

Environmental volunteering as a tool for integrating refugees and asylum seekers in host countries

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Summary

According to the UNHCR, an average of '21.5 million people' have been 'forcibly displaced' annually due to weather-related events (McAllister, 2023). This includes both refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees are individuals who have been forced to flee their home countries because of fears of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have disturbed public order and, as a result, are outside the country of their nationality (UNHCR n.d.).

Without significant reductions in greenhouse gases over the next decade, global surface temperatures will likely exceed the 1.5C threshold (Weiss and Reynolds, 2019). As a result, sea levels will continue to rise, and natural disasters will persist. We must recognise the urgency of climate change and take it seriously for the well-being of future generations. Otherwise, by 2050, according to the international think tank IEP, '1.2 billion people' could be 'displaced globally due to climate change' (McAllister, 2023).

In the following report, the issues of integrating refugees and asylum seekers, who have been forced to move as a result of being displaced through climate change, into host countries will be discussed. For this report, asylum seekers will be defined as individuals who have sought international protection but have not yet been granted refugee status (UNHCR, n.d.).

The report will highlight new studies and projects like the tandem project (CEV, 2015) that have utilised volunteering, including environmental volunteering, as a means of social integration. Volunteers according to a definition by the EU 'act under their own free will, according to their own choices, motivations and do not seek financial gain.' (European Commission, 2011) In this context, individuals actively participate in activities to conserve and protect the environment. Environmental volunteering encompasses reforestation, wildlife conservation, clean-up campaigns, sustainable agriculture practices, and raising awareness about climate change and its impacts on ecosystems.

By incorporating environmental volunteering into the integration process, refugees and asylum seekers will have the opportunity to take civic action on climate-related issues that are relevant to them while also educating communities about the realities of climate change through the experiences of direct victims of natural disasters caused by climate change. This approach offers a powerful platform for fostering community connections and promoting mutual understanding between refugees, asylum seekers and host populations, fostering a sense of shared responsibility in addressing the global challenges of climate change.

Literary Review

As suggested, the impact of climate change extends far beyond environmental consequences, as it progressively depletes crucial resources and exacerbates poverty, especially in vulnerable regions of the world. For example, in Pakistan, extreme weather is increasing, and the lack of resources to adapt to an increasingly inhospitable environment forces the population to seek refuge elsewhere. (UNHCR, 2022) Alongside this, there are cases where these growing conditions led to natural disasters or conflict, for instance, in Cameroon. Here 'temperatures are rising 1.5 times faster than the global average.' (UNHCR, 2022) Water scarcity, crop failure, and food insecurity are all consequences of this. Fishermen attempted to preserve the remaining water by digging trenches, but these trapped local farmers' cattle, resulting in a clash between the two groups. During the conflict, many people died, and many more were forced to flee, leaving their homes behind.

These countries, already dealing with numerous socioeconomic challenges, bear the brunt of the climate crisis's devastating effects, including extreme weather events, desertification, and declining agricultural yields. Communities are being pushed to the brink of extinction due to dwindling access to clean water, arable land, and reliable food sources, forcing individuals to flee their homes for better conditions and sustainable livelihoods. The combination of climate change and poverty creates a vicious cycle, perpetuating inequality, and displacing people from their ancestral lands, uprooting entire communities and adding to the strain on already overstressed resources in neighbouring areas. As climate change worsens, we must recognise the interconnectedness of these challenges and work together to mitigate their impact by supporting vulnerable populations and addressing the root causes of migration.

This is prevalent through geropsychiatry, a developing field intersecting the 'health, environmental, human, social, economic, and political sectors'. Its studies have commented on the mental health effects of such natural disasters. The challenges mentioned translate into psychological symptoms, including 'substance abuse, uncontrollable stress, long-term feelings of sadness... and adjustment issues.' These symptoms may 'interfere' with an individual's ability to function, sometimes resulting in conflict due to distress and anger. (João Mauricio et, 2022:1) Syria is a prime example of this, McAllister emphasised that the desertification of formerly fertile farming land between 2006 and 2010 resulted in crop yields plummeting, 800,000 people losing their jobs, and 85 percent of the country's livestock dying. As a result, food prices rose, and 1.5 million rural workers relocated to cities for work but those who were left behind suffered mentally in poverty and were an easy target for Islamic State recruiters. (McAllister, 2023)

These are not the only factors that contributed to the Syrian civil war, with the “Arab spring” and the Syrian government's strict restrictions also playing important roles. However, societal issues caused by climate change exacerbated pre-existing tensions. As a result, the conflict fuelled one of the world's ‘worst refugee crises in decades’, with approximately ‘6.6 million Syrians’ (roughly a quarter of the population) forced to flee their homeland. (McAllister, 2023)

As climate change worsens, it is critical that we recognise the interconnectedness of these challenges and work together to mitigate their impact, providing support and solutions that empower vulnerable populations who have been displaced as a result of natural disasters. This is possible by prioritising the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in host countries, which provides a haven for people fleeing conflict. However, what integration should look like varies greatly; for example, (Berry, 1997) believes that one's original culture engages in daily interactions with other groups, whereas the UNHCR recognises local integration as fostering support through programmes such as ‘language and vocational training’ (UN, 2018:45) to foster social integration and promote a sense of unity and diversity within communities. Although both integration strategies are beneficial, this report will investigate a framework with limited research, integration through volunteering.

