

Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

EU-level Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations

Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

This will be the Training Kit, our ultimate deliverable which will address the challenges faced by refugees in integrating effectively in their host countries. The Training Kit will contain content addressing refugee-led groups that wish to be active at a national and/or European level. It will also be available to the public and thoroughly disseminated throughout the Partners' networks.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the [project webpage](#).

About the author(s)

Reshad Jalali,
European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Avenue des Arts 7/8,
1210 Brussels,
Belgium

Tel: 0032 232 900 40

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Background and Objectives of the Report

This report is drafted by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) to examine and better understand the role and presence of Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs) at the European Union (EU) level and what challenges and opportunities lie ahead of RCOs working on EU policies. This report aims to help RCO's overcome the challenges they may face, to support policymakers to consider the recommendations and inclusion of RCO's while developing policies that affect their lives, and to help other stakeholders to include refugees within their work.

Methodology

The researcher collected secondary data from the existing reports, studies and articles on the presence of RCOs. As the use of primary data for this report was considered very important as well, the primary data collected through in-depth interview with RCOs; Refugees; Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and EU policymakers.

The researcher conducted in a total of 10 interviews divided as follows:

- 5 RCOs
- 2 Refugees
- 4 Policymakers
- 1 CSO

This report gives background information on refugees in EU Member States (MS), elaborates the political context and recent policy developments at the EU level, explain the presence of CSOs and their coordination in Brussels, explain the presence of RCOs at the EU level and finally present analysis.

RCOs Activities at the EU Level

Background Information

As a result of ongoing civil war in Syria and the increase in conflicts and violence across the world, the number of refugees and internally displaced people worldwide reached a new record of around 70.8 million in 2019¹. According to Eurostat data, between 2015 and 2019, 4,361,545 people claimed asylum in the EU (28 countries)².

In 2019 the number of newly arrived asylum applicants (those who lodged an asylum claim for the first time) in EU 27 was 612,700, a significant decline compared to 2015 and 2016³. The most common citizenship of asylum seekers in 2019 in EU 27 was Syrian, Afghan, Venezuelan. The main country destinations of asylum applicants in 2019 were Germany, France and Spain.

When refugees come to a new country, they also bring a set of new skills and experiences with them. Although at the beginning of their stays in the new place, they face new challenges in the host society and have specific needs. In this regard, RCOs can play a significant role by helping their communities. However, the role of RCOs is often ignored or underestimated and they are not financially supported for what they do. At the policy level, where RCOs can contribute greatly by elaborating the gaps in the development and implementation of policies, based on their knowledge and expertise, their voices are often missed⁴.

Political Context and Policy Developments

The EU has a shared competence with its MS in the area of asylum and migration. Therefore, it plays a key role in the in the formulation of asylum policies through the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The CEAS is a legislative framework created by the EU under the [Treaty of Amsterdam](#) which came into force in 1999. The CEAS sets and regulates common standards in the field of asylum intending to create a unified and harmonised asylum system among EU MS in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1951 regarding the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol.⁵

¹ UNHCR.

² Eurostat, *First time asylum applicants - annual aggregated data*, available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tps00191&language=en>

³ Pew Research Centre (August 2016), *Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 million in 2015*, available at:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>

⁴ Rights in Exiles (September 2017), *The importance of refugee-led organisations to effective refugee response*, available at:

<https://rightsinexile.tumblr.com/post/164876697307/the-importance-of-refugee-led-organisations-to>

⁵ European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (August 2016), *An introduction to the Common European Asylum System for Courts and Tribunals (a Judicial analysis)*, available at:

List of Current CEAS instruments:

CEAS instruments	Date of entry into force
The Temporary Protection Directive	07/08/2001
The Qualification Directive (recast)	09/01/2012
The Eurodac Regulation (recast)	19/07/2013
The Dublin three regulation (recast)	19/07/2013
The Reception Conditions Directive (recast)	19/07/2013
The Asylum Procedures Directive (recast)	19/07/2013

According to ECRE’s Asylum Information Database (AIDA), which provide detailed comparative analysis of asylum system in 23 countries, the following gaps were identified on the CEAS implementation.⁶

