

Activity Report 2017-2018

# VOLUNTEER REFUGEE HOSTING INITIATIVES AS PART OF THE HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS



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The aim of this report is to evaluate the work done by the *Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante* and its member associations with regards to the humanitarian corridors programme, which hosted its first refugees in July 2017.

## Summary

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# I. The refugee hosting project by the *Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante*

## 1. Background

In September 2014, the *Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante* (FEP) and its partners considered the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and decided to start promoting and implementing a programme to host refugees from Iraq and Syria, in coordination with public authorities, which involved offering free shelter in private homes, provided by community group organisations.

As leader of the network, the FEP began making plans to host people who had been granted asylum on the D visa, and who had arrived in France after their application had been processed by the consulates. This work had been carried out through partnership since 2014 with the Asylum department of the Ministry of the Interior, with assistance since 2017 from a partnership of five institutions, the *Fédération Protestante de France* (FPF), the *Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante* (FEP), the *Conférence des Evêques de France* (CEF), the *Secours Catholique – Caritas France* (SCCF) and the *Communauté de Sant 'Egidio* (CSE), in addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the agreement protocol was known as “humanitarian corridors”).

Refugees are monitored on a daily basis by host community groups throughout France. The groups are also supported by associations belonging to the FEP, which have strong regional bases, meaning that

they can forge reliable connections between the host communities and the government on the one hand (communities and decentralised services) and the associations that coordinate support for the refugees and help them become part of society on the other. The entire scheme is supported by a national refugee assistance platform based in Paris.

It has received some government funding since 2017 and funding from the European Commission since January 2019 and private support from foundations and individuals.

Between 2015 and 2018, it was instrumental in hosting and supporting around 435 people (approximately 88 families). At the end of 2018, around 250 people were part of the programme, with others having become part of the common law system.

## 2. Project goals

The refugees hosting project has three main goals :



**Allow more refugees who have fled Syria and Iraq headed for Lebanon to find safety in France ;**



**Invite, support and develop solidarity drives involving Christian and non-Christian community networks to ensure unconditional acceptance ;**



**Help newcomers to settle and integrate into the country by giving them a warm and friendly welcome.**

This project is all about extending friendship to others. Offering support to new arrivals actually helps volunteers to get to know them better, what makes them different and how they can have a positive impact on society. Showing solidarity to those in need also expresses a willingness to live side-by-side, which results in less xenophobic and isolationism.

The support that the FEP encourages is in no way supposed to replace official government measures. It is actually an integral part of the national refugee hosting initiative and a very powerful lever for integration among those who are hosted here and immersed in French culture.



*During 2018, these community groups, guided by the FEP, hosted 126 people (33 families), who received an asylum visa as part of the humanitarian corridors initiative.*

## II. Actions carried out and results achieved

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### 1. Hosting asylum-seekers and structuring of the hosting network

A two-person team works in Lebanon to identify the families that could be hosted. The team also works on their application (which is later sent to the French authorities) and gets them ready to start their journey.

The platform was set up in Paris, and included employees and volunteers who worked on orienting, identifying and providing guidance to local volunteer groups who wanted to get involved in the initiative. At the end of 2017, three regional support branches were set up, based in Strasbourg for the Grand-Est, Valence for Franche Comté-Bourgogne-Rhône-Alpes and Bordeaux for Nouvelle Aquitaine. These branches were managed by FEP member associations which have already worked to support refugees: *Étage*, *Diaconat Drôme Ardèche* and *Diaconat* in Bordeaux. These regional branches (one employee supervised by a head of department) recruited and ran 32 host groups that provided accommodation in 2018. Each group supports one hosted family. During 2018, these community groups, guided by the FEP, hosted 127 people (33 families), who received an asylum visa as part of the humanitarian corridors initiative.

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In addition to accommodation, these community groups are organised so that they can provide guidance for asylum seekers as they begin joining society. That might be through language learning, access to employment or housing, or building up a network through cultural, sporting or social activities. Community groups are not supposed to replace the guidance provided by social workers, but to create links between the people who are hosted and public services. They are also trained on inter-cultural hosting issues. As such, two training sessions called *Accueillir et se Comprendre* (Host and Understand each other), attended by 8 community groups (18 people, an Ivorian and a Syrian couple) in Sommières and one community group (10 people) in Cambrai were held to facilitate communication with migrants, identify cultural differences, various forms of communication and promote the importance of learning French.

