

## ISSUE BRIEF:

# PROMISING PRACTICES FROM WORKING WITH REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN EUROPE



UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe conducted a comprehensive mapping of ongoing initiatives and engagement with refugee-led organizations in 2020. This Issue Brief seeks to summarize the main findings of this mapping exercise, share the promising practices identified in different countries, and provide practical tips to further support and reinforce the work done by refugee-led organizations and refugee-led initiatives across the region.

# Contents

What are refugee-led organizations?

Why engage with refugee-led organizations?

What are UNHCR and partners doing to support and promote refugee-led organizations in Europe?

What are the promising practices identified so far?

Practical tips and ideas

THIS DOCUMENT WILL BE PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED DURING THE UNHCR REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOS IN EUROPE IN SEPTEMBER 2021.



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## What are refugee-led organizations?

The term **refugee-led organizations (RLOs)** is understood as organizations that are either entirely established and led by refugees, or have more than 50% refugees in positions of leadership and decision making, and which are providing advocacy, protection and/or assistance to their communities. This includes women-led organizations, youth-led organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities that are inclusive of refugees.

In the **European context**, many refugee-led organizations identify themselves as “diaspora organizations” or organizations working to support a specific nationality, inclusive of both refugees and migrants. Many are led by former or naturalized refugees who have been in Europe for a longer period of time and have members with different legal statuses in their country of asylum (such as asylum-seekers,

temporary or subsidiary protection holders, family members of refugees who have arrived through family reunification etc.).

Refugee-led organizations;

- can be formal or informal;
- may or may not be officially registered or have legal recognition in the country.

The degree of **organization and structure** varies greatly among refugee-led organizations, as does their access to funding and to decision-makers, and the concrete activities that they are conducting in support of their communities. Many refugee-led organizations in Europe also offer support to the host community and engage in activities to promote social cohesion and integration in their countries of asylum.

### Extent of the engagement with organizations led by refugees , IDPs and Stateless persons



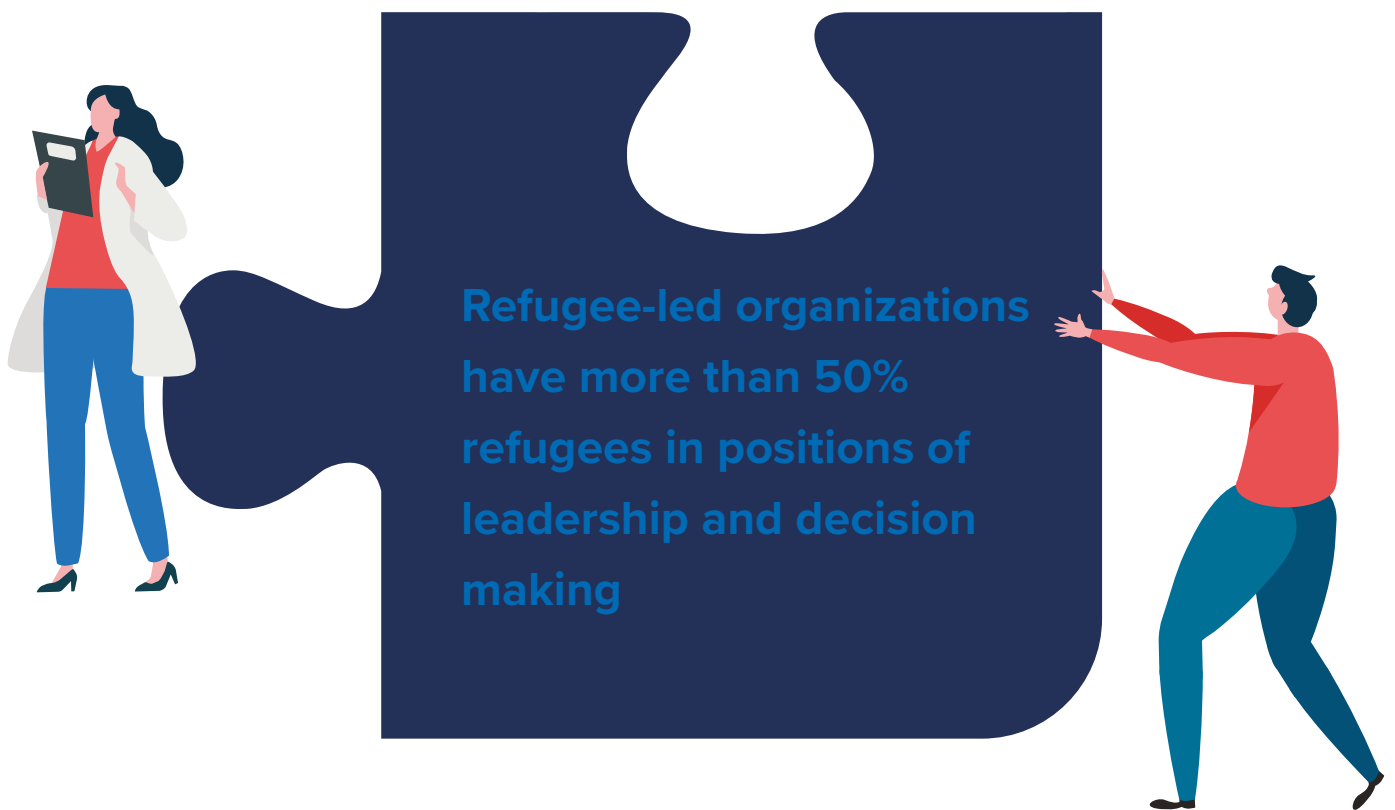
## Why engage with refugee-led organizations?

