

Finding Best Practice

Inclusion of refugees and migrants



«This Nordic collaboration is a boost for us volunteers!»



All who attended the meeting.

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BACKGROUND

The Nordic Red Cross model for inclusion of newly settled refugees through the Refugee guide program/buddy program/mentor program, has shown to be meaningful both regarding social inclusion, language learning and counteracting prejudices in society. All though having quit similar programs, the Nordic Red Cross sister organizations haven't before now had any comprehensive collaboration regarding common national programs in the integration field. Thanks to the funding from Nordplus, Icelandic Red Cross, Swedish Red Cross, Danish Red Cross and Norwegian Red Cross got the opportunity to have a 3day collaboration and workshops in Oslo, Norway.

The main aim of this report is to make a foundation for further development of our national programs, based on exchanged experiences across the sister organizations, as well as addressing current challenges locally and nationally, and hopefully provide concrete tools and suggestions on how to meet these challenges.

THE «ARRANGED FRIENDSHIP»

The Nordic model of language practice by socializing through a «local guide» or simply a commoner from your local society is a natural way to integrate newly settled refugees and migrants in their new environment, getting to practice the new language, finding new friends and learning the norms and ways of living in the new country. Although having different names, the Nordic models for including the newly settled refugees and migrants through the guide/mentor/buddy programs are more or less alike and meaningful both regarding social inclusion, language learning and counteract prejudices in the society. As a rule the program connects the refugee (participant) who has newly got a residence permit in the country with a volunteer who knows the local society. In this way the newly settled refugee gets a guide and hopefully network within the local community.

The meeting between the participant and the volunteer is supposed to be informal and free of cost. Both decide

what things to do, like watching a football match, go for a walk, cooking or just talking together. They should meet at least once every second week, 2–3 hours each time. The Red Cross has it as a goal to connect a guide and a refugee who has something in common, whether its age, life situation, interests, profession or education. Depending on the local needs and capacity, the connection doesn't necessarily need to be one-to-one, it can also be family to family, two-to-one and so on.

COLLABORATIONS/WORKSHOPS

All the sister organizations participating in the collaboration had prepared a presentation of their programs, which they presented on the first day of the meetings. This gave the participants the opportunity to get to know one another's programs, as well as asking questions and enlighten relevant issues. A former refugee also told his story about how it was to have a Refugee guide in Oslo, Norway, and how he later on became a Refugee guide himself. The first half of the second day was used to have depth workshops aimed to address the issues that came up the first day.

Although most of the discussions throughout the collaboration are raised in its entirety in this report, we issued three main questions during the workshops on day two of the meetings.

- 1) How to cooperate with the municipalities?
 - 2) How do you use the principles to decide who gets a guide and who doesn't?
 - 3) How can the relation in your buddy/family/mentor program help the refugee with understanding the local society and improving language skills?
- The few next pages will look closer into the reflections that came up regarding these issues.

1) HOW TO COOPERATE WITH THE MUNICIPALITIES?

Icelandic Red Cross had challenges with the municipalities at several levels in surten parts of the country. For instance it was difficult to find enough help from the municipalities with language translators in smaller places. The roles are not always clear regarding who does what. Some needs of refugees aren't met because it is not clear who is responsible for them – and often it is the Red cross who ends up dealing with the consequences. They also faced challenges according to the system in the municipality such as rules and regulations which are there but not necessarily followed. For example, parts which government should imply, working groups – executive board, collaboration meetings that never formally were done, or done when the projects were over. In the city of Akureyri however, they had huge success working with the municipality, but the same challenges regarding the municipality.

Denmark had a positive cooperation with the municipalities which gave them the possibility to support the refugee from the beginning. Trust and mutual recognition of one another importance was a key factor for a good cooperation. This is a shared experience from Norway and Akureyri in Iceland, where the Refugee guide often is closely linked to the Introduction-program that the refugees are committed to undergo, arranged by the municipalities. However there were some different opinions regarding funding from the municipalities. Denmark and Iceland meant that the local branches shouldn't get funding from the municipalities as this could unbalance the relationship, as the former would feel more justified to intervene in the voluntary work, and disrupt the Red Cross independent value. Norway on the other hand argued that the municipalities should help funding volunteer work and in this way not just show that they see inclusion activities as a crucial part of integration and language learning, but also make both parts co-actors, being able to enquire minimum standards from another. Either way a written agreement and regular meetings are key factors for understanding each other's roles and preventing misunderstandings.

2) HOW DO YOU USE THE PRINCIPLES TO DECIDE WHO GETS A GUIDE AND WHO DOESN'T?

