

HOW CAN WE HELP VOLUNTEERS HELP REFUGEES BETTER?

A toolkit for NGOs

SOLIDARITY
HERE AND NOW

Mass migration has become one of the biggest challenges for the European continent in recent years. More than a million asylum seekers arrived to Europe in 2015, which caused a political and humanitarian crisis. In 2017 this number has declined, but the challenge is still present. The influx of people has changed our societies: it has contributed to the rise of far-right moods, while at the same time has motivated many citizens to go out to the streets to help newcomers in acts of solidarity.

‘Solidarity here and now’ is a long-term project that aims to bring together volunteers and volunteers’ coordinators engaged in work with refugees across the European continent to share their experiences, discuss common problems and learn from each other. The pilot edition of the project took place 24-29th November in Gdansk, Poland. This publication is a result of the interviews with volunteers from Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Russia, Serbia, and Spain who took part in the project. The project has been organized by the Allianz Cultural Foundation and the European Solidarity Centre.

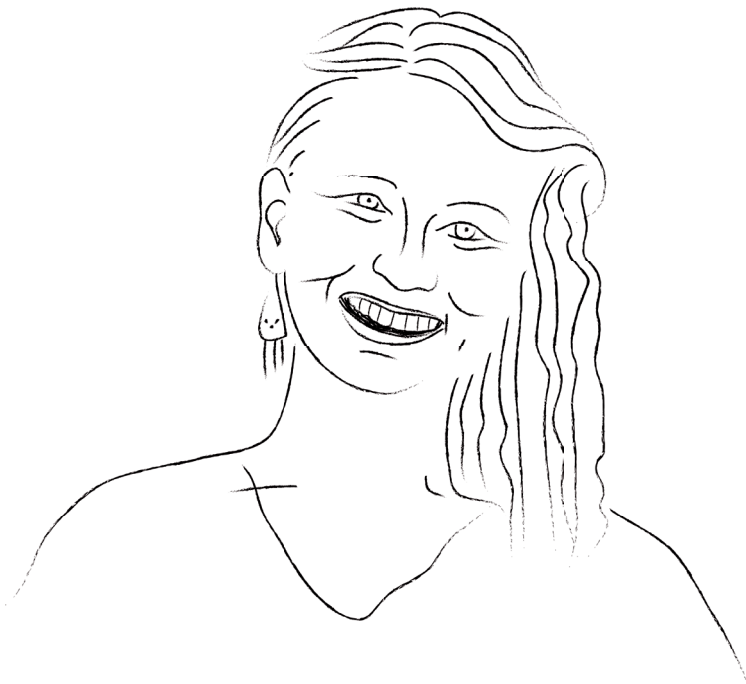
The aim of this publication is to highlight the motivations, problems and needs that the volunteers have while working with refugees. This publication is addressed to non-governmental organizations and cultural institutions that already support or want to support volunteers in the important work they are doing.

The text is structured to answer the questions that were repeatedly popping up in the interviews. Each answer is a series of quotes, opinions and experiences of the participants of the project. These answers do not pretend to be the right ones, but they can serve as a guideline for a better understanding of voluntarily work.

“The work that volunteers are doing is the key to integration,” stressed **Eli Wael**, originally from Syria, who himself arrived to Europe as a refugee and then became a volunteer coordinator at **Give Something Back to Berlin**. The success of the integration process depends to a large extent on the quality of the volunteer work, the support that volunteers get from the organizations at which they are working as well as from society as a whole. So how can we help the volunteers to help refugees better?

WHY DO WE NEED TO LEAVE OUR ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND WHEN WORKING WITH REFUGEES?

Most people are driven by good intentions when they come to voluntarily help newcomers. They have heard about the problem on the news, seen images in the newspapers and may have already formed their own set of ideas of what a refugee looks like, what he or she needs and how to help. Often these expectations are harmful as they set up a power balance from the very beginning that makes it impossible to “treat refugees as human beings,” explains **Hania Hakiel**, psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at **Give Something Back to Berlin**.