## Guidance for asylum seekers as they become part of society

Each community group, which is usually made up of a dozen very active members and more than 50 less active but contributing members, is set up for each family of asylum seekers. Each member of the group is in charge of supporting the asylum seekers with a specific issue. This support is closely linked to how the local association and the national system for the reception of asylum seekers are organised; it is not a substitute for it. For example, a member of the community group whose main aim is to provide administrative and legal support will be a point-person for the associations that are specialised in this field, such as *Cimade*.

### Key figures

- **126 people welcomed;**
- **46 minors attending school;**
- **More than 600 people actively involved in hosting.**

## Providing guidance for people hosted within humanitarian corridors in 2018 with learning the language

As the families are fully-immersed into the French-speaking world, language is a key factor in their integration, but in addition to regular conversations with community groups, a learning programme is set up for each family.

Adult family members can therefore take French as a Foreign Language lessons (individual classes, group lessons, conversation workshops, reading workshops) at the initiative of community group members, who are often retired or active teachers, with or without professional supervision (linguistic and cultural learning manager for the Grand Est branch, French as a foreign language trainer at the Auvergne Rhône Alpes branch) to provide educational advice (volunteer guides for literacy, French as foreign language websites, beginners' mistakes to avoid, etc.). Some are able to take French classes in sociolinguistic workshops with associations (*Centre de la Fédération des Œuvres Laïques, Secours populaire, Centre Socio-Culturel, Croix Rouge Française*), or through public schemes (organised by local communities, MJC) in rural centres, at the *Alliance Française*, or even university courses (for example at Bordeaux Montaigne University or at the *Maison universitaire internationale* at the University of Strasbourg). Some of the people hosted have even taken online courses to obtain level A1, A2 or B2 levels (AFPA training organisation for example). Recently, the Ministry of the Interior has also offered a massive open online course system (MOOC) to obtain an A2 to B2 level, that some hosted people will soon be able to try.

Schoolchildren make very quick progress when they are encouraged by their families and can speak and write "fluent" French within six to nine months. In secondary school however, learning can be more difficult when pupils also need to get up to speed on other subjects. Some secondary schools in cities have UPE2A

classes (education facility for incoming students who don't have French as their native language) that allow them to integrate gradually into regular classes. These classes provide some “comfort” for refugee children but are rare or non-existent in rural areas. Volunteers at community groups also provide academic support, which helps to bring hosted families and community group families together.

## Actions to support employment

There are many limitations which are specific to the beneficiaries of this project. On the one hand, the law prohibits asylum seekers from becoming employed. Only those whose application was submitted over 6 months ago can apply for a work permit.

On the other hand, the beneficiaries of the humanitarian corridors project are accommodated according to specific vulnerability criteria, particularly in terms of their health. Many are simply too sick to work. Yet access to employment is key in securing long-term autonomy for a family.

So, despite these difficulties, the platform and its local regional branches have come together to:



**Facilitate the public service processes involved in the local social integration and employment plan (Plan Local pour l'Insertion et l'Emploi), keep volunteers up to speed on professional integration programmes that refugees might be able to join as part of their employment support plan (associations and integration drives, workplace immersion schemes, etc.);**



**Help find professional training tailored to their needs and expectations, while keeping their eyes open to the real market situation (e.g. directing a refugee looking to pick up a university degree to the language centre at the University of Saint-Etienne first, to start them off on a French-language programme, or fostering the partnership between the University de Haute Alsace and the *Démocratie et entraide en Syrie* association—organisation for democracy and mutual aid in Syria—which is making it possible for students to return to their degrees after events in their country of origin caused them to discontinue their studies);**



**Provide assistance with qualification-recognition procedures through the Ministry of National Education agency;**



**Help with mobility: provide funding or driving lessons, or assistance with applications to recognise driving licences, help with acquiring the “BFR” (moped licence), support funded by local communities (bus, train, or car journeys, including insurance ), loan of a vehicle when the host village is in a rural location for example.**



**Support in opening a bank account, which can be an excessively complex process, especially for people who are applying for asylum.**

Lastly, when refugees are hosted by a community of people, the beneficiaries receive daily guidance as they look for work (e.g. the use of a computer, obtaining a four-week temporary assignment in a factory, an outdoor work contract, food and bakery internships, or help in registering for and providing support during appointments at the national employment centre (*Pôle Emploi*) and draw on the professional networks of these volunteers (connection with a researcher/lecturer if the former profession of the recipient is relevant, or with a business manager).

