



# Developing a Refugee Advisor Programme for Community Sponsorship

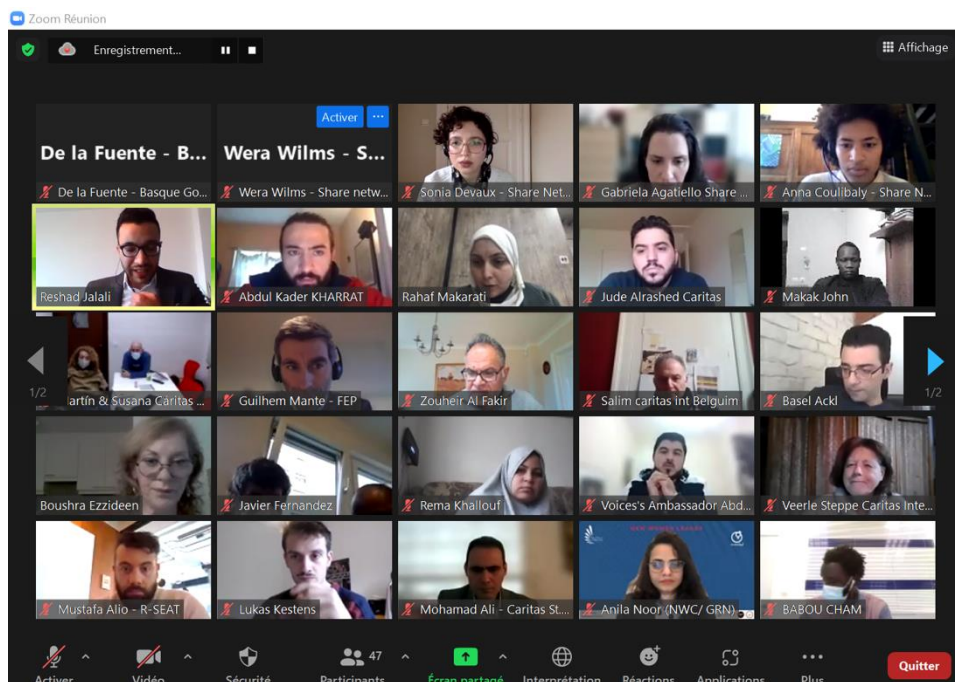
## Preliminary Workshop

25 January 2022

14.30-17.00 CET

Zoom

## REPORT



## Agenda

14:30-14:45	<b>Welcome and Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Gabriela Agatiello, ICMC Europe/Share Network:</b> Why are we here? Introducing the Share Network and community sponsorship objectives in the 2022-2023 programme.</li> <li>• <b>Sonia Devaux, ICMC Europe/Share Network:</b> Introducing the proposed features of the Refugee Advisor Programme for Community Sponsorship</li> </ul>
14:45-15:30	<b>Presentations – Meaningful participation of refugees at different levels: examples of initiatives at the global, EU, national and local level that can apply to community sponsorship</b>  <i>Moderator:</i> Reshad Jalali, Policy Officer at European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)
14:45-14:55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mustafa Alio, R-SEAT Co-Managing Director, Canada:</b> How to increase the participation of refugees at the global and national level in sustainable and transformative ways.</li> </ul>
14:55-15:05	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Anila Noor, New Women Connectors Founder and Managing Director:</b> Meaningful refugee participation in advocacy at the EU level using a gender lens.</li> </ul>
15:05-15:20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Doaa AbuAmer, VOICES Network Participation Officer, British Red Cross</b></li> <li>• <b>Adurahman Bdewi &amp; Khadija Alamy, VOICES ambassadors:</b> How to successfully set up a Refugee Ambassador Programme on a local and national level.</li> </ul>
15:20-15:30	<b>Questions and Answers</b>
15:30-15:40	<b>Coffee Break</b>
15:40-16:35	<b>Breakout Rooms</b>  <i>Questions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Which elements resonated with you in the participation models that were just presented in the context of community sponsorships?</i></li> <li>• <i>What areas would be most relevant to consider for refugee participation in advocacy for community sponsorships?</i></li> <li>• <i>What features should be included in a refugee advisor programme to truly support meaningful participation?</i></li> <li>• <i>What could be the most effective tools to communicate refugee views?</i></li> <li>• <i>What would you want to get out of such a programme?</i></li> </ul>
16:35-16:50	<b>Reporting back from Breakout Rooms &amp; Discussion</b>
16:50-17:00	<b>Conclusion &amp; Steps Ahead</b>



## Introduction

The Share Refugee Advisor Workshop for Community Sponsorship took place on Zoom on the 25th of January and provided a platform to exchange and discuss best practices for meaningful participation of refugees. This preliminary workshop was organised under the umbrella of Share's Refugee Sponsorship Mobilisation Platform which among its objectives, seeks to ensure that refugee voices are represented in advocacy at the local, national and EU level through the development of a Refugee Advisor Programme for Community Sponsorship.

