

**IFLA Satellite Meeting**

[From refugee to citizen-integration: Policies and actions of cultural Institutions](#)

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## Opening the library's doors to refugees

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### Abstract:

*In the last few years, libraries all over the world have made a concerted effort to serve refugee and asylum seekers. In this paper, we hope to make a case for greater international collaboration within the library community when it comes to serving refugees. Different countries do have different situations when serving refugees, such as the number of refugees they receive, the origin of the refugees, and the amount of control they have over who enters their country. Libraries as well differ in the purpose and amount of resources they have. Despite that, there are many similarities that those serving refugees share, such as the needs of the newcomers and the previous trauma many of the refugees have endured. The last section of the paper is comprised of concrete examples of items used in refugee services that could be shared across borders, including posters, films, flyers, and books.*

**Keywords:** refugees, asylum seekers, libraries, international collaboration

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Many countries all over the world have received asylum seekers and refugees during the past years. Languages, conditions, responsibilities or governmental or political attitudes may differ, but the aim of libraries in all these countries is to make a significant contribution to language acquisition and to serve as a social and educational space for the city's refugees.

Problems and challenges are very similar, too. Funds and personal resources are limited, improved language skills or literacy would make things much easier, and existing rules and regulations often make it difficult to act pragmatically.

On the other hand, serving refugees and asylum seekers is not only an obligation. It is also a great chance for libraries on their way to becoming community centers which are open to all, working far beyond books to meet the needs of the community they serve. It also promotes libraries as strong partners worth collaborating with in terms of integration and creating a new citizenship. In Germany, which has received more refugees and asylum seekers in 2015/2016 than most countries, authorities, foundations, sponsors, and other cultural institutions have started to regard libraries with different eyes. Part of it is the result of libraries' activities in the field of integration of refugees.

This is a great chance. Libraries should jump on it. In order to be successful it is important to be aware that nobody has to reinvent the wheel and that there are many ideas and resources which can be adapted. On the national level, many great efforts have been made to share ideas and experiences. Sharing internationally could result in even better progress.

In order to give the audience an idea of how collaboration could work on an international level, first we will discuss the differences in the challenges that libraries may be facing, following by a discussion of the uniting factors. After that, we hope to present some concrete materials of which libraries anywhere could use. We wish to encourage librarians from other countries to think about using these in their own libraries, or taking inspiration from them, and of course, to share their experiences and ideas with others, so that we can all learn from one another.

### **What are the differences between libraries?**

One of the major differences that libraries may be facing is the number of refugees that they are receiving, in total or in relation to their population. Eurostat, UNHRC and other statistics tell us a lot about the number of refugees and asylum seekers different countries received during the past years. It's always worth having a look at the figure and data, teaching us for example that Germany's share of the EU-28 total rose from 35 % in 2015 to 60 % in 2016 whereas the Hungarian and Swedish share fell more than 10 percentage points (Eurostat 2017). Sweden recorded the highest rates of refugees in Europe relative to size of the resident population in 2015. It is important to know what we are talking about, who we are working for and where we can look up data, if we need it. It does not make any sense to provide services, for example, in Somali if a city does not receive any Somali-speaking refugees.

European countries normally do not know much about the refugees they receive. Many refugees find their ways to Europe without specific destination. For European countries it is hard to forecast where people are coming from, how many there are, what languages they speak, whether they will stay or not. Refugees normally live in accommodation facilities for quite a while. France mostly receives refugees on their way to Great Britain who have completely different needs from refugees who apply for asylum in a country. The United States typically has a good idea of the numbers and nationalities of the refugees they receive, as the U.S. receives refugees largely through resettlement agencies which typically have found rooms to live in for them in advance, though they also receive asylum seekers mainly from Central America, who are largely unaided. Conditions all over the world are different.

Even within the library community, there are differences in the purpose and abilities of libraries. An academic or special library, for example, is going to have a different role in serving refugees and asylum seekers than a public library will. This does not mean that they can have no role, especially as young refugees and children of refugees enroll in universities, though we will be focusing mainly on public libraries here.