## Housing support initiatives

A condition to be granted housing is having legal status. The request for a personal registration number to access social housing is often the best solution for people who receive poverty benefits or are on very low incomes, because the cost of rent is reduced. The application must be kept up to date for the request to be successful (online access), which means that regular steps must be taken, with support from the social worker in the regional branch (e.g. access to the rent support organisation in the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes branch, or the partnership between the housing organisation - *Offices Publics d'Habitation à Loyer Modéré* - social housing, social estate agencies in the Drôme department) or a social assistant based near to the community groups and beneficiaries, or through a comprehensive support service package for refugees (e.g. the Accélaïr programme by Forum Réfugiés). Social workers can underline the importance of specific requests for housing, which, depending on the situation, may speed up the process. For example, departmental community group agreements allow social housing landlords to prioritise the most urgent requests, as long as a social worker has assessed the housing and financial situation ahead of time. The social worker's knowledge and experience help to provide accurate information to families and members of community groups, and to get certain stagnant situations moving.

Having acquired refugee status or social protection and the full range of income benefits, some families, particularly in small towns, have been granted accommodation. The larger the city, the greater the difficulty in finding suitable housing.

In this respect, the sliding-scale rental system is very appealing, because it reassures landlords (individuals or businesses) and enables community groups to tailor their assistance to each need. The network and knowledge of the community group also often encourage beneficiaries to consider private housing. In some cases, private landlords accept rental payments in increments, which rise as the tenant's resources increase. There is huge disparity between rural areas - where housing is available for people on very low income - and big cities. However, being out of work is still an obstacle to finding housing.

Very often, becoming a tenant does not mean being completely independent for every undertaking. Several community groups have pointed out that families who no longer require social housing still ask them for support from time to time: to explain official letters, specific requests from the prefecture or OFPRA, access to training, access to employment, or legal aid to reunite with their families.

Lastly, individuals work on guidance towards autonomy: raising awareness about budget management (e.g. help with covering food costs for people who buy their own food, or "training" on the price of electricity, as well as appointments with a budget and family consultant in a welcome centre), and housing autonomy.

## Actions taken to help create a social network through cultural, sporting or social activities related to the host society

The community groups ensure that the people they host are invited to outings, parties, and events in order to ensure they become part of the local community. Whether it's spending time with members of the host community, seeing how birthdays are organised and what family celebrations there are, visiting a museum, going to concerts, or swimming pools, funfairs, sharing and making meals together, going for walks, the idea is to help them get the most out of life in France so that they can start looking to the future and rebuilding their lives. In Périgord and Gard, some hosted families organise Syrian or Iraqi meals once or twice a month, and some of their neighbours come to share a little exotic flavour and exchange recipes.



Another example: three families living in the Upper Rhine invited a family into their homes for a weekend to introduce them to the region. The hosted family then travelled by train, without assistance, and were asked to prepare some of their own culinary specialities, as well as some of the host country's dishes, and to make some fond memories with their new friends. Visits to institutions and cultural centres are just as important as visits to cities, regions and local areas. The friendship and trust that can develop between people in the community groups and those who are hosted usually provide a solid foundation for the future.

The *Étage* association at the local Grand Est branch organises outings to Strasbourg for parents and children: visits to the media library, trips to city parks and the activities they provide, music festivals, children's entertainment, walks in the snow-capped mountains, swimming in lakes, and so on. These kinds of activities are available for all French or foreign families, and are run by *Étage* or the FEP, which encourages people to meet each other and creates social diversity.

