

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Finland

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.

In Finland, there is a wide range of civic organisations of different sizes supporting long-term integration of immigrants. Under these organisations, thousands of volunteers are offering their time and skills for different kinds of activities. This fiche will first briefly introduce a couple of major Finnish actors in the field of immigrant integration, then more specifically introduce a few grass-root level citizens' initiatives that have been running for several years. Around the country, there is a long list of small scale volunteer groups, organisations and projects related to long-term integration of immigrants. Only a small sample will be presented here.

Major civic organisations

One of the largest civic organisations in Finland is [The Finnish Red Cross](#) (FRC) which has about 45 000 volunteers enlisted who help with different kinds of projects nationally as well as internationally. Among other tasks FRC supports the authorities in receiving asylum seekers and refugees by maintaining reception centres in different parts of Finland. Over 8000 volunteers have been offering their help to ease up the pressure caused by the refugee crisis of 2015. However, FRC's work with the asylum seekers is not limited to providing initial help, they also organise a variety of multicultural activities aimed to bring all kinds of people together. Volunteers can for example participate to language, international or homework clubs. They also provide orientation services.

Another large civic organisation working with asylum seekers and refugees is [The Finnish Refugee Council](#) that was founded in 1965. There are currently 21 member organisations and about 560 members in the Finnish Refugee Council. Through these member organisations, the Council enlists tens of thousands of Finnish people to carry out its numerous activities. The organisation's work in Finland is informational, educational and practical. The Council's integration activities are aimed at both recently arrived refugees and immigrants, as well as active immigrants who have been residents in Finland for some time. The Finnish Refugee Council aims to support the immigration and participation of refugees in everyday Finnish life by solving possible conflict situations in residential areas and by helping immigrants deal with everyday issues through peer support groups. The organisation also offers support and information for immigrants to establish and run associations.

Smaller scale initiatives

[Suomen Isovanhemmat ry](#) (Foster grandparents for immigrant children)

In the capital region, there are 10 active senior citizens (7 women and 3 men, aged between 60 and 75) who act as foster grandparents for immigrant children who don't have any relatives in Finland. They started their activities in 2003 and to this date, they've had altogether around 30 participating grandparents. According to their representative, at the end of 2015, there were 36 children from about ten different families taking part in the programme, and more are willing to join but there are not enough grandparents volunteering.

The primary goal for these foster grandparent activities are to help immigrant children's integration into the Finnish society. Volunteering grandparents cooperate with immigrant families and the kids get to improve their knowledge of Finland and the Finnish culture. The grandparents also get to know a different culture and eventually build long-lasting and rewarding relationships with the children.

[Let's Read Together –network](#)

Let's Read Together –network, founded in 2004, supports immigrants integrate into the Finnish society. A network of Finnish volunteers offers free literacy and the Finnish language classes (including learning material), originally to immigrant women, but nowadays also to immigrant men in various locations all over Finland. At the end of 2015, there were some 80 study groups with over 400 teachers and 1600 students. Study groups meet once a week for two hours. During the year 2014, nearly 300 of the network's students started other studies or working.

According to the network's representative, students form a very heterogeneous group. They have origins from all over the world, represent various age groups (although 70% of them are aged between 26 and 50) and have diverse educational backgrounds. During the year 2014, 8% of the students were illiterate and 44% didn't have any Finnish language skills. Many of the students were young mothers, but a lot of senior immigrants were also involved in the network which provided an easy and free way to learn Finnish. 1/5 of the students had a higher education.

Over the years, Let's Read Together –network has gathered a large group of cooperation partners (especially municipalities and NGOs) that provide them free working spaces. This concept has been used by other actors such as municipalities who have started to organise Finnish lessons for housewives. The Finnish Federation of University Women is responsible for the network in partnership with Zonta International District 20 and UN Women Finland. The network is funded by The Finnish Cultural Foundation.

Global Clinic

The Global Clinic offers primarily medical but also other kinds of help for undocumented people in Finland. Global Clinic was set up in Helsinki in April 2011, in Oulu in June 2012 and in Turku in April 2013. There is a network of volunteers consisting of health care and medical professionals in each of these locations. There are also interpreters, lawyers and social workers. Help is given for free, anonymously and in strict confidence. All the premises, medicines and other equipment used at the clinic are donations. According to an article in [Helsingin Sanomat](#) in March 2015, the Global Clinic had treated over 500 different patients in 4 years and has a network currently consisting of about 15 physicians.

