

Refugee and Asylum Seeker Environmental Conservation Programme - Scotland

A partnership project - BEN. SRC. BTCV

The project was developed in recognition of the lack of support or provision of innovative activities for refugees and asylum seekers in terms of community involvement and social integration and of the need to provide meaningful and worthwhile opportunities for refugees to participate and contribute to their new community. This project took place in the background of the Home Office's Refugee dispersal programme. This project demonstrates how BEN works for equal opportunities within the environment sector through the creation of relevant entry points for ethnic and cultural communities based on their needs and concerns.

Aims

- To engage refugees living in Glasgow in experiencing and participating in conservation based activity in order to create mutually beneficial connections with the Scottish environment for the improvement of the health and wellbeing and the quality of life of refugees
- To assist refugees in feeling that they are an active and contributory part of Scottish society through positive environmental action

Objectives

- To run a programme of environmental activities engaging refugees and asylum seekers in protection and development of the Scottish environment through practically supporting both urban and rural conservation and environment projects
- To support refugees in undertaking environmental action through working in partnership with environment sector bodies, in particular BTCV Scotland, Cashel Forest For a Thousand Years
- To create relevant activities and experiences and develop potential for longer term environmental participation for refugees through using feedback gained from an environmental taster programme, (which was run as a precursor to this projects to introduce refugees to a range of environmental issues and projects), to tailor the project to the needs and interests of refugees
- To allow refugees to contribute to the community and country through participating in the development and protection of Scotland's Millennium Forest

Partner organisations

Black Environment Network - the lead organisation, working for equal opportunities within the environmental movement.

The Scottish Refugee Council - the only organisation in Scotland providing a range of support, encompassing legal and benefits advice, support for health and housing and drop in centres, to refugees and asylum seekers who have fled persecution, torture and conflict.

BTCV Scotland - Scotland's leading conservation body, involved in activating individuals and communities in integrated practical action for the conservation and development of the local and wider environment.

The project also works with Cashel Forest for A Thousand Years - a Millennium Forest For Scotland project at Loch Lomond, working to build community involvement in the reforestation of the countryside.

The Environmental Taster Programme

A programme of environmental activities was organised to build the basis for a longer term environmental project that will address the needs and concerns and be of benefit to refugee and asylum seekers in Glasgow. Scotland.

Taster Programme Activities

- Visit to local community farm
- Conservation work and countryside trips with BTCV Scotland
- Environmental arts activities - recycled collage - willow weaving - mosaic
- Visit to Glasgow Zoo
- Gardening workshop at Botanic Gardens

Challenges and Barriers

- Initial participation low. Varying levels of participation
- Slow in getting started and in gaining enthusiasm
- Frustration of environmental activity providers unused to working with refugees and asylum seekers
- First few activities and trips dominated by men - no families or women
- Lack of resources - financial and staff time

Outcomes and Achievements

The project provided crucial support to a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers:

- Bringing people together, combating isolation. Established a core group of participants with whom regular contact was developed
- Familiarity of the countryside, relaxation and family enjoyment
- People making positive contributions
- Breaking down negative images
- Moving away from labelling people
- Lifting spirits, the countryside as a healer
- Social and cultural meanings
- Positive links with the local community
- Built the basis for a longer term project to support refugees and asylum seekers through environmental participation

Potential Long Term Outcomes

- Breaking down negative images of asylum seekers
- Integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the local community
- Wider organisational benefits
 - through the contributions that participants can make to their work and projects
- Supporting refugees and asylum seekers in terms of:
 - orientation
 - English skills
 - meeting people
 - integration with local communities
 - improving quality of life

Future Plans

Growing demand for the project:

- more asylum seekers coming to Scotland (6000 per year)
- participation levels in existing project very high and continuing to grow
- existing project resources not sufficient to meet these needs

Specific opportunities for developing existing partnership work:

- engaging refugees and asylum seekers in environmental participation within communities in which they are living
- using the countryside trips as a way of engaging new participants and then introducing people into other mainstream activities
- engaging refugees and asylum seekers in environmental participation on an area basis. Develop programmes of activities for people living in the same area - allowing people to get to know others living near them
- running activities to different locations and more often and expanding the range of activities offered

Specific Issues facing refugees and asylum seekers in Britain

Loss of Identity and Status

- Professional people who find themselves living on benefits and unable/not allowed to work - can be a humiliating experience in itself
- Qualifications, previous employment, training not recognised

Benefits

- Not entitled to full income support
- Single refugees and asylum seekers have only £10 cash per week
- The rest is in the form of vouchers - can only be use in certain shops
- Stigmatising and humiliating

Housing

- Do not have access to, or priority on council housing waiting lists
- Private landlords, hostel accommodation
- NASS accommodation through funding to private landlords and unused/unfit council housing
- Living in areas and estates that are least equipped in terms of the health and social needs of refugees and asylum seekers

Support

- Lack of interpreters mean that often health care and other support services are difficult to access
- Lack of social networks - people isolated from familiar cultures. People separated from friends and family under the new dispersal scheme

Negative and Unrepresentative Images

- Often portrayed as scroungers on the states and criminals
- Media plays a strong (often negative) role in forming public opinion
- Issues used as a political tool
- Racial abuse directly targeting refugees and asylum seekers

People are not seen as individuals

- Not a homogeneous group of people
- Different countries, cultures, social groups and professions. Individual identities, aspirations and reasons for seeking asylum

Points of Good Practice in Working with refugees and asylum seekers

- Make contact with the appropriate organisation for their expertise, staff support, networks of contact and direct links to refugees and asylum seekers e.g. drop in centres
- Start small:
 - one off workshops and trips
 - important for building confidence of refugees and asylum seekers and environmental staff
 - allowing people to participate initially without the need for major commitment
- Joint approach and working in partnership. Voluntary sector working with the environmental sector:
 - pooling resources, experience and skills
 - bringing together agendas and different areas of work for common objectives e.g. addressing mental and physical health issues through environmental participation
- Be aware of issues with regards asylum seekers in your own social and political scene - awareness raising for staff and volunteers
- Listen to the needs and wishes of refugees and asylum seekers. Evaluation and feedback to focus further activities and projects

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