team; that demographics impact the needs to be attended to; and that language is the biggest barrier to integration.

Main Recommendations

- Language classes should be provided by both government institutions and civil society partners (NGOs);
- NGOs should target different demographics according to their needs, especially women and children;
- The actions of the NGOs should aim to provide relief to refugees and asylum seekers as soon as they arrive in the country of reception;
- NGOs should participate in and promote awareness campaigns within the general public to decrease prejudice and stereotypes;

Abbreviations:

ACM	High Commission for Migration
OCDE	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
EU	European Union
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
UK	United Kingdom
CPR	Portuguese Refugee Council
ISS	Institute of Social Security

Introduction

Up until this moment, the rate at which people are being forced to flee their original countries due to war, fear of persecution, or economic reasons, is growing faster than the ability to find a solution for their challenges. Ideally, the best outcome would be that these people could return to their home countries voluntarily, in safety, and with dignity. However, since this is virtually impossible, other solutions must be found, and they include the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in safe countries where these people can be protected. This report looks at the way NGOs, and the role of volunteering can impact the integration of migrant societies, especially in Portugal and the United Kingdom, and intends to contribute to filling the gap in the literature in this field.

The increased flow of asylum applicants to the EU has put pressure on the reception schemes in place in the EU member-states, and it is raising challenges regarding the integration of newcomers into the host countries, as such, it appears to be a global issue that goes beyond borders. The role of the European Union as a centralised response to the crisis is also analysed in this paper.

The 1951 Geneva Convention defined as refugee someone who has “fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of this nationality and is owing of such fear, is unwilling to avail himself the protection of that country. Asylum seekers are those who “ left their country of origin, have sought international protection, have applied to be recognized as a refugee, and are waiting on the decision from the host government. The issue of the integration of refugees and asylum seekers also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, number 16, which reads: “ Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, build effective accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

The process of a migrant adjusting to a new social reality can happen in four ways: assimilation: when the migrant does not wish to maintain their cultural identity and opts for the adoption of the host’s country culture; separation: where migrants hold on to their cultural identity and avoid the host country culture; marginalisation: when a block to each culture is imposed by either part and finally, integration, defined by Berry (1997) as the maintaining of one’s original culture while engaging in daily interactions with other groups. This is, according to the author, the best approach to models of interaction between two cultures, and it’s the one analysed by this report.

Refugee integration is a complex and multidimensional construct, as it encompasses economic, health, educational and social contexts, and this process is depending on the physical and mental health of refugees, how much social support they have upon arrival, as well as the support provided during the adaptation time for refugees and asylum seekers

2- Literary review

2.1 Asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom and in Portugal

2.2 The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's government accepts someone as a refugee if they have fled their original country because of a well-founded "fear of prosecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" in line with the definition provided by the Geneva Convention.

The United Kingdom receives every year refugees and asylum seekers¹, of which 90% originate from Asian and African countries², however, the rate of asylum request approvals remains on half of the applications, meaning that many of those who applied to be protected by the United Kingdom faced rejection and had to seek protection in another host country. In 2021, the United Kingdom received 55,146 asylum applications, and by March 2022, 85,007 people were being supported by the country's government. The support provided by the British institutions to asylum seekers is deemed insufficient as it totals to less than 6£ per day,³ per person. In addition, asylum seekers are also not allowed to work.⁴ These two factors position asylum seekers in a very vulnerable situation. Only 28 days after the decision is made, asylum seekers⁵, now refugees lose access to the subsidy provided by the government and many are faced with a situation of homelessness and underemployment. It is also noted that there is little support for finding accommodations, opening bank accounts, or securing a steady income.

Another issue faced by the United Kingdom is the high level of unaccompanied children arriving in the country. In 2020, 21,000 children applied for asylum arriving in European countries without parents or guardians (UNHCR)⁶. Of these, 4,081 applications were made in the United Kingdom. These children come mostly from Sudan, Iran, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Syria and are mostly aged between 14 and 17.