Another difference, which impedes some collaboration, is the language barrier that exists between libraries in different countries. How can a library which uses French share materials with libraries which uses Swedish? This idea stops many people from looking to collaborate outside of their borders, but in fact, when dealing with refugees, most libraries are assisting a population that speaks only a little of the local language anyway. Wordless materials, or materials with few words that can be

edited to be replaced with those of the local language, can easily cross borders. In addition, many countries are receiving refugees who speak the same languages, such as Arabic and Somali, so materials produced in those languages can be shared across borders as well.

In addition to these differences, there are significant differences in the abilities and funding of libraries. Some libraries may feel that they do not have the resources to put towards services for a new population. Other libraries may have a large budget which allows them to develop new services and products for refugees and asylum seekers. Staff size may also be a challenge for some libraries. However, we firmly believe that every library can do something to help serve refugees and asylum seekers, and that cooperating with other libraries can help those with fewer resources better serve the population.

These differences are important to a certain degree. It might be an advantage to receive less people per inhabitant, so the infrastructure is not overwhelmed. On the other hand, it might be easier to receive quite a huge number of people with the same mother language, for example if you only must offer guided tours in Arabic or Farsi. However, we believe that these difficulties do not and should not deter collaboration. In the end, we are all working towards the same goal - to better serve individuals in our community, no matter where they are from or what language they speak, and the solutions to those problems can transcend borders.

### **What are the similarities?**

There are many similarities between libraries who are striving to serve a refugee population, because there are many similarities between refugees populations. The people are newcomers in a country or town. They have similar needs. When they arrive, they often have to pick up the language which is often completely new to them. They have to find a way to get into kindergarten, school, university or find a job. When they have been in the country longer, they want to remain connected to their own culture and language, while also learning how to better operate in the society of their country of residence. At all stages of the refugee experience, there is a need to make social connections, for both practical and emotional support.

In addition to those needs, refugees, wherever they settle, have often been through extremely traumatic experiences, as explained in a mental health journal by Schouler-Ocak (2016):

“The loss of loved ones or caregivers and/or livelihood, the destruction of property, insecure living conditions, war, torture, imprisonment, terrorist attacks, abuse and sexual violence....experiences of defenselessness and disorientation, extreme conditions of cold or heat, hunger and thirst, lack of medical care, robbery, sexual violation, assault and discrimination (are often experienced by refugees)...further stress factors are represented by residence in mass accommodation facilities, difficulties dealing with authorities because of language and cultural barriers, being allocated to specific municipalities only, the lack of a work permit, dependence of social security (subsistence-level poverty), the lack of future educational and occupational opportunities, uncertain residence status (asylum or only temporary ‘toleration’) and the threat of deportation despite sometimes having resided in the country for many years.”

The circumstances refugees experience lead to high risk for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts in both adults and children. However, for children in particular, some of these effects can be eased by “stable settlement and social support in the host country”. Even for migrants who are not refugees or asylum seekers, migration increases the probability of developing depressive disorders, especially in women. Being able to integrate into the community, and having resources to seek help, are important for these populations to be able to live healthy lives (Schouler-Ocak 2016).

In order to maintain good social and mental health, refugees need to feel comfortable and accepted in their new communities. This anxiety is well expressed in a quote from an interview with an asylum-seeker in Norway: “We fear being rejected, because coming from countries with less education we feel embarrassed, (we) do not know how to communicate, why should they be interested in you? (Varheim 2014)”. For many Muslim refugees, the ability to feel comfortable in their country is hindered by the fact that Muslims are now a target of discrimination and alienation (Pateman 2008).

