

## Behind the numbers: the role of NGOs in the refugee crisis

by **Jessica Rush**, Oxford graduate and legal intern at **ACAA**



Source: *BBC News*

With the demolition of the Calais Jungle happening this week, the precarious situation of those that seek refuge in Europe is once again highlighted in the news. The numbers give a sense of the scale of the problem: there are around 7,000 who were officially estimated as living in the squalor of the camp, though NGOs have estimated the number was actually closer to 10,000. This includes 1,300 refugee children, many of whom had a right to come to the UK to be reunified with family. Beyond Calais, the UN has estimated that there are 65 million displaced people in the world as of 2016 – the highest number on record.

Behind the numbers, however, are the individual stories that range from the harrowing to the inspirational. Each migrant has a story of physical hardship, emotional terror, and desperate actions. Most have left conflict zones where to stay in the place they once called home would be to risk their lives. The journeys they take over land and sea can be arduous and potentially fatal. Once they have reached the relative safety of Europe, however, there are still significant obstacles to be surmounted. If a migrant (that is, any person who has left their home to settle somewhere else) has a claim for asylum, they become an asylum seeker. Those that are successful in their asylum application become officially recognised refugees. These asylum seekers and refugees face the unenviable challenge of building homes and lives from nothing.

The role of NGOs has become increasingly important, especially in providing services for those who have reached Europe. Without charities collecting and distributing supplies and warm clothing in the Jungle, for instance, a great many people would have frozen to death each winter. Their role does not stop at the check points across the channel, either. There is a myriad of issues an asylum seeker faces once they arrive in the UK, and while governmental services can offer much, there are significant gaps in the help they can give.

One NGO operating in London is the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association. From its offices in Deptford, it provides a range of services aimed at integrating and assisting migrants that come into the UK. Its focus is Afghan and Central Asian refugees, but all migrants looking to build a life in the UK are welcome to make use of its services. The charity's importance comes from providing services that go above and beyond what is provided by the public purse – helping those who come to the UK build a livelihood after the government has granted them a place to live.

The most significant service the ACAA provides is the supplementary school and ESOL English lessons, which are available free of charge to those seeking to integrate into British society. Each weekend, parents can drop their children off at the supplementary school – which liaises with the

children's teachers in their mainstream school – so that the children can learn English and maths, as well as lessons in their native languages. Meanwhile, the parents can take free English lessons while they wait. These educational services have the potential to change the fortunes of asylum seekers and refugees; the story of Rahim is one of many. Rahim was a 16 year old Afghan refugee who came to the UK after fleeing the conflict. With his mother, Leila, and older brother he got in contact with the ACAA and his mother took ESOL courses in order to learn English.



Source: ACAA website

The point of the supplementary school and language classes is to give migrants the tools to rebuild their lives in the UK and remove barriers to their integration. The charity firmly believes that the empowerment of women – particularly mothers – is key to settling families into the UK. The Women's Group that the charity runs provides a safe space for women to meet, discuss the problems in their lives and benefit from classes and informational talks. Leila joined this group, using it as a place to express her concerns and make connections in her new home. Her involvement with the group led her son Rahim to get involved with the mentor program, where he worked with a Farsi speaking mentor in order to look into college courses he could take. Eventually, he gained a place on Lewisham College's construction course. The mentor then assisted Rahim in claiming financial assistance from the college in order to make his attendance a feasible prospect.

Access to justice and awareness of UK procedures is also vital for integration. On an informal level, mentoring services are useful for the newly-arrived. A mentor can help a migrant with a variety of things. Building a CV, understanding the training systems in the UK and polishing interview techniques can help someone to gain employment. A friendly person to explain how the British school system works can help both parents and students get to grips with their education. Advice on what benefits can be claimed and how to go about getting housing can be invaluable. Help to fill out forms and make applications can mean the difference between floundering and making a start on a productive new life. The ACAA helped Rahim in this respect too. Despite claiming financial assistance from the college, the family still struggled, so Rahim attended a drop-in clinic to create a CV with a volunteer's help. He managed to secure a part-time job within the week.

For more specialist issues, legal help can be provided. The ACAA puts individual cases forward to pro bono organisations, and regularly runs a drop-in legal clinic. It is a place for members of the community to ask their questions about asylum, immigration, family issues and benefit entitlement. Migrants can come into contact with many branches of British administration: the police, the courts, the Homes Office, Social Services and educational authorities. All can be overwhelming to those with limited language skills who may be unfamiliar with the mechanisms of complicated bureaucracy.

However, the real advantage a small, locally run NGO has over government services is in its grassroots nature. Many of the staff are bilingual, and can communicate with migrants without the barrier of a translator. The ACAA has been chosen by the Home Office to run Prevent counter-radicalisation services, as the charity is able to directly address the problems of isolation and alienation that so often the root cause of radicalisation in communities. Being trusted and approachable encourages those who are suspicious of the authorities to come forward and get help from the ACAA. Irregular immigrants who wish to claim asylum may be wary of the

authorities, so an organisation that actively welcomes them can be their first point of contact before making an application. NGOs are vital to humanitarian efforts in this time of crisis, because they can show empathy and cultural understanding that public services often cannot. Legal rights and social security are a step towards integration. However, it is services like those provided by the ACAA that actually help new arrivals build a new life.

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*More information about the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association can be found [here](#).*

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