With the lived experience of displacement, refugee-led organizations are the best placed to identify concerns and opportunities within their communities and to find suitable, practical and sustainable solutions to protection and integration challenges in Europe, taking into account and mobilizing the capacities and resilience of refugees themselves.

In Europe, refugee-led organizations often act as the first point of contact for asylum-seekers arriving in the region, providing critical and lifesaving information about available services and rights, and acting as guides and translators in their new countries of asylum. They provide frontline and grassroots level support to refugee communities and help the most vulnerable access assistance, counselling, education

and livelihoods. Many refugee-led organizations also offer support to the host community and engage in activities to promote social cohesion and integration, and to combat hate speech and xenophobia.

In addition, refugee-led organizations often act as the “voice of refugees” in the public space, as well as with government authorities, UNHCR and other stakeholders. They are powerful agents of change in the region and can contribute to meaningful and sustainable participation and inclusion, in line with [the Global Compact on Refugees](#), the [localization agenda of the Grand Bargain](#), and UNHCR’s accountability to affected people.



## What are UNHCR and its partners doing to support and promote refugee-led organizations in Europe?

UNHCR's mapping in 2020 found that more than half of its offices (20 out of 38) were already engaging or partnering with refugee-led organizations. **More than 80** such organizations were identified across the Europe region, of which 30 are working under the umbrella of the [PartecipAzione project](#) in Italy alone.

While some of the organizations had a regional or national scope, the majority of the organizations that were mapped have developed organically at the local level. Many remain small in terms of geographical scope and membership, and several of the organizations that were

interviewed by UNHCR expressed difficulties in **ensuring sustainability, predictable funding and external communication**. Some organizations further highlighted language and information barriers to conduct their work, and barriers related to official registration or other legal and administrative requirements.

A number of **positive initiatives are already ongoing to address these challenges**. A few examples are highlighted in the table below.

### Snapshot of ongoing activities:

<b>Austria</b>	UNHCR has implemented a series of webinars for RLOs (" <a href="#">Community Online Capacity Pool</a> ") and created a <a href="#">Community Dialogue Facebook-Group</a> . An advisory board ("UNHCR Refugee Team") was established in 2021.
<b>Belgium</b>	UNHCR is supporting the establishment of an Umbrella Refugee Committee in Brussels, comprised of a number of refugee committees, supported through capacity building.
<b>Bulgaria</b>	In Bulgaria, a Refugee Advisory Board was established with UNHCR support and is now managing an <a href="#">online anti-rumour and misinformation campaign</a> .
<b>Georgia</b>	UNHCR and World Vision have in 2019 recruited Community Group Facilitators to enhance participation and community mobilization.
<b>Italy</b>	UNHCR and INTERSOS are (since 2017) implementing a programme of support for RLOs entitled " <a href="#">PartecipAzione</a> " which promotes the protection and active participation of refugees in the economic, social and cultural life in Italy.
<b>Lithuania</b>	In Lithuania, the Artscape project seeks to address integration challenges by (i) creating synergies between "informal" integration platforms and the formal integration system, (ii) engaging refugees as service providers and volunteers and (iii) capacitating the <a href="#">Lithuanian Refugee Council</a> , the first refugee-led organization in Lithuania.
<b>Malta</b>	UNHCR in Malta supported RLOs with coaching sessions and office set up (such as IT and other equipment).
<b>Sweden</b>	In Sweden, the RLO <a href="#">Hero2Be</a> was awarded the UNHCR 2020 NGO Award, with a grant of 15,000 USD to further their work on psychosocial support for refugee children.
<b>Turkey</b>	UNHCR and partners work with a number of community structures, including refugee-led organizations, refugee committees, volunteers, community leaders and other networks, comprised of more than 1,300 members. 21 refugee-led organizations supported by UNHCR were mapped in 2020.

