



REFUGEE COMMITTEES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: AN OPERATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

**Promising Practice
in Community Engagement
in Belgium**



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Cover photograph: Refugee Committee members engaging in a dialogue with UNHCR staff in front of the community centre for refugees in Brussels.

Photo credit: ©UNHCR/Nina Daelemans

Title: Refugee Committees and Local Governments: An operational partnership for an inclusive approach to community-driven solutions

Type of practice: Promising Practice

Programme objective: To promote an inclusive approach to refugee integration through the interaction of refugee-led structures with local governments in the design and implementation of public policies and programmes

Dates: October 2019 to present

Population groups: Refugees, asylum-seekers and host communities

Partners: Government of the Brussels Capital Region; municipal governments; a network of reception and integration service providers at governmental and non-governmental level; civil society actors; financial institutions and refugee-led structures partnering with refugees in Belgium

Programme overview

[Refugee committees](#) in Belgium are representative advisory and operational bodies in which solutions to address protection and integration issues are developed by and for refugees. Though well established in other regions and contexts under different names or formats, working with refugee committees is an emerging practice in Europe and they play a transformative role in the way that UNHCR approaches community engagement in Belgium. The aim is to create opportunities for refugees to be included and participate more directly public policies and services provided to them. In these committees, refugees and asylum-seekers become voting members who, through their General Assembly, elect refugee representatives responsible for acting on the community's concerns, addressing issues such as access to documentation, health care, housing, social protection, employment, education, information and more.

With the support of UNHCR, 10 committees now operate in Belgium, where refugees lead work on integration and livelihoods, management of community housing spaces and participation in local government and municipal policymaking for forcibly displaced persons in the country. The committees represent different ages, countries (Afghanistan, Burundi, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Ukraine) and gender and other diversity characteristics, including persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). In addition, an Umbrella Refugee Committee was created, gathering representatives from all other committees in Belgium to ensure aligned positions and coordination.

The Belgian legal and institutional framework created both the need and the opportunity for refugee committees to come into existence and thrive. Initially conceived to act as a bridge between refugee communities and service providers, over time the committees have expanded their scope of engagement, assuming an operational role in the direct management of seven collective shelters¹ and one community centre for refugees, as well as serving as liaison officers with regional authorities to advise on the planning and implementation of integration policies for refugees. They also conduct surveys and data collection exercises with refugee communities to support the government in making decisions based on evidence and set up mobile teams that provide information and support to individual cases.

¹ Formerly unused, vacant hotels.

Context

At the end of 2022, Belgium was hosting 194,072 persons in need of international protection, including 41,810 asylum-seekers. The largest populations of refugees in Belgium are from Ukraine (61,975), Syria (17,808), Afghanistan (6,238), Eritrea (4,621) and Palestine (4,607).² Belgium has a robust asylum system and has invested significant human and financial resources to establish a local integration framework for refugees in the country.³

Despite these efforts, refugees' prospects for socioeconomic integration may in practice be constrained by a complex federal system in which multiple layers of institutions and regulations often create challenges for the efficient delivery of services to the refugee population.⁴ The various competences and responsibilities at federal, regional, provincial and municipal levels on issues such as health, education, employment and housing lead to distinct integration pathways for different regions in the country. This means in practice that the provision of services may vary significantly from one location to another and

refugees may lack clarity as to which specific service provider has geographical or functional competence to intervene. In addition, growing negative sentiments against foreigners are gradually eroding public support behind the asylum regime and affect refugees' long-term chances of integration.

Against this background, [refugee committees in Belgium](#) have emerged as a bridge between refugee communities, municipal regional authorities and local service providers, facilitating access to information on documentation and social support for newly arrived refugees and promoting their economic and social inclusion in the long term. Their work complements federal, regional and local policies and practices and helps to facilitate a variety of administrative processes with a variety of authorities. This specific type of refugee self-management structure gives the refugee population in Belgium a voice and a formal space for participation, alongside political and administrative decision makers who are in a position to support them in their socioeconomic integration process.