Before you come to a camp, leave your ideas and expectations aside. People usually expect to see a lot of suffering, sadness and depression; they expect children to wear old clothes. They believe they know where the people come from, they have a ready image of a refugee but already this sets power balance and doesn't allow you to meet a person as a person before you meet a person as a refugee.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

In her experience some volunteers are there expecting to hear stories about crossing the ocean in a boat or experiencing war. Hania calls this ‘trauma voyeurism’ and tries to detect it straight away.

By digging these stories they can make a lot of harm to people who may be not ready yet to talk about it. Or maybe volunteers don't have tools to deal with emotions, memories or flash backs.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

Some volunteers come with their own ideas of how to help, based on previous knowledge and experience. However, one needs to be ready to leave their ideas behind and listen carefully to the needs of those with whom they are encountering. This happened to **Maggie Simon**, an American living in Berlin, who initially had the idea to do creative arts with refugee teenagers but ended up facilitating cooking classes.

We often come with our bag full of supplies – for me it was art supplies – wanting to use them as tools to help. But sometimes the tools that we have naturally are all that is needed: just a conversation, just being present as a person is enough.

Maggie Simon, a cooking class facilitator, USA/Germany



Sometimes the idea of helping others and the reality of how this turns out doesn't correspond. For example, those people who imagine saving the world but end up doing bureaucratic work may become frustrated and give up entirely. Thus, when working with new volunteers, it is important to take their expectations of volunteering into account.

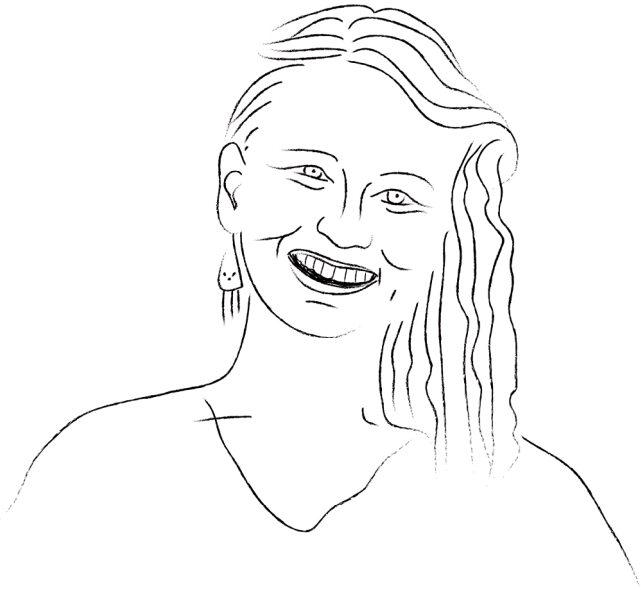


The word 'volunteering' is idealized by many people. They are charmed by the idea of volunteering, but the reality is not so ideal and many people don't like to face it.

Aya Mambetalieva, a volunteer at the center for refugee and migrant children Kids are Kids, Russia

WHY SHOULD WE DO MORE THAN 'HELP'?

People help each other in their daily lives: parents support their children, classmates share notes with each other during exams, friends are there for each other in difficult situations, people on the street give a hand to a stranger when he or she falls down. Is helping a refugee different than other forms of helping?



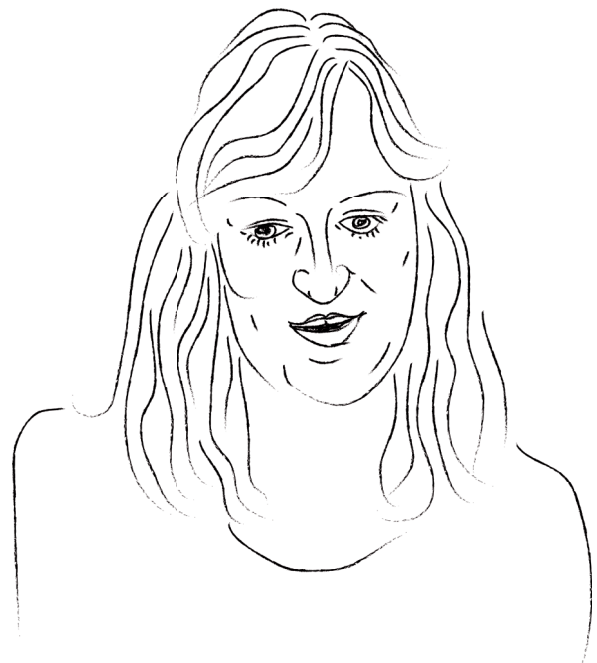
A lot of helping is understood as giving. This creates the wrong impression: people arrive to Europe and experience it as a place where things are chaotically given to you, while what is expected in return is not clear. I see many newcomers being lost, we forget that every gesture of giving is leaving an imprint. We should ask ourselves what kind of symbolic messages on life in Europe our gestures send.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

