

24 - Identifying refugees' most urgent needs

Aim: To help volunteers to identify and respond to refugees' most urgent (non-linguistic) needs when they first meet them.

The main aim of language support provided by volunteers is to enable refugees to communicate in the language of the host country. However, during the first meeting special attention may be needed if the refugees are under psychological strain or have suffered traumatic experiences. This tool may help you to prepare for this eventuality and to adapt your approach and plan language activities accordingly.

Suggested procedure (first meeting)

- Pay special attention to refugees' vulnerable emotional state.
- Welcome and try to reassure them.
- Find out whether there is one or more common languages in which to communicate with them. Common languages may include the host country language or any others spoken by volunteers and refugees.
- If necessary, ask some refugees to act as informal interpreters for people from their countries who do not speak any common language.
- Provide a limited amount of simple information, asking just a few questions.
- Use images, objects, gestures, and speak clearly and slowly to facilitate communication. Bear in mind that it may not always be possible to establish an easy and immediate relationship with the refugees.
- Consider carefully the following three main needs, and try to identify who is available to help refugees to deal with them:
 1. Need for healthcare: a lot of refugees are tired or exhausted and sometimes distressed when they arrive. They may also be ill due to the unhealthy conditions experienced during their journey.
 2. Welfare needs in terms both of protection and a warm meal, a bed, access to a bathroom, new clothes, rest etc.
 3. Need for orientation and information concerning their exact location, their legal status etc.
- Discuss these and other difficulties with the other personnel involved, such as:
 - healthcare staff
 - people in charge of immigration procedures
 - counsellors, social workers and mediators
 - non- governmental organizations, international organizations and multilateral agencies such as UNHCR, Save the Children, OIM
 - other volunteers working in the centre.
- Ensure that the refugees understand clearly the roles of these various people.
- Focus on refugees' communication needs: do not try to offer advice in areas in which you are not an expert. Put refugees in touch with the relevant person instead.

- Pay special attention to vulnerable refugees such as pregnant women, women who are victims of trafficking, children, elderly people, people with physical and psychological disabilities, victims of violence and torture. In addition to being forced to leave their communities and undertake dangerous journeys, refugees may have had traumatic experiences, such as violence, psychological or sexual abuse, slave-like detention and even torture.
- Be aware that dealing with trauma victims may itself be traumatic. So never try to handle cases on your own: refer to professionals such as psychologists and medical staff, and share your experiences with supervisors or in peer consultation groups.

During your conversations:

- Bear in mind the need to restore refugees' self-confidence through useful non-formal language activities that also help to pass the time.
- Focus on social interaction: the refugees' new life in the host country can begin to take shape if language activities provide opportunities for social contact, especially spoken interaction with members of the host community.
- Explain how the language activities work and ask for each refugee's agreement so that they do not feel forced to take part in them if they don't wish to.
- Especially where children are concerned, offer language activities that involve movement, singing, and play.
- Avoid asking about refugees' bad experiences such as their reasons for fleeing their country, their escape etc., or about the whereabouts of family and friends, but don't turn a deaf ear either. If refugees spontaneously talk about these experiences, listen and acknowledge the seriousness of them, as well as remarking on refugees' physical and psychological resilience. Listen with empathy – show that you are interested in them as people without asking personal questions.
- Bear in mind that refugees suffering trauma may have problems with attention span, concentration and memory, may be disorientated, irritable, or may be suffering from chronic depression and psychosomatic disorders. They may experience a sense of guilt and estrangement from others. They may also lack a sense of purpose and may be unwilling to make plans for the future. This can lead to a lack of interest in learning the host country language or in participating in language activities.

The following sections offer more detail about the kinds of questions that recently arrived refugees may want to ask and get help with, depending on their individual situations.

What kind of help might refugees need in transit or on arrival at a destination country?

The following needs are likely to be common among recently arrived refugees. When first meeting each of them, make notes and, where necessary, find out who in the location is available to help refugees with them, as recommended on page 1.

1. Need for orientation and information, both geographical and legal - some possible questions in the minds of refugees:
 - Where are we exactly?
 - How long will we be here?
 - Can we go out of the reception centre?

- When will my application be processed etc.?
 - Where can I charge my mobile phone/ connect to the internet etc.?
2. Welfare needs (especially in transit) - some possible questions in the minds of refugees:
- Will my family and I be safe here (especially in the case of women and girls)?
 - Where can we get a warm meal?
 - Where can we find a bathroom, clean clothes etc.?
 - Where will we sleep? etc.
3. Need for healthcare: refugees are likely to be exhausted when they arrive, and may sometimes be distressed. They may also be ill due to the unhealthy conditions they have experienced during their journey. Some possible questions in the minds of refugees:
- Where can my family and I get treatment if we are sick?
 - Can I have some medication for my headache/backache etc.?
 - Where can I find a doctor who speaks a language I know?
4. The need to rebuild self-confidence: useful activities, such as language activities, orientation to the locality or country, sports, art activities etc., can help with this and will also help to pass the time. Possible questions in the minds of refugees (especially in medium-term stay situations):
- How long will it take to be granted asylum?
 - Where can I find more information and legal support?
 - What are my rights and obligations during the process of seeking asylum?
 - When will I be allowed to work legally?
 - Will my qualifications be recognised?
5. The need for social interaction - possible questions in the minds of refugees (especially in mid-term stay situations):
- Where can I join in free or low-cost cultural or sports activities?
 - Where can I socialise with local people?
 - How can I contact other people from my country?
6. The need to plan ahead - possible questions in the minds of refugees (especially after arrival in a destination country):
- How and where can I get financial support until I am able to work?
 - How can I open a bank account?
 - Where will I be able to find affordable housing?
 - What costs will housing involve – rent, heating, electricity etc.?
 - Where can I get furniture?
 - How do I find a school for my child?
 - What is life like at school? What is expected of children here etc.?