Another major defining aspect of refugee life is the complete severing from former information landscapes, which consists of social and informational ties that help people make sense of the world. After settling in a new community, refugees need to rebuild these connections. When someone loses their connection to cultural, social, and institutional systems, they have to reorient themselves and reframe their understanding of their knowledge environment. Building social connections is a major part of this process, and social inclusion is of paramount importance. Major barriers to this effort are “language, racism, discrimination and labelling”. Public libraries have been recognized as a good place to help with the rebuilding process, being “safe and non-judgmental place(s) where assistance is offered to enable the developing information literacy practices” (Lloyd 2015).

Though the needs of refugee populations are unique in many ways, it is also important not to exoticize them. When you come to a new place, what’s the first thing you want? For most people in the developed world right now, that answer is “the Wifi password.” It’s the same for refugees, free access to an internet connection is important to refugees, and is often what gets them in the door of a library (Lison 2016). Having smartphones is also particularly important to new refugees, since smartphones can help with navigation and translation in their new environment, as well as help them maintain connections to friends and family (McDermott 2016).

Libraries can help immensely by becoming hubs of the refugee communities, and supplying services and materials that the people are in need of. The circumstances that libraries are facing all over the world are very similar. Libraries aim at making refugees and asylum seekers feel more comfortable in their new surroundings, and since so many libraries are sharing in that task, no one library has to forge ahead alone. There are so many best practice examples and ideas that can be adapted or simply reused.

Libraries often try to invite newcomers from foreign countries to visit the library or to explain their services using images and only few words. This fact gives librarians all over the world the rare chance not only to look what others do but to share material and resources. Why shouldn’t a library in France use a video or a poster somebody in Scandinavia has created?

There is so much to do in terms of assisting refugees to integrate into the labor market for those who have arrived earlier and other tasks that need to consider specific frames and conditions where resources can’t be shared that easily. It would be almost irresponsible not to cooperate where we can.

Looking beyond one’s own nose broadens one’s horizon and is a highlight of our daily work. Conventions like the IFLA give librarians the chance to meet once a year, but there are many colleagues who cannot take part. Having a look at what others do in terms of services to refugees and asylum seekers allows us not only to improve our library’s services but to learn ourselves about libraries and people worldwide.

The rest of this paper will be devoted to examples of materials that we believe could be useful to libraries anywhere. There are many more such materials out there as well, and we hope that librarians and library workers will strive to find those materials that will aid them in their work of helping refugees find a home wherever they are.

## Examples

### Posters:

The Committee for Intercultural Library Services of the German Library Association is going to release a poster soon. It aims at explaining the most important ideas and services about a public library with few words. And it wants to show that the library is a place for everybody where people not only borrow books but also meet, talk, study or play.



It will be available for free download shortly at the German Library Association's website. The illustrator Julia Friese is pretty famous. She has illustrated quite a few children's books of Christian Duda which have been translated to several languages.

Another poster worth considering to work with is originally from Austria. It is just welcoming people with different languages to the library. It shows with very simple instruments the benefits of libraries. Everybody is invited to find his or her personal message when looking at or speaking about the poster. Examples are: Books / studying / reading / education makes you stronger / help(s) to succeed in overcoming difficulties e.g. The poster is available for free download at <http://www.bibliotheksverband.de/dbv/themen/fluechtlinge-willkommen/willkommensplakat.html>.



Another example, a bit older, and originally not meant for refugees but as multicultural service in general is the so-called intercultural look-and-see picture. It was the Committee for Intercultural Library Services of the German Library Association that worked on it with their guest members from Austria and Switzerland. The colleagues from bibliomedia (Switzerland) asked an educationist to run some workshops on ideas how to use the picture in the library. As a result they offer glossaries in twenty languages as well a card game and a “Spot-the-Difference” version (and answers) on their homepage. Of course, the look-and-see picture is available for free download, too.



## Films:

Another approach to give explanations about the basic ideas of public libraries is a little film without words. It could be run in an infinite loop somewhere in the library or it could be sent to groups or classes in preparation of a guided tour in the library, also created by the German Library Association.