## What are the promising practices identified so far?

### Promising practice #1: Capacity building and training

Several UNHCR offices and partners have initiated capacity building and training programmes for refugee-led organizations with the aim of enhancing existing assistance, protection and advocacy efforts. While such programmes are context-specific and designed in consultation with the organizations themselves, these would normally address:

- Registration, administrative and legal requirements in the country of asylum;
- Fundraising and financing models for refugee-led organizations;
- Programming, budgeting and procurement procedures;
- Public information and communications (including the use of social media);
- Networking and advocacy;
- Protection (including relevant national and international legal frameworks and the prevention of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse);
- Conflict resolution (to enhance social cohesion).

In Italy, for example, UNHCR and INTERSOS have since 2017 implemented a **capacity-building and empowerment programme** for refugee-led organizations entitled “PartecipAzione”, which promotes the protection and active participation of refugees in the economic, social and cultural life in Italy. Five standard training modules have been developed, which also include a tailored regional module with local actors in each region. In 2019 alone, 145 refugees affiliated with 69 organizations attended these trainings.

After six months, 100% of the refugee-led organizations that took part reported enhanced visibility and improved capacity to make the voice of refugees heard in the media; 80% that they had enhanced partnerships and networks; 76% that they had received new funding; and 66% that they had access to decision-making meetings or processes.

UNHCR in Turkey, via a local partner, is supporting 12 community-based and refugee-led organizations through capacity-building and coaching on topics such as finance, procurement, reporting, safety and privacy online, and conduct of social cohesion events.

UNHCR in Austria has implemented a capacity building programme in the form of a **Community Online Capacity Pool**, with webinars of topics such as: “How to found an association in Austria”, “Social cohesion and participation”, “Social media and storytelling” and “Public Relations for associations”.

Similarly, in 2019, UNHCR and World Vision in Georgia recruited Community Group Facilitators from eight different countries and who were offered training on community mobilization; identification and referral; communication; democracy and local government; active citizenship, civic voice and advocacy.

### Partnering with academic institutions

can further enhance the training opportunities available to RLOs. In Bulgaria, for example, UNHCR partnered with the Bulgarian School of Politics (Dimitry Panitza) and, in Belgium, with University Libre de Bruxelles (ULB).

## Promising practice #2: Advancing visibility and networking opportunities

Some refugee-led organizations may - at least initially – benefit from support in accessing government counterparts and other decision makers, expanding their networks with the media and other stakeholders, and ensure “a seat at the table” when policy issues are discussed. This is particularly the case where refugees are not systematically consulted by local authorities/municipalities, NGOs and other service providers, for example in relation to services provided, or regarding reception conditions and integration more broadly.

Promising practices in Europe include linking refugee-led organizations up with each other, with NGOs and with government authorities that are providing services at local and national level. Feedback indicates that this is most efficient if it is done at local level first, with UNHCR or its partner’s role described primarily as a “door opener” or “facilitator”. In Belgium, for instance, UNHCR has engaged in a pilot project to establish an Umbrella Refugee Committee in Brussels, made up of representatives from different refugee committees and acting as a bridge between communities, UNHCR, municipal authorities, service providers and civil society. One of its key objectives is to contribute to a constructive dialogue on refugee integration and welfare in Brussels, as a model for other cities.

In Italy, a two-day event was sponsored by the Naples municipality and attended by 150 participants from institutions, civil society and media, and facilitated the exchange of practices and collaboration with and among refugee-led organizations. Similarly, in 2019, a “Dialogue” with NGOs and relevant

authorities was organized by UNHCR in Spain and an “Outreach Fair” for refugee-led organizations and NGOs in Hungary.

Refugee-led organizations in Malta were invited to an “Integration Roundtable” with service providers and other stakeholders for information-sharing and networking, while in Georgia, UNHCR facilitated an event between the Public Defender’s Office and the Community Group Facilitators aimed at voicing the refugee community concerns, needs and capacities, while identifying and offering potential solutions and facilitating dialogue.

