



volunteer centres

Ionaid d'Oibrí Deonacha na hÉireann

IRELAND

# supported volunteering - refugee and asylum seekers

## a step by step guide

Refugees have been arriving in Ireland for many years, in search of temporary sanctuary or in order to rebuild their lives in exile. Volunteering can be a key step in their resettlement.



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Across Ireland, volunteering has built bridges between communities and volunteering has enabled refugees and local people to make new contacts, acquire new experiences and understanding, and increasingly, for asylum seekers to move on to paid employment.

Refugees and asylum seekers bring with them to Ireland a vast array of skills and qualifications. Although they are often unable to secure work, collectively they are among the more vulnerable and socially excluded in society. It therefore matters that they are given every opportunity to take part in volunteering, with all the benefits this can bring both to them and to community organisations.

This Step by Step guide is an attempt to assist groups examine how they might tap into this valuable pool of volunteers.

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## step one the basics

**Asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to volunteer. They are also allowed to receive reasonable out-of-pocket expenses incurred in the course of volunteering.**

People who have refugee status, humanitarian protections or exceptional, indefinite or discretionary leave to remain, and their family members, are allowed to do any type of paid work as well as volunteer.

Asylum seekers are permitted to volunteer as soon as they arrive in the country. This includes people who are in the process of appealing against a decision to refuse them asylum.

“Many volunteers registered with volunteer bureaux are refugees or asylum seekers.”

## step two cultural differences

**'Culture' is a shared set of knowledge, beliefs, customs, orals and habits. Most of us in Ireland are unaware of our culture because we grow up in it. We both experience it unconsciously and considerate it normal.**

However, our culture is foreign to many asylum seekers and the term volunteer does not mean much to many refugees and asylum seekers. To some, unpaid work is an alien concept. Others readily give their time to help people in their community but don't see this as a formal activity that can be measured and labelled. Some have been forced to 'volunteer': volunteering in the Irish sense is not a familiar concept to some who have been living under harsh regimes.

'In Bosnia, communities come together. For instance, if you build your own house, twenty to thirty people will come together to help. It's the same with building a railway track. People do things for to improve life for all'. Sead Masic

'In Afghanistan, volunteering is forced. They say, 'tomorrow is volunteering work'. It encouraged people to hate this kind of work. We will give our life if someone asks, but not if we are forced. In fact, most of my work was volunteering – going secretly into women's homes, teaching and helping with cases of domestic violence.' Mina, Afghan volunteer.

*The A-Z of volunteering and asylum, A Handbook for Managers', Ruth Wilson, The National Centre for Volunteering UK*

## step three cultural awareness

**Apply the following 'cultural awareness checklist' when dealing with foreign national volunteers: Be aware of your own cultural assumptions and how these may affect your understanding and responses to those wishing to volunteer.**

- Listen with respect and with a genuine wish to learn.
- Find out how people see themselves and their culture, what they value, what they see as important.
- Be prepared to change your understanding as new information becomes available.
- Understand the importance of factors such as age, generation, life experience, occupation, education and so on.
- Realise that culture is one factor, but not the only factor in anybody's life.
- Remember that the person you are working with is always the expert on their own life, wishes and needs.

## step four useful information for volunteers

**Internal information packs can be an invaluable resource for volunteers, staff and volunteer managers. Your local volunteer centre has prepared a step by step guide to developing a policy document outlining all aspects that should be included when using the services of volunteers. This step by step guide includes such issues as;**

- General information about the organisation
- A statement of values
- The role of volunteers
- Recruitment, interview and induction procedures
- Supervision & support
- Key policies such as confidentiality, equal opportunities, health & safety, expenses

**Your local volunteer bureau or centre will be more than happy to assist groups on an individual basis regarding issues related to volunteering and refugees and asylum seekers. Your local volunteer bureau can be contacted at the following address:**