

Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

Comparative 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 in mind, 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. The aim is to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, and to facilitate engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

The above will be addressed by 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 material relevant to the work of 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 Council for Refugees, 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: <https://aditus.org/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

About the author(s)

This Comparative Report is published by aditus foundation with substantial input from all the project partners.

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About this Comparative Report

Aims and Methodology

The main aim of this Comparative Report on the Status of Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs) is to provide a contribution to the project's formulation of a training kit that supports the establishment and strengthening of such organisations. Our project was conceived of as a step-by-step approach towards the creation of the training kit, with each step building on the previous ones and paving the way for future project activities. In this sense, the discussions being held by the project partners on the training content and methodology are consistently based on earlier research, findings and conclusions; either our own or contributed by third parties.

Following the publication of five national reports on the theme as well as one report looking at the EU-level context¹, this report is a synthesis of the main elements emerging from those six reports. It reflects the national and EU realities, as identified and presented by the project partners, extracting and presenting the reports' key observations.

It is our intention for this report to be read in conjunction with the Literature Review, a publication gathering the most significant publications in this area and summarising their most salient points. Whereas the Literature Review provides valuable technical input from the wealth of experiences in this sector, this Comparative Report is entirely based on the realities in the six contexts analysed in the national/EU reports.

There is a need to underline the observation made in the EU-level Report that RCOs active in Brussels-based advocacy are generally national or local level RCOs keen on influencing EU laws and policies. For the purposes of this Comparative Report, this observation implies that the identified challenges and recommendations are also relevant for those RCOs operating at EU level, since they would be established and mainly active in national settings. Since there are no RCOs operating exclusively at the EU level and/or based in Brussels, this report does not identify any challenges or recommendations specific to that reality. However, acknowledging the particular nature of EU-level advocacy, this Report flags those challenges and recommendations that have a particular bearing on EU-level activities and – where relevant – further explanations are provided to ensure clarity of this observation.

¹ All reports are available on the project's website:

<https://aditus.org/mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations/#.YFnJuy1Q1hE>.

By way of context, it is relevant to underline points very clearly emerging from the national reports: the number of RCOs is very different from one EU Member State to another. In addition to noting the number of RCOs in different EU MS, the reports also underline the relationship between the presence/activities of RCOs and various contextual elements that either support or limit them.

We hope that, together, these publications will feed into the project's discussions on the kind of content that is best suited for our training kit and, importantly, the most appropriate training methodology.

Main Challenges faced by RCOs

All six analysed reports presented a range of challenges faced by RCOs in their attempts to mobilise, formalise, operate and achieve a desired level of impact. Whilst the contexts described in the six reports all have their own characteristics, affected by historic, demographic, economic and political elements, a set of common challenges may be extracted from the reports.

These are presented below, gathered in thematic headings that are, of course, interrelated.

Capacity

As with all civil society organisations, RCOs face challenges securing those resources necessary to become and remain operational. These resources include material elements as well as skills and knowledge, without which the shift from individual to community management becomes a struggle.

GOOD PRACTICE

Ministry of Social Affairs (The Netherlands), in 2019 organised a refugee consultation and establish a temporary advisory board for refugees to provide input and feedback on the new integration policy.

Looking closely at the identified capacity struggles, it emerges clearly from the reports that lack of capacity may often be seen as a result of, rather than the cause of, the other challenges gathered under the other two thematic headings of Environment and Mobilisation. It is our understanding, therefore, that refugees often lack the necessary capacity to operate effective RCOs not because of limitations that might be, or might be perceived to be, intrinsic or specific

to refugees or to refugee communities but because of obstacles resulting from a combined impact of the structural/institutional short-comings and personal/social situations identified under the Environment and Mobilisation sub-headings. This conclusion is an important one for the purposes of identifying those training needs that the Project will seek to address in our Training Kit, since it underlines the need not only to address individual/social situations but also – and possibly more importantly – to formulate a strategy that targets the structural elements that present obstacles to the effectiveness of refugee efforts at self-organisation.

GOOD PRACTICE

Unire – Rifugiati in Rete: This is the first national platform (Italy) created and managed exclusively by refugees, with the aim of offering a positive narrative of the socio-cultural and political commitment of refugees. Established in Rome in 2019, the network is accessible through its [Facebook page](#).