In Turkey, refugee-led organizations and community members regularly attend City Council meetings to raise protection concerns directly with municipal structures. They also attend local provincial coordination meetings, chaired by Deputy Governors, where they bring forward issues and recommendations to the attention of local decision-makers.

In Austria, a workshop with six refugee-led student associations was organized in 2020, focused on the inclusion of refugees in higher education. The findings of the first workshop were thereafter presented by the associations at a meeting with universities, NGOs, municipal and federal educational institutions. As a result of a second workshop, the associations also presented findings from an online survey of refugee students during COVID-19 and collected recommendations for different mentoring projects.

Social media and digital platforms can enhance the visibility of refugee-led organizations. UNHCR in Austria, for example, uses the Facebook group “UNHCR Community Dialogue” to

exchange with the organizations and to share webinars and material, whereas UNHCR in Turkey uses the Facebook group “UNHCR Turkey Information Board”, with 85.000 followers, to enhance its communication with different refugee communities and refugee-led organizations in Turkey. This facilitates the sharing of important updates, including on COVID-19, GBV services and psychosocial support.

### Promising practice #3: Start-up support and grants

Many organizations can benefit from start-up grants or material support to enhance their activities, in particular where independent funding sources are not (yet) forthcoming.

In Turkey, UNHCR initiated a Community Support Projects Committee in 2017 to support community-led initiatives and nearly 30 projects have been implemented since, with an additional 20 direct implementation interventions in 2020. Awards granted through PartecipAzione in Italy have benefitted around 8,000 persons with micro-projects in 11 regions over two years, as a multiplier of social and economic inclusion and integration.

In Bulgaria, the Refugee Advisory Board benefitted from UNHCR Innovation funding to set up a community-led online rumour and misinformation platform, and in Malta, UNHCR supported several RLOs with practical office set up, such as IT and other equipment.





## Practical tips and ideas:

**Do no harm** – Be aware of potential protection risks faced by refugees and asylum-seekers who are working for their communities, in particular in countries where the legal framework may not be supportive of such activities or where there are strong anti-refugee sentiments or xenophobia. Consult with the organizations about such risks and seek to mitigate these, where possible, prior to any public engagement.

**Seek equal partnerships** - Be careful not to undermine the role or credibility of refugee-led organizations through “tokenistic” or “tick-box” activities. Ensure that such organizations are engaged from the very beginning of - and throughout - an initiative, rather than, for example, only inviting them in last minute as participants or panellists.

**Promote gender parity and diversity** - Refugee-led organizations should reflect and represent the diversity of - and within - their communities. This includes considerations of age, gender, gender

identity, sexual orientation, languages, ethnicities, religion and other individual qualities, such as income, legal status and educational background.

**Involve all relevant stakeholders** – Seek to engage with local authorities and municipalities from the very beginning to assess and encourage their interest in working with refugee-led organizations. Partner with academic institutions and other experts, for example to develop trainings or capacity building, surveys or impact assessments.

**Plan for continuity and sustainability** – Community-based work requires dedicated and continued resources, time and staffing. Try to plan for the medium to long term, for example by looking into external fundraising opportunities or by supporting organizations to overcome administrative and legal barriers in their country of asylum.

### EXTERNAL REFERENCES

UNHCR Global NGO in 2020 : <https://www.unhcr.org/2020-unhcr-annual-consultations-with-ngos/>

ECRE 2019 Working Paper on RLOs: <https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Working-Paper-01.pdf>

Community Online Capacity Pool (Austria): [www.unhcr.org/dach/at/was-wir-tun/integration/community-dialog-und-forum/community-online-wissens-pool](http://www.unhcr.org/dach/at/was-wir-tun/integration/community-dialog-und-forum/community-online-wissens-pool)

Community Dialogue on Facebook (Austria): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/unhcrcommunity>

Global Compact on Refugees, paras. 12, 75, 77 and 106: [https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR\\_English.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf)

Global Refugee-led Network, Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: <http://aprrn.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines.pdf>

Lithuanian Refugee Council: <https://www.refugeeslt.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/refugeeslt/>

PartecipAzione (Italy): <https://www.partecipazionerifugiati.org/>, with short video reports available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc1X\\_4Wvqul](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc1X_4Wvqul) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_JK2zmUv\\_ns&t=2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JK2zmUv_ns&t=2s)

PartecipAzione Facebook Community: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/709353276133781>

Refugee Advisory Board's online rumor platform (Bulgaria): <https://rumorfree.org/en/>

UNHCR Turkey Information Board: <https://www.facebook.com/unhcrturkeyinfo/>