

# CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITIES

CONSULTATION  
FEBRUARY 2025



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## Introduction:

On the 8<sup>th</sup> February 2025, UNHCR Ireland and the Irish Refugee Advisory Board held a one-day consultation workshop with the aim of exploring the potential for Refugee Led Organisation (RLO) to address the issues of most concern to refugee and asylum-seeking communities.

40 individuals from over 15 different countries who live all over Ireland came together to discuss, exchange and record the top issues of concern, along with their barriers and potential solutions to them. Participants were from various age groups with varying routes of arrival to Ireland including resettlement, Government programmes and successful asylum after arrival. A small number were still awaiting decision on their claims.

### Consultation

Using inclusive and participatory methods (Open Space and World Café) attendees selected the top seven areas of interest or concern to them. They were asked to consider the potential of refugee led organisations to address these challenges. Each theme was discussed in rotation by participants through a series of questions:

- Tell us more about this topic and why it is important
- What barriers might you meet in addressing this topic
- What would help you address this topic?

On the day, participants were also asked to map any existing RLOs they knew of or worked with, and if a UNHCR Ireland WhatsApp channel would be of interest to them.

## Open Space Findings

'With a view to addressing the question *'How can RLOs make a difference in Ireland'*, participants identified seven themes:

### **The 7 key themes chosen were:**

1. Employment
2. Housing
3. Political participation and representation
4. Integration & Intercultural support
5. Health
6. Community Representation, Advocacy, Safety
7. Education

### **Some other key topics that came up, but were not focused on were:**

- Sports
- Cultural exchange
- Diversity, equality and racism
- Data collection
- English language support
- Transportation



- Communication pathways
- Youth
- Disability support
- Information provision around Irish procedures
- Communications channels
- Woman's rights and opportunities/women and children support
- Funding

## World Café Findings:

### Employment

Participants were confident that employment improves the general wellbeing of individuals by reducing stress and improving mental health, dignity and self-esteem. It empowers and involves individuals in society and their community, as well as being good for economic development.

### *Challenges*

Participants identified many challenges around access to employment. Some key concerns were lack of recognition for previous education or experience, resulting in asylum seekers only being offered low-skill jobs in healthcare or security. Nepotism was mentioned many times, participants mentioned it is very hard to get a job when you are new in Ireland without knowing someone. Other challenges included:

- Discrimination and racism
- Language barriers
- Housing issues
- Poor mental health
- Lack of childcare
- Lack of public transport
- Lack of support for applicants with disabilities
- Driving license needed

### *Solutions*

Suggested solutions to these challenges included an RLO that works on categorising community's skills through a standardised form and then passes it on to the government or local authority. It was suggested that a process recently done by Dental Council of Ireland to register international dentists could be presented as best practise.

Participants noted that diverse routes to careers would make them more accessible, for example allowing people to take exams or assessment when their qualifications not recognised. In centres, people can be empowered to improve their own skills – through online courses or resources that are accessible to all.

Other possible solutions where RLOs could support were as follows:

- Increased financial support for entrepreneurship

- Internships, placements and career development courses
- Workshops for employers to combat discrimination
- Hub for CVs, tips, interview practice, job opportunities, etc.
- Job advertisements in different languages
- Hybrid roles which can allow working from home
- Simplified processes
- Increased networking opportunities

## **Housing**

When talking about housing, participants used emotional language to describe a safe and happy place for them and their families to grow in dignity and make memories. They stressed that local community and neighbors allow for an important sense of belonging when making a home in a new country.

### *Challenges*

The main challenges around access to housing which were stressed, were discrimination from landlords and a myriad of issues with the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). Often, participants felt they would be discriminated against because they were not Irish, and because they were trying to secure housing using HAP. Differences between treatment of Ukraine population and the rest of the asylum-seeking community were highlighted here.

Systemic issues surrounding housing were very prevalent, including the high price of rent, lack of housing or rental stock, lack of affordable housing or social housing and the need for more information. Applicants said, 'in reality, housing is not a human right in Ireland' and noted that housing was being used as an issue to sow hatred between refugees and Irish people.