Specifically, the six reports identified the following as the main **Capacity** challenges:

1. Creating and maintaining a **public image** for the organisation, identified as key for networking, project partnerships, and dissemination of mission/activities. In particular, it was noted how difficult it is to also maintain this image through an active, updated and relevant online presence, referring to the need to have a functioning website and various social media channels.
2. **Securing funds** to organise activities and maintain regular operations. All reports flagged this as a main obstacle to a minimum level of stability and sustainability, highlighting the complexities and stringent formal requirements associated with accessing, implementing, managing and reporting public funds – including for project partnerships. As a consequence, organisations underlined that basic operational costs, such as rent for office of activity space, are often impossible to meet. It was further underlined that the majority of initiatives organised by RCOs, particularly in the area of social inclusion, are done on a voluntary and unpaid basis.
3. Difficulties manoeuvring the **national requirements** for establishing and running organisations. Many refugees lamented the complex bureaucracy related to formalisation of their groups, from registration requirements to compliance with fiscal and accountability regimes applicable to NGOs. Associated with this point is the observation that many RCOs, including many refugees themselves, were simply unable to open bank accounts in many of the reporting countries.

GOOD PRACTICE

Lesbiche Senza Frontiere (Lesbians Without Borders):

“Our needs are different to those of other migrants, because too often we are not able to rely on the support of our co-nationals in Italy due to our sexual orientation and we encounter racial prejudice from the LGBT community.”

More information on this Italian organisation is available on the [website](#).

4. In relation to the point made just above, the EU-level report indicates that there are no established RCOs focusing exclusively or primarily on the EU-level advocacy. This is partly due to the complexities of influencing EU policies, and partly due to the lack of financial support needed in order to secure a physical presence in Brussels.
5. Long lists of extremely complex **needs within refugee communities**. The reports highlighted that the volume of demands often placed on RCOs far exceeds their capacity, which is often composed of either untrained or non-professional volunteers. In particular, the needs of vulnerable persons were flagged as posing significant challenges on RCOs operations in terms of their complexity but also of the sheer volume of demand. So whilst this particular challenge may be identified as one linked to capacity, it also raises questions about strategising and the prioritisation of activities within a broader context. It also relates to the identity, format and modus operandi chosen by any particular RCO, insofar as this is a determining factor in assessing whether it is intended to actually meet community needs and also the manner in which it wishes to do so such as, for example, through direct provision, awareness-raising, political advocacy, etc.
6. Many RCOs identified their **lack of expertise** in those national regimes relevant to their operations, preventing them from remaining updated and relevant in terms of knowledge and information. The reports identified this, on the one hand, as an information challenge and, on the other hand, as a networking one whereby refugees are often excluded from those networks through which valuable information is channelled. In particular, reference here is made to knowledge and information of national asylum laws and regulations, roles and powers of various entities (governmental, European, international and non-governmental), administrative procedures, and rights and obligations.

7. As an underlying comment to all the above challenges, the reports underlined the continued **reliance of RCOs on government, UNHCR or other NGO support**. Although this was generally seen as necessary for start-up and capacity-building, the reports noted that this dependence often runs the risk of limiting the RCOs' independence in terms of vision and priorities. It was further noted that, for state entities, UNHCR and several NGOs, refugees and/or RCOs are often treated as project targets and goals when defined as *project beneficiaries*, thereby also attributing a monetary value to the disempowerment of refugee communities.

GOOD PRACTICE

Nieuwlander foundation (The Netherlands): An organisation of former refugees who have lived in The Netherlands for more than 30 years, sharing their extensive experience and knowledge. The foundation provides training, guidance and information. More information on the [website](#).

Environment

Under this section we are gathering those identified challenges that relate to contextual and institutional elements affecting RCOs' potential. This heading therefore presents elements that speak of the political, social, legal and policy environment and how these influence the operational space available to RCOs.

It is primarily in relation to this heading that the reports presented a range of perspectives, reflecting the very different contexts reported on. Yet within these perspectives the main observation that emerged is that context, and an understanding of how this operates, is in fact crucial.

The main challenges flagged in the reports relating to the **Environment** within which RCOs operates are:

1. Generally, the level of understanding and welcoming of any environment to the **active presence of civil society organisations** is a central feature affecting the very possibility of RCOs to be established. It is also a determining factor in shaping their role and function insofar as environments might have particular expectations or requirements of civil society organisations – whether RCO or otherwise. The reports reflected the contextual differences they reported on in underlining how, in some contexts, civil

society organisations are not publicly acknowledged as being part of policy or advocacy discourse, limiting their role to service-providers. Other contexts presented a contrasting environment where Government actively seeks cooperation and dialogue with civil society as an almost natural component of governance.

2. Closely related to the previous point, the reports noted that the **quality of national asylum regimes** has a direct impact on the level of effectiveness of RCOs. The reports mention how asylum plans, strategies, structures, legal and policy regimes, authorities and funding mechanisms shape RCOs' operational environment by impacting the overall wellbeing of refugees and of refugee communities. This 'wellbeing factor' was flagged in the reports as referring to both the level of rights enjoyment and also the political approach found in the various contexts. It was noted that contexts with low wellbeing levels generally place higher demands on a struggling refugee population, whilst contexts with higher levels allow RCOs to engage more actively in advocacy and policy issues.