Alina, a Ukrainian refugee and president of the Ukrainian Voices Committee, and her daughter standing in front of the European Commission. ©UNHCR/Frederik Bordon

² [UNHCR Global Trends 2022](#) including [Data Annex Tables](#).

³ UNHCR (2023). [Belgium Fact Sheet](#).

⁴ For more information on the Belgian federal system, please refer to: https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staet.

Programme background

The refugee committees build on the momentum created by the first [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#) (2019), which garnered a strong consensus and commitments towards strengthened refugee participation and inclusion in national systems. Until then, UNHCR work in Belgium had mainly tackled legal and advocacy objectives, but the committees enabled UNHCR to integrate refugee participation directly into its protection and solutions response.⁵

The resulting initiative drew on traditional refugee representation structures that exist in other contexts (primarily in Africa and the Middle East), in that committee representatives are elected by the community to represent them in camp coordination mechanisms and/or consultations with humanitarian actors to inform programme design and implementation. Given the specific legal and institutional framework in Belgium, this refugee self-organization model was adapted to enable participation in decision-making processes at governmental level.

Refugee committees were thus launched in Belgium with the support of UNHCR, to empower refugees and expand the participation of an increasingly diverse refugee community in the discussion of public policies for reception and local integration.⁶ Their establishment also reinforces the organization's commitment to “ensuring that people are at the centre of all that we do” as reflected in the updated [2018 Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability \(AGD\) Policy](#).

Following the decision to embark on the project in late 2019, UNHCR set to contact different refugee groups and communities in Brussels with the objective of determining their level of interest in self-organizing and working together to improve

their prospects of local integration. With this aim, UNHCR initially targeted the largest refugee groups present in the country that year, namely Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, as well as specific groups at risk of marginalization such as women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) refugees. Each community was approached through visits to “known meeting sites” frequently used by community members, to identify focal points interested in taking part in the initiative and reaching out to other members in their communities.⁷

Through the initial network of refugee contacts, UNHCR established a team of 30 community facilitators comprised of refugee leaders who had volunteered to organize and lead consultations with communities on the main challenges for local integration.⁸ They collaborated with UNHCR and fellow volunteers in the communities to reach out to the refugees, across AGD groups, to organize discussions, document agreed action points, update contact lists, etc. To promote the participation of women in these discussions, about 70 per cent of the facilitators engaged between 2019 and 2020 were women.

Consultations between refugees and local integration service providers revealed several factors hindering integration, including language barriers and lack of access to relevant information at municipal or regional level, as well as challenges to accessing adequate housing and the labour market.

Once established, refugee committees played a consultative and advisory role before the relevant authorities, which in turn provided them with an opportunity to assume roles and responsibilities in their places of residence, supporting local service providers.

⁵ UNHCR Intranet (2023). [Refugee Committees: An inclusive approach to integration solutions \(unhcr.org\)](#).

⁶ The Refugee Committees built upon two important UNHCR campaigns embraced in Belgium, “[Cities with Refugees](#)” and “[Buddies with Refugees](#)”, which showcased the roles and contributions of local stakeholders in creating a welcoming environment for the inclusion and integration of refugees into Belgian society.

⁷ Some examples included mosques and other places of worship and headquarters of organizations supporting women and LGBTIQ+ people.

⁸ In compliance with Belgian labour regulations on volunteer work, refugee facilitators received flat-rate compensation for each community consultation session.

Resources and partnerships

UNHCR Belgium protection staff oversee implementation of the Refugee Committees project. UNHCR has established a dedicated community-based protection (CBP) fund to support refugee committees and strengthen their mobilization and outreach activities. The 2023 budget to support refugee committees was \$18,000.

The Government of the Brussels Capital Region subsidizes a large part of the activities of the Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee (UV-RC), one of the refugee committees supported through this initiative, including its management of collective shelters and a community centre for refugees.⁹ In partnership with the Umbrella Refugee Committee (U-RC), UV-RC oversees the management of one collective shelter currently housing refugees of various nationalities.