Our network is vast, but our approach is simple. All Red Cross programs and activities are guided by the Fundamental Principles of Humanity, Impartiality,

Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles allow us to provide help immediately to whoever needs it, wherever they are, whatever their race, political beliefs, religion, social status, or culture.

Although the main objective of the program is to assist newly settled refugees with getting a guide and a first contact into the local society, some of the national societies have also connected participants who didn't have a stay permit. In the capital of Norway, Oslo they had a few cases immigrants without permit wanting a guide. They felt isolated and fare away for the rest of the society. Oslo Red Cross would in such cases give the person a guide, as the person probably was in a very vulnerable situation. This was also the case in some places in Sweden.

This was however not the case in all the places. In other cities in Norway for instance, they would limit the program to the refugees already settled, and participating in the Introduction-program offered by the municipality, and rather offered the joined group activities to other migrants.

The conclusion from this discussion was that asylum seekers/ persons without papers either way should be given the chance to participate in the refugee guide program, regardless of their residency status. This point touches upon the basic principles of the Red Cross, striving to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavors, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being.

The objective of the Refugee guide is nonetheless inclusion of migrants into the local society, something all migrants will benefit regardless of their residency status. Also when the asylum process stretches over months and years, support is needed and the integration process starts sooner as well. This also prevents marginalization.

However, you the local Red Cross branch has joined group activities as well, it is important to consider what is most appropriate and feasible.

3) HOW CAN THE RELATION IN YOUR BUDDY/FAMILY/ MENTOR PROGRAM HELP THE REFUGEE WITH UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL SOCIETY AND IMPROVING LANGUAGE SKILLS?

The program can be an important link between the society and the refugee in several ways. One important

aspect is bridging between important public open meeting places and the participants. A good example is the library where also a good environment for language learning. Here several volunteers and participants can meet and for instance find relevant books, read newspapers or just talk.

Although the programs aim to give newly settled refugees more information and knowledge about the meeting with the local society, and language learning, it is the smaller things that's the most important to understand. This can for instance be the need of wool socks in the Scandinavian winter, how the locals talk about the weather, and basically how the local transportation system works. As an artist, and former refugee, participating in some of the collaborations expressed: «I just need someone to tell me about the buildings, what's inside the buildings and what people do in their free time. It's very frustrating because it feels like being a child again, you can't speak well, and need someone to explain everything.»

All the national societies agreed on that the strength of the activities is that there are volunteers who are helping the participants both to understand the local community, and in improving language skills. Also knowing that someone wants to get to know you and help you, without receiving money is an important aspect of the relationship. Further it's important to have professional support by consultants within the Red Cross, as well as having the headquarter make unified national materials for the activities.

The second half of the day professionals and volunteers from two districts in Norway had workshops regarding central challenges and routines in the Norwegian programs and how we should focus more on diversity amongst our volunteers. The main point regarding the latter was to not think of the migrants just as people who we want to help, but mostly as people with skills and resources that our organization needs. To give the control back to people to people by asking «what do you want to contribute with» and not «what do you need».

The third and last day of the meetings went to workshops where we worked with determining key points and suggestions from each national society, for this report. Along with the discussions regarding learning points and achievements, there was also a broad understanding of how fruitful the meetings had been as well as inspiring for integration work in the future.



Volunteer from Denmark.

IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR GOOD INTEGRATION

Coming to a new country without knowing the language and culture can be tough. The feeling of «starting all over» can be even harder. It's commonly known that learning the new language and getting a job is the key to successful integration. However, feeling included in, and part of, your host society is as important.

The first step is to build a good fundament where the government, municipality, society and volunteer organizations cooperate with complementary roles. Danish Red Cross has made several detailed booklets about how the volunteers can cooperate with the municipality and vice versa, and how the volunteer can lead an integration activity, finding new volunteers and connecting with refugees and other migrants. Such tools are crucial for not just for ourselves and how we take care of our activities, but this also helps the Red Cross to define our role in the landscape facing the municipalities and other collaborators.

Volunteers are the key into the local society and cracking the social codes. They meet the refugees as commoners, give of their free time and aren't paid in any other way than making their local society a better place for newcomers. Integration can't be complete without inclusion. And inclusion needs to be sincere and from the heart of the locals.



Employed and volunteered from Sør-Trøndelag, talking about diversity in the Red Cross.