Case Studies

According to the INVOLVE project, there is ‘little if any research on volunteering of migrants and its role in integration.’ (CEV, 2006:96) However, this does not mean that there aren't potential areas of success for organisations implementing this type of integration. For example, volunteering allows refugees and asylum seekers to acquire basic knowledge of their host country through projects guided by the host community, as they usually match refugees and asylum seekers with peers and mentors. In this sense, integration can result in cultural exchange and diversity; it benefits host countries by broadening perspectives and promoting crosscultural friendships. However, it also improves refugees' and asylum seekers' skills by allowing them to learn the language and explore civic organisations in the host society. Therefore, organisations should outreach to volunteers to encourage volunteering through integration specifically to maximise the positive impact of cultural exchange, facilitate the integration process, and encourage refugees and asylum seekers to thrive in their new communities.

SAMAH

A prime example is SAMAH (SAMAH,n.d.), an independent charity actively trying to improve the well-being of young asylum seekers between 12 and 25 in the Netherlands. Their strategy entails standing up for these young people's rights and enhancing their place in Dutch society and their nation. SAMAH has successfully implemented several projects with the assistance of (former) unaccompanied adolescents since its founding in 1999, in which experts, volunteers, and young people play vital roles. To encourage young people's participation and integration into society, SAMAH has engaged almost 5,000 of them in a wide range of programmes and activities.

One noteworthy example of SAMAH's efforts is the 'SAMAH- empowering unaccompanied minors' project, which seeks to improve the well-being of young adult asylum seekers by fostering their understanding and integration into Dutch society. An intriguing activity under this project is the 'think peer' initiative, where young Dutch individuals are paired with young refugees to facilitate mutual understanding and ease their integration process. This project has yielded positive results, with young volunteers not only learning about Dutch culture but also gaining self-confidence and developing a positive outlook on the Netherlands (CEV, 2006:50).

SAMAH seeks to facilitate the successful integration of young asylum seekers into society in the Netherlands and their country of origin through these numerous programmes. Young volunteers' improved knowledge of Dutch culture, boosted self-esteem, and positive outlook on the Netherlands are just a few of the positive outcomes of this project that demonstrate the potential advantages of integration-focused volunteer programmes in fostering inclusive communities.

The TANDEM Project

Alongside this, the TANDEM project (CEV, 2015), within the framework of CEV and previously established as a grassroots initiative by asylum seekers in Belgium, is an example of this type of volunteering; it is an initiative that fosters collaboration and growth among refugees, asylum-seekers, and organisations. It was founded to help and empower refugees and asylum seekers in Belgium, allowing them to actively contribute to the community while reclaiming their dignity and autonomy through short-term volunteer placements at various organisations. TANDEM also aims to bridge the gap between individual refugees and asylum seekers and non-governmental organisations, allowing these organisations to gain first-hand insight into the challenges these individuals face and identify opportunities to support them in their local communities directly.

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So, involving refugees and asylum seekers in climate volunteering, in particular, provides a unique perspective on the profound link between climate change and the personal experiences of those affected, fostering a deeper understanding of the consequences of our actions. Their stories serve as powerful testimonials, emphasising the importance of collective action to address climate change and its humanitarian consequences. Furthermore, involving refugees and asylum seekers in volunteering on issues of personal significance empowers them to participate and constructively express their emotions actively. This integration process also allows them to gain valuable skills in their areas of interest, such as the growing field of climate conservation, paving the way for future employment in a sector that aligns with their passion and enabling them to achieve self-sufficiency and empowerment.

This applies to environmental volunteering, as it is stated that 'the second major type of environmental volunteering concerns community education on a given topic.' (Barnett and Measham, 2007) Many of the problems associated with climate change stem from a misunderstanding of how we contribute to it. As a result, greater awareness of an issue allows someone to act following the knowledge they've gained. Allowing refugees and asylum seekers to share their stories of diminishing access to clean water, arable land, dependable food sources, and regions on the verge of extinction helps to raise awareness of the issue. It teaches people about the actual consequences of their actions effectively.

Organisations should make a targeted outreach to encourage volunteers with experience on the topics of the activities, such as climate refugees. By reaching out and involving refugees and asylum seekers in climate volunteering initiatives, organisations can unlock the full potential of their unique perspectives and experiences, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive, informed, and empowered approach to tackling the urgent challenges of climate change.

Involving asylum seekers and refugees in integration initiatives while also focusing on the environment might therefore be very successful. Encouraging them to share their experiences can foster meaningful connections and promote smoother integration into host communities.

Erasmus+ Projects

A current example project of one of the many useful Erasmus + projects implemented in Belgium is called 'Climate Change and Migration - fostering critical thinking skills, lifelong learning competencies, and democratic engagement among young students to reflect on the root causes of environmentally induced migration and possible alternatives' (European Commission, 2021) is an example how environmental lessons could be incorporated into integration initiatives through facilitating the sharing of testimonies from refugees and asylum seekers. . The goal of this project is to teach young students about the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations while also encouraging critical thinking skills. According to the project, environmental protection is more than just 'protecting the rainforest and endangered species; it is also about meeting 'the needs of highly vulnerable populations in the least developed countries.'