Specifically, it was noted that in this area, there has been a breakdown of understanding between the Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) and refugees and asylum seekers. With refugee and asylum-seeking communities unclear on what the LAITs can do for them.

### *Solutions*

Participants had ideas on RLO led solutions to improve the housing situation for asylum seekers and refugees in the short term which centered around community support. This could include more information about existing support through volunteers, help with HAP forms, and more volunteer translators. An established channel of support for engaging with racist landlords who deny renters based on nationality would be timely.

RLOs could help search for suitable properties for people to rent or buy. Houses could be owned and managed by trusts or RLOs, for example in Germany they have housing cooperatives. They suggested that a more diverse pool of rental references could be relevant to landlords including solicitors, center managers or fellow community members in a recognized RLO.

Contributors on the day also had policy suggestions around housing which included:

- Incentives for vacant houses to be converted to rent to refugees
- Expand community sponsorship housing model

- Expand planning permission so refugees could buy and build on land
- More government consultation with refugee communities
- Increase HAP
- Set rental limits
- Invest more in social housing

Participants were passionate that more effective housing policy for everyone in Ireland would be the best route forward, and ultimately asylum seekers and refugees.

## **Political Participation and Representation**

Participants stated that refugees at the decision-making table with the expertise necessary can bring impactful changes as they're connected to the refugee population. This can then result in improved communication and integration. Participation allows refugees to influence topics of debate in the political sphere, and to make sure diverse needs are met as well as ensure justice and equality. Participants stated "who lives it, knows it better"

### *Challenges*

The main challenges to this issue centre around negative narratives in Irish and asylum-seeking communities. There is a fear of diverse politicians from Irish communities. Participants state that Irish communities believe that there's a decrease in local power as the number of refugees in their areas increases. Stories are twisted for the spread of misinformation, and this is used against the refugee community.

There is harassment and racism experienced by minority candidates when people do try to step up, because of the color of their skin. This directly affects lives and people are afraid, therefore the willingness to be in the spotlight is low.

Participants identified that asylum seekers and refugees lack trust in Irish politicians. They believe Irish politicians are not interested in migrant communities and there is a lack of political appetite from the broader public to cover migrant issues. Cultural differences and misunderstandings can also factor in. Participants also stated that there is a lack of knowledge around political rights, and the Irish political system.

### *Solutions*

Participants stated that a political network for refugees and migrants could be very valuable. They suggested to establish councils that represent each different migrant group in Ireland where every migrant community could have their own representative. This could encourage migrants to vote and to run for elections after experience gained in councils.

Workshops could help inform the community, and consultations could inform the councils. Shared experience among migrants also helps establish better focused initiatives within the community. RLOs could then hold meetings with political parties or decision makers.

Solutions also focused on increased connections and exchanges to allow communities to get to know their local politicians. Joining both local and migrant communities to interact and engage with policies. This can be done at events such as town hall meetings and meetings to exchange views, concerns, opportunities, etc.

They stressed that more education around this topic is needed to build self-confidence. More positive success stories of migrants in politics could empower others to see what their futures could look like. This could show the possibilities and keep hope alive.

Other practical suggestions included:

- Leadership training
- Internship opportunities specifically for migrants and refugees in the political sphere
- Access to and promotion of political education
- Funding programs for migrant political participation
- Local authority projects that encourage the political participation of migrants

## **Integration & Intercultural support**

Contributors remarked that integration makes refugees feel seen, free, and like members of society. They stressed the importance of belonging and being part of something, which increases confidence while building networks and trust.

One participant said, 'Integration is not assimilation but sharing, like completing a picture'. The mental health benefits of intercultural exchange are very large, it means being allowed to be who you are and adopt Irish customs—but also maintain aspects of your original culture. Individual improvement then helps the host country. Responsibility comes with making Ireland a new home, to build an inclusive and diverse society. The more diverse a society, the more prosperous it becomes.