- Inadequate reception provision (quality and quantity)
- Barriers to registration
- Lack of special procedural guarantees
- The asylum lottery
- Harmful and insufficient use of Dublin

Recent Developments

Since past ten years, the EU’s objective has shifted toward the prevention of people coming to Europe by outsourcing migration to third countries through the linking of development assistance to migration control objectives; ‘push back’ policies at its borders; detention in neighbouring countries; an increase in return of third-country nationals by reaching informal agreements with third countries such as EU-Turkey deal and the Joint Way Forward with Afghanistan and through the creation of a hostile environment to deter entry into Europe.⁷ Internally, the EU sets to reform the current CEAS instruments, to overcome the disparities in policy and practices of MS in the field of asylum and prevent secondary movement of people from one MS to another.

To this end, the European Commission tabled seven legislative proposals for reform, in two packages, published in May and in July 2016 to limited access to asylum for people in need of protection. Over the past 4 years, progress on the negotiations over the reform of CEAS proposals between the two co-legislators, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU have been blocked. Within its previous

<https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/BZ0216138ENN.PDF>

⁶ Asylum Information Database available at: <https://www.asylumineurope.org/>

⁷ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (November 2019), *Time to Commit: using the Global Refugee Forum*, available at:

<https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Policy-Note-23.pdf>

term, the European Parliament made tremendous steps to fundamentally amend the EC proposals and included many important human rights safeguards and reached a trialogue stage of negotiations with its co-legislator the Council of the EU on 5 out of 7 legislative proposals. These proposals are: Qualification Regulation; the Reception Conditions Directive; Union Framework on Resettlement; Eurodac Regulation and the European Agency on Asylum. The European Parliament also reached a position on the two notorious proposals namely, the EC proposal of the reform of the Dublin Regulation and the EC proposal for an Asylum Procedure Regulation, however, due to lack of solidarity and disagreements on responsibility-sharing among MS particularly on the last two proposals, there was no agreement on the CEAS package among MS in the Council of the EU.

The current political landscape with an increase of the presence of far-right movements across EU governments and minority governments in place in several EU MS, it seems unlikely that the package will be adopted.⁸

Efforts are ongoing from the European Commission (EC) side to pass the proposals and reach an agreement between MS. In December 2019, the new European Commission announced plans for developing a comprehensive ‘Pact on Asylum and Migration’. The Pact aims to foster MS support for the reform of the CEAS proposals and to reduce MS disagreements on proposals. The Pact may contain, both legislative and non-legislative proposals.

The unpreparedness and lack of willingness of EU MS to manage the increase of arrivals led to a humanitarian crisis in the EU and fuelled the rise of far-right and anti-establishment political parties across several EU MS. As a result, ‘Migration control’ becomes a top priority for the EU in its internal affairs matters as well as in its external relationships with third countries. The migration control objective of DG Home is now shadowing the work of other DG’s particularly DG DEVCO and the External Action Services (EEAS). All efforts are to prevent refugees from coming to Europe and shrink the protection space in Europe.

CSOs in Brussels

CSOs at the EU level play a crucial role in defending and promoting fundamental rights and played an important role during the so-called refugee crisis. Article 11 of the Treaty of European Union underlines the importance to have an open, transparent and regular dialogue with CSOs. There are a growing number of CSOs active in Brussels, whose role includes advocating in EU institutions and working on EU policies. The number of CSOs that led by refugees and migrants also known as RCOs are also increased by trying to change the old narratives and improve policies that shape their life.

⁸ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (October 2019), *Making the CEAS work, starting today*, available at:

https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PN_22.pdf

CSOs coordinate and work together in a variety of ways in Brussels. [ECRE](#) is an alliance of 106-member organisation in 40 European countries. It works in coordination with members and including their views in ECRE's policies is crucial for ECRE's work. ECRE's secretariat in Brussels informs, supports and works with the network through hosting joint events, provide briefings to members, and the management of thematic working groups. ECRE's work covers three main activities Legal Support and Litigation; Advocacy/Research; and Communications.