Through school, registration at recreation centres, volunteering or sporting activities, integration is relatively easy for both children and parents (some of whom may also take part in school events). In Lille, one refugee joined the basketball team; at *La Force* in Perigord, another runs in races; in New Aquitaine, another refugee does gymnastics while yet another attends folk dancing classes. Sports clubs are just as beneficial for adults as they are for children, and language is rarely a barrier to mutual understanding and knowledge.

When refugees first arrive in France, their Syrian or Iraqi compatriots play a hugely important role, and those who are already settled are happy to help newcomers. Lastly, connections are formed within religious communities (Eastern Christians, local Muslim communities).

## 2. Development of tools for project stakeholders

In order to support the project's various stakeholders, the FEP has developed tools specifically designed for each participant. Community groups are given the tools to provide support throughout the stages of the integration process: they cover the legal aspects of accommodation, and administrative support for asylum seekers (1), for regional centres, tools for raising awareness about humanitarian corridors and calls for accommodation (2); and tools designed to help hosted families settle in and become part of society (3):



## III. Keys lessons learnt during the project

The current situation in France and Europe in terms of hosting migrants often causes tension and instability for the people themselves, and those involved in supporting them. We can draw several conclusions from the project:



**Hosting helps to change attitudes towards foreigners. 75% of the host groups involved say that the project has made a positive impact on how the people around them viewed migrants<sup>1</sup>.**



**Paradoxically, it takes much longer to obtain international protection than it does to be part of the humanitarian corridors protocol; that's why nearly half of all asylum seekers were not dealt with by OFPRA during their first three months in France, which goes against the project's own protocol<sup>2</sup>.**



**Volunteering solidarity in this structured manner is not a substitute for national initiatives, but rather an addition to them. As a result, 81% of host communities cooperate with public organisations, almost 2/3 of local authorities collaborate with social support structures designed for state-funded asylum seekers<sup>3</sup>.**



**Legislative or regulatory measures are more restrictive, the new decree dated 31 May 2018 no longer allows asylum seekers living with private individuals to receive the additional financial support provided to other asylum seekers. The decree dated 14 December 2018, prohibits asylum seekers from being accommodated by third parties, while allowing them to live in accommodation of which the applicant is an owner or tenant, or housed in accommodation belonging to/rented by their spouse/child/ascendant. Again, there is a waiver for asylum seekers housed as part of the humanitarian corridors initiative.**

These mixed signals sent out to asylum seekers require us to be extremely vigilant and encourage us to run experimental projects intended to identify, map out paths, and try out various forms of hosting, support and action. We have observed that the regional poles that have been set up (which are much more suitable to and effective for organising and following up on hosting, connections made, running of community groups) have greatly improved how the system is coordinated and how the hosted people are monitored. In addition, the volunteers and permanent staff involved in the day-to-day coordination of the platform in Paris have proven that they are the cornerstone and living memory for the project.

1. *Accommodation support for refugees* "Testimony from the host communities and people receiving the assistance as part of the humanitarian corridors project".

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

## IV. Conclusions and outlooks

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The FEP's hosting system has undergone significant changes since it was set up in 2014. However, since the platform was implemented, the FEP has structured and developed the project so successfully because its network has always remained highly motivated. The specific characteristics of the people being hosted (low level of French, poor knowledge of administrative procedures and sociocultural norms, lack of a professional network, etc.) means that initially, intensive and personalised support is required. This FEP network has an impressive amount of legal and administrative knowledge about refugee status, public authority, and its specific characteristics, and is also able to provide the skills required to communicate with its beneficiaries, who often have a limited knowledge of French. It fosters public support by drawing on volunteer groups whose members are prepared to provide accommodation support and guidance for families. It ensures stable living conditions and helps beneficiaries to become independent again, and to recover a dignified and safe environment, respecting the privacy, abilities, wishes and daily routines of everyone involved. It helps to create integration solutions based on the principle of unconditionality (lack of distinction based on religious, social or political affiliation).

In the future, the FEP would like to share the specific expertise it has developed in hosting and supporting asylum seekers. This will involve sharing the lessons it has learnt with all the players in the sector: civil society organisations, public authorities, committed citizens.

In addition, the FEP would also like to become more involved in bringing about an essential integration tool for foreigners in France: the right to work. And that will involve developing innovative programmes to get people from different countries into work.



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