Various non-governmental organisations coordinate Global Clinic. The network consists of the Helsinki and Oulu Deaconess Institutes, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Oikeudet ilman rajoja ry, Pakolaisneuvonta ry (The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre), Psykologien Sosiaalinen Vastuu ry, Protukupiste, the Finnish AIDS Council and the International Evangelical Church, among others.

iCount project

iCount is a project governed by the multicultural association network Moniheli ry and funded by the EU Integration Fund that aims to improve the dialogue between immigrants, the authorities and political parties in Finland, to increase the knowledge about the Finnish political system and strengthen the participation of immigrants in the decision-making process. Key people are working as volunteers for the project. They support and organize the project's activities by spreading their own knowledge all over the country through their network. During iCount's latest phase, it had 80 volunteers with over 15 national backgrounds that were active. But one of the volunteers had an immigrant background. The vast majority of the volunteers were men aged between 30 and 45 and over 70% of them had some kind of higher education. According to project's representative, by spreading information, iCount reached at least 10000-15000 people during its 2014 operational year. In the spring 2015, before the parliamentary elections, the project organised, a nationwide tour of election panels in cooperation with other notable actors such as the Ministry of Justice. The project has established partnerships with governmental organisations and municipalities in the capital region.

iCount project started in 2012 and its first phase targeted the Municipal Elections organised that same year. It got its inspiration from the finding that only under 20% of Finnish citizens with an immigrant background had voted previously. The number was much lower compared to other Nordic countries and immigrants themselves thought that something had to be done. So, they started by spreading basic knowledge about the political system in Finland. In more recent phases, the project focused on promoting an active citizenship and getting immigrants involved in the political system. The project's third and latest phase came to an end in June 2015. The project was selected to receive the "Intercultural Achievement Recognition Award 2015" of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

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

Here is a sample of some of the initiatives that have been started only recently:

Refugees Welcome Finland – Home Accommodation Community

Refugees Welcome Finland (RWF) is a non-profit, non-political, non-religious network of individuals who want to provide asylum seekers with a humane and warm welcome by organising accommodation for them. RWF was established in September 2015 in the wake of the refugee crisis and its activities are authorised by The Finnish Immigration Service. The network also works in close cooperation with The Finnish Red Cross (FRC), which runs the reception centres, the initial accommodation system for the asylum seekers.

Refugees Welcome Finland got its inspiration from the German-based organisation named Flüchtlinge Willkommen, which helps asylum seekers find so called normal housing instead of mass accommodation. Refugees Welcome Finland is deliberately self-directing and non-bureaucratic network that wants to support the society by creating solid practices for inviting asylum seekers to live in private homes with locals, organising communal living, and offering peer support. The network consists of local groups located all over Finland, mostly in municipalities that have a reception centre for asylum seekers.

Startup Refugees

Startup Refugees is a programme initiated in September 2015 by entrepreneurs and TV-personalities Riku Rantala and Tuomas “Tunna” Milonoff. The programme’s goal is to help asylum seekers make use of their talents and eventually start up their own businesses. By doing so, they would also help the declining Finnish economy.

A common problem with the asylum seekers is that during the asylum application process they end up living in the reception centres doing very little with their time, although many of them do have useful knowledge and skills to be utilized. The Finnish law gives them the right to work after three months in the application process and this is where Startup Refugees program comes to picture. One key objective of the program is to open an electronic job market for asylum seekers who will be marketed as potential employers.

Startup Refugees works as a network consisting of public and private enterprises, and NGOs. They count on over 300 partners, including Ministry of Interior, the Finnish Immigration Service, regional Employment and Economic Development Offices, refugee reception centres, as well as a long list of enterprises. Some notable startup business experts such as Slush, Arctic Startup and Aalto University have joined the developing process. Business ideas are going to be developed by professional business mentors.

The programme is divided in three phases. The first phase started in November 2015 and consists of mapping the potential that lies in the reception centres, with the help of 300+ volunteers spread around Finland in the reception centres trying to find out what kind of skills do the asylum seekers have but also what kind of hopes do they have regarding employment. The second phase is about connecting potential employers and employees with each other and bringing together potential entrepreneurs and people who could support them. The third phase consists of initiating a business incubator.

Choose Your Future

Choose Your Future is student-run programme founded in 2015 at the Turku School of Economics with the goal of promoting immigrant and refugee integration into the Finnish society. The program aims to do so by providing refugees and immigrants with information and advice, giving them the tools they will need on a day to day basis when making Finland their new home and choosing the life they want to pursue. Moreover, their purpose is to correct any misconceptions or disinformation about refugees. Currently, the programme focuses its operations in the city of Turku and its surroundings.

According to the programme's website, Choose Your Future collaborates with the mobile learning service Funzi to launch the information service "[About Turku](#)", which includes useful and topical content to facilitate the integration of asylum seekers into the local community. The City of Turku has also been involved in the content production. The service is free of charge and can be used with a mobile phone. The service is provided in English and in Arabic, among other languages.

Recreational fishing with asylum seekers in the North Karelia Region

In the city of Joensuu, a local fishing club called [Lesnan Naputtajat](#) has recently started to cooperate with the refugee reception centres in the area by offering the asylum seekers an opportunity to fish with the club members. The idea is that the club provides the asylum seekers knowledge about fishing in Finland, borrows them proper equipment and takes them fishing. This creates interaction between local people and the asylum seekers. Traditionally different kinds of sporting activities have been an easy way for native people and immigrants to get to know each other a little bit better.