They noted that integration benefits the host community, as it brings unity, improves understanding, and helps reduce multicultural tensions and discrimination.

## ***Challenges***

Within asylum seeking communities there can be a passive mindset in asylum seeking communities due to past trauma or poor mental health which leads to seclusion. There can also be a fear of judgement from people in the community around assimilating to Irish culture. Lastly, there is a residual feeling of danger after the Dublin riots. A large anxiety around racism and its impact; refugees feel like Irish people don't want them here.



Participants stated that integration events need to bring together both refugee and host communities. The host community needs to be willing to receive refugees into their circles for integration to be successful. The concern was raised that individuals who are pro refugee in their communities are now facing backlash.

Other common challenges included:

- Language
- Locals avoiding centres
- Lack of cultural exchange opportunities
- Miscommunication between cultures
- Culture shock

### *Solutions*

Intercultural exchange is key to making connections with people, learning about the host culture, and understanding how to interact with the locals. Involving the local community in large scale integration efforts make it more meaningful.

Participants said that there could be more opportunity for collaborative intercultural exchange to share traditions customs and culture. Including solidarity dinners, community intercultural events, sports opportunities and music. Respect and ongoing communication were mentioned as the two key components to long term relationship building between communities.

Refugee led organisations could help in empowering individuals to be active in their own integration journeys and an increased understanding of the time that integration takes. More volunteers from refugee backgrounds could work as interpreters to aid communication, especially for those who do not speak English.

Lastly, they mentioned that the Government policy around integration needs to be supported and resourced.

Other solutions that RLOs could work on with their local communities included:

- Increased conversations about racism
- Intercultural exchange to combat misinformation
- Sports as a common language
- Workshops for new arrivals to help bridge intercultural gaps

### **Health**

Participants stated that good physical and mental health are universal rights and allow refugees to be able to contribute to society. Without health you cannot work or attend events or activities, health is life. Poor mental health causes desperation and impacts people's belief in the future.

### *Challenges*

Contributors stated that you cannot separate mental and physical health for refugees, and this is often not understood. 'The lived experience in you feels it, you know it in your body'. There can be

frustration over not having autonomy over your body and the lack of recognition of the physical aspects of psychological issues.

Participants stated that there is a lack of cultural awareness from practitioners, and racial profiling. For example, practitioners are unsure how to deal with people with severe complex trauma, certain tropical diseases or transgender needs.

There is racial profiling around women of colour, a sense that women of colour during pregnancy do not receive the right care. Doctors do not listen to patients, and their health is not taken seriously until it may be too late and refugees lack the authority to stick up for themselves.

Psychological support and trauma are often ignored or on a long waiting list. Children with complex trauma are required to go to schools with a lack of help. It was felt that teachers do not try as hard to find support for refugee children with trauma.

One participant said 'The healthcare system is less efficient than 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries.'

Other challenges included:

- Difficulty around medical cards
- Access to GPs
- Long waiting lists for procedures
- Expense of healthcare
- Mistrust of doctors by patients
- Language barriers
- Lack of understanding of the system and medical insurance
- Female genital mutilation (FGM) specific needs
- Lack of robust mental health support
- Stigma in refugee communities around mental health
- Living with no privacy affecting health

## *Solutions*

Participants centred solutions around using the resources within refugee communities. They stated a lot of doctors and nurses who are not certified might be able to get guidance and internships to work in their communities to help bridge the gap and translate with their communities. The Irish Medical Council could work to find an access pathway for doctors with refugee status to work. They stated that new arrivals could be encouraged to pursue medicine rather than care roles when looking at the healthcare field.

Refugee led organisations could help with access to medical care or providing a chaperone when attending a treatment centre. Volunteers could help fill medical forms, make home calls or provides transport.

Attendees discussed gathering resources, like developing a network of GPs around the country who could take on new patients or promoting organisations like Black Therapists. More support for those with additional needs, like help with finding schools and recourses with people with disabilities was highlighted as a need. Pro bono work and funding towards groups that could support these endeavours could help.