2.3. Portugal

Although Portugal is geographically close to northern Africa, the country has not been a frequent choice of the host country for most refugees and asylum seekers. Portugal only began to receive asylum seekers under the EU relocating schemes until 2015, meaning that studies about integration of refugees in Portugal have a somewhat limited scope. Under the

¹ Refugee Council. 2022. *Refugee & asylum facts - Refugee Council*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/>> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

² Robilia, M., 2018. Refugees and Social Integration in Europe. *United Nations Expert Group Meeting*.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

⁴ Refugee Employment Network -. 2022. *Home - Refugee Employment Network*. [online] Available at: <<https://refugeeemploymentnetwork.co.uk/>> [Accessed 3 September 2022].

⁵ refugees, A., 2022. *Refugees in the UK - Full Fact*. [online] Full Fact. Available at: <<https://fullfact.org/immigration/uk-refugees/>> [Accessed 3 September 2022].

⁶ https://www.unhcr.org/cv/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2020/06/UNHCR-UNICEF-and-IOM_Refugee-and-Migrant-children-in-Europe-2019.pdf page 6

European system, the country received in 2017, 1550 migrants arriving from Greece and Italy.

All migrants arriving in the country benefit from a range of services offered by the High Commission for Migration (ACM), although asylum seekers and refugees are not the primary targets of this institution. The country has installed a new system under which, the hosting entity, which can be a municipality, foundation or NGO, is in charge of assuring the integration of these groups in matters of housing, health, education, employment, and language. Although this is a decentralised response to the flux of migrants, the hosting entities are all coordinated by the ACM. A spontaneous asylum seeker, that did not arrive in the country following an EU redirection scheme, will rely on their integration process being handled by the Portuguese Institutions⁷ and by the Institute of Social Security (ISS). Portugal is one of the few OCDE counties in which asylum seekers may access the labour market within a month of arriving, without any geographical, sectoral, or occupational restriction. In 2018, the ACM created an online job search platform targeted at refugees⁸, with job vacancies available to this group, and by the end of 2018, almost half of the working-age asylum seekers and refugees in the country were either in training or working. This data does not break down into smaller indicators, meaning that at the moment it is not possible to establish the difference between the numbers of those who are working or training, as well as age and gender-related. It is then difficult to identify if there are any vulnerabilities.

ACM has been developing integration tools such as the language program *Portuguese For All*. It has also adjusted its educational offer to target migrants and asylum seekers by offering an entrepreneurship course in Arabic. In contrast with several other OECD countries, Portugal does not have reception centres for applicants waiting for their statuses, in contrast, spontaneous applicants

may wait at the CAR premises.⁹ These total a full capacity of 52 places, and are frequently housing more people than the official numbers. In 2018, CAR assisted 1171 migrants.

Asylum seekers coming to Portugal through the EU relocation Scheme go directly to private housing, arranged and financed by the hosting entity.

The financial support available will vary according to which means was used to access the country and to the status of the application.

The Portuguese Refugee Council¹⁰ (CPR) supports spontaneous asylum seekers before the ISS takes charge of their integration. In 2017, the living allowance was 150 euros per month, per person, and 50-70 per child depending on their age. The CPR also offers help by providing housing, second-hand clothes, and food support in partnership with the Food Bank. Once the integration process evolves to being under the scope of the ISS, the value of the living allowance rises to 269€ per household person per month, plus 75 per child. It is noted that at this moment, migrants are expected to provide for their own housing. Once the asylum

⁷ Lisbon Project. 2022. *Home*. [online] Available at: <<https://lisbonproject.org/>> [Accessed 11 September 2022].

⁸ <https://www.noticiasaoiminuto.com/economia/1954844/ha-23073-vagas-de-emprego-para-refugiados-em-portugal-em-que-setores>

⁹ <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/portugal/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/>

¹⁰ <https://www.egnetwork.eu/about/mission/>

seeker reaches the status of refugees, they become entitled to the same benefits as nationals.