Implementation of the project relies on collaboration with a number of actors, including:

- Municipal and regional governments
- Reception and integration service providers, including Public Social Welfare Centres, the Federal Agency for the reception of asylum-seekers (FEDASIL) and Regional Employment Offices (ACTIRIS)
- The academic sector, notably the University Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Katholieke Universiteit (KU) in Leuven, which offers technical support in developing data collection surveys for refugees
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provide support for the implementation of capacity-building activities
- Law firms, particularly DLA Piper, which provide technical advice on acquiring legal status for non-profit associations
- Financial institutions, mainly Microstart, which provide support for the development of revenue-generating projects and applications for micro-credit loans.

Process and activities

1

CREATION OF THE REFUGEE COMMITTEES

Building on initial UNHCR efforts to carry out community consultations, refugees in Belgium expressed an interest in organizing themselves and taking steps towards formalizing their legal status as a committee. This led to the creation of refugee committees based on nationality (Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi), as well as committees representing specific AGD

groups (e.g. a women's refugee committee and an LGBTIQ+ refugee committee).¹⁰ The newly formed committees used social media networks to communicate internally with their members and also to announce events to external audiences and reach out to other refugees in their communities.¹¹

⁹ Please refer to Activity 9 for more information on the Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee (UV-RC).

¹⁰ Some of the initial members of the Women's refugee committee were also members of nationality-based committees who decided to create a separate committee, with UNHCR support, to overcome patriarchal attitudes preventing them from effectively participating in the nationality group. Over time, however, the position of women within nationality committees has been strengthened through regular training of refugee committee members on the UNHCR AGD approaches, targeted outreach to more refugee women through social media outlets and the adoption of consensus-based decision-making processes within the committees.

¹¹ The project also has a [dedicated website](#), created in 2020 by a member of the Syrian Refugee Committee.

Throughout this initial stage of the process, UNHCR liaised regularly with the committees and community facilitators to assess capacity-strengthening needs and provide technical and logistical support for the establishment of short-term priorities and implementation of outreach strategies to expand the committees' membership base. The objectives of the refugee committees, jointly developed by UNHCR and the committees, included the following:

- To act as entry points for structured consultations with refugees communities
- To keep refugee communities well informed on existing services provided to refugees and on social cohesion developments and integration issues
- To ensure refugee representation and follow

up during dialogues with local authorities, unions and civil society platforms

- To establish collaborative partnership with different stakeholders, including local authorities, universities and civil society
- To support surveys and data collection exercises regarding integration in Belgium
- To create workplans and priorities on integration activities (advocacy, collaborative plans with integration stakeholders on housing, job, education integration, etc.)
- To initiate and promote refugee community mobilization exercises to further integration activities
- To engage with the media and decision makers to regularly profile refugee community contributions to Belgian society.

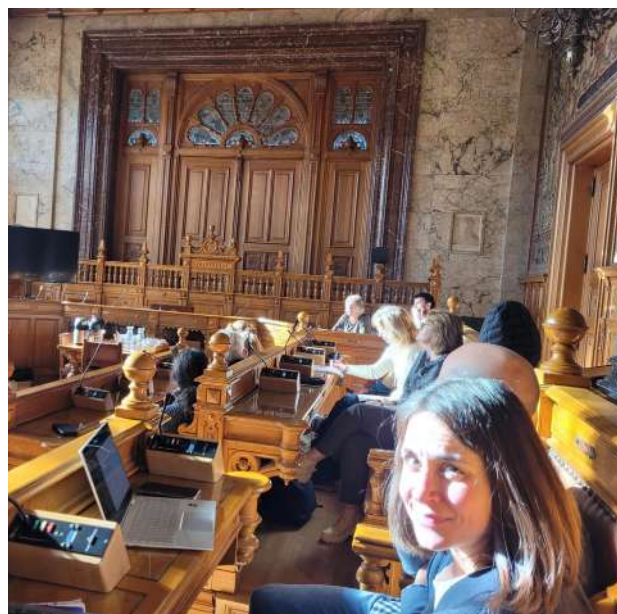
2

INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

The refugee committees established mobile support teams comprised of volunteer focal points ready to provide forcibly displaced people with information on the asylum system, emergency assistance, local integration service procedures and providers, inter alia. These mobile teams act as bridges between UNHCR, national authorities and communities by referring refugees at heightened protection risk to the relevant service providers and conducting surveys that contribute to informing refugee policies and responses.¹² To strengthen the outreach and response capacity of these mobile teams, UNHCR developed training sessions on protection and integration mechanisms, which were tailored to committees' needs and requests (as detailed in Activity 7).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the committees also supported governmental and civil society organizations in their responses. For instance, members of the committees enlisted as health/translator volunteers for Médecins

Sans Frontières Belgique (MSFB) mobile clinics and engaged in mask production initiatives promoted by municipal authorities.