The workshop was attended by over 50 participants from across Europe, Canada and the United States with the majority of participants having direct experience from the field, either as sponsored refugees, refugee students, volunteer sponsors, intercultural mediators, or training and lead sponsors organisations. The event featured presentations from the VOICES network in the UK on their sponsorship ambassador programme, as well as from R-SEAT - an international initiative working to increase the participation of refugees at the global and national level in a meaningful, sustainable, and transformative way. We also heard from New Women Connectors, a migrant and refugee-led organisation that uses a gender transformative approach to advocate for changes in EU migration policies. Most importantly however, the workshop provided a meaningful opportunity for attendees to co-design and give feedback on proposed features of the advisor programme as well as discuss what would be the most effective tools to communicate refugees' views.

## Introducing the Share Network and community sponsorship objectives in the 2022-2023 programme

Established in March 2012 by ICMC Europe, the Share Network focuses on connecting and engaging with local European actors and communities interested in or working in the area of Refugee and migrant inclusion, refugee resettlement, complementary pathways of admission, refugee sponsorship, and relocation. Since then, Share has engaged 4 000 stakeholders in 27 countries in dialogue, capacity building and advocacy.

Working in collaboration with different partners in seven European countries currently implementing community sponsorship schemes, the Share Quality Sponsorship Network (QSN) uses a multi-stakeholder, grassroots and bottom-up strategy to build strong and sustainable sponsorship programmes. We believe that sponsorship programmes should foster refugee participation, and ensure the voices, experiences and learning of grassroots sponsorship actors are present at the national and EU level.

Within the Share QSN, we have developed a Refugee Sponsorship Mobilisation Platform which gathers a wide variety of actors, including civil society organisations, cities and regions, faith communities, volunteer groups, diaspora organisations, universities, private business, philanthropy, and refugee themselves. The platform builds strategies and joint advocacy initiatives to expand and develop different types of sponsorship programmes adapted to national contexts. As part of the [Refugee sponsorship mobilisation platform](#) activities, the Share Network is working on setting up a **Refugee Advisor Programme for Community Sponsorship**.



## Refugee and migrant participation at the Share Network

In the past year, Share has reached out to a number of organizations with experiences in advocacy by and for refugees. These good practices have informed our thinking behind the preliminary workshop and the proposed features of the Refugee Advisor Programme.

**The first important lesson we learned is that supporting the co-creation of programmes with refugees takes time and needs to be integrated into the long-term welcome and integration process.** It requires a change of attitudes and practices in organisations and institutions. For instance, by involving refugees in the evaluation of programmes and projects through feedback mechanisms, where refugees get to share their opinions on how programmes can be improved, and their involvement better integrated in their design. Co-creation also requires reflecting on the motivations of participants: Why would people with a refugee and migrant background want to participate in the co-construction of a project or programme? What can they get from it in terms of personal and professional development?

**The second important lesson is that the inclusion of refugees needs to be purposeful and planned – it should not be merely an afterthought.** Co-creation is easier if people are involved in the initial idea - starting from a common identification of needs, wants and opportunities. It is important to keep in mind that the time and resources available to refugees is not unlimited – we have to take into account their constraints and obligations. It is also essential to manage expectations of participants by providing the necessary information in advance and being transparent about what is expected from them.

**The third lesson is that empowering people to actively participate in decision making requires capacity-building.** It is vital to identify training needs and interests with individuals and create curricula in collaboration with refugees.

**The fourth lesson is that language barriers must be taken into consideration.** To overcome language barriers, we can work with interpreters, translators and intercultural mediators. Another option that we chose during the workshop is to offer the possibility of working in groups with a common native language to encourage collective reflection.