2.4. The Role of the European Union

Europe has seen a very high rise in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the past decade, which triggered the need for a unified response at the level of the European Union, not only to tackle the problem of border control and distribution of migrants but also to ensure integration and a dignified level of living conditions¹¹ for those who apply for protection on European soil.

The European Commission considers the integration of migrants as key to the future well-being, prosperity and cohesion of European society and has established an *Action Plan* on integration and inclusion. It focuses not only on social integration but also on cohesion and the good functioning of the economy. It focuses on early education and training by providing basic schooling and higher education to migrants, as well as focusing on the fastest recognition of qualifications. Language lessons are also included in this topic, funded by the European Union. Secondly, it focuses on improving employment opportunities and skill recognition. The commission works with social and economic partners to ensure that people are “reaching their full potential”. The Commission is allowing EU funding to promote full access to health systems for people from outside the EU. Finally, the Commission is working on access to adequate and affordable housing funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, and the Asylum and Migration Fund.

2.5. The Dublin system

As Europe operates under the principle of freedom of movement, the principle under the name of Schengen Space, it is necessary to bring up a unified response to border policy for arriving migrants.

The Dublin system is the system in place in all EU countries plus Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, and is the procedure that determines which country is responsible for examining and deciding the outcome of the asylum application. There are four criteria to determine which country should be responsible for the application:

- The member state where the migrant’s family has been granted international protection or is an asylum seeker will become the responsible country;
- The responsible country is the one that can provide a visa or residence permit to the applicant;
- The responsible country is the one that collected the fingerprints of the applicant;
- The responsible country is the country in which the applicant has been living in the case there is evidence of doing so.

¹¹ Von Beyme, K., 2016. Refugees and Migration in Europe. *European Policy Analysis*, 2(1).

Under this scheme, reunification can be facilitated if the family member of the applicant is a legal resident in another member state or if there is a relationship of caring assistance between family members.

Both politicians and scholars have presented criticism of this model by stating that the system does not seek to fairly distribute migrants amongst the member states but instead focuses on establishing the responsible country quickly in order to rush the application process. Critics also mention that the most commonly used criterion is the one regarding the country of arrival, meaning that the responsibility over the process will fall disproportionately on the countries whose borders are closer to the countries of origin of asylum seekers and refugees, such as Italy or Greece.

The second critique lies in the fact that the system does not work efficiently, meaning that migrants will find alternative routes to their chosen allocation countries. The FRONTEX (the European border agency) estimates that only 64,635 of the 170,000 migrants that arrived in Italy remain in the country, having fled in a non-protocolar way. This happens because the system does not respect the migrants' preferences.

Finally, many migrants cannot easily legalise their living situations, many times due to the lack of documents, and are faced with a situation of clandestinity and statelessness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This research report aims to investigate the ways in which volunteer-based NGOs can impact the process of integration of migrants in European societies, in particular in the cases of Portugal and the United Kingdom. The report argues that volunteer-led initiatives have a very positive impact on integration and should work closely with national institutions to complement the help already offered by the host countries to the asylum seekers and refugees in those countries. To verify or contradict this hypothesis, two interviews were carried out with members of two NGOs that work closely with these two groups. One represents Portugal, and the other, the United Kingdom.

The interviews followed a semi-structured basis, meaning that a set of questions was already pre-established by the researcher but at the same time allowed the possibility to add follow-up questions to previous responses.

3.2. Design of the questions

The questions used by the researcher followed an open-ended format. This was chosen as qualitative data would be more suitable for acquiring information, as each participant's experiences differ significantly, and a quantitative approach to this matter would be limited.