Helping is much more than giving or doing things for someone. Helping is also about explaining and teaching, making connections and making people feel comfortable. Empowering is the tool that really helps, says **Linda Massino**, a volunteer coordinator from Internationaler Bund, working at the first container village in Berlin.

Sometimes volunteers come around and they want to do everything for the refugee, but this is not useful. Of course if they don't have high language skills they do need assistance, but all in all they have to learn to do it on their own. If we are doing everything for them they will not be able to deal self-determined with any upcoming situation in their own flat and they will always need support.

Linda Massino, a volunteer coordinator, Germany



One-time help is not enough, building lasting relationships is what makes a difference, says **Eli Wael** based on his own experience as a refugee:

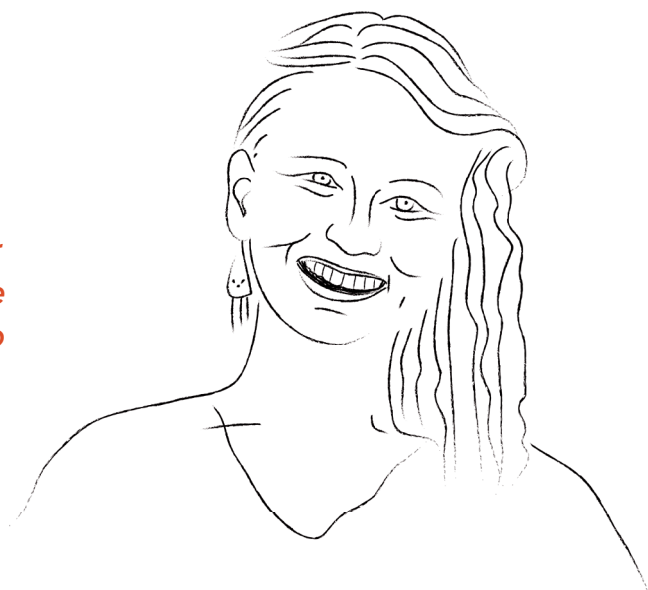


If you come into their lives for a couple of weeks and then disappear you create more damage than help, because they have so many variables in their lives, including the place they live in. It damaged me really badly. It makes you feel you are still travelling, you haven't arrived yet. It was very hard. The most important thing in their lives is stability, if you add more instability, you are not helping.

**Eli Wael, a volunteer coordinator,
Syria/Germany**

Long-time involvement is not something everyone can give. Instead of planning a workshop for two days with refugees, one can put efforts in providing additional training to the volunteers who are already helping refugees on the daily basis, advises **Hania Hakiel**.

It is not the most advisable to come for a few days, build relationships with people and go. People in refugee camps experience enough instability, randomness, trust does not come easily. What I would advise, if you want to help, but you can't commit regularly, is to either get involved in the backstage doing some humble physical jobs or offer your skills to support volunteers. By empowering them with your art, yoga, stress management, theater, and so on, workshop, you help them become stronger and better equipped in empowering refugees on long term, stable basis.



**Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for
volunteer training and mentoring at the Give
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WHAT SKILLS DO VOLUNTEERS NEED TO HELP REFUGEES MORE EFFECTIVELY?

