

Vitality & Engagement

Developing Communities

Project Newsletter December 2022

PARTNERS



The VE Project is being implemented by Amnesty International Ireland and The Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR).

Amnesty International Ireland and The Refugee Council (CPR) Portugal are working in partnership to raise engagement and awareness of the Community Sponsorship (CS) initiative- locally, nationally and transnationally. The newsletter is here to share the voice of refugees, CS industry allies, highlight milestones and look to next steps for the VE programme.

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19



Civil Society Events Hosted

373



Civil Society Event Attendees

13



Project Case Studies

620

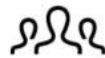


Online Training Users

Infographic Summary

DECEMBER 2022

72



Outreach Events Hosted

1145



Outreach Event Attendees

26



Allies Network Partners

16



Resources Available

785



Community Sponsorship Enquiries

980



Social Media Followers

11



Online Training Modules Developed

Case Study – Portugal: Organisational Perspective



MEERU APROXIMA

“RELATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP, AFFECTION AND TRUST BETWEEN LOCAL PEOPLE AND MIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES”

In Since 2019, MEERU Aproxima aims to create profound relationships based on friendship, affection and trust between local citizens and the migrant and refugee families welcomed in different communities. The concept is simple: volunteers and newcomers get together with the aim of building strong and solid bonds and an overall sense of belonging to a new place.

The main activities of the program MEERU Aproxima revolve around capacity building for volunteers, who receive training and provide close support to refugee families for at least eight months, which includes social and emotional support, introducing the local community and helping newcomers adapting to the Portuguese society through cultural orientation. Volunteers also help reduce isolation by ensuring weekly visits and the promotion of social interactions. There is also special focus on social events, which are organised so that the community and the refugee families have the opportunity to get to know each other and spend good times together. Events include cooking workshops, sport events, cultural sessions, hiking or celebrating local festivities.

In addition to direct support, volunteer teams also work to raise awareness to the issues of refugees, thus combating negative narratives towards refugees and migrants in the community. Awareness-raising sessions are held in schools and community groups, informing about human rights, interculturality, citizenship, mental health and migrant's needs and challenges.

Every action contributes towards one general focus: people. And it is with people and around people that this project has been built and developed.

“IT IS A PRIVILEGE TO BE ABLE TO HELP THEM GROW AND KNOCK DOWN SEVERAL WALLS ABOUT THE ADAPTATION PROCESS IN PORTUGAL. THEY FILL MY HEART WITH LOVE.

WHAT THIS PROJECT DOES IS INCREDIBLE – IT IS ABOVE ALL ABOUT PEOPLE AND THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT CHANGING THE WORLD BIT BY BIT”.

MEERU Aproxima has had such incredible success and positive impact: newcomers are more autonomous, active and included in the community and the communities are more engaged in intercultural dialogue and in welcoming and including new people and new cultures. On the other hand, volunteers feel they are contributing with real and tangible actions to help support refugees.

Another volunteer states “being a volunteer at MEERU is to embrace the joys, distresses, sadness and challenges. It is being a friend at any time”.

For the newcomers the experience is also successful: “You are already part of our family, because we are apart from our dear ones. (...) You are the meaning of true friends.”

MEERU experiences have been gathered to present good practices and recommendations, as an inspiration to the development of inclusive measures through community engagement.

The organisation is currently focusing on expanding their activities, having launched programmes such as MEERU Reconstruir, through which volunteers can help rebuild homes for migrant families in Portugal; and also Comunidades de Impacto which aims to promote awareness-raising, education and intervention for Dialogue and Proximity, to empower communities where everyone is an agent of social transformation.

Case Study – Ireland: Refugee Perspective



HAITHAM AND HEND ALRAHAL

A CORK PHOTO EXHIBITION SHOWS A REFUGEE FAMILY’S JOURNEY TO SAFETY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY WELCOME.

In 2011 Haitham and Hend Alrahal and their two children fled the war in Syria to seek refuge in Lebanon, only to experience the hardship of the refugee camps there.

As they fled the family took precious family photos with them, and throughout their journey Haitham documented their experiences with his camera.

“I wanted to show the effect of war on Syrians and on our cities through the photos, and how much our family went through to get to here,” he said.

Their journey was a difficult one - while in Lebanon they fell victim to scammers offering to help them to find safety, but who instead stole all their savings. Haitham also suffered an accident in Lebanon that injured his back.

The family sought help from UNHCR and in 2020 they were accepted into Ireland's Community Sponsorship Programme. They were welcomed by a community sponsorship group based in Carrigaline, Cork, who had been working to support their arrival. The group helped them to settle into a new home in West Cork, and supported them with all of the aspects of building a new life in Ireland, with the assistance of regional support organisation, Nasc, who support refugee rights and resettlement in Cork.

Janet Twomey, a member of the Carrigaline sponsorship group, said that when Haitham shared his photos with the group, a photo exhibition was suggested as a way to share their experiences with the wider community, and he and his wife Henda agreed.

"I suppose in one sense it was thought that it might be a good way to let people know what a refugee journey might be like – and to show that a family who had fled unimaginable suffering was now living here in safety and really settling into Irish life," Janet said.

Some photographs showed how the couple met in Syria, their engagement party and wedding with their family around them, and the arrival of their children, as well as the beginning of the war, fleeing the country, and their new life in Ireland.

Both of Haitham's parents passed away in Syria, and he said sharing his parents' photos and also what their life was like in Syria with the community has meant a lot to him.

"WHEN WE CAME HERE WE WERE WELCOMED, PEOPLE ARE FRIENDLY, WHICH IS SUCH A BASIC THING, AND EVERYTHING IS GOING WELL, YOU CAN'T COMPARE THE DIFFERENCE.

WE ARE VERY HAPPY TO BE HERE"

"In Syria my father was a teacher and we had a little garden where we could grow vegetables. I worked as an electrician. Life was good there before the war," he said.

Though their journey was difficult, Haitham said their life has changed so much after they arrived in Ireland. "The difference is from the night to day, the difference in treatment. We felt we didn't have rights before, and in the camps there was often no electricity, sometimes no food, it was a very hard time," he said.

"When we came here we were welcomed, people are friendly, which is such a basic thing, and everything is going well, you can't compare the difference. We are very happy to be here," he added.

To honour their journey, the main theme of the photo exhibition was 'Healing'. The photos were first exhibited during World Refugee Week, and then the exhibit remained open for people to see throughout 2022.

Janet said there was a very positive response from the community to the exhibition. "On the opening day the room was packed. Many community members had supported the arrival of the family and the fundraisers, so it was great for them to be able to meet the family for real and spend some time talking to them about their story." she said.

"It was a very heartening piece to be involved in," Janet said. "I felt it would be such a powerful and heart-warming story to share with others," she added.



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