LOCAL ADAPTION

The Refugee guide program has overall guidelines and goals that are meant to be followed nationally in each national society. However, to establish the program in a community it is essential to know and understand what the demographic is in the community. How many refugees are settled in the municipality? What is their age group? Are they families or young single men? What kind of activities do they need and what kind of activities is possible within the community? Where can volunteers be recruited from? And what does the municipality already provide? What challenges are there in the society? Also it is important to see the refugees and migrants as individuals and not as groups, just because they are in the same age group or from the same country. Iceland is a good example for this, as they, in the beginning, thought that all the Syrian refugees needed to be treated alike, as they were from the same country with the same culture and so on. After some time it became more and more clear that not only weren't they that much alike, they didn't want to be treated the same either. And of course they had different needs. Some came with their families, some came alone, some just wanted to get a job, and some needed more time to get used to the new country and take things slower. Also some had much bigger need for socialization, while others didn't.

So, the local adaption goes to ways. Adapting the program and activities to the possibilities locally, along with the resources at hand, and understanding the people we wish to include and welcome in the society. No one want to be treated as just a part of a bigger crowd.

CHALLENGES

Finding enough volunteers

The coordinators of the Refugee guide program in Västerås in Sweden experienced that it was difficult to find enough volunteer men for the activity. This could be quite a challenge, as many male refugees wished to be matched with a male guide, as they wanted a «buddy» through the program. This has been an air challenge in the Norwegian program as well. Specially in smaller cities.

The challenges were however solved quite similarly, by finding other ways to match people. For instance, in Drammen, Norway, a large municipality, they matched elder women with younger males. These women often involved their families in the program. By this they made it possible for the participant to get to know a family through the guide, and sometimes getting to spend time with adults with the same age, through the grownup children of the guide. In Västerås they also matched groups together as well as refugee families. Challenges from Oslo are that they also experience the lack of male volunteers, and had to recruit them especially through internet and by telling active guides the need of more male volunteers. Other and entrepreneur starting up activities to help refugees to gain more network, improvement of language and job-related mentoring. The challenge regarding funding is how we can show that Red Cross is unique in its field.

How long should the program last?

During the collaboration the question about the length of the activity was discussed. It is important that the relationship

is long enough to be fruitful, but at the same time not make the participant dependent on the volunteer, and by this making it a too big commitment to become a volunteer. All countries agreed on having a minimum duration after matching and in this way making some predictability for both parts. Denmark and Sweden for instance had a minimum of 6 months commitment, while Norway had between 9 – 12 months, were the local branch set the final period of commitment. However, in Trondheim, the third largest city in Norway, they would extend the connection

with 6 or 12 months if the participant wanted this and the volunteer was ok with it. A counterargument to such extensions was that, duo to lack of enough guides it wasn't very sustainable to use the volunteer resources for the same person for such a long period, as well as that if the parts wanted to continue meeting they could do so as friends and not necessarily through the Red Cross anymore. All this however would depend heavily on the local conditions and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEARNING POINTS:

Although local adjustments are essential for all the programs, we found it possible to land some basic recommendation and learning points as a result of the workshops and collaborations. We have concluded that these provide good conditions for the programs and make already established programs even better.

- See the refugees and other migrants as resources and ask them after they have had a guide, if they want to become guides themselves, or become volunteers in other programs. Like in Sogn and Fjordane in Norway earlier participants have become volunteers in the local Red Cross Search and rescue team.
- It is important to ask the refugee and volunteer to set a goal for the match (make sure the goals are reasonable) in the beginning of the year. This makes both the guide and the refugee aware of the other persons expectations and wishes, and what they want to achieve by going into the program. Then going through the goals at the end of the period and see what goals they have reached. This will give both participants a sense of achievement.
- Minimum length for the activity to ensure continuity and predictability.
- Interviewing both refugee and refugee guide, gives a clearer picture of the refugees needs and strengths/ interest, as well as what the guide is looking for.
- Need of training of trainers / group leaders. Volunteers who have been refugee guides mentoring new ones.
- Reuse the guides when the first period is over, by asking. This way you will reduce of having to few guides.

«I feel so inspired going back home with all these new experiences»

CONCLUSION

The Nordic model of integration programs are quite similar, with a lot of shared experiences and challenges. The fundament of the programs are the same, namely to offer migrants a way into the society through a local whom they can practice the local language. This collaboration shows that those who have driven such programs for a longer time, such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway, can by close cooperation and communication, prevent Iceland who is in the starting phase of establishing a integration program, prevent the same starting mistakes the other sister organizations did. By communicating with one another in the way it has been done here, it is also much easier to establish broadly, what works and what doesn't, and making the smaller adjustments that can increase the quality and sustainably of the programs.

Also the exchanging knowledge and networking between professionals and volunteers, nationally and across the countries has been very valuable. Learning from those who actually take part, an making the programs possible, has been a must for this report.

At the same time, having such established programs for a long period of time can make the national societies get stuck in the same patterns and lacking a fresh look. Coming together in workshops and collaboration made it possible to view the programs from the outside, and learn from one another's experiences, how new challenges could be solved.

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