GOOD PRACTICE

G-100 New Voices for Europe is a workshop where around 100 newcomers, former refugees who share the same experience, European experts, and decision makers meet to discuss and deliberate about different challenges that they are facing. These meetings take place in different European cities where these challenges exist.

3. Lack of **refugee-led spaces** for coordination of approaches, strategies and messages. The theme of dependence is a recurring one, flagged here in the context of the difficulties faced by RCOs in taking control of their own agendas. Too often consulted, within consultation parameters that are often predetermined and not necessarily reflecting RCO priorities, RCOs feel that they are hardly ever able to lead a discussion or to participate in the establishment of the terms of reference of discussions.
4. RCOs lamented that policy-makers are often not too happy to engage with organisations representing **one particular voice or individual voices**, but prefer a collective voice that talks about the broader picture. The national reports talk of a consultation preference that is not too keen on specialised organisations – for example, those representing particular national communities, refugee woman, LGBTIQ+ refugees, or refugee children – mainly due to the comment that such consultation processes are too resource-intensive and shift the focus from a general policy-orientation towards a one based on specific realities/needs/rights. From an RCO perspective, this engagement

approach contrasts with what is considered to be one of the main strengths of RCOs, being their representation of specific interest or groups.

- RCOs noted how their recommendations and input were often **not taken as seriously** as those provided by other non-RCOs.
- The **relationship between RCOs and other NGOs** was identified as a core challenge, to various degrees. Issues flagged include a collaboration gap, the lack of inclusive employment/opportunity policies by non-RCOs, power imbalances operating against RCOs and NGO discourse fuelling the stereotypes that refugees are disempowered and in need of assistance. Interestingly, the very existence of this distinction between RCOs and non-RCOs, instead of a general or harmonised approach towards all NGOs was noted.

GOOD PRACTICE

European Commission's 'Mapping key migrant-led organisations across the EU' (2021): With this analysis, the EU Commission provides a glimpse into some of the most active – and, where possible, policy-relevant – migrant-led structures in the 27 EU countries (EU-27). The analysis is exploratory in nature, as the list of migrant-led structures is not exhaustive but focused on prominent examples identified by our network through desk research.

Information on the research and its main findings is available on the [site](#).

- To what extent does the **legal environment permit refugees** to enrol in NGOs or to set up their own organisations? Whilst possibly an obvious question, this is clearly a key question determining the possibility of refugees to engage in RCO activities, whether formally or informally. It is noted that some contexts present legal obstacles to the registration by refugees of NGOs.
- Racism** and xenophobia are key challenges faced by RCOs, affecting them at an individual and personal level as also the institutional one. In relation to this point, several reports mention the difficulties – or impossibility – of refugees being employed by State institutions, as a key obstacle.

Mobilisation

This section gathers those challenges relating to the possibility of refugees and RCOs to muster sufficient human capital in order to organise themselves as a collectivity, whether as a formal RCO or as a group of active refugees.

The challenges under this heading include logistical elements that go hand in hand with any NGO operation, as also elements relating to group identity and representativeness as a key conflict – internal and external – faced by refugees as they seek to mobilise themselves.

Key challenges under the **Mobilisation** theme are as follows:

1. Dependence on the **limited or irregular time** available to refugees to engage in RCO activities, mainly due to the nature of work engaged in by refugees.
2. **Individual versus the community?** Engagement in RCOs is often competing with activities aimed at securing basic needs, in particular for newly-arrived asylum-seekers and refugees. The reports flagged the importance of securing a basic level of stability before refugees are able to pursue RCO or related activities. Delays in reaching this basic level of stability result in delays and increased challenges in mobilisation and self-organisation.

This element is also relevant for the challenge faced by many refugees in accessing support for **trauma and related mental health issues**.

Furthermore, RCOs struggle to balance the efforts to cover individual needs as presented to them by their community, with tackling the broader community interests they might feel the need to. The reports also noted the persistent fear faced by refugees that engagement in RCO initiatives, or any form of advocacy for the community's interests, could **prejudice their own individual situations** due to possible recriminations. Will asylum procedures be affected? Will family members be permitted to join? Will jobs be lost?

It is also possible to classify under this sub-heading the concern expressed by several refugees in the reports that they often are too emotionally exhausted to provide the necessary assistance to their community members.

3. **Refugee energy drain.** This is mainly associated with the excessive use – mainly by non-RCOs – of individuals to recount personal stories or to work with them as

volunteers. It is also flagged in relation to the tendency of the more active refugees to be offered employment by non-RCOs.