Sports events related to health, as well as yoga and meditation courses for mental health, are often offered to refugees so they can learn about the different facets of health. It was noted that activities that are more community group focused like Sanctuary Runners are perhaps more useful to encourage people to exercise.

Participants also noted that medical capacity in accommodation centres could be improved by having an emergency doctor or nurse on call or staff and by providing basic healthcare training and mental health training for people who work there.

Other solutions discussed were:

- Cultural and trauma-informed training for primary care staff
- Increased interpretation
- Medical information in more languages
- Financial incentives for doctors to learn a second language
- GPs who specialise in working with refugees and understand the needs of these groups
- First aid training for people in direct provision
- Wheelchair-accessible hostels and refugee centres

### **Community Representation, Advocacy, Safety**

Attendees stated that local representation is key, as refugees know about their own issues and the needs of their communities, so it is essential to involve people with lived experience.

Representatives of refugees understand the issues of their communities, and it is easier for them to establish trust. Participants highlighted the phrase: 'There is nothing for us without us'.

They stated that refugee communities should be brought into community decision making processes as actors rather than just beneficiaries. Representing the community promotes a sense of belonging and empowers people from the community to do the same. It is important to encourage people to go for what they want and to lead by example when refugees use their voice, they can better serve the local community and the refugee community.

### ***Challenges***

Contributors stated that more mediation is needed between refugee communities and Irish society to foster connection and engagement. They said funding streams are complicated and difficult to track or access and political and community systems are not known to refugees and asylum seekers.

There is a lack of diversity across government and local authority bodies. Participants believed it is important for the Government, Gardai and public services to better represent the community they serve. If refugees are working for the Gardai, they can represent a role model for their community and bring new competencies within the system. The rise of the far right also emphasizes the need for more diversity in the Gardai. More diversity would help reduce fear in migrant communities towards police forces and would show that refugees can contribute to protecting the local community.

Other challenges include:

- Language barriers, including knowledge of Irish language

- Lack of recognition of qualifications
- Political shift towards far-right ideas affects the security and sense of safety
- Fear and low self-confidence

## *Solutions*

Contributors suggested including refugees in local events without emphasizing their difference as refugees, i.e. participating in Saint Patrick's Day Parade as a local person and not as a refugee. More community groups with a mix of refugees and local people would be helpful. Examples of these types of groups that are already formed are community sponsorship groups or Irish hosts. With these groups, they stated that you can rely on both local knowledge of the system and awareness of refugee needs. These groups also sensitize Irish groups to refugees.

In response to funding challenges, RLOs collaborating with organizations who have a registration number would enable access to funding opportunities and allow pooling of resources. More capacity building for RLOs could build up institutional knowledge.

Developing community networks would be beneficial. This can be done by identify community leaders and providing space to encourage participation. Build community programs to train community leaders so they can share the information with their communities

Focus on empowerment to encourage participation, for example through TEDX conferences showcasing refugees who managed to make a difference for their locality. More radio, TV and media representation is encouraged to present talent skills and competencies which can deconstruct stereotypes.

## **Education**

Participants used emotional words such as 'freedom', 'light' and 'empowerment' when speaking of education. Participants stated that education opens doors to employment and fosters understanding between people. It brings wisdom and helps build self-confidence.

Engaging in education sets an example for family, inspires others, and sets the foundation needed to find a job and build a career. Language skills are a very important part of education for refugee and asylum-seeking communities. Language opens doors to integration and independence.

## *Challenges*

Financial barriers can be significant when it comes to accessing education in Ireland. The costs involved in studying at third level education for refugees or asylum seekers are often prohibitive with not enough access to scholarships and/or grants. Accessing information about educational opportunities, including grants and scholarships can be difficult.

The restrictions around certain categories of non-Irish citizens accessing the SUSI grants are challenging. Likewise, when they are obliged to pay the same fees as international students.

English language classes can also be difficult to access. Often, classes are not accessible due to remote locations or poor public transport. Poor language skills can result in highly qualified people working in low-skilled jobs.