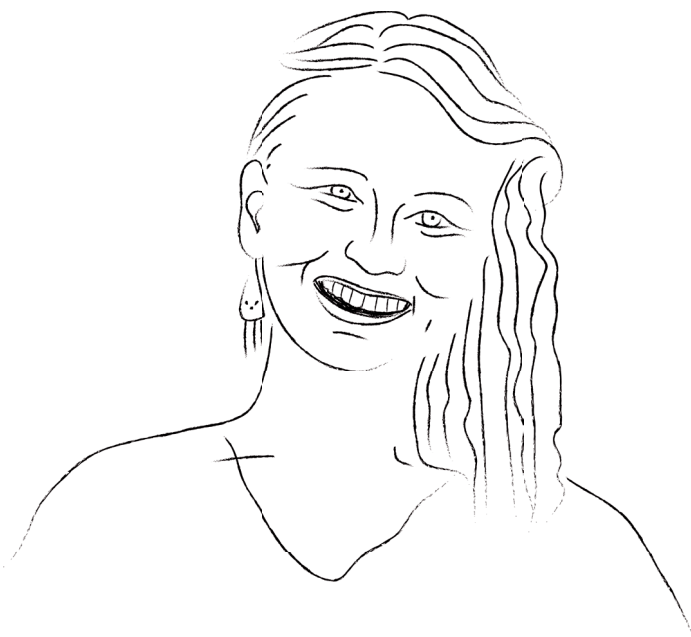
Volunteers are mainly just people who are kind and want to help. They don't necessarily have cultural knowledge or deep understanding of psychology, says **Valeria Pavlova**, who coordinates volunteers at **Kids for Kids**, Russia. She thinks organizations should provide such training to ensure volunteers are well equipped, preventing any possible harm.

A volunteer who works with refugees should be at least a little bit 'in the topic.' It is not enough to know the language to translate something to a refugee, you need to know what this all is about.

Evgeny Yastrebov, a volunteer at **Civic Assistance**, Russia



Intercultural communication skills and knowledge about cultural differences are very important for the volunteers, says **Hania Hakiel**, as well as basic understanding about Islam.



Sometimes people see all the refugees as Arabs, they don't distinguish between people from Syria and from Afghanistan, this is a basic mistake, but people still do it. We try to have ongoing training on culture, intercultural communication, etc. The problem with volunteer work is that you can't do these lectures every week. And what is more, every week there are new people who want to join our team.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

But above all knowledge, the most important quality for a volunteer to have is openness, says **Eli Wael**.

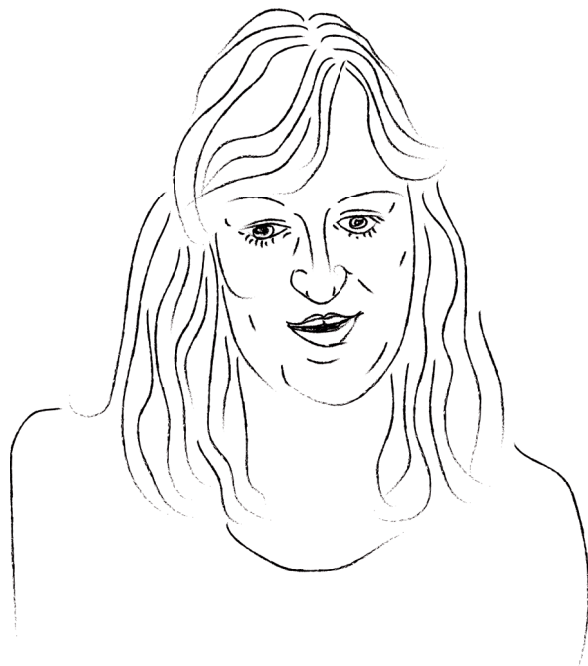


For a volunteer all you need is openness to receive and understand their system of values. For instance, in eastern culture tea is very important: invite someone for tea is to show an interest in a person. It is the way the society in Syria supports each other. That is a support we need right now, rather than an action. A hug would do much more rather than going with them everywhere they need to go for two days.

**Eli Wael, a volunteer coordinator,
Syria/Germany**

Careful consideration of one's actions and an awareness of the experiences refugees might have gone through is what a volunteer always should have, says **Linda Massino**.