The Working Groups bring ECRE members with a strong interest in a particular thematic area together. Members are welcome to contribute as actively as they wish however there are no specific obligations attached to membership of a Working Group – members are free to use them just to gather information if they prefer. The Working Groups will meet in person when possible, otherwise; regular communication will take place virtually. Moreover, ECRE meets with its Brussels based members quarterly to discuss and exchange recent developments and, where relevant, to initiate joint advocacy.

There are several other coordination initiatives among refugee and migrant rights sector in Brussels, one of which is [EPAM](#) (European programme on Asylum and Migration). EPAM is the meeting-place of European non-governmental organisations and networks (including ECRE) seeking to contribute to the development of asylum and migration policy in the European Union. The platform has been running voluntarily since 1994. Quarterly meetings are co-chaired by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and UNHCR. Another initiative coordination platform is "migration discussion group" led by Oxfam. This group meets every second Thursday to update and where relevant coordinate their advocacy work.

Presence of RCOs at EU Level

RCOs play a vital role in bridging the gap between communities and the host societies. Many of the RCOs are grassroots organisations and are working at the local level providing immediate assistance to new arrivals, helping them with the integration process and organising cultural activities. The number of RCOs working at the policy level, particularly influencing the EU policies is limited. However recently, a number of RCOs started organising themselves and becoming active at the policy level by sharing their expertise through advocacy and demanding their inclusion at the policy-making level.⁹ Although the size of these organisations are small, and the majority of them work voluntarily, their impact is significant according to the participants.¹⁰ At the policy level, many of these organisations came into existence as they felt excluded from the policies which affect their lives and shape their future. As highlighted by one participant "we came out when we realised our voices are missing and we are not being included when designing policies on our future".

⁹ Self-representation and self-advocacy often start at local or national level and that in some cases, this is then expanded to also address EU relevant issues or going beyond that interaction with EU policy-makers directly.

¹⁰ Refugee Council (October 2018), *A bridge to life in the UK*, available at:

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/A_bridge_to_life_in_the_UK_Oct_2018.pdf

The majority of participants acknowledge the importance of CSOs advocating for refugee's rights, they also feel the need for CSOs to be more representative by recruiting more staff with refugee and migrant background and refugees should be advocating and bringing their experience to the table. When asked about opportunities for involving RCOs, the majority of participants responded that RCOs and refugees should be involved at all levels, from designing policies to monitoring their implementation.

The majority of RCOs find it very important to influence EU policies. As was highlighted by another participant, *“it is important to lobby EU policies, given the EU’s power in the area of asylum and migration, and its influence through funding”*. At the time of drafting this report, there are no RCOs established in Brussels that work on EU policies. This is partly due to the complexity of influencing EU policies, and partly due to lack of financial support to rent an office in Brussels. In the past, there were attempts by some RCOs to create a European network of refugees at the EU level. For example, the Greek Forum of Refugees with the support of ECRE and Advocate Europe created a network called RISE, [Refugees Ideas and Solutions for Europe](#), which initially was very successful. However, later due to lack of financial support it became inactive.

Due to increase advocacy efforts from refugee communities and CSOs to include the voices of refugees at the decision-making level and with the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which calls on the involvement of refugees when designing policies, UNHCR created a [Global refugee-led network](#) (GRN) consisting of members from all refugee communities and regions throughout the world. The aim of the network is to include the views of refugees when designing policies and throughout their implementation at UNHCR. The GRN has been divided into four regional chapters including the European Chapter with the aim to be more organised and active on policies concerned at the EU level.

The increase demand from refugee communities and advocates to be included in the policy making level led to the organisation of the first [Global summit of refugees and migrant](#) which took place in 2018 with the slogan of “nothing about us without us”. The successful organisation of the first global summit led to the organisation of the [European summit of refugees and migrants](#), which took place in 2019. The European Summit of refugees and migrants brought together refugee and migrants from all over Europe to discuss their inclusion and participation at the decision-making level.