Degrees obtained abroad are often not considered. The fact that many educational institutions in Ireland do not recognize qualifications from other countries means that refugees and asylum seekers can be hugely disadvantaged when trying to progress their education.

Poor or costly transport links are often a barrier to accessing education in general. Lack of access to suitable childcare is another barrier often experienced by refugees and asylum seekers and affects women disproportionately.

These challenges can lead to a loss of confidence and sometimes, to poor mental health.

## *Solutions*

Participants said there is an abundance of information, but it can be difficult to find. There was a suggestion to establish a 'sanctuary hub' in third level institutions where this information is collated and can be accessed. More information sharing is needed across the board.

They suggested leaning on local organizations, people or volunteers who know the system to help new arrivals navigate it. Education and Training Boards (ETBs) around the country have resources, but it is about knowing what is available and how to access those resources.

Participants suggested using leaders and champions who have successfully moved forward in education to show others that it can be done, using role-modeling through story telling.

They stated that increased coordinated political lobbying around education could put these issues on the table. The restrictions around accessing SUSI grants could be reviewed and adjusted.

More coordination around English classes could help. They noted that local volunteers are often willing and able to help with language skills through conversation hubs or one-to-one English classes. English classes being compulsory could make a big difference. There was a suggestion to have taking English classes linked to welfare payments - no attendance results in no social payments.

## **Presentations**

With the aim to provide practical information, inspiration and networking opportunities for refugee community organizers, there were a number of presentations on the day.

There was a panel to hear of the experiences of existing RLOs in Ireland, with the following contributors:

- Michael Rashid - Rohingya Action Ireland
- Ganna Basilo - Ukrainian Action Ireland
- Charles Sweeney - Local Authority Integration Team, Donegal

Contributors Michael Rashid and Ganna Basilo spoke of how their RLOs developed, delivering advice and lessons learned which have allowed their organisations to provide for their community. Some of these takeaways included:

- Large positive change can come about when people come together and form strong community bonds
- Establishing strong links and trust with civil society organisations, local groups and Government is key
- The importance of empowering the younger generation through education
- The value in exploring cultural, social and political opportunities to further human rights

- The power of sport as an integration tool
- Information as a crucial component for new arrivals
- Charities have heavy responsibilities and obligations, and the process to become a charity takes a very long time