You should also be really careful as it is all depending on the person. The idea of going kayaking with refugees can be good, but it can be harmful as well, because they might have come by boat across the water. This might have been one of the experiences they made during their escape to Germany.



**Linda Massino, a volunteer coordinator,
Germany**

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DO VOLUNTEERS NEED?

To work effectively, volunteers need a system, and even better, a specific person with whom they can turn to when they have questions. The reality is very different depending on the country within which you are working. In Berlin, most of the residences for refugees have volunteer coordinators. **Linda Massino** is one of them. “When no one is taking care of the volunteers they might experience difficulties, even traumatization,” she says, emphasizes the importance of coordination. In countries such as Russia, there is a lack of coordination for the volunteers. **Evgeny Yastrebov** says that his organization is now developing a system for the volunteers, to make their work more structured.

One of the main needs of the volunteers stressed by several participants of the project is constant psychological support.



When you start volunteering you face different emotions, clash between their expectations and reality. It would be great to have a psychologist who could help at this moment realize what is going on. Explaining, consulting, psychological trainings are very important because we work with people.

Aya Mambetalieva, a volunteer at the center for refugee and migrant children Kids are Kids, Russia

Working with refugees is very emotional, even for me as a non-emotional person. Sometimes you don't know how to cope with it. Here, [at Solidarity here and now] I was taught how to accept my emotions. It is great to have an opportunity to talk about it and to learn some practical tricks for everyday work.

Evgeny Yastrebov, a volunteer, Russia

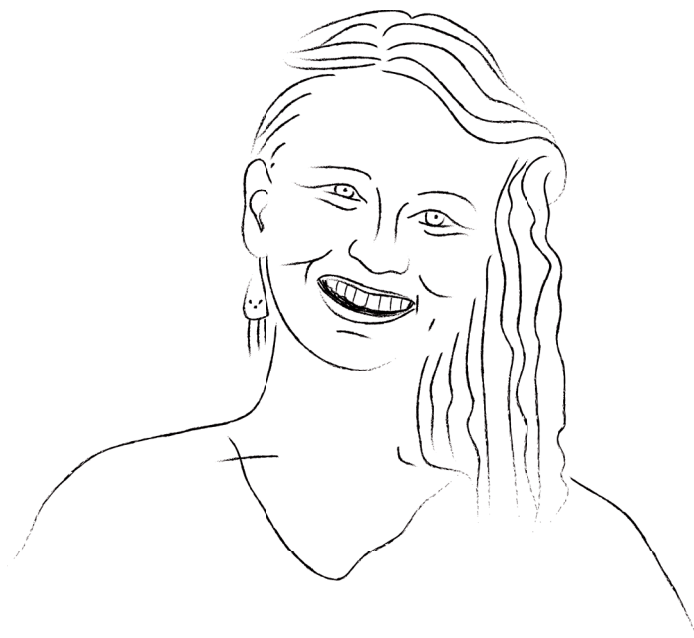


Care goes both ways, If you can't care for yourself, how can you care for someone else?

Maggie Simon, a cooking class facilitator, USA/Germany



Hania Hakiel is a psychologist and part of her job is to educate volunteers about their emotions and how to cope with them.



Volunteers experience a lot of emotions in their work and very often their own personal stories are being triggered because this is a very vulnerable environment. A lot of training happens in an ongoing intervention – we meet one per two weeks and have sharing circle. This is the best moment to bring knowledge because it is based on their experiences – it is lecture on the go.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

WHAT DO THE VOLUNTEERS GET OUT OF VOLUNTEERING?

People volunteer for different reasons, but there is always some sort of non-material compensation that makes it work in the end. Some help other people because of their religious beliefs or similar experiences they have had in their lives. **Dragan Stanojlovic**, a volunteer from Serbia vividly remembers bombing in Belgrade in 1999 and how it feels “to be without everything.” Shortly after this experience he found religion and now his faith moves him “to be a better person and to want to help others.”