Other fishing clubs, stores and local fishermen donate fishing equipment.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

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

The overall feeling is that the new initiatives born in the wake of "refugee crisis 2015" attracted a lot of young people who may not have been volunteering before but who had a kind of a wakeup call in the autumn 2015. For example, there has been various volunteering projects started among universities students. Social media has probably been a major factor since it helps spread information and allows easy sign-up. Integration being a very long process, can this wave of compassion be sustained in the long term?

Long-standing initiatives - Key facts on volunteers:

1. Most **foster grandparents** are retired and aged between 60-75. All of them are native Finns.
2. About half of the volunteers at Let's Read Together –network have a teacher's education, two thirds of them are over 65 years old and almost exclusively native Finns. Almost all teachers are women but in recent years, a few men have joined the network.
3. Since the **Global Clinic** is operating kind of 'underground', it is difficult to find out further information about healthcare professionals volunteering in this structure nor about the undocumented people that are being helped.
4. A slight majority of volunteers at **iCount** are native Finnish men and a vast majority are aged between 30 and 45 and over 70% of them had some kind of higher education.

New initiatives - Key facts on volunteers:

1. **Refugees Welcome Finland –network** hasn't gather specific information about volunteers yet. Nonetheless, RWF's representative told us that people who have expressed their interest in hosting asylum seekers come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Most contacts with the network have been made from major city regions like Helsinki metropolitan area, Tampere and Turku. In addition, several immigrants have volunteered as hosts.
2. All volunteers gathering information for the **Startup Refugees** programme are college students. Their universities have joined the network and informed them about the opportunity. In addition, the programme collaborated with volunteer translators; some of which are asylum seekers themselves.
3. **Choose Your Future** programme has 50+ volunteers who are all students of the Turku School of Economics.
4. At the **Fishing club Lesnan Naputtajat**, all volunteers – 5 (4 men and 1 women) at the end of 2015 are native Finns. According to their representative, there is even more people wanting to take part in the activities.

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

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

The activities of the **foster grandparents for immigrant children** are an innovative as no similar initiative existed back in 2003.

Thanks to the **iCount** – project, the Ministry of Justice sent a letter before the Parliamentary Elections 2015 to every person who had gained Finnish citizenship after previous Parliamentary Elections. The letter contained basic knowledge about the political system in Finland and information about how to vote and the overall importance of voting. This practice will be repeated for future elections.

The innovation of the **Refugees Welcome Finland –network** lies in its self-directive and non-hierarchical character which gives total power to active volunteers and functions as a civil movement not dependent on traditional NGOs.

Choose Your Future's “About Turku” application is an application directed specifically to asylum seekers and immigrants in the region.

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.

Let's Read Together –network clearly fills a gap. About one third of immigrants coming to Finland have found a job prior to their arrival. This means that they do not attend the integration training provided by the state. In some cases, companies arrange some Finnish courses for them but this rarely happens in the low-wage sectors for example. Volunteer networks like Let's Read Together have an important role in helping immigrants integrate into the society when no other programme is proposed automatically.

Global Clinic's services are primarily meant for people who are not entitled to public healthcare in Finland, in other words for undocumented people. Global Clinic is open to everyone, regardless of nationality or migration status.

The activity of **Refugees Welcome Finland –network** is unique in Finland. Flexibility and adaptability are 2 of its key added-values.

As a network, which brings together public and private enterprises, and NGOs to support the employment and entrepreneurship of the asylum seekers, **Startup Refugees** is one of its kind in Finland. It has potential to become a vital help for the pressured public sector in helping the immigrants integrate into the labour market.

It has been widely reported that the asylum seekers often get bored in the reception centres because there just aren't enough meaningful activities for them. Fishing club **Lesnan Naputtajat**, among other sports clubs, do valuable volunteer work in offering asylum seekers a chance to remain active while in the asylum process.

7 IMPACT

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

Comparisons between old versus new initiatives are challenging because the new ones have been running for little time. Their impact is still mostly to be studied. However, it is already clear that new initiatives have been valuable in increasing the capacity of existing NGOs and state services, during the refugee crisis in Finland. For example, when thousands asylum seekers arrived every week in autumn 2015, the state was unable to provide decent accommodation for all because. Refugees Welcome Finland offered a solution to this national capacity problem. The public sector has actively sought cooperation with the new initiatives such as Refugees Welcome Finland –network or Startup Refugees program.

One can speculate that the state increasingly relies on civil society, but the reality is probably that the two actors rather complement each other. At this point it is hard to see any negative consequences caused by the initiatives introduced above. The overall political atmosphere towards immigration has got more critical, but volunteer work has a good reputation among Finns and thousands of new volunteers enlisted in the wake of refugee crisis 2015 tells that there is a strong willingness to help.

Many of these new initiatives seem to be related to internet, social media and digital environments which have the potential to mobilise young people but do these people have a possibility to commit to these initiatives for years to come? Or is it a new ‘normal’ that initiatives just last for short period until something else comes along? In this era of social media, it will be interesting to see if this initial wave of compassion will carry on.