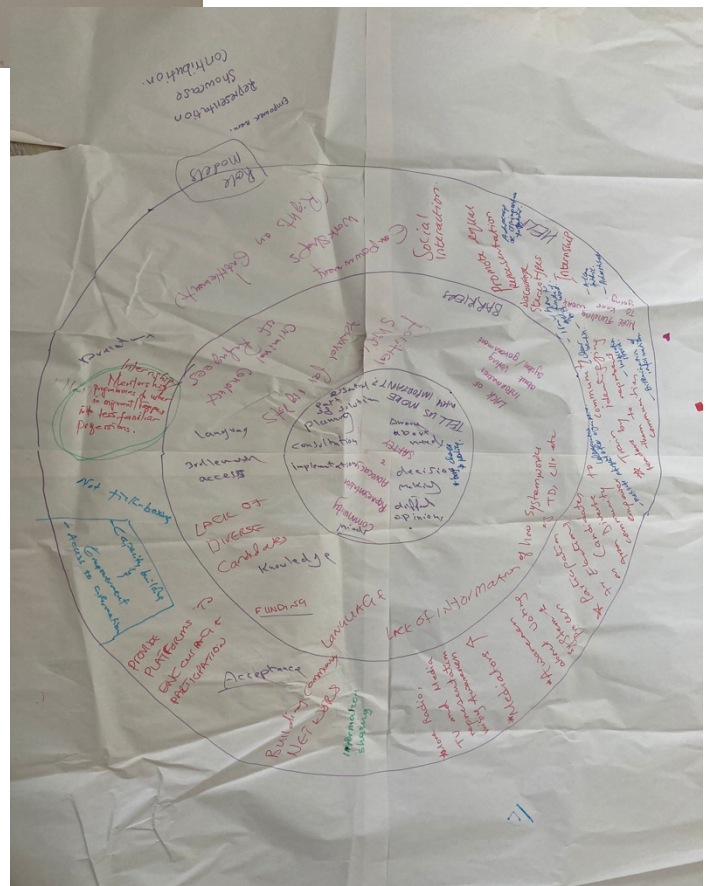
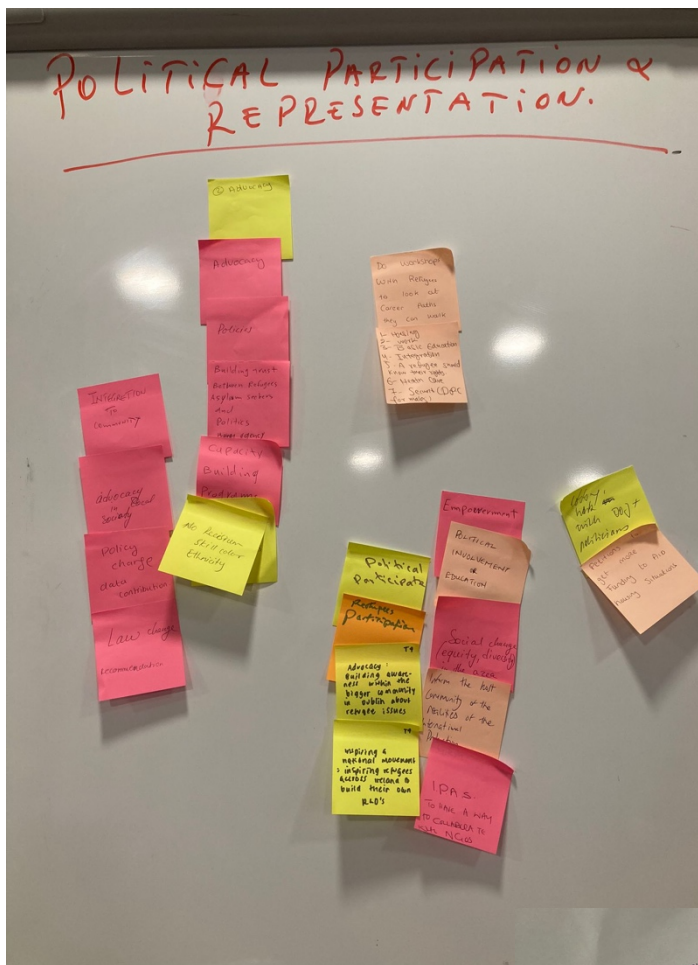
Charles Sweeney, representing the [Local Authority Integration Team \(LAIT\)](#) in Donegal spoke of how organisations can work together with their local authorities. He covered the role that the LAITs play, the power of partnerships and what gaps they see where RLOs could help them carry out their work.

Seperately, Alphonse Munyaneza, the Community Based Protection Officer from UNHCR Belgium made an online intervention on the Impact of RLOs in Belgium. He described the work of the Refugee Umbrella Committee in Brussels. He covered the structure, the services the committee provides, and why they are best placed to do so.

This provided context and inspiration for participants in the room who had questions around how to provide long term support to vulnerable community members, support for RLOs, funding, entrepreneurship, and monitoring community progress.

Lastly, Jillian Van Turnhout delivered a practical session on the governance of formal & informal structures in Ireland. She covered the basic first steps for different community groups or NGOs in Ireland and gave tips on how to approach your organisations journey from the beginning. Participants had questions on financial options of organisations, sustainability of community groups, the difference between legal terms and legal statuses.

## ANNEX







housing  
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Matters  
Matters

Housing

Housing Support

Housing

TA  
housing

Provide  
Housing  
Support

Special  
Housing  
Procedures

Eviction  
Recommendation

Housing and  
Eviction  
Support  
1/1







## Barracuda

MENTAL  
HEALTH SUPPORT