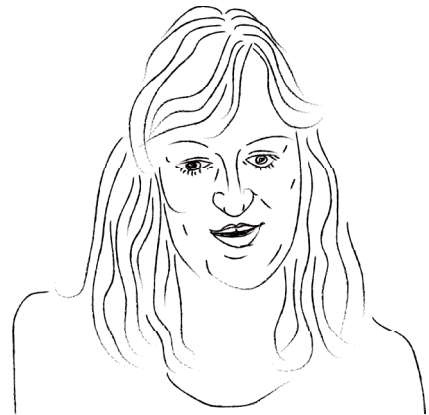
Manuel Epifaneo Márquez from the Evangelic Church of Spain is preparing to receive the first refugees in the residence in El Escorial near Madrid. Already retired, he has taken this “opportunity to have a new mission, as a Christian that loves his neighbor.”

For others, volunteering is an opportunity to gain work experience in a field. **Evgeny Yastrebov** studied International Development and Economics at the University of Eastern England. Back in his home country of Russia, he has been a volunteer for Civic Assistance for more than 8 months. “I came there just for experience but after a while I understood that without this work it would be so hard for refugees.” Evgeny stayed as he saw a real need in his work and after eight months, he was hired by the organization.

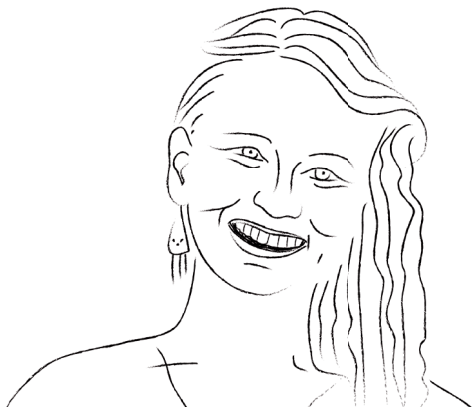
Even though volunteers do not expect receiving any remuneration, it is important to give them something back in return, stresses **Linda Massino**.

We e.g. organized a BBQ for volunteers and invited them to the celebrations at the residence. Such things are important, as volunteers are coping with issues which aren't taken care of by the public government.

Linda Massino, a volunteer coordinator, Germany



In their work, volunteers come to learn about different cultures and religions and gain an understanding of intercultural communication, body language and psychology. These skills can be useful outside the context of working with refugees



I can see volunteers applying this knowledge to understand themselves better. A lot of volunteers told me that they have never spoken so openly about the emotions.

Hania Hakiel, a psychologist responsible for volunteer training and mentoring at the **Give Something Back to Berlin**.

HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION BE USEFUL?

The refugee crisis is an international problem and it requires an international solution. While EU discusses quotas for refugees for specific countries, NGOs and volunteers can cooperate on a 'supranational' level to help refugees arrive and integrate.

The first important issue is the exchange of information. **Dragan Stanojlovic**, who helps refugees that are on their way through Serbia to the EU wishes his group had more contact and exchange with organizations in other countries. He would like to be able to share this information with refugees.

For example I have friends in Macedonia and they gave my contacts to a family who later came to Belgrade and when they arrive they contacted me – then I was with them, talked with them, helped them. Then they moved forward and I called other friend in the other city. And that is how we can make a little bit easier for them travelling to Europe.

Dragan Stanojlovic, a volunteer, Serbia



Difficulties volunteers face are to a large extent similar in different countries. By sharing experiences, discussing problems and exchanging solutions, volunteers from various countries learn from each other and improve their day-to-day work.



We know from the media that Germany does a lot to integrate refugees, but I knew nothing about Serbia, Czech Republic or Poland. It turns out there are a lot more organization, and many work in similar conditions without any governmental support. It is very useful to learn from those people and their experiences from practical point of view. It is easy to talk in theory, but there are many problems in practice.