**The fifth and final lesson is the importance of finding resources to support participation.** Programmes should ideally have a dedicated budget for participation in order to value the contributions of refugees who bring their expertise and offer their time.

Taking into account the above elements, the workshop sought to put in place a dynamic of co-creation by offering a space where refugees could exchange and express advocacy needs when speaking about community sponsorship, as well as provide feedback on proposed features of the programme.

## Presentations

The presentations addressed meaningful participation of refugees at different levels and sought to give examples of initiatives at the global, EU, national and local level which could be applied to



community sponsorship. This part of the workshop was **moderated by Reshad Jalali, Policy Officer at the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)**. He reaffirmed how essential migrant participation is to the creation of more welcoming and inclusive societies, especially given the aim of international actors to increase legal channels and places for refugees in Europe. The UNHCR's three-year strategy envisions that third country solutions for refugees will be expanded so that by the end of 2028, 3 million refugees will benefit from effective protection and solutions through resettlement (1 million) in 50 resettlement countries and complementary pathways (2 million).<sup>1</sup>

[Mustafa Alio, Co-Managing Director of Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table \(R-SEAT\): how to increase the participation of refugees at the global and national level in sustainable and transformative ways](#)

[R-SEAT](#) is a refugee-led NGO in Canada, their goal is to enhance the global refugee system through institutionalised refugee participation (working with 20 countries from the global North and South).

Mustafa stated that refugees and migrants are witnessing a **failing system** of migration management. Refugees are impacted by the flaws of the system on a daily basis. Their **participation** in the international as well as national migration systems **should not be a goal but a tool** to improve migration management and prevent the system from complete failure.

The Covid-19 pandemic has enhanced systemic flaws and mistakes and has made shortcomings more visual to the public eye. This is reflected in the sudden **interest in refugee leadership or refugee-led ecosystems in different bodies (be they governments or UN bodies)** which is continuously growing. Yet donor contributions to the UNHCR or international organisations for refugee protection amount to just around 52% of the budget requested.

How to work on improving the system then? The lack of refugee participation has a negative impact on the system. Refugee participation is not the only solution, but giving refugees a say in designing the programmes addressed to them can contribute greatly to tailoring the programmes to their real needs. **The inclusion of refugees in designing and implementing policies will contribute to a better system.**

**Refugee inclusion is forward-looking, improves programming** (solutions are more efficient when the refugees participate) **and empowering**. It is not enough to empower and enable participation at global and national level. More profoundly, **refugee self-reliance needs to be strengthened**.

It is not enough to ask how to increase the participation at global and national levels, a more **systemic approach** is rather needed:

- **building a case** for participation, convincing people it is important;
- **making people understand it** is a tool and not a goal;
- **identifying stakeholders to be targeted** on global (e.g., states) and (sub)national levels (e.g., NGOs);

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, "The Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways", *UNHCR*, June 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/5d15db254.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2022).



- making participation **transformative and sustainable**.

Full representation never happens, however **more structured approaches to inclusion can increase representation**. Clear mechanisms can help to enable participation **through not only funding or compensation, but also training to build the knowledge and skills of refugees**.

The mainstream **narrative** about refugees **must be shifted from the passive victim in need of help to one conscious that they can be equal partners** with their own insights in policy design and implementation.

[Anila Noor, New Women Connectors Founder and Managing Director: meaningful refugee participation in advocacy at the EU level using a gender lens](#)

[New Women Connectors](#) is based in the Netherlands and seeks to bring an **intersectional, feminist, and gender lens** to policy debates around migration. They believe that **meaningful participation is a form of transformative leadership for both refugees and non-refugees**.

Anila explained that there are different **spaces** when it comes to refugee participation:

- *closed* - to which refugees are not invited
- *open* – to which refugees are invited
- *co-led* – which refugees have claimed

And, similarly, different **modes of engagement**:

- *engagement* implies refugees are treated as partners with full participation in design and implementation (power 'shared with')
- *partial engagement* makes refugees recipients who might be consulted and informed, or even just assigned and informed (power 'to')
- *non-engagement* (power 'over')

Meaningful participation is hindered by organisational and institutional discrimination and barriers. Refugees are often only **perceived solely as beneficiaries** who must be informed and at times consulted rather than actors of welcome and integration. They are sometimes asked to design policies and programmes but only rarely to implement them.

