

Executive Summary of Report

I Get You: Promoting best practices to prevent racism and xenophobia towards forced migrants through community building



Background

For 2 years, JRS Europe and its partners in 9 countries have conducted an in-depth mixed methods research project, with an accompanying public awareness campaign, into the work being done by local societies in welcoming and including forced migrants and refugees into the fabric of their societies. Stemming from our own experience being part of networks of hospitality and welcome for refugees seeking safety in Europe, we have looked at the work of Community Building Initiatives (CBIs), and how they have encouraged encounters and designed innovative ways to promote the social inclusion of forced migrants thereby countering racism and xenophobia in society.

Main Findings & Conclusions

From the quantitative data gathered, we can see that CBIs are small in scale and size but have impactful scopes; main findings include:

- Participants are mainly working age adults with few initiatives focusing on children or the elderly.
- The main countries of origin of forced migrants who participate are Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Gambia and Mali.
- Among the forced migrants involved in CBIs, 61 percent are men while 39 percent are women, and among the locals involved in CBIs, 55 percent are men while 45 percent are women.
- 70 percent of the volunteers are host country nationals, while 20 percent are from other EU countries and 10 percent from third countries.
- A variety of activities and services for people are covered such as skills training, leisure activities and intercultural activities.
- On average initiatives operate on budgets of 25,000 Euros or less. Those that have larger budgets tend to be CBIs with operations on a national or regional level.

The qualitative findings of the research are organised by 10 criteria – Interaction & Encounter, Participation, Awareness Raising, Education, Support & Service Provision, Interculturalism, Dignity, Hospitality, Sustainability and Innovation – established through the Delphi methodology by a group of experts.

In welcoming migrants in local communities, *I Get You* has seen that small-scale initiatives that keep the involvement of people at the centre of activities work best. Such initiatives achieve this through a balance

of one-to-one relationship building and low-threshold activities that promote encounters between people. Local citizens and civil society organisations are able to more quickly and adequately provide for needs of forced migrants despite changing contexts by filling identified gaps in services that the local authorities do not. Initially motivated by altruism and compassion, overtime locals have realised the mutual benefit and multicultural perspectives that welcoming newcomers brings to their communities.

CBIs do not only change people's perspectives of one another, but they change the ways that citizens and administrations interact. Authorities and citizens need to work together and build upon their unique strengths to continue to build inclusive communities across Europe. While CBIs filled gaps in service provision typically the competence of local authorities to provide, CBIs often struggled with the professionalization and sustainability of their activities. At the same time, authorities and professional structures will never be able to provide the human element that citizens' initiatives provide. Therefore, the future challenge lies in finding and maintaining a balance between governments' and citizens' engagement.

From the experience of *I Get You*, we have developed a series of Guidelines for Best Practices to be used by Community Building Initiatives as well as a series of Policy Recommendations for local, national and European level. The Guidelines for Best Practices are organised in three areas: before starting and setting up the CBIs, keeping the people – refugees, local citizens and staff members – at the heart of the mission and work and how to organise the activities.

Policy Recommendations

JRS Europe and its partners strongly believe that the responsibility to welcome, protect and facilitate the integration of forced migrants lies in the first place with the authorities. Citizens' initiatives cannot become a substitution for state involvement. At the same time, as *I Get You* clearly shows, citizens' involvement in activities for and with forced migrants is a crucial element to work towards social inclusion, create understanding among different communities and effectively combat racism and xenophobia. A part of governments' action to create a cohesive and welcoming society should therefore be to encourage, promote and invest in such community building initiatives.

Although the competence for social inclusion and integration of newcomers lie primarily with the Member States, the EU can play a key role by shaping a common framework based on best practices and by creating incentives for Member States to invest in inclusive national policies. Therefore, drawing conclusions from the best practices identified by *I Get You*, JRS Europe has elaborated a set of recommendations both for the EU institutions and for the national governments. Specific recommendations adapted to the different national contexts can be found in the national reports.

Recommendations for EU Institutions

The European Commission's *Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals* from 2016, as acknowledged by the Council conclusions on integration of legally staying third-country nationals, already contains many important and necessary steps towards migrants' integration and social inclusion. JRS Europe welcomes the efforts that the Commission is doing in its implementation. We therefore first of all recommend that these efforts continue, are evaluated and do not stop after 2017.

However, the experience of *I Get You* shows on the one hand that the plan does not address all the relevant issues and on the other hand where already existing efforts should be intensified.

We therefore address the following recommendations to the European institutions.

Concerning Policy Priorities and Implementation

Leverage the existing experiences and best practices at community level when adopting policy and frameworks on social inclusion, countering racism and xenophobia and promoting integration, for example in the follow up of the EU *Action Plan* on integration after 2017.