Refugee Committee Representatives participating in the municipal consultation in Schaerbeek to address social and safety impacts of a new refugee shelter. ©UNHCR

¹² UNHCR Intranet (2023). [Refugee Committees: An inclusive approach to integration solutions](#)

3

DATA COLLECTION AND EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY

A COVID-19 survey positioned the committees as important actors for data gathering on the refugee population, for the purposes of evidence-based advocacy. In consultation with UNHCR and the refugee committees, the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Katholieke Universiteit (KU) in Leuven developed a COVID-19 survey addressing the impact of the pandemic on the refugee population in Belgium. Led by refugee facilitators and a UNHCR community-based protection team, the survey reached out to 339

respondents and the results were systematized in a report publicly released in early 2021 by ULB and UNHCR.

The survey findings provided the basis for framing the first refugee committees' workplans and advocacy strategies (described in Activities 5 and 6). This exercise also forged a partnership with academic actors, who continue to provide the committees with technical advice on how to design the subsequent data collection exercises.

4

MAPPING KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Motivated by their active role in the COVID-19 response, the committees and UNHCR continued to extend their contact with entities and service providers that could address the needs of the refugee population. Thus, they mapped and reached out to governmental and non-governmental institutions with expertise in the provision of services to refugees, as well as entities with a common interest in partnering with refugee-led organizations for academic research or business opportunities. The process contributed to achieving the following objectives:

- To present the Refugee Committees initiative to key stakeholders and identify collaboration opportunities, including for capacity-strengthening activities (described in Activity 9)
- To develop a database of local integration service providers (governmental, non-profit and private sector), which was concluded in 2021 and is updated periodically
- To build relationships with authorities at municipal level to inform them of specific concerns of refugee communities and offer collaboration to design joint solutions for their integration.



Refugee Committee members with high-level Belgian government officials, Mr. Rudy Vervoort, Mme. Sophie Lavaux, and Mr. Pierre Verberen. ©UNHCR

5

CREATION OF ACTION PLANS

At the end of 2020, each refugee committee organized workshops, with UNHCR support, to prioritize the main challenges to local integration needing to be addressed, generate ideas regarding possible solutions and develop strategies to engage local authorities. The discussions centred on the five main integration challenges reported by refugees who participated in the COVID-19 impact survey, namely: (1) accessing information; (2) language barriers; (3) education; (4) employment and (5) housing.

THE WOMEN REFUGEE COMMITTEE

Among these different refugee-led advisory bodies, we have identified the need for a space entirely dedicated to women.

Because women, in every context, have specific priorities and battles to fight.



WHAT IS THE WOMEN REFUGEE COMMITTEE ?



- A **safe space**, where you are free to communicate your fears, concerns, and problems. You will be listened.
- A space to **ask questions, find support, collaborate** with women from different countries and origins.
- A space to **get to know better your rights as a women**, your entitlements and the possible way to exercise them.

Technical facilitators¹³ assigned to each refugee committee distributed relevant documentation to participants in advance and liaised with note takers and translators. UNHCR promoted participation across AGD groups, encouraging the inclusion of additional participants in each committee on the basis of diversity within the community (age, gender, disability, minority and socioeconomic groups, etc.).

At the end of the consultations, each refugee committee developed a strategy identifying problems, objectives and responses for each integration area.

6

UNIFICATION OF PRIORITIES UNDER THE UMBRELLA REFUGEE COMMITTEE

UNHCR supported the development of an Umbrella Refugee Committee (U-RC) as a means to coordinate and integrate the proposals put forward by each refugee committee and bring all of the communities together as one unified voice.

