

Volunteering in asylum reception centers

Summary and recommendations



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Summary and recommendations

NGOs in the voluntary sector contribute significantly to the lives of residents in asylum reception centers. A vast array of activities for adults and children are offered, ranging from cultural events to sports and educational courses. These are valuable and alleviating activities for the residents whose life situation is oftentimes challenging and filled with uncertainties. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) has an overarching responsibility for the asylum reception centers and consequently strives to facilitate positive, safe and secure activities for the residents of these centers.

Oxford Research, contracted by the UDI, has examined how voluntary work functions in the reception centers. The report also takes a close look at the utility of formal agreements between the directorate and some of the larger civil society actors. Based on our findings, the report offers input and recommendations to how the UDI can facilitate NGOs' provision of activities to residents in asylum reception centers. In this summary we initially go through our main impressions and empirical findings in relation to the research questions for the assignment.

1.1 To what extent does volunteering by civil society contribute to residents' being active and interacting with local society?

NGOs create a considerable volume of activities for residents in reception centers. Culture and sports are the predominant activity types. Approximately three quarters of the activities take place in localities outside the premises of the reception centers themselves. There are indications that some types of activities are more appreciated than others. These are characterized by first, helping residents to socially connect with local host population, and second, being regular fixtures that give a certain structure to everyday life. Moreover, it is important that the activities have a low threshold for participation. The extent of participation in activities depends on a solid groundwork and cooperation on the part of NGO volunteers and staff in the reception centers.

Several factors can impact the volume of activities. Some of these are structural in nature and cannot be altered by the UDI, an example of which is geography and characteristics of the centers' localities. Reception centers located in or close to urban centers often have wider options in terms of activities, and it may be easier for residents to access them.

Funding is another important factor. The report finds that accessible funds and NGOs activities are closely related. Moreover, volunteers are both scarce and volatile resources that are challenging for NGOs to administer and utilize. Predictability and long-term perspectives are important building blocks for stimulating solid NGO contributions within safe and secure environments. Volunteers need time and experience to properly understand their role and responsibilities when interacting with residents who may be in a vulnerable and uncertain life situation. It is also time consuming to build up trust between NGOs, reception centers and the residents themselves. Large scale changes, such as the dismantling of a reception center in a

locality, moving residents, and loss of funding are highly disruptive events that impact NGO actors in the voluntary sector and consequently the activities that are offered residents.

The residents themselves play key roles in many reception centers. Resourceful individuals and resident councils can play a major role in boosting the participation in planned activities. In some centers the resident council are found to be malfunctioning or barely active whereas in other places they are highly adept. Well-functioning resident councils are characterized by having some degree of influence and decision-making power, a meaningful budget, and involvement in the processes and circumstances that affect everyday life at the reception centers. Center staff's active recruitment of resourceful individuals to these councils, delegation of responsibilities to them as well as guidance in acting as representatives for other residents, appear to be key elements that make up a sound resident involvement.

1.2 How have the formal agreements functioned?

Formal agreements between the UDI and ten of the largest NGOs address important issues. The purpose of these agreements is to regulate the cooperation with the civil society and humanitarian organizations, improve coordination and stimulate increased volume of activities offered to residents at reception centers. Additionally, the agreements should contribute to quality control of volunteers that gain access to reception centers.

Examining this question shows that the agreements were highly relevant in 2015 following the migrant- and refugee crisis. They also had positive impact in terms of easing the NGOs access to reception centers – especially in 2016 and 2017. To some extent the agreements became an incentive to formalize cooperation and coordination. Some NGO actors reported that the agreements raised the quality of training provided to volunteers throughout this period. The contact between the UDI and the NGOs, however, have seemingly decreased in parallel with the nationwide downscaling of the reception center apparatus.

Empirically, there is little evidence that suggest that reception centers prefer to cooperate with the large NGOs that have formal agreements with the UDI. Those NGOs only make up a proportion of the total number of organizations that offer activities for the residents. The ten NGOs with formal agreements often make up well under half of the reception centers' collaboration partners. Reception centers prioritize NGOs that are present locally and show determination and willingness to cooperate long-term, independently of any formal agreements at the national level.

There are indications that the agreements positively affected safety and security aspects through stressing reception centers' compliance to the routines of obtaining criminal record certificates from the police. However, for many NGOs this was already an established practice when recruiting volunteers. Both staff at reception centers and NGO actors emphasize numerous considerations regarding protection when working with residents – particularly when it comes to minors. This is especially pertinent in the matter of ensuring that no volunteer is ever alone with vulnerable residents at any point in time for the duration of activities and procedures for receiving and managing complaints and concerns. Obtaining criminal record certificates is frequently only the first step in a suitability assessment that also

consists of interviews and observation during training. Some NGOs call for a closer professional partnership with asylum reception center operators regarding security and emergency response, where points of improvement can be identified in collaboration.