The EU *Action Plan* also indicates the following policy priorities: pre-departure and pre-arrival measures, education, labour market integration and vocational training, access to basic services (adequate and affordable housing and health services and active participation and social inclusion). *I Get You* shows that citizens have been active in all those fields, often reacting to the existing needs much faster than the authorities. The EU needs to capitalize on these experiences when developing future policies.

Enlarge the scope of pre-arrival measures to prepare host societies for the arrival of forced migrants beyond resettlement programmes and mainstream them throughout the asylum and reception system.

The *I Get You* experience in countries like Portugal and France clearly confirms what the *Action Plan* on integration that informing the host communities about the situation of forced migrants who will come to live among them is beneficial to foster a welcoming attitude and social inclusion. However current pre-arrival measures, as referred to in the *Action Plan*, are generally limited to the framework of resettlement. *I Get You* initiatives show that such measures are beneficial also as a part of the EU relocation scheme and more generally in connection with the national reception system. They help to dissipate local population's fears and prejudices and foster understanding also for the situation of people who are still in the asylum procedure.

Foster direct dialogue and cooperation between authorities and citizens' initiatives by making it possible for the civil society to participate in the European Integration Network

One of the best way to capitalize on citizens' initiatives experiences is to make sure authorities and civil society can exchange directly and work together. Enlarging the participation to the EU Integration Network, or establishing a clear link between this network and the European Migration Forum would be conducive to this end.

Play a stronger dissemination role, by making best practices of one Member State known in other Member States, and facilitating exchange among citizens' initiatives in different countries to replicate success stories.

I Get You shows that often citizens in different countries took initiatives to answer to same kind of challenges. Some initiatives proved more successful than others. It is important that lessons learned are passed on, so that citizens in other countries do not have to start from scratch and repeating mistakes each time. Programmes whereby citizens go abroad to learn or do voluntary work, such as the European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+, in addition to being powerful tools for intercultural dialogue and social inclusion, can also play a role in disseminating good practices. The European Website on Integration is a welcome tool in this sense and should be developed further.

Concerning Funding

Encourage actions that strive to mainstream integration of migrants within broader policies on social inclusion by prioritising the funding of projects with mixed target groups, both migrants and other local vulnerable groups.

The *I Get You* findings show that these initiatives have higher chances to be successful in combating racism and xenophobia. A positive example can be found in Plauen, Germany, where a

grassroots organisation composed mainly of volunteers adopted an inclusive approach, organising activities both for forced migrants and different groups of marginalized and vulnerable locals, such as young people with disabilities and unemployed people. This approach proved successful in promoting an inclusive community for all rather than competition among locals and refugees in a town strong racist and right-wing tendencies are otherwise widespread among the local population.

Encourage national governments to invest in local, small scale, community building initiatives, by giving priority to the financing of such projects within the relevant European funds.

Attention should also be paid to encourage national governments to invest not only in inclusion and integration projects in the capitals or big cities, but also in smaller towns and rural areas, where the experience on these issues often lacks. This is particularly necessary when forced migrants are distributed.

Simplify the existing EU funding channels or create new specific ones to make it possible for small scale initiatives to apply and obtain them.

In particular, review and simplify the application system or reporting obligation, that represents a major obstacle for small initiatives, as they simply do not have the capacity to dedicate to such lengthy, technical and time-consuming processes.

Explore the possibilities for microfinancing schemes or other creative ways to support directly small-scale citizen's initiatives, that are otherwise not in the position to apply directly for EU funding.

Concerning the Legislative Process

Prioritise and embed the goal of integration of newcomers throughout the revision of the Common European Asylum System and in general in all other legislation concerning migration, in particular:

Move towards a system that takes into consideration asylum seekers needs and preferences when establishing new rules for the determination of the Member State responsible for the examination of an asylum application (the so-called Dublin regulation).

Extend and simplify the possibilities for family reunification both for asylum seekers under the Dublin regulation and for all beneficiaries of international protection. The total impossibility for asylum seekers of having a say about where they can seek protection in Europe and obstacles to family reunification for both asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection appear as a recurrent obstacle to integration and the feeling of belonging to the host society throughout the *I Get You* research.

Provide for permanent permits of stay to beneficiaries of international protection.

Certainty about the legal status is beneficial to forced migrant's mental health and motivation to actively invest in finding their place in their new societies. It also decreases the obstacles they often face in finding employment or housing, as a permanent residence permit appears offers more guarantees for both employers and landlords too.

Promote small scale reception facilities as the preferred reception model for asylum seekers within the Reception Conditions directive.

