

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

# VOLUNTEERING BY AND FOR MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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**IVCO**  
SENEGAL 2022



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We are living in a time of escalating conflicts and rapidly increasing numbers of forced displacements. At the end of 2021, [more than 1% of the world's population](#) was forcibly displaced. The need for innovative solutions and shared responsibility is greater than ever. Recent years have seen increased support for refugee solidarity movements, including from within the Volunteering for Development (V4D) sector, whose response has included the expansion of international volunteering opportunities in conflict-affected and refugee contexts. Where the sector has continued to fall short, however, is in too often overlooking the role that refugees can and must play in the global refugee crisis response, and in failing to value the actions [already being taken](#) by refugees themselves in their host communities. Refugees actively contribute to their own communities and to their host communities through diverse volunteer activities, whether through sharing information, skills and knowledge or through advocating for social and political change.

The V4D sector can play a critical role in responding to the global refugee crisis through fostering an enabling environment for refugees to engage through volunteerism to support the realisation of more systemic, policy-based solutions through focusing on the three [durable solutions](#) available to refugees: i) local integration, ii) resettlement and iii) voluntary repatriation. There is no simple and direct link between volunteering and these durable solutions, most of which require deep systems changes. However, focusing on the meaningful participation of refugees within V4D programs is one means through which our sector can tackle the global refugee crisis. We propose three pathways through which VCAs can promote volunteering to support meaningful refugee participation, which include: i) supporting resettled refugees who volunteer in their own communities with both newcomers and more established populations; ii) supporting the forcibly displaced and former refugees to volunteer internationally through emerging solidarity networks; and iii) supporting refugee led voluntary organisations that support improved integration, especially those operating in first countries of asylum.

First, examples of local volunteering can be seen across any and all communities that host large numbers of refugees and former refugees. The [Global Compact on Refugees](#) holds that refugees should be given the chance to contribute to the development of the communities hosting them. Inspiring individuals such as [Syed Hasnain](#), founder of UNIRE, the first national network of refugees living in Italy, provide support to refugee integration and advocacy for policy change. Through WUSC's long-standing [Student Refugee Program](#), resettled refugee youth exercise leadership in supporting new cohorts of young refugees to arrive in Canada, and engage other student communities in learning together about the issues faced by refugees and other marginalised groups.

Second, a key role that V4D organisations can play is to mobilise refugee networks as a source of volunteer recruitment, creating programs specifically designed for refugee volunteers, who have deep expertise to offer and who need specific forms of support. WUSC's online [International Seminar in 2021](#), for example, targeted refugee youth as volunteers in collaboration with peers from around the world. Moving back to physical, in person, volunteering creates new challenges, including travel permits and visas for refugees who often lack documentation. But the potential of enrolling refugees as volunteers to support networks of solidarity is too great not to tackle these challenges head on.

Third, V4D organisations should seek to support initiatives led by refugees and to partner with refugee-led organisations (RLOs, especially those operating in first countries of asylum. Supporting RLOs as partners and hosts to international volunteers can mobilise much of what V4D organisations do best. At the same time, we must recognise that RLOs are often amongst the most marginalised of organisations, and may lack the systems and structures that we often seek from partners. We will need to be flexible and adaptive in supporting RLOs from the ground up.

Through supporting meaningful participation of refugees, and continuing to keep our eyes on working towards durable solutions, the V4D sector can become a better ally to refugee communities and their organisations. None of these proposed pathways alone can achieve durable solutions for the refugees. But refugees are demanding that development organisations begin to [shift power](#) and invest in the refugee leaders, networks and organisations as a first step towards durable solutions.

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