[Doaa AbuAmer, VOICES Network Participation Officer at the British Red Cross and Abdurahman Bdewi and Khadija Alamar, VOICES ambassadors: how to successfully set up a refugee ambassador programme on a local and national level.](#)

The [VOICES network](#) is a collective of refugees and people seeking asylum. VOICES grew out of the pioneering British Red Cross's [AVAIL project](#) that put refugees and asylum seekers at the heart of services and policies that support them across four European countries. **As people with lived experience, VOICES Ambassadors speak out about issues that affect them**. VOICES runs in towns and cities in England, Wales and Scotland. Their ambassadors advocate on various issues, including the government's new immigration bill, the right to work, family reunion and immigration detention. Working collaboratively as a group, they decide which issues to focus on and what action to take. In



its strategy for 2030, the British Red Cross clearly commits to refugee participation affirming that “[the] best way to help someone through a crisis is to ask them what they need; we don’t have all the answers ourselves.”

**Key principles** for setting up a refugee advisory/ambassador programme:

- Create spaces where everyone is equally able to contribute,
- Find inclusive ways of working that allow groups to turn ideas into action together,
- Include people in making genuine decisions with potential for positive change,
- Ensure that participation is not tokenistic,
- Commit to share power between staff, volunteers, and individuals with lived experiences,
- Have mutual respect,
- Give people a role in project planning (from first stages of any project – be it research or campaigning) and decision making (final outcome and assessment of changes),
- Be flexible (adapt to new opportunities)
- Create a friendly atmosphere to help bridge linguistic or cultural differences within organisations or between participants.

**Essential requirements** for setting up a refugee advisory/ambassador programme are:

- Open and honest communication between all parties involved (especially when discussing expectations and expected outcomes),
- Willingness to try alternative methods and tools,
- Mindfulness of potential barriers,
- Addressing challenges such as legal obligations, IT equipment shortage, family commitments, linguistic and cultural differences,
- Cultural differences can be bridged by having other refugees who are active in the work you are doing provide peer support (e.g. VOICES network hosted workshops led by refugees with adults who arrived in the UK through Community Sponsorship – Read the report [here](#)).

Abdurahman Bdewi, Voices Network Refugee Ambassador came to the UK in 2018 and is today working in community sponsorship in North London where one family has so far been welcomed. In this context, he works a lot on managing newcomers’ and sponsor groups’ expectations and mediating between them. In addition to mediating expectations, he explained that policy change to facilitate access to essential services is another challenge. Access to financial resources and education are particularly difficult for refugee families in the first six months to a year in the UK.

He also is a VOICES ambassador and explained that building bridges between cultures implies more than making culture(s) understandable to each other, as refugees also have a lot of things to learn from *and* offer to British culture. The VOICES Ambassadors program helped create a feeling of safety for newcomers where they could freely speak about challenges and areas for improvement.

Khadeja Alamarj, Voices Network Refugee Ambassador highlighted the experiences and skills she has developed since she started working as a VOICES ambassador. The programme has helped her develop her confidence as she has felt that her participation is valued. She has also enhanced her communication skills thanks to the trainings she received on media engagement. Moreover, she has contributed to raising awareness about community sponsorship to the larger British public. On



different occasions (e.g., on iTV), she was interviewed by the media to speak about community sponsorship and encourage refugees to volunteer in community sponsorship programmes.

## Breakout Rooms

Participants were divided into four breakout sessions and invited to reflect together on the following set of questions:

- (1) **What areas would be most relevant to consider for refugee participation in advocacy for community sponsorships?**
- (2) **What features should be included in a refugee advisor programme to truly support meaningful participation?**
- (3) **What could be the most effective tools to communicate refugee views?**
- (4) **What would you want to get out of such a programme?**

Breakout rooms 1 to 3 exchanged in English. Breakout room 4 was facilitated in Arabic by Doaa AbuAmer and Basel Ackl.

Participants in the breakout rooms **defined refugee participation** as:

- Increased inclusion in project planning,
- Increased presence in advocacy,
- Contribution to decision making and policy setting,
- A tool to change ideas made about refugees.

Participants discussed **basic requirements for the success of a refugee advisor programme**. They stated that the objectives of the programme must be clearly explained to potential candidates before asking for their engagement. Advisors cannot be very effective if they do not know what they are supposed to do and what tools are available to them. In order for them to be involved in advocacy for community sponsorship they need to have a clear understanding of community sponsorship and what advocacy means.