3.3. Data Analyses

The data was collected between the 10th and 20th of August and was later transcribed to a word document to be analysed under the light of the literary review.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

All participants were made aware of the fact that taking part in the interviews would be a voluntary exercise, from which they could withdraw at any moment. Information about the research was provided as well as the researcher's email for any queries or follow-up questions. The participants were given the choice to be identified or remain anonymous. The data collected was also in conformity with the UEA privacy regulations. No ethical issues were found.

3.5. Limitations

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to carry out more interviews to widen the scope of the data gathered.

Results and Analyses

Question 1: *Can you introduce us to your organisation and what is your role in it?*

Participant 1:

"My name is Alicia and I am a volunteer at The Lisbon Project. This organisation aims to help not only asylum seekers and refugees but also migrants to feel welcome in Lisbon, the only city in Portugal where we operate by helping with finding housing, jobs, and education and promoting networking between migrants and volunteers. I am a member of the Bridge Team meaning that my role is establishing contact between migrants and Portuguese institutions such as social security, the national health system, or the unemployment centre, so my role entails mostly translation. "

Participant 2:

"I am Amelie and my role at the New Routes Organization is to coordinate communication, development, and volunteers. My tasks include overseeing all of our volunteer activities, which include English classes, befriending and mentoring, social events, and helping with food or other goods that might be needed. I also coordinate the Norwich Refugee Week, which is a yearly event held to gather funds and raise awareness on this topic in our city. "

Both participant's activities are connected to the role of volunteering. Alicia is a volunteer herself and works in a team also managed by a volunteer member. Amelie coordinates the tasks of a team of volunteers at New Routes. The scope of their organisations is similar –

both aim to enhance the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in their cities and focus on similar aspects such as education, housing, and the social aspects of their lives.

Question 2: *How can a refugee or asylum seeker be made aware of the existence of your organisation?*

Participant 1:

“The founder of our organisation was a lawyer that worked closely with migrants. She started to form a small team of volunteers to help with her workload and then the Lisbon Project was born. Since then, it has mostly worked on a word-of-mouth basis where migrants who are already established in the country and benefited from our help, guide newcomers to us. We are open to everyone who needs help, and our premises work as an open house to all migrants and volunteers up until 7 pm. We also have our website, so if someone looks for The Lisbon Project, they can easily find where we are located.”

Participant 2 :

“We have an online presence with our website and Facebook page, to try and reach out to as many people as possible. Another way that brings people to us has to do with the fact that many migrants that arrive in the country are accommodated in shared houses facilities, and usually someone in the house will already be aware of our existence and tell them about New Routes. Finally, with our yearly Refugee week, we aim not only to gather more volunteers for our organisation but also to make ourselves known to people who might need our assistance.”

Both participants rely on the same means of advertisement: word of mouth and online presence.

While migrants may have limited access to the internet while adjusting to their new lives in the host country, word of mouth seems to be the most out-source. As some scholars note, the success of the migrant's integration is more successful if help is available in the first moments upon arrival. This happens because the journey to the host country can many times be traumatic as well as the reception of the migrant in the new country, which can be faced with armed police, without translation systems available, and demanding documentation that might be lacking. Due to all these aspects, this report recommends that NGOs like *The Lisbon Project* and *The New Routes* find alternative ways to communicate their offers, either by advertising in reception centres, in the case of the United Kingdom, or with the premises of the CAR in Portugal.

Question 3: *What is in your opinion the biggest barrier to integration for a refugee or asylum seeker in your country?*

Participant 1:

“In my opinion, the hardest barrier to integration is related to the difficulties in accessing language classes. Without speaking the host's country language it will be very difficult to

access health systems, which often do not offer service in English or any other language, as well as other services such as the IIS. The job market for a refugee that does not speak Portuguese is extremely limited and not knowing the labour market laws often leads to exploitation and very poor work conditions. We try to tackle this issue by offering help with translation services but that is not a sustainable solution because it does not promote the learning of the same language. As such, we do offer Portuguese classes, and signpost migrants to educational entities that may offer help with language skills. However, it is important to note that the funding available for this sort of help is extremely limited and the demand is high, meaning that not always it is possible to ensure that a migrant will benefit from help regarding language.”