Best practice citizens' initiatives are most likely to develop where asylum seekers live as close as possible to the local community. Small scale reception, distributed throughout a country's territory and both in urban and rural area are conducive to encounter, exchange and fruitful cooperation among reception structures and citizens' initiatives. When working on a recast of the Reception Condition Directive that aims at the further harmonisation of reception

conditions among Member States, the EU should clearly include provisions encouraging the use of small scale reception facilities.

Recommendations for National, Regional and Local Authorities

Play a coordination role, by providing room for exchanging of good practices, lessons learned and for evaluation of activities and guaranteeing quality of services provided.

A recurring recommendation for the national and local authorities by JRS's national partners is authorities to leave enough space to citizens' initiatives for innovative and experimental activities. At the same time, they ask them to play an active coordination role to maintain an overview and streamline work to make their actions more efficient. Also, they ask the authorities to constantly evaluate results, in order to keep investing in activities that have proved to work.

Establish structural long-term cooperation with citizens' initiatives, whereby each actor plays a clear role: governmental administrations provide professional services, citizens provide interpersonal relations and community.

In the past years, citizens often filled gaps in providing services that should be provided by authorities. This should change in the long term and government should take their responsibilities. However, authorities and professional structures will never be able to provide the human element of horizontal encounter and community that citizens initiatives provide. Cooperation between authorities and citizens is crucial to achieve social inclusion.

Promote and invest in local, small scale initiatives

Local initiatives have the advantage of being closer to the ground, knowing the local reality and challenges and adapt to it. Moreover, forced migrants need to gain access to local networks to achieve integration and social inclusion. *I Get You* clearly shows how small-scale initiatives are more conducive to establish real human and personal contacts between the local population and the forced migrants.

Provide citizens' initiatives with structural core funding for them to be sustainable on the longer term

The great majority of initiatives that were mapped by *I Get You* financed their activities in a grassroots way (small scale donations, selling homemade goods, crowdfunding and innovative fundraising). Most initiatives rely heavily on volunteers for their work. This is positive in the sense that it shows the high level of good will and civic commitment. However, it is seldom sustainable in the long term. Core funding is necessary to make citizens' initiative sustainable in the long term.

Ensure the availability of professional training for volunteers who are active in citizens' initiatives.

Professional training on topics such as asylum and migration legislation and on combating racism and xenophobia, should both be provided by authorities and by independent organisations. Funding should be made available to citizens' initiative to organise independent professional training for their volunteers.

Promote and invest in initiatives with a wide range of activities, such as cultural, spiritual and sports, in addition to focusing on integration on the labour market.

Finding a job is extremely important for forced migrants to become financially independent and further build their life in their new home country. However, our research shows that investing in personal relations has a long-lasting impact on their perception of the home-country, to their self-esteem and their empowerment.

Promote and invest in initiatives that work with a mentorship model or 'buddies'

One-to-one contacts and individual, tailor-made assistance are the most effective way to foster mutual understanding and help forced migrant to effectively find their ways in their host societies. Initiatives based on buddy or mentoring systems are the most suited for it. It is about establishing links among peers, for example students living with other students in Italy, or professionals helping other professionals to find a suitable job in Belgium.

Promote and invest in initiatives that are meant for broad target group, including both forced migrants and other vulnerable social groups

Forced migrants are not the only group suffering from social isolation and discrimination. People living in poverty, homeless people, people in long-term unemployment, single parent etc. often face similar challenges. Investing in services that are only meant for forced migrants can exacerbate differences and result in a negative competition for scarce services among vulnerable group. This in turn can fuel racist feelings towards new comers. Initiatives that are meant for a broader target group lead to mutual understanding of the shared difficulties and to empowerment to overcome them.

Actively consult with and listen to forced migrants in deciding which initiatives should get priority and give them ownership on the activities put in place.

Our research shows that in many initiatives forced migrants are not simply the receivers of services. They are actively involved in developing and implementing them on the same level as locals. This is important not only because forced migrants are the best placed to determine what their needs are, but also because it helps break the paradigm in which migrant are depending from aid. It shows that migrant have a lot to offer to the local communities too, therefore fostering acceptance among locals.

Provide community building initiatives with physical space to meet

A consistent finding across the majority of the 315 initiatives mapped in the research was the importance of a physical meeting place in which to conduct regular meetings. While the frequency of meetings varied from initiative to initiative all were creative in finding locations for their actions to take place. All the initiatives were creative in finding locations to meet. However, if governments intend to promote community building initiatives, providing meeting spaces, such as office space, sports facilities or polyvalent rooms, would be an important support.

About JRS Europe

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Europe is a network of offices in Europe and one of the regions of JRS International. Our mission is to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of all forcibly displaced people regardless of race, ethnic origin or religious beliefs.