1.3 Recommendations for the UDI

From a civil service perspective, one does not wield direct influence and power to instruct NGOs in the voluntary sector. Thus, it is necessary to increase focus on how the UDI creates and maintains relations with this field of actors. It is worth taking note of the fact that the constraints on how to deal with NGOs are questions that many state institutions grapple with, and there is increasing interest in examining how public services can be supplemented by activities carried out by NGOs.

It is natural for state actors to be primarily occupied with their own areas of responsibility and service provision. NGOs on the other hand, commonly operate with limited information and insights into how government actors work and think. In this perspective the latter sometimes adopt an instrumental approach to the voluntary sector. We find that the analytical model underpinning this assignment is well suited to tackle some of these questions: it presumes that the interplay between reception centers, NGOs and residents is the basis from which beneficial activities are generated. The pressing question for the UDI is how this interplay can be facilitated.

1.3.1 The UDI should draft an overall policy

The UDI should draft a short policy document that articulates its approach to the voluntary sector – how the UDI relates to the sector, and how they want the sector to relate to the UDI. This document should establish some principles for how the relations with these organizations, whose purpose is to enrich and benefit society, are maintained.

The UDI's approach to actors in the sector has gradually formed without any overarching policy guiding the process, and therefore the approach has been largely instrumental and shaped particularly by needs and concerns which surfaced in the context of the refugee crisis.

We consider the following points essential to include in a policy document:

- **The value of activities.** One should establish the importance of activities for the residents – no matter if they are organized by the *reception centers*, through the *voluntary sector NGOs* or by *residents* themselves. In a time when many reception centers experience their operations as challenging from a resource perspective, it is doubly important to counteract and mitigate negative aspects of a difficult life situation – especially mental health problems and passivity. (Berg, et al., 2005; Jakobsen, Sveaas, Eide Johansen, & Skogøy, 2007; NKVTS, 2006). These issues not only impact individual residents themselves but have proven to be counterproductive in light of the UDI's work with voluntary returns (Winsvold & Engebriksen, 2010). On this basis it is quite natural to conceive of bolstering activities in reception centers

as a pre-emptive element in the UDI's wider approach – also when it comes to mitigating negative and unwanted incidents in the reception centers. In other words, activities remain an enriching and beneficial component to the reception centers – no matter who organizes them.

- **Mutuality.** In our view, the UDI's approach to the voluntary sector could to a greater extent build on mutual benefit and shared vision. At a basic level, there are three things we believe are important for the NGOs: the NGOs have a need to be seen (as regards their work and the benefits it produces), heard (for the knowledge and experience they accumulate) and appreciated in terms of their contributions being recognized. Approaching the voluntary sector with these points in mind can create a more dynamic and constructive relationship between the UDI and NGOs. This might also contribute to preventing relations from stagnating in periods with less pressure and few arrivals. Following up the cooperation agreements would be a good framework for this effort.
- **Coherence.** The policy document should establish a holistic reasoning that connects the financial support scheme, regulations, cooperation agreements. As of today, there is no document that look at these tools as a whole. We are not insisting that the agreements should stipulate financial support, but simply asserting that the elements that make up the UDI's "toolbox" are brought together in a coherent way. This may be even be a simple overview or table that states how each tool is relevant to maintaining and strengthening the UDI's relations to the sector and facilitating activities for residents of reception centers.

1.3.2 The UDI should follow up the cooperation agreements actively

As previously mentioned, the findings in this report point out that the agreements: (a) were more relevant earlier, (b) are less important today, and (c) can and should be more relevant in the future. We hold the view that the agreements make up a useful framework for maintaining and building relations to some of the most important actors in the field – preferably on a regional level that are in closer proximity to the localities of the reception centers and the volunteers. To prevent the relations from stagnating, it is necessary to invigorate the cooperation between the state and relevant actors. If these relations weaken, it becomes harder for the UDI to mobilize them in future crises.

In our consideration, a more active follow-up of the cooperation agreements can make them more relevant. In the UDI's own assessment, this is an area where more resources and efforts can be exerted. The follow-up should aim at improving the shared arenas and meeting places, dialogue, collaboration and competency building. Our impression is that the UDI's work in these domains have decreased over the last few years, i.e. nationally the meetings have been less frequent and only the UDI - Region South has held regional gatherings with actors in the voluntary sector.