Participant 2:

“The little financial support, I would say. An asylum seeker in the UK earns way below the living wage that a national would receive. In addition to that, an asylum seeker is not allowed to work legally in the United Kingdom, meaning that they often live in really poor conditions. Sometimes a family of 4 is living in one single bedroom, which will represent a very precarious situation. It is very difficult to promote and enhance integration when someone does not have a basic, dignified, living arrangement. At the New Routes Organization, we promote free events that will hopefully better the days of our participants, either by offering a free lunch at Family Club every Sunday or by offering free art classes. We expect from these that our participants will develop their social circles and befriend other participants, which, without us, they probably would not be able to do due to money restraints.”

As stated in the literary review, an asylum seeker in the UK makes less than £6 daily.

The national living wage in the country provides their workforce with £44 a day. This is a very substantial difference and surely impacts the way in which the asylum seeker will interact with the hosting's country society, meaning that there are very limited options for interaction among them.

In contrast with the Portuguese government, the United Kingdom does not offer official English classes to refugees and asylum seekers, meaning that access to this type of education lies heavily on civil society and NGOs, many times voluntary based. The New Routes Organisation not only offers English classes free of charge to adults but also provides childcare for the children of the attendees, while they are in class. The Lisbon Project does not offer this modality, meaning that especially mothers who are typically in charge of looking after the children, have limited availability to attend class. Some scholars argue that access to employment is the most important factor in integration as it allows for the better development of the host's country language and creates the foundation upon which the refugees will build their future. Refugees who are working adjust more easily to the host society when compared to unemployed refugees. The main challenges faced to obtain a job are language barriers, underemployment, and inability to locate a job.

Portugal tries to facilitate the process of a refugee obtaining a job by creating a 'quota' system under which a set number of job offers must be allocated to a refugee. Companies

who aim to hire a refugee can submit a form provided by the Portuguese Government Website, and that post will later be advertised on platforms created specifically for this group. In 2022, there were 23.073 job vacancies opened to this group, in the sectors of communication, technology, transport, and building.

In contrast with the asylum seekers, who do not have the right to work in the UK, refugees are free to work without any restrictions, however, challenges like the difficulty to have their skills recognized in the host country or the language barriers will get in the way of finding employment. Up to 80% of refugees in the United Kingdom were unemployed in 2020.

Question 4: *Do you have a different approach to working with children? Is there any specific program targeted at them?*

Participant 1:

"I am not fully aware of the work being done with children as that is not part of my tasks within the organisation. I do know that they promote playdates and offer support with homework and school-related topics. What I do regarding children is help the parents find a vacancy in the public education system. The Portuguese schools have designated spots for refugee children making

the process of finding a vacancy is somewhat facilitated, however the limited funding of the system does not allow for the hiring of more professionals to work closely with these kids, especially when it comes to learning the language. That's where we try to intervene and promote a little extra help with language skills."

Participant 2:

"Of course. This process is very difficult for children. Many times kids learn English faster than their parents and because of that, they are put in charge of handling the conversations between the family and the public structures. It is very difficult for them to adjust to a completely new reality, but we believe that the younger the child is when they arrive in the country, the more changes they will have to adjust to the host's country. Of course, we also have the case of unaccompanied children arriving in the country that face a lot of hardship in the institutions where they reside. We want to give these kids the opportunity to just be children, and as such we have many activities such as the weekly soccer club, we offer dance lessons, and homework club twice a week. We also have a volunteer-led program of mentoring for older children and teenagers that works very well. Many of the kids helped by us have gone on to University."