Valeria Pavlova, a volunteer, Russia

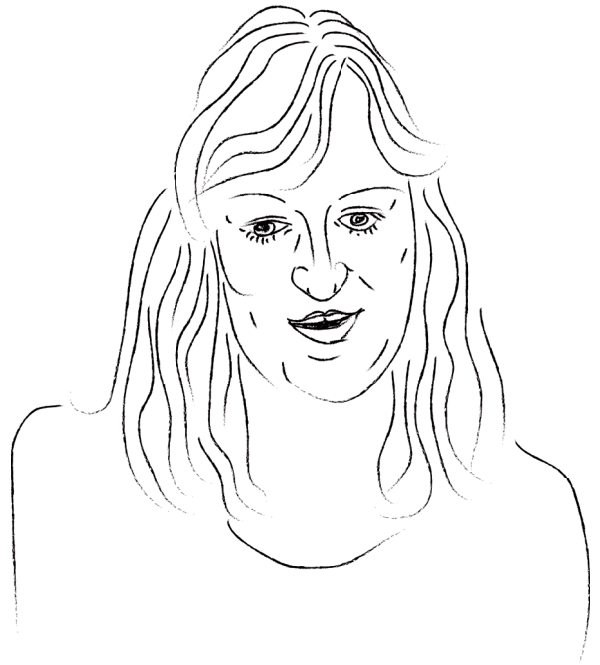


The experience of how to organize work with volunteers is also very valuable for those who just start. My organization is planning to create a system for volunteers based in exchange of international experience. Learning from best practices from abroad is useful.

Evgeny Yastrebov, a volunteer, Russia

Meeting other volunteers can be a big inspiration to continue as you experience that others might struggle sometimes as well.

Linda Massino, a volunteer coordinator, Germany



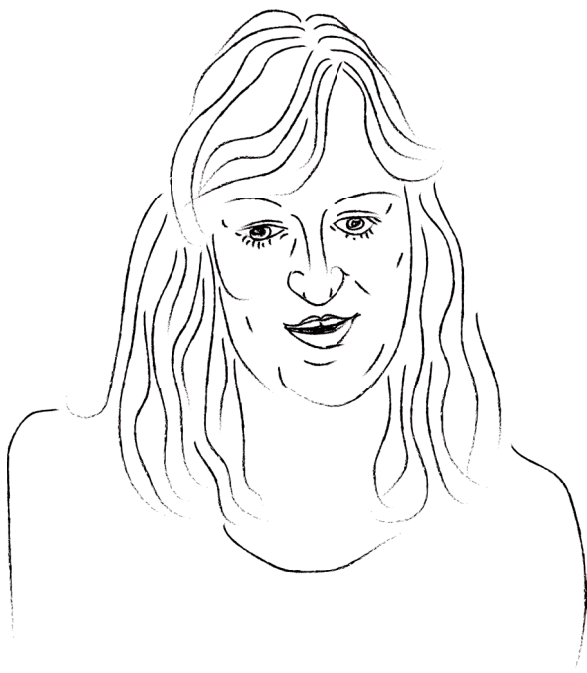
It helps you to get out of your bubble and find out how it functions in another setting so you can continually enrich your own project.

Maggie Simon, a cooking class facilitator, USA/Germany



WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

The influx of refugees to Europe is often framed as refugee 'crisis.' At the same time this 'crisis' has a great potential. New people that come are changing our societies and this change can be seen positively as well. For example, refugees have changed the lives of the volunteers – have given them a chance to help, learn and develop themselves. For the whole continent it has been a chance to rethink its politics and its ideals of human rights. It is also a lesson to learn and a chance to get ready for the future, when migration will be even more widespread.



I think more people are expected to come from Africa in the near future. So now we are trying to make the right conclusions about the migration that took place in the last 3 years.

Due to the climate change and already existing and upcoming conflicts there will be more people coming and we will always have to learn and to reflect on our work. I think empowerment of former refugees will be important – for those who are already here and for those who are still about to come.

In addition we have to learn how to improve the integration of women and the implementation of offers for bigger families. New concepts of living are needed, to ensure that refugees can move into a flat any time soon and have a buddy to get in touch with in the area. Finally what is really important is that refugees aren't segregated in specific areas. The integration of all groups of refugees could also benefit from this integrative concept of using former refugees as well as local buddies and create innovative concepts of living.

Linda Massino, a volunteer coordinator, Germany

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