Composed of two representatives from each refugee committee across the country, U-RC developed a detailed action plan, by priority area, outlining the main institutions involved in the provision of services to refugees, the main operational challenges to accessing these services, key suggestions to overcome

these obstacles, and the potential role of U-RC in supporting authorities and integration stakeholders. The resulting strategy provided a framework for planning advocacy activities and presenting the key objectives and priorities of U-RC to government counterparts and other relevant actors.

In 2022, U-RC formalized its status as a non-profit association. It preserved a board structure composed of two representatives from each committee (one man and one woman per committee), presently totalling 18 members.

¹³ Comprised of refugee leaders assisting with the logistical arrangements and moderating the consultations with the communities.

An executive committee (six members and a president) is elected by the board to oversee the management of daily operations. The U-RC president represents the committee in interactions with the government, media outlets and non-governmental entities; in keeping with

representative purposes, the president's actions and public speeches are guided by the board's internal directives and decisions. All refugees in Belgium can participate in the General Assembly convened annually by the U-RC board.¹⁴

7

CAPACITY-BUILDING AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

UNHCR, in consultation with the refugee committees, developed annual training plans to enhance the committees' expertise in the legal, technical and practical aspects of accessing key public systems and financial services in Belgium, as well as to promote their financial self-reliance. To deliver the training, UNHCR teamed up with organizations with solid expertise in these areas, including the multinational law firm DLA Piper and the NGO IEDA Relief. Training covered a wide range of topics, including: an overview of the Belgian asylum system and procedures; the levels of government in Belgium (federal/region/municipal) and their powers regarding integration affairs; steps to acquiring legal status for non-profit associations (ASBL in French); the country's education system, labour laws and social and private housing system; self-employment and

entrepreneurship regulations; protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA); consumer rights and access to utility services.

Due to logistical and financial constraints, UNHCR primarily targeted this training at U-RC participants and members of subcommittees actively engaged in the project and then encouraged them to replicate these sessions with other members. Through partnerships with DLA Piper and the academic sector (ULB University), UNHCR also facilitated access to technical assistance for the refugee committees and U-RC to help them through their legal formalization and internal governance processes, including the drafting of their internal statutes and regulations.



The first mobile team of the U-RC deployed to Molenbeek to assist with the reception of refugees and support homeless refugees. ©UNHCR

¹⁴ The General Assembly has competence, inter alia, to approve annual budgets and work plans, modify statutes and internal regulations and establish the strategic direction of the committee.

We aim to become your go-to partner whenever you need to engage in a dialogue with refugee communities in order to build mutual understanding and successfully promote social cohesion and integration in Belgium. Not only are our communities appreciative of the new life opportunities offered to them by Belgium; they also wish to mobilize their talents and energy to actively contribute to Belgian society (excerpt from the Umbrella Refugee Committee leaflet produced in June 2021).

The refugee committees developed PowerPoint presentations and leaflets with key advocacy messages that were presented to the local authorities and other stakeholders during introductory meetings facilitated by UNHCR. Since U-RC represents the unified voice of refugees in Belgium, it has taken the lead as the main interlocutor before governmental authorities.¹⁵ Following an initial meeting between U-RC and the Chief of Cabinet of the Brussels City's municipality at the end of June 2021, U-RC and the refugee committees continued progressively to gain legitimacy and credibility before governmental actors¹⁶, which in turn facilitated access to other public institutions relevant to the integration of refugees. Strengthened collaboration with municipal governments helped to establish communication with authorities at regional level.

The Umbrella Refugee Committee also developed strategic partnerships with non-governmental actors and financial institutions (e.g. Microstart) to assist new arrivals and receive training on entrepreneurial skills and develop business plans to apply for loans. Similarly, refugee committees received financial support from UNHCR to continue with their outreach and mobilization efforts. Activities supported have included: commemoration of World Refugee Day with arts contests and exhibitions; sporting and cultural events to promote local cohesion and reach out to potential new committee members; language learning exchanges; identification and referral of homeless refugees, etc. In 2022, members of the Somali, Eritrean and Burundian refugee communities who had been reached through these activities established their own national committees.