The project aims to achieve its goals by creating interactions between students, researchers and displaced students from areas impacted by environmental issues. These exchanges allow students to learn from real-life experiences and understand the challenges affected communities face. By sharing their stories, the displaced students bring attention to the urgency of environmental problems and motivate others to take action.

The programme pushes for curriculum revisions in schools to incorporate lessons on sustainability and environmental issues. This can then result in a generation of knowledgeable and environmentally conscientious people who are better prepared to handle upcoming environmental difficulties.

Overall, exchanging experiences and advocating for policy changes work together to empower students and build a more environmentally aware and proactive society. It hopes to make a long-term impact through this project by raising awareness and empowering students to become advocates for new environmental policies.

Recommendation

This is the perfect project to directly integrate refugees and asylum seekers by giving them a platform to share their own stories. Integrated volunteering programmes like the TANDEM project and a range of Erasmus+ projects can be combined to develop an effective strategy that promotes the integration of refugees and asylum seekers while informing others about their personal experiences.

Such individuals can actively participate in environmental activities related to climate change and share their individual stories with host communities by embracing the TANDEM project's focus on empowering refugees and asylum seekers through volunteer opportunities. This sharing of experiences builds compassion among the host country and may lead to inclusive communities.

Moreover, drawing from an Erasmus+ project that engages with students, for example, is specifically effective as it can involve young students in learning about the challenges faced by vulnerable populations due to natural disasters caused by climate change. By integrating testimonies from refugees and asylum seekers into education curricula, students gain a deeper appreciation for urgent environmental issues and become advocates for positive change. Through this educational exchange, asylum seekers and refugees find a platform to express their hardships and share their resilience, again, leading to a stronger sense of belonging within host communities.

This synthesised approach not only empowers asylum seekers and refugees to play an active role in addressing climate change but also promotes social integration by nurturing empathy and understanding among host communities. By sharing their experiences and knowledge through integrated volunteering initiatives, displaced individuals can effectively educate others about the consequences of natural disasters while finding a sense of purpose and belonging in their new environments.

Limitations

However, as the INVOLVE project suggests, integrating refugees and asylum seekers through volunteering is a framework that isn't widely explored. There are 'major barriers' to asylum seekers and refugees participation in these activities. (CEV,2006:96) Legal barriers make it difficult for certain groups of migrants, such as asylum seekers and those receiving social benefits, to volunteer. In the Netherlands, for example, asylum seekers are permitted to volunteer; however, the organisation they wish to volunteer must obtain a volunteer declaration form, and the work must be of social value, non-profit, and unpaid; this governmental process complicates the volunteer experience.

Furthermore, the role that volunteering can play in promoting integration is not often acknowledged, which is concerning, especially in official integration policies. In order to promote social cohesion and empower refugees and asylum seekers, governments should provide incentives for organisations to recruit volunteers and take part in integration efforts.

Especially as opportunities are squandered for people and host communities by the undervaluation of the useful skills acquired through volunteering. Building more inclusive and cohesive communities, encouraging positive change, and empowering displaced populations to thrive in their new environments are all dependent on increasing awareness of the value of volunteering in integration and recognising the acquired skills.

Likewise, there is a lack of a coordinated approach to encouraging volunteering, as well as a scarcity of targeted volunteering infrastructure that provides comprehensive information on available opportunities. As a result, adding a new unexplored type of volunteering to this already problematic framework could introduce many new issues. To address the lack of a coordinated approach and targeted infrastructure for volunteering, especially concerning displaced populations' integration, careful planning and thorough research are essential.

As a result, policymakers must create a coherent approach that meets the requirements of refugees and asylum seekers. In order to make evidence-based policy decisions, thorough research must be conducted, including evaluating current programmes and comprehending the preferences and abilities of displaced people. Additionally, creating a single website to offer thorough details on the volunteering possibilities available will enable refugees to make educated decisions and help companies find qualified volunteers. By enacting these steps, we may improve the framework for volunteering and ensure that the integration of displaced persons into host communities is feasible.

Conclusion

In closing, the effects of climate change are causing an increase in forced displacement, making the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into host countries a problematic task. Volunteering may provide a solution by allowing immigrants to actively participate, learn, and build connections in their new communities. In the context of climate change, involving refugees and asylum seekers in climate volunteering gives them a unique perspective and a deeper understanding of the consequences of their actions. They can raise awareness and sensitise others to the realities of dwindling resources and communities on the verge of extinction by sharing their personal experiences. However, there are obstacles to overcome, such as legal restrictions and a lack of understanding of the role that volunteering plays in integration. Coordination is required to remove these impediments and encourage volunteering as a means of promoting social cohesion and addressing climate challenges. We can work towards inclusive societies that support vulnerable populations and tackle environmental issues collaboratively by acknowledging the interconnectedness of climate change, displacement, and integration.

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