



WHY REFUGEES SHOULD BE WELCOME IN PARKS

VOICES
FROM
WITHIN

An interview with Clare Rishbeth by Minouche Besters and Konstantinos Gournianakis

Refugee integration is a topic of frequent debate in urban discourses especially after the migration crisis of 2015. The European Union has established new policies within its borders to better facilitate and regulate inflows of people seeking sanctuary to ensure basic rights and accommodation. But what happens when asylum seekers and refugees find a city or town where they can settle? Are their problems finally over? Or is it just the beginning of a new journey for them to become members of a new society? We spoke with Clare Rishbeth, who is the lead of the “#RefugeesWelcome in parks” project, to provide us with some insight on the current situation of refugees, and how her project links use of urban greenspaces with integration and provides some guidance for good practice.

PARKS FOR EVERYONE

It is important to consider that the existence of parks doesn't necessarily mean that they are always equally accessible for all. More positively, could these public spaces be more instrumental in promoting inclusivity? This was the central question of the research project #RefugeesWelcome in Parks, which interviewed refugees and asylum seekers in three different cities, (Sheffield and London, UK and Berlin, Germany) and also many organisations across two sectors: greenspace management and refugee integration. The focus was on urban parks used for recreation, not on parks potentially appropriated for temporary migrant accommodation in tents.

To locals, visiting a park is an activity that is usually of minimal risk. They know what is usual to do in these spaces, at what times, and what they enjoy. But for a refugee or asylum seeker, it is not so simple, and the research found that there were a number of barriers for them in using parks.

To visit a public space and to become part of the activity requires a level of confidence: You need a certain boldness to venture out' observed Mercy, a Kenyan woman seeking asylum in London. This can be shaped by their own experience of harassment, or confusion about cultural norms in unfamiliar types of parks, and a worry about getting it wrong or not fitting in.

CURATED SOCIABILITY

One way that the unfamiliar can be made easier is if you 'go with a friend'. In many of the home countries of asylum seekers and refugees spending time outside is a very sociable kind of activity. But many people caught up in forced migration have extremely fractured social networks and are

often very isolated. So the project explored how providing an easy-to-access social context could be one way to improve use and the wellbeing benefits of using greenspace.

“Sociability is really an important way to experience public space and it’s not necessarily about being in a big group of people all the time but thinking about social context and cultures of how people want to join in.”

We developed the term ‘curated sociability’ to describe activities that do this. This can mean different things in different contexts and appealing to different interests, but usually does involve some aspect of ‘curation’ – of some low key facilitation by peers, organisations, or people willing to share their own enthusiasm. Examples included sports, walking groups, gardening projects, informal orientation, or even just taking activities outside when the weather is good. Social connections and networking play a crucial role in the well-being of refugees. Feeling a vital part of any community, even a sports team, can prove beneficial to their sense of belonging and personal wellbeing. Taking part can help refugees and asylum seekers feel positive about their identity and skills (not just as a number in a system) and give them a weekly event to look forward to amidst difficult life situations.

The experiences of refugees with the low-entry open air language classes that were organised in Paris on the stairs of a building provide good insights. The interviewed refugees shared that:

- ◆ They provide extremely easy access to drop-in French classes that are not hidden away in a building.
- ◆ Sitting outdoors with the sensory qualities of trees and sky has additional health benefits, potentially reducing stress levels.
- ◆ People passing by can see for themselves refugees’ willingness and commitment to learn the language. The visibility of the classes provides a counter-narrative to fearful perceptions of asylum seekers as a burden, and of this neighbourhood as a place for drug dealing and rough sleeping.
- ◆ Asylum seekers are themselves less vulnerable to abuse because they find themselves in a group context.
- ◆ Within a 10-minute walk from this square there are two high-quality public parks, so there are opportunities to continue socialising in a more relaxed way.



According to Clare, participation is key:

“As soon as you’re in a group it’s a very different situation. That can give confidence and an informal way of sharing support”.

Potential interactions with locals sharing a common interest can help destigmatizing asylum seekers and refugees. There is the added benefit that by doing activities outside they are visible in the community and this has the potential more broadly to challenge local misconceptions.

THREE GOOD REASONS WHY

1. INCREASED AUTONOMY

Refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves constrained; they have little opportunity to make their own choices and pursue their personal goals. Initiatives similar to that of Clare and her team can increase refugees’ confidence by allowing them to make well-informed choices about where to go in a city.