Settlement.Org, a website run by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants in Canada, has some materials that may be helpful to communicate what services the library offers. One of these is a series of seventeen videos on Youtube, each explaining the library in a different language. There may be some differences in the services that the Canadian libraries offer and other countries, so differences should be noted if these videos are used (Settlement.Org Youtube).

Another video project, called “A Million Stories” that is currently underway endeavours to document the stories of migrants in four different countries. Libraries in Sweden, Germany, Denmark, and Greece are working together to create written and video records of refugees, funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. These records have not been released yet, but they will begin to share some of the stories in 2018. These could be very useful to libraries looking to educate their local populations about refugee experiences (Stadt Koeln).

## Flyers:

Many libraries do not have the ability or resources to create translated materials about their libraries for refugees or other migrants. Settlement.Org, in addition to the videos mentioned before, has a series of flyers explaining and promoting the library in nineteen different languages. This is another case where all of the facts may not be correct for libraries in other countries, but they can be easily edited with a similar pdf editor to obscure sections that do not apply to your library, and replace “Canada” with your own country's name (Settlement.Org).

It may be useful to find such flyers from countries that have the most similar library system to your own, so the edits that need to be made can be limited. The Finnish library Pirkamaan Kirjastot also has a series of flyers explaining library services in 17 different languages. These may still require some effort, or the help of a native speaker, but it can greatly lower the barrier to have explanatory material in many languages (Pirkamaan Kirjastot).

## Books:

A project which has been an international project from its very first days is a variety of books collected by IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People). It features two collections (2013 and 2015) of children’s books from all over the world. They are called silent books because they are wordless, but they have lots of stories to tell.

The original idea was to create a library on the small Italian island of Lampedusa for use by local and immigrant children. Lampedusa is known for the large number of refugees from Africa and the Middle East as it is the closest European territory to Libya. Several thousand refugees made their way to Lampedusa only in 2015, and several thousand refugees also died on their way there.

The next was to build the 2013 and 2015 collections of silent books which travel around the world and have been displayed in Italy, Mexico, Canada, Austria, Germany and New Zealand.



IBBY Sweden has produced a booklet giving ideas about how to use the Silent Books with children, which can be downloaded. The guide gives suggestions of activities surrounding the silent books, as well as explaining how they can be helpful for refugees (IBBY Sweden).



Displaying the books can contribute to libraries efforts to raise people's awareness of the situation of refugees and asylum seekers. In addition to that, the Annapolis Valley Regional Library in Nova

Scotia has put together of silent books in their own collection, which may be helpful to those looking to enlarge their own silent book collections.

Another great internationally known book often used by libraries for children's activities is a picture book of Carson Friedman Ellis. She is an artist well known for her children's books illustrations. For "Du Iz Tak" she received a Caldecott Honor. It's a story about the cycle of life in an imaginary land. It's written in a made-up (but somehow decipherable) language (Ellis 2017). Children's groups from different origins and with different mother languages enjoy listening to the story translated into several other made-up languages, so it can be a great way to bring together the refugees and non-refugees in a community. They share the experience of what the story is about even if they don't understand the language.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there is huge benefit to international collaboration for libraries who are looking to develop or expand services for refugees, asylum seekers, or other newcomers. By combining our efforts and learning from each other, we can only improve the services that we can offer, especially for smaller institutions with less resources. In addition to that, when it comes to citizen-integration for refugees, libraries have proved more to have more creativity, flexibility, and effectiveness than most other cultural institutions, and are being recognized as such. Many institutions have learned more about the modern library, and come to see them as the vivid, colourful, and multifunctional places they are.

It is important to remember that, no matter what challenge your library is encountering in serving refugees and asylum seekers, other libraries are facing the same issues. Providing services for newcomers is something that every library deals with, so there is no need for each library, or even each country, to reinvent the wheel when it comes to developing resources and services for that population. By collaborating with libraries outside our borders, we expand the pool of materials and knowledge that we can use exponentially, and can discover ideas that we would never have thought of. We hope that some of the materials that we have