

Mercredi – session 2

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Language support for adult refugees toolkit

Language is an issue for refugees and asylum-seekers. Typically, a refugee will arrive in the receiving country with no, or limited, language ability. Exceptions are refugees from francophone countries arriving in France or Belgium, and those from anglophone countries arriving in the UK or Ireland.

Nonetheless, the majority of refugees in EU Member States must learn a new language. During an asylum procedure, which can last for several months, there is often no, or limited, structured language training made available and asylum-seekers rely on informal methods of learning resulting in a long period of time during which language is acquired piecemeal. In these circumstances, refugees' existing skills, experience, knowledge, qualifications and careers are put on hold until such time as they receive refugee status and are able to participate in a structured course to obtain a grasp of the new language. This applies equally to unskilled, skilled and professional refugees and language acts as a leveler amongst different social and employment strata.

Lack of language precludes networking, retraining, job seeking, and usually working itself; it severely restricts the ability to be self-reliant in terms of social and economic activity and is a barrier in multiple ways to finding accommodation. The individual, no matter their former status, is invariably grounded, made dependent, and isolated by their lack of language.

From receipt of refugee status onwards, language affects everything: employment, training, securing housing, social interactions, pathways to citizenship, dealing with officialdom. Refugees in Europe tell us that language is a cornerstone. Securing or not securing language at the earliest possible stage influences when integration is possible to begin properly.

The large-scale influx of refugees in Europe in 2015 and 2016 has given rise to an increased involvement of the voluntary sector. In many places in Europe volunteers work with the refugees to help them to find their place in their new societies. This often includes language lessons. Last year I even met in Belgrade, Serbia, a group of volunteers who were teaching German to Syrian refugees, to prepare them for a future in Austria or Germany. Some of these volunteer teachers may have found proper methods for their efforts; other may still be struggling with methodologies.

UNHCR therefore warmly welcomes the development by the Council of Europe's language department of the Toolkit for language support to adult refugees. We hope it will be of help to all those volunteers –and perhaps professionals too- who help refugees.