Based on its successful experience of collaboration with refugee committees, the government of the Brussels Capital Region (RBC) sought the advice of UNHCR on how to explore ways to integrate Ukrainian refugees directly into the governmental response as full participants and not only as aid recipients. As a result, UNHCR and U-RC

supported the government in finding solutions to the refugee reception crisis. They also supported Ukrainian refugees in establishing their own Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee (UV-RC) to facilitate consultations, internal data collection and the channelling of financial assistance for their activities.

¹⁵ Nevertheless, other refugee committees have also built key partnerships on their own, including at governmental and non-governmental level.

¹⁶ As result of this initial meeting, refugee committees supported local authorities' COVID-19 prevention initiatives. This collaboration included outreach to refugee communities to provide information on health authorities' vaccination campaigns and conducting surveys with target refugee groups to understand the main reasons behind resistance to vaccination.

In May 2022, the RBC government adopted a decree containing a comprehensive policy aiming at the local integration of Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection (BPT). This policy designated UV-RC and U-RC as the official administrators of seven collective shelters assigned to them by the government and allocated UV-RC a community centre where refugees could meet, study, and participate in informational and recreational activities. It also created a task force of seven working groups headed by high-ranking officials at cabinet level for each sector of the response.¹⁷

Moreover, facilitated by UNHCR, the government recruited seven Ukrainian representatives from the refugee community (also members of UV-RC) to act as Special Persons of Contact (SPOC) between the communities and the task force. It did this by conducting rapid assessment needs and involving the community in the design and implementation of solutions discussed in each sector. As part of the process, UNHCR and refugee SPOCs attended weekly meetings with the Ministers or Cabinet Officials heading each response sector to assess results versus objectives, convey challenges

reported by refugees and discuss options to overcome them; remarkably, the president of U-RC has been invited to join these meetings by the task force.

Although the government's strategy and funding are being directed primarily at the Ukrainian Committee, U-RC and UV-RC have joined efforts to promote further participation and integration of refugees of other nationalities. This has been gradually achieved by conducting joint activities such as producing and presenting a GRF position paper to the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) with concrete proposals on how the government could improve the protection environment for refugees, both at reception and integration levels. Other collaborative activities have included: co-facilitation of awareness-raising and information sessions; joint management of a collective shelter housing refugees from other nationalities; access for all refugee committees' members to the community centre's activities coordinated by UV-RC; and the promotion of internal dialogue among refugee groups in order to bring unified voices and stances to conversations with state authorities under the U-RC framework.



Kelly Clements, UNHCR's Deputy High Commissioner, and Elizabeth Tan, Director of UNHCR's Division of International Protection, share a dialogue space with refugees in Brussels. ©UNHCR/Frederik Bordon

¹⁷ These sectors include: housing; shelter; employment and languages; education; health; and social protection and protection of groups at heightened risk.

Achievements, results and impact

Self-organization and meaningful participation of refugees

Since its launch in 2019, UNHCR Belgium has supported 10 refugee-run committees representing 7 national communities (Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Burundi, Eritrea, Somalia and Ukraine), LGBTIQ+ persons and refugee women. Additionally, the Umbrella Refugee Committee provides a forum to express a unified voice for refugees across nationalities, cultural diversities and AGD characteristics. Through participatory processes, refugee committees have consolidated their internal governance and operative structures. The committees have also received logistical and financial support from UNHCR to organize outreach activities and workshops on strengthening organizational and fundraising capacities for self-sufficiency, with five committees registering as non-profit entities in 2022.

Consultations and data collection

Refugee committees regularly support the organization of focus groups, discussions and thematic surveys concerning the refugees' needs and priorities. Thus, the committees are increasingly recognized as an important source of data about the broader refugee community in Belgium. Local governments increasingly turn to these committees to obtain information about the refugee population to help them improve the services they provide.

Direct provision of assistance and services

A distinctive component of this process is that refugee communities are directly taking part in the protection and integration response in Belgium. As a result of UNHCR efforts to strengthen their self-organization and outreach efforts, the refugee committees have acquired more expertise and autonomy to collectively address the priorities of both refugees and

integration stakeholders in the country. This is reflected, among others, in the services rendered by refugee mobile teams supporting refugees at heightened protection risk with timely information and referrals towards first-line health-care and social service providers. Most notably, given the favourable legal and institutional framework in Belgium, some committees have also received public funding and assumed responsibility over the management of 7 collective shelters (able to house 650 refugees per day) and 1 community centre currently offering refugees 35 activities, with an average of 250 visitors per day.