Disseminating information about the asylum process will always be an important part of the UDI's work, and this is useful, but the events and meetings places can perhaps be filled with

content that inspire and bring out more active participation and mutual engagement. We find the following points to be worth considering:

- Meeting places / gatherings should also be established at the regional level. The UDI should challenge relevant actors to present their ideas on pressing issues. The need for transport could be one such topic to explore jointly view a view to find new solutions. Another issue revolves around new ways of encouraging interaction between residents and the local community, through activities where people from the host population and residents of reception centers participate on equal footing. A third issue could focus on how residents of reception centers can be given roles in the actual organizational work that underpins the activities in the voluntary sector.
- The UDI should challenge the NGOs on how they collaborate and coordinate themselves. Our impression is that organizations, locally, have quite limited knowledge and understanding of each other's activities and doings. Is it possible to identify good examples of how organizations collaborate in order to solve problems and meet specific needs?
- More contributors could be invited to the regional gatherings. It would be beneficial to have these arenas contribute to dynamic interaction between the three central groups of actors: NGOs in the voluntary sector, coordinators at reception centers, and key-individuals or resource persons among residents of the centers.
- The UDI should consider if specialists and researchers can contribute to improving the quality of the content. This would be a way to make these arenas more attractive for the participants.
- The UDI could consider inviting in resources from the municipalities. In this project few, if any, asylum receptions or organizations have mentioned being in regular contact with coordinators for voluntary sectors in the municipality (or similar positions).
- Through meeting places, the UDI should facilitate information dissemination between the above-mentioned groups of actors. The UDI does this as of today, but there may be room to find and collect ideas, solutions and examples of best practice in a more systematic fashion, and subsequently share these between regions.

1.3.3 Strengthen resident involvement and agency

As previously mentioned, we have identified factors that contribute to involvement of residents – especially as regards functional resident councils. We believe there's room to increase efforts in this area. The following points are pertinent:

- The council must preside over a meaningful budget. By regulation, the UDI already has demanded that reception centers establish a council of residents. In our view one could add to this regulation language that specify the need for a budget of some disposable financial means that enable prioritization of purchases and / or activities to the benefit of all residents.

- The council must have a degree of decision-making power and influence in affairs that are significant to the reception center. By and large the obligation is on employees in the centers to ensure this, but the UDI might see it beneficial to integrate this in the follow-up on the centers, as well as emphasizing it in the written regulation. Involving residents does not necessarily mean the council, but also individual residents in different circumstances.

The reception center's proactive recruitment of resourceful individuals, the delegation of responsibilities and guidance in the representative role seem to be important and integral parts of sound resident involvement. The UDI may consider facilitating a more systematic training in this regard. For example, representatives of a resident council could get the opportunity to participate in courses or be invited to gatherings, and simple guidelines defining the role of council members could be developed. This might give council members a better understanding and sense of responsibility that comes with the role, as well as motivation. Several NGOs with cooperation agreements have expressed that they see opportunities to give trainings on civil society engagement and local democracy tailored for resident council members. The UDI's role in this setting could be as an initiator – setting up a project where these measures can be tried out.

1.3.4 Explore possibilities for cooperation on security

Volunteers are not responsible for security in reception centers, however some NGOs in the voluntary sector have professional competencies and considerable practical experience. This is related both to how activities with young participants (i.e. children and adolescents) are planned and carried out in a safe and sound fashion, as well as first aid, trauma care and routines for handling unwanted situations that can arise during the implementation of activities. Some sources expressed a desire for the UDI to connect them to the forum for reception center operators (driftsoperatørforum).

In our view it is possible that some actors could benefit from learning about each others' approaches and perspectives on security. The UDI could explore this topic and assess whether competent NGOs together with reception center operators could run a project in tandem to share lessons learned and experiences with a view to better safety for residents, reception center employees and volunteers. This might also give an improved overview over potential risks, measures of mitigation and routines for handling unwanted incidents.

1.3.5 Improve predictability for actors in voluntary sector

The UDI should request the Ministry of Justice and Public Security to include the funding scheme for activities in reception centers in a government regulation, and if possible expand the duration to a two year frame – as opposed to a one-year frame for both applying for, receiving and spending the funding. The findings in this report (and in our previous evaluation of the UDI's funding scheme) suggest that predictable arrangements for actors in the voluntary sector are key.

Longer planning horizons strengthen cooperation between NGOs, reception centers employees and residents. It also increases the chance of volunteers getting the opportunity to properly learn and adapt to being contributors in activities. It is quite likely that this would positively impact the quality of implementation. A longer duration for the funding additionally makes it easier to make use of the whole calendar year with all its seasons, as opposed to several months being lost to processing applications and effectuating payments and reporting. The current situation leads many organizations to commence activities in late spring or autumn.

1.3.6 Make accessible information about organizations' presence

When residents move from one reception center to another the UDI can make it simpler for volunteers to put them in touch with the same organization in the new locality. For example, the UDI could make information available online, summarizing which organizations that are present in different localities. This could for example be an annually updated overview listing cooperation partners that offer regular activities for residents. This could be part of the follow-up on cooperation agreements. It would also be listing of contacts (by consent) or general contact information for the local branch of the organization.

1.3.7 Secure a variety of activity types

A broad array of activities is important to boost participation. Even though some activities are more popular than others, it is essential that these are diverse and cater to different preferences. Among residents the variation in interests are at least as diverse as in the majority host population. Thus, it would not be beneficial to steer in the direction of prioritizing certain activity types over others on the national level.



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