The refugee council of the United Kingdom raises awareness of the fact that many children arrive in the host country traumatised and in need of mental health support. The Lisbon Project does not provide any mental health related actions, and the New Routes has enough funds to hire a practitioner which is deemed not enough for the number of young people in need of help.

Unaccompanied children ask for special care. These are children that are younger than 18 and arrive on the territory of a member state not accompanied by an adult. In 2016, 15.9% of the asylum seekers arriving in the UK were unaccompanied children. The needs of younger refugees depend on their pre-migration conditions, for example, exposure to violence, counts of sexual abuse or trafficking, and the prospect of being reunited with their families.

In 2021, Portugal received 33 non-accompanied children under the EU relocation scheme who were allocated to hosting families or public institutions.

Question 5: *What do you think has to change in order to achieve better and more complete integration?*

Participant 1:

“There is an absolute need to change the prejudice against migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Although our national politics are quite progressive and aim to facilitate integration, our society is still very much backwards when it comes to accepting people from outside. There is a mentality that if our state does not provide for our homeless people, for example, however, they will provide for a foreigner, which is deemed to be less eligible to access help. It stems mostly from lack of information, and this is where we can step up. I believe that we should increase our number of outreach activities, for example, awareness campaigns in schools and companies to try and bring down the stereotypes that are being perpetuated by some locals and media. Once everyone has the knowledge that we are going through a crisis and that no citizen should be left behind, issues such as finding housing, and finding a job will be less and less impacting on the lives of the refugees and asylum seekers residing in Portugal.”

Participant 2:

“Lots of things must change in order to ensure a more fair, balanced, and responsible system. It starts with the political side of the matter. The UK’s government has been following a policy that creates an “hostile environment” for refugees and asylum seekers in order to ensure that fewer and less people seek protection in our country. That happens through poor housing offers, very little financial support, and overall lacking living conditions. One big change that has to happen to ensure better integration is to give the right to work to asylum seekers – which has been asked by civil society to British politicians for a long time. I also believe that bringing awareness to the general public can benefit our migrants. That is one of the reasons we hold The Refugee Week every year in Norwich, to try and show the general public that these are people just like them who might need a little bit of extra help.”

Conclusion and recommendations

The research conducted by this report reiterates the hypothesis that volunteer organisations have a very positive impact on the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe.

This happens because these organisations work as a complementary force to the help provided by the state's governments, which can be perceived as lacking. Below are the recommendations made by this report:

- **Language classes should be provided by both government institutions and civil society partners (NGOs)**

This report finds that language is one of the most important barriers to integration faced by refugees and asylum seekers. It notes that the response made by the host's country systems can be lacking (in Portugal) or nonexistent (in the United Kingdom). This responsibility falls many times onto civil society or non-governmental organisations such as the Lisbon Project or New Routes. As such, it is recommended that more budget and effort is put into providing language classes.

- **NGOs should target different demographics according to their needs, especially women and children**

There is little data on how different demographics are performing when it comes to integration. For example, data on women's employment compared to men's is not available. It would be interesting to deepen the literature in this field and find solutions more targeted at gender and age differences specifically in education and employment.

- **The actions of the NGO should aim to provide relief to refugees and asylum seekers as soon as they arrive in the country of reception**

This recommendation ties in with the information gathered in the literature review that the sooner help is available to the asylum seeker or refugee, the more successful their integration process will

be. It is also important to have information available at the time of the migrant's reception, including their rights under the Dublin system. It is also recommended that mental health practitioners should be located at reception centres to help migrants with the hardship faced while fleeing their original countries.

- **NGOs should participate in and promote awareness campaigns within the general public to decrease prejudice and stereotypes**

Efforts like the Refugee Week held yearly in Norwich are commendable and recommended because they help bring awareness to the general public regarding the large number of refugees fleeing to Europe. The migrant goes through a process of adjusting to a completely new reality, however, the hosting society should equally be better prepared to receive asylum seekers and refugees, with minimal prejudice and harmful stereotypes.