2. SUPPORT RESPITE

Many refugees and asylum seekers struggle with poor mental health, and all of them are trying to find their feet and their own sense of being and belonging in a new cultural context. Respite (as potentially provided by outdoor places and activities) can be about peaceful relaxation, the enjoyment of taking part in familiar activities, or the pleasure of doing something you are good at.

3. USING AND BUILDING ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Most initiatives are supported by (and in turn support) social relationships. The human to human element is important: both between organisations and refugees or asylum seekers, and within the friendship networks of the newly arrived.

WELLBEING BENEFITS OF BEING OUTDOORS

There is wide-ranging research on the positive impact of spending time outdoors in natural places as beneficial for wellbeing. This was also emphasised by many of the participants who took part in the project. Being outdoors can help them feel calmer and gives a sense of relief from some of the pressures and boredom of being in a legal limbo. Well maintained parks can provide a more pleasurable location to look after their kids or spend time with friends than poor quality housing or institutionalised support settings. When hanging out in a park it is possible (even temporarily) to feel ‘normal’, evoking a feeling of being at home. ‘When we sit in the park we say hello to people. When we see someone with an Arabic face we talk to them, but we talk to anyone if they can understand our English’. (Khalid, m, London/Syria)

7 BRILLIANT IDEAS ABOUT PARKS FOR PEOPLE WORKING TO INCREASE WELLBEING AND INTEGRATION FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS



① INCLUDE LOCAL PARKS AND GREENSPACES IN ORIENTATION PROGRAMMES

ESPECIALLY THINKING ABOUT THE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES AND TIMES OF THE DAY/WEEK/YEAR.



② WITH REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS, CO-CREATE INFORMATION

ON LOCAL FACILITIES, EVENTS, OUTDOOR VOLUNTEERING AND ACTIVITIES. FIND METHODS WITH WHICH TO UPDATE AND SHARE THESE.



③ CONNECT THE INDOORS AND OUTDOORS. WHEN THE SUN IS SHINING, TAKE ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE

OR SUGGEST NEARBY PLACES TO CONTINUE CONVERSATIONS AFTERWARDS.



⑤ HELP REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS TO FEEL MORE CONFIDENT ABOUT EXPLORING THE OUTDOORS BY

'GOING WITH A FRIEND'

ESPECIALLY IF TRYING OUT A NEW ACTIVITY OR FINDING A NEW PLACE. ENCOURAGE THE MORE SETTLED TO ACT AS TOUR GUIDES FOR NEW ARRIVALS.



④ ENCOURAGE 'CONVERSATION CLUBS'

TO TALK ABOUT PARKS, DIFFERENT TYPES AND KINDS OF OPEN SPACE, FACILITIES, WHAT IS OK TO DO THERE (AND WHAT IS NOT), AND BEING HONEST ABOUT PROBLEMS.



⑥ THINK ABOUT HOW YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION 'CAN BE FOUND'

BY SPORTS AND GREENSPACE ORGANISATIONS LOOKING TO PROMOTE EVENTS AND IMPROVE INCLUSION.



⑦ SET UP A 'HEALTH & PARKS'

KIT. LEND FRISBEES, BADMINTON SETS, FOOTBALLS, BBQ SETS, PICNIC RUGS, TRAINERS, SKATEBOARDS.

THE 'FIND-CHAT-JOIN-FEEL BETTER' FORMULA

Clare and her team found that activities should involve a combination of the following elements:

FIND:

How refugees and asylum seekers understand the culture and diversity of parks, and research what information they need before visiting.

CHAT:

How your confidence to visit parks increases when you are accompanied by friend(s) or a facilitated group.

JOIN IN:

The potential of parks and open spaces to offer a range of (mostly free) activities so as to help provide entertainment for visitors and give a sense of purpose.

FEEL BETTER:

The ways in which spending time in parks and other natural environments can improve mental health.

IMPACT

Parks and other kinds of urban greenspaces can make a positive contribution to refugee integration and wellbeing. The findings and the case studies give a good sense of small initiatives that can help counter barriers and ensure that experiences of parks are welcoming. And though targeted particularly at the experience of asylum seekers and refugees, there are important points here about how an intentional considered inclusivity can guide those involved with urban placemaking into shaping a more humanitarian society.

Learn more about the project here www.refugeeswelcomeinparks.com