Participants also insisted on the **importance of motivation and commitment** for potential candidates and the necessity of creating spaces where refugees can speak freely about the challenges that they face.

On the topic of **selection of advisors**, participants put forward the idea that refugees should not be chosen simply because they have lived experience but because of their unique expertise. It is also essential to have diversity in refugee representation and some participants argued that diversity should be thought of in broader terms beyond gender and age. An intersectional approach should be used in order to support the participation of disadvantaged groups such as sexual, gender and religious minorities.

On the **issue of language**, participants stated that while speaking English is a necessary and important skill for such a programme, it is unfair to expect refugees in non-English speaking countries to speak English as well as their host country's language fluently.





Participants also discussed specific priorities when it comes to advocacy for refugees in community sponsorship:

- **Educational pathways:** Two UNICORE students from Ethiopia shared that albeit safely landing in Italy, they still think of family and friends left behind in refugee camps. They have a strong community both in Italy and in the refugee camp, where they had previously lived for many years. They try to motivate other refugees to focus on their studies to be able to come to Italy through educational pathways. They would like to engage in advocacy so that more students can come to Europe via complementary education pathways. They seek to make a meaningful contribution to policy making and underline that they have skills that can be used in host countries. Refugees have agency and they are extremely committed to helping other refugees.
- **Status and documentation:** Some participants argued that refugees' residence permits should also include a travel permit (e.g., in Italy refugee students' documents are recognised in different regions but these documents do not give them the right to travel).
- **Recognition of diplomas:** A number of participants discussed the issue of skills and qualification recognition and argued that work experience and diplomas from non-EU countries should be recognised and valued to allow refugees to work in jobs that suit their skills.
- **Working opportunities:** Other participants talked about the development of labour mobility programmes where refugee candidates could be selected based on their professional qualifications and skills.
- **Needs of refugee families:** A better understanding and importance to the needs of refugee families was also identified as a priority.

Some of the advocacy points discussed in the groups focused more specifically on the operation and coordination of sponsor groups:

- **Expectation management:** Participants who are sponsors stated that they believe refugee advisors/ambassadors could help in managing expectations. For example, often incorrect information and a lack of clarity in the system makes it difficult to navigate essential healthcare and administrative tasks.
- **There needs to be greater geographic representation of sponsorship** across national territories
- Availability and quality of **housing should be a priority** as well as **financial support from the government** to be able to afford quality accommodation.
- More emphasis should be placed on the importance of **compulsory language learning** for refugees and **access to education for children**.

## Conclusion and Steps Ahead

The Share Refugee Advisor Programme will aim to recruit a diverse group of refugees with representation from different European countries participating in sponsorship. Following the workshop and feedback received, a call for applications was launched. The call seeks to recruit motivated and skilled individuals with a refugee background in order to raise awareness about community sponsorship, bringing their lived experience and concerns to the local, national and particularly the EU level. The Share Network aims to promote refugee participation as a tool for the



creation of more welcoming and inclusive societies, and advocate for more resettlement and complementary pathways, and the expansion of community sponsorship.

Although we are aware that asking for English language skills will limit the number of candidates, ability to communicate in English is key for the work that advisors would be involved in within the Share Network's scope of activities. This programme will be focused not only on national contexts but also and predominantly on EU-level advocacy. While the language requirements would mean that many potential candidates will be excluded, once we have recruited the refugee advisors, the Share network is planning on working with advisors as mediators to engage more refugees in other languages in their local communities.

**Objectives of the Refugee Advisor Programme include:**

- Promote refugee participation as a tool for the creation of more welcoming and inclusive societies, and to advocate for more resettlement and complementary pathways, and the expansion of community sponsorship.
- Enable the participation of refugees and raise awareness about sponsorship, bringing their lived experience and concerns to the local, national and particularly the EU level.
- Enhance refugee participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of sponsorship programmes and policies.
- Offer a platform for refugees to network and exchange with a variety of actors in the sector in the context of the Refugee Sponsorship Mobilisation Platform and beyond.
- Develop recommendations and influence policies and practices through advocacy.

For more information on the Share Network's refugee advisor programme and call for applications please visit: [Refugee Advisor Programme – Call for applications](#).

For more information on the Share Network's work on refugee participation please visit our new section on the Share website on [Participation of Refugees and local actors](#).