Many refugees in the reports also noted how engagement in RCOs seemed to prolong the personal ‘refugee’ identifier, whereas in several cases refugees are keen to move on from this administrative label in order to live a regular, ‘non-refugee’ life.

The reports also flagged **lack of hope** about the future as a key challenge preventing mobilisation.

GOOD PRACTICE

Federation of Somali Associations in the Netherlands (FASN) is an umbrella organisation of over 50 organisations, seeking full integration and participation of the Somali community in Dutch society.

- Challenges representing or advocating for the **specifics of particular groups**, such as of refugee women, LGBTIQ+ refugees, children, etc. It was noted that, very often, refugee women and LGBTIQ+ refugees are not accepted, represented or welcome within RCOs or formal communities, fuelling the creation of multiple discrimination layers and reducing the opportunity/space to enjoy protection and support. We noted how, in such cases, refugee women and LGBTIQ+ refugees seek representation and acceptance from NGOs specialised in their specific identity.
- Mobilisation that occurs as a **response** to specific situations, for example a new law or policy, happens frequently yet this tends to be volatile and not sustainable.
- ‘How representative are RCOs?’** is a key theme that ran across most reports, directly or indirectly, presenting a complex discussion that talks about the expectations stakeholders have of RCOs in terms of their degree of representativeness required for them to be considered a partner worth engaging with. The reports do not provide a clear-cut response or conclusion to the discussion, but present it as an on-going struggle faced by RCOs as the degree of their relationship with refugees is constantly questioned as put up as a threshold for eligibility to engagement.

It is noted in the reports how similar questions are not raised with non-RCOs, their eligibility to engagement often somewhat automatic, with an assumed expertise that is not also assumed for RCOs. Interestingly, in this regard, the reports also note how

professionalism or expertise requirements tend to be lower for RCOs, as their perceived claim to engagement is often not their expertise but their very representativeness.

Furthermore, the reports note how expectations of solid, comprehensive and inclusive representativeness are often impossible to meet by RCOs due to the very diversity within the refugee population, which diversity often runs counter to the idea of having a handful of RCOs representing ‘all refugees’.

Recommendations

Several recommendations were made in the six reports, emerging either from the interviews/focus groups conducted as part of the research process or from the expert analysis conducted by the Project Partners.

The recommendations generally target the format/methodology and content of the Training Kit the project is set to create.

Training Content

Information

- How the national/EU systems work in terms of structures, procedures, rules, practicalities, etc.
- Funding sources, and methods of accessing them
- Advocacy tools and exercises
- The ‘bigger picture’ and how this relates to and influences asylum issues
- Empowerment discourse
- Contact points/techniques for reaching refugees in various areas/settings
- NGO management from establishment through to operations: setting missions, goals and strategy to meet them.

GOOD PRACTICE

Associazione Donne Africa Subsahariana e II Generazione (Italy): The objective of the association is to tell another story of female immigration and to be a point of union between those who arrive in Italy today and those who have faced that path previously, choosing to build their

professional and family future here. More information available on the [website](#).

Skills

- Network building, and adopting differing strategies for different partners/stakeholders
- Setting objectives and priorities
- Communication as a bridge (active listening, negotiation, discussion, positive framing, etc.)
- Engagement with people having differing views, including within the refugee communities
- How to secure commitment and professionalisation
- Creating and fostering leadership; understanding group dynamics and emergence of leadership
- Personal stories: how to depersonalise them and convert them to recommendations and solutions
- Presentation of identities as a tool to bridge gaps
- Time management: managing RCO whilst also studying and/or working
- Social media management
- Establishing trust from the community
- Self-preservation whilst providing support services
- Understanding the challenges and opportunities presented by the position of ‘in-betweenness’
- Understanding and reflecting on the different types of available spaces for advocacy and dialogue (closed, invited, created, etc.), and how to create/work within these spaces

Training Format/Methodology

- Talks, exercises, interactive approaches
- Combination of skills and information
- Provision of tools for identification and prioritisation of goals and targets
- Recognition of the diversity within the refugee population and also of the needs therein
- Stimulation of mentoring/networking through facilitated encounter sessions
- Ensure a safe space for interaction and discussion
- Methods and approaches of engaging new members, and promoting their active mobilisation as part of the group
- Exploration of longer term twinning/buddy schemes between experienced/less experienced RCOs
- Delivery should be a combined use of training experts, refugee advocates, asylum experts

- Involvement (use of online tools) of refugee advocates from other EU Member States to share experiences

GOOD PRACTICE

Klankbordgroep ('sounding board') in The Netherlands is an initiative at the provincial level of Gelderland, seeking to hear the voices of refugees on its integration policies. It is established to provide recommendations to the province, the Dutch Council for Refugees and different municipalities in the same province. More information is available on the [website](#) (only in Dutch).