

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Croatia

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

Since 2003, the NGO *Centre for Peace Studies* has carried out several activities directed towards asylum seekers and refugees which are carried out by volunteers. These are:

- Croatian language course which takes place once a week, on Wednesdays, for two hours in the Kutina center;
- Daily administrative support to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in their communications with public institutions;
- Individual Croatian language course in Zagreb;
- Teaching the children of asylum seekers and aliens under subsidiary protection in Zagreb.

Some of these activities were inspired by those organised by other organisations such *Filantropia*, *Peace Institute* (Slovenia), *Menedek* (Hungary), *Austrian Ministry of Integration*, the *Dutch Council for Refugees*, etc.

Before working with asylum seekers, volunteers undergo intensive training and their work is monitored and supervised. In 2012, approximately 768 hours of Croatian language was held for about 200 asylum seekers and refugees.

Activities were conducted as parts of several projects among which “Refugees Welcome - Improving conditions for asylum, migrant reception and integration”, funded through European Commission’s EIDHR programme, and “Supporting Refugees – from Practice to Policies”, funded by the UNHCR. In 2014, 34 volunteers held 3,068 hours of direct work with 150+ asylum seekers and refugees within the Human Rights House and Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Zagreb, including direct assistance, intercultural workshops and workshops of the Croatian language.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS’ INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

TASTE OF HOME, initiated by a group of individuals of all ages and backgrounds (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and natives) brought together by a common interest in food and cooking, started in 2015. They [work](#), in collaboration with the *Centre for Peace Studies*, towards economic emancipation of refugees and persons with migrant background, through culinary and cultural exchange. A valuable contribution to shaping and [promoting](#) the project came from activist-based organisation Fade In which included it in a documentary movie and a campaign on the integration of refugees.

On the 23 of February 2016 “[The Taste of Home](#)” registered as cooperative association, with an inclusive business model. Its culinary-gastronomic work consists of cooking workshops and classes, public food tasting, food festivals, catering for business conferences and parties, and cookbooks. The language and cultural element offers language courses (four to start with), translation of booklets and articles, translation services at conferences and other public events, and cultural (movie, literature, theatre, etc.) evenings.

WELCOME: REFUGEE SUPPORT INITIATIVE is an umbrella platform that gathers numerous NGOs, non-formal initiatives and individuals in Croatia which have shown interest in helping and offer different kinds of support to newcomer refugees. More than 60 civil society organisations and 400 volunteers are involved in working groups: advocacy, activism and media, humanitarian and direct work, and legal. They for example provide information to refugees about current residence procedures. The [platform](#)’s website publishes news from the ground and useful information for refugees, such as transport timetables or dictionaries. The initiative strongly advocates urgent harmonisation of positions on EU level, political agreement in the UN for common approach to stop the war in Syria and sustainable and adequate solutions based on international humanitarian law, protection of human rights, intergovernmental cooperation and solidarity, on the national level. [Facebook page](#)

In addition to these integration-related initiatives, others focus on providing humanitarian help to refugees. It is the case for the volunteers registered on the [Are you syrious](#) Facebook page, which was created in August 2015 to “ease the difficult journey of refugees”.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

The new initiative “A Taste of home” attracts more volunteers with migrant background, primarily refugees and asylum seekers, than older initiatives where Croatian citizens prevailed.

“Welcome: Refugee Support Initiative” initiative attracts more volunteers than old and long-standing ones, partially thanks to the high coverage of the crisis by the media and to the variety of possible activities one can be involved in: gathering or sharing of donations, transport of refugees, sharing of information, translation, etc.

In general, immigrants remain under- represented among volunteers but are more numerous than ever.

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

For the “Taste of Home” initiative, the promotion of the economic emancipation of refugees and other migrants, through capitalisation of knowledge, skills and earlier experience, was an innovative element. The Project sensitise the public to the potential of refugees’ integration through the cooking and language based social cooperative (social entrepreneurship shaped and led by refugees themselves).

“Welcome: Refugee Support Initiative” innovation lies on its capacity of bringing many parallel work and organisations together. However, few months after its creation, one can feel a certain drop in enthusiasm, motivation and interest from some partners and volunteers, but many are still (pro)active.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

The Croatian authorities have, to some extent, neglected integration policies, especially those providing opportunities for work and education, making refugees dependent on state services, even years after their arrival in the country. Refugees lack the language and communication skills, as well as other soft skills which make them unable to find a place in labour market. “Taste of Home” help refugees in their journey of acquiring and capitalising on existing skills, through previous experience as professional chefs, for example.

“Welcome: Refugee Support Initiative” has a great potential for further educational work on racism and xenophobia.

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

The cooperative [The Taste of Home](#) plans to employ some 20 people in the near future. The overall impression is that this initiative positively changed the activities of existing NGOs by increasing the capacity of these actors to promote integration by economic emancipation and participation in the cultural and everyday life of the Croatian society. This helps fight prejudice and opens the society to hospitality.

“Welcome: Refugee Support Initiative” has positively changed the perception of NGOs working in fields other than migration, which now get interested in refugee issues and help in this area, with the dedication. In addition, it has become a part of Croatian governmental reception system for the temporary transit accommodation of refugees in reception centre. It also monitors the reception conditions in present reception centres for asylum seekers. Nevertheless, it has not yet fostered further state actions in order to improve capacities for integration of recognised refugees.