Community engagement

Refugee committees have been successful in mobilizing and empowering communities to collectively address barriers to effective integration. Since committee members are part of the same communities they serve, they have a better understanding of the issues at stake for newly arrived refugees as well as those who have stayed in the country longer and are trusted by the communities they represent. They also represent an important base of social and emotional support for forcibly displaced individuals who cannot communicate in the officially spoken languages, have special medical conditions, have been exposed to high levels of trauma, inter alia, and need advice and comfort from people with whom they have common ties. All of this reinforces refugees' willingness to collectively reach out to other members of their communities and seek solutions to address common concerns.

Shaping policy and planning in partnership with the government

Through the refugee committees, refugees can influence decisions on reception arrangements and integration initiatives at both municipal and regional levels of government. Regular exchanges on specific challenges to integration and possible solutions have earned the committees the trust

and recognition of municipal actors. In fact, refugee committee members are in direct contact with key counterparts in government agencies and can convey to them the problems reported by refugees. Moreover, they have been able to jointly solve situations on an ad hoc basis, setting precedents for gradually removing administrative and operational barriers preventing refugees from effectively accessing public housing and social services.

As part of this process, UNHCR and U-RC have also positioned themselves as main interlocutors on refugee issues vis-à-vis the government and humanitarian actors. This prompted the Government of the Brussels Region to create a model in which refugees are directly involved in designing and implementing its response to the Ukrainian emergency, in collaboration with UNHCR. As a central result, since mid-June 2022 seven refugee SPOCs have received government civil servant contracts and are working on

a daily basis with high-ranking decision makers at cabinet level on planning and analysis of implementation of integration goals by sector. The weekly participation of UNHCR and U-RC in Ukrainian integration task force coordination meetings with cabinet members contributes to ensuring that other refugee communities are represented in discussions and that access to rights and benefits is mainstreamed to the wider refugee population.

By working closely with refugee SPOCs as liaison officers and the refugee committees as their operational arm, the Brussels Region Capital has been better able to identify refugee integration needs and obstacles and put in place rapid, effective and flexible solutions that are co-designed and tested by refugees. As policymakers experience first-hand the benefits of talking directly to refugees about issues of common concern, the model sets a precedent for continuous engagement of the government.

In 2023, Belgium authorities faced challenges in coping with the steep volume of refugees applying for shelter, resulting in the political and humanitarian impact of rising numbers of asylum-seekers on the streets. On two occasions, the regional government sought the help of UV-RC and U-RC to quickly resolve specific out-of-shelter situations. The successful and discreet resolution of these episodes has given the community-based protection approach credibility with the government.

Expansion of protection space in Belgium

The Refugee Committees initiative is a cost-effective intervention by UNHCR in the context of budget constraints. It provided the small protection team of UNHCR Belgium with direct access to relevant information and data on integration and protection realities in Belgium. It also provided UNHCR with additional capacity to monitor refugee communities and the Belgian administration response plans simultaneously in real time. Furthermore, the increased interaction of UNHCR with government authorities dealing with integration and reception matters has brought additional opportunities to discuss refugee issues in a collaborative manner.



Ahmad, a former refugee from Afghanistan and president of the Umbrella Refugee Committee, standing in front of the European Parliament. ©UNHCR/Nina Daelemans

Lessons



ENABLING FACTORS

- 💡 The Belgian institutional system permits civil society actors, including refugee committees, to actively participate in the development of public policy.
- 💡 Leaders/managers of refugee committees are part of the communities that they represent and serve. Because of this, communities trust them to facilitate connections with integration stakeholders at governmental and non-governmental levels.
- 💡 The committees are playing an increasingly important role in collecting data on refugees and the impact of public policies and practices on refugee communities.
- 💡 Refugee committees have established themselves as non-partisan actors and their contributions make it possible to focus on technical discussions about integration issues in a neutral manner, in an increasingly politicized environment.
- 💡 The need for quick and effective responses to address emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass influx of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine, brought unique opportunities for refugee committees to engage directly in the humanitarian response and advise local authorities on how to improve the delivery of assistance and public services to refugees.
- 💡 The composition of the refugee committees varies in terms of the AGD characteristics of their members. This strengthens the quality and reach of the discussions and data collection processes, as different perspectives and capacities are captured.
- 💡 The academic and professional background of refugee committee members is diverse, bringing expertise in a variety of fields, notably including languages, information management and social work. The process has capitalized on existing capacities by promoting the transfer of knowledge and skills among community members.
- 💡 Adjusting the working hours of UNHCR staff to accommodate the availability of refugees and volunteers facilitated the continued engagement of UNHCR with these committees.
- 💡 Daily consultations and coordination of activities between refugee committees and UNHCR have enabled the operation to better understand their needs and determine how to support them.



ADVERSE FACTORS AND CONSTRAINTS

- The process for obtaining non-profit association status in Belgium is lengthy and complex. It is therefore generally difficult for refugee-led organizations to complete all of the steps and formalities without financial assistance and external legal counsel.
- Refugee committees that have acquired legal status continue to face fundraising and sustainability challenges. Contributions are generally restricted to operational expenses, excluding wages. This has direct implications for the working conditions and administrative structures of the committees, as most cannot afford to pay stipends for volunteers and community facilitators. The reliance of some committees on unpaid voluntary work from committee members who have other work commitments makes it difficult for them to address pending requests and discharge their duties.
- Changes in the membership of refugee committees pose challenges to the continuity of the self-organization process, with some members leaving and others joining, particularly during the first year of implementation of the project. This suggests the need to ensure a short handover period during which exiting and incoming members can work together to ensure optimum knowledge transfer and the continuity of ongoing activities.
- Internal divisions among some national refugee groups with different political, cultural and religious backgrounds made achieving consensus in committees more challenging.

➤ Tips for replication and scaling up

- ✓ Refugee committees should be explicitly included in UNHCR multi-year protection and solutions strategies so that funds and staffing can be appropriately allocated.
- ✓ Ensure that UNHCR personnel devote sufficient time to supporting the committees and have the necessary skills and significant experience in working with communities at field level.
- ✓ Building refugee committees' self-reliance entails a long-term vision of the process. Emerging committees will require time and support to strengthen organizational and fundraising capacities and set priorities and action plans, including for advocacy and networking.
- ✓ Develop training on public speaking and advocacy as part of the capacity-building programme for refugee committees. This will enable refugee leaders to engage more effectively with political actors through constructive discourse.
- ✓ It is advisable for UNHCR to schedule resources for the salaries of refugee committee managers (or focal points overseeing daily operations) until the committees become more self-sufficient. This type of support would enable a more sustainable project launch, as refugee managers would be able to dedicate more time to implementing activities.

- ✓ Encourage committee members (e.g. team leaders, committee managers, etc.) to devise a process whereby a proper handover process is completed by members leaving the committees as a means of promoting the retention of skills and knowledge.
- ✓ Set internal parameters to establish when and how UNHCR should transition to other forms of collaboration with the refugee committees. Discuss an exit strategy with the committees while continuing to support them in finding complementary means of achieving self-sufficiency.

Next steps

UNHCR will continue supporting refugee committees in becoming financially and operationally self-reliant. UNHCR will promote greater engagement with potential donors and collaborators and continue to support training on financial sustainability. Based on successful collaboration between refugee committees and regional ministers and authorities responsible for integration, the next steps include directing

efforts towards replicating this model at federal level. As part of the preparation for the [2023 Global Refugee Forum](#), U-RC advocated, inter alia, for the State to increase the overall budget for refugee integration and to create more funding and participation opportunities for refugee-led organizations in day-to-day operations concerning refugees and asylum-seekers.

For more information please contact:

Division of International Protection
Community-Based Protection Unit
hqts00@unhcr.org

Regional Bureau for Europe

UNHCR Belgium
Belbr@unhcr.org