A number of other initiatives also has been taken to systematically include refugees and migrants at the policy level. As such was the piloting of the [European Migrant Advisory Board](#) (EMAB) whose aim was to advise cities and the European Commission on integration policies. EMAB which was a one-year programme (2018-2019) was supported by the Open Society Foundation. A network of Syrian-led organisations, called [DNA](#) (Diaspora Network Alliance) also tried to establish an office in Brussels, but it was not successful. However, the presence of RCOs based in MS trying to influence EU policies has increased over the past few years, yet their activities are rather ad hoc and limited.¹¹

Recently, the European Commission launched an expert group on views of migrants in the fields of migration, asylum and integration policies. The group is comprised of people with refugee and migrant

¹¹ European Summit of Refugees and Migrants (May-June 2019).

backgrounds and aims to include their views on designing of policies that affect their lives and to monitor the policies' implementation with the active involvement of Refugees and migrant themselves.¹²

In 2019, the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) commissioned a report to map out the list of RCOs and migrant-led community organisation in Europe and published a list refugee and migrant-led organisations and individuals in Europe.¹³ Which is still relevant and provides a good overview of RCOs in Europe.

¹² European Commission (September 2020) Expert group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3734>

¹³ European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) (October 2019), *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, available at:

<https://www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf>

Analysis

Based on desk research and interviews with RCOs and refugee advocates based in MS and other relevant stakeholders, the following challenges and opportunities have been identified.

Challenges

Although RCOs have specific challenges which vary from one Ms to another, they share similar challenges across Europe.

Funding

Securing core funding is one of the main challenges faced by many of Refugee led-organisations across the EU. Most of such organisations are not able or eligible to secure funding either because of lack of a professional fundraising officer or because of the lengthy applications set by donors. Indeed, a majority of organisations are reliant on a community or even personal contributions. Some of them complain about the lack of direct coordination between donors and RCOs.

As was raised by several participants during a webinar on the impact of Covid-19 on refugees, “RCOs should have equal access to funding and should be given core funding to ensure that they are empowered and ensure the sustainability of their work.”¹⁴

Asked about how they are successful, one participant responded “with a very limited amount of resources, we do a lot for the refugee communities by supporting the new commers”.

Inclusion and empowerment

The meaningful inclusion of RCOs at decision-making level and consultation was identified as another challenge by all stakeholders, as indicated by an EU policymaker “unfortunately there is not a habit for the EU policymakers to include CSOs including RCOs at decision-making process.”

Reach out to policy makers

Regarding access to policymakers another participant from CSO was of the view that when it comes to policy recommendations, RCOs recommendations are not being taken seriously compared to those of other CSOs. There is little appetite from policy makers to reach out to RCOs when designing of policies.

Capacity building

Majority of the newly established RCOs struggle with lack of knowledge on EU policy-making as was highlighted during the interviews. For RCOs the complexity of EU institutions discourages them from engaging regularly with EU policies or to do advocacy at the EU level.

¹⁴ The webinar organised by the Global Refugee-led network (GRN) (April 2020), *Refugee leadership in response to Covid-19*, Global Online conference.

Opportunities

Based on desk research and interviews the following recommendations were suggested by all participants.

Funding

Since funding is a big challenge for many RCOs, philanthropy and the EC should financially support RCOs and provide them with core funding. Philanthropy organisations should streamline funding applications and project reports. The focus should be on delivering results, rather than filling the lengthy reports, as was pointed out by a participant during the interview *“in order to empower refugees and ensure the sustainability of RCOs, philanthropy organisations should provide us with core funding”*.

Capacity building

Mainstream CSOs and European Commission (EC) should strengthen their communications and organise training sessions on the work of the EU for RCO representatives. Mainstream CSOs can play a constructive role by supporting RCOs in developing advocacy skills and lobbying the EU’s policies.

Inclusion

At the EU level, policymakers should systematically include the voices of refugees, not only by inviting to an event or to be a speaker, but rather to be their partners when designing policies. According to a participant from the European Parliament, *“the European Commission should support the establishment of RCOs at the EU level, it makes their work easy to invite them to their hearings and to their consultation.”*

To ensure inclusivity and representativeness, CSOs particularly those working in the refugee rights sector should recruit people with the refugee and migrant backgrounds as their staff and include the views of refugees when drafting policy positions.

Empowerment

Refugees are often portrayed as victims or beneficiaries of help; this old fashion narrative should be changed. Refugees should be empowered so that they could contribute in the host society and participate at decision making level and actively contribute for the improvement of policies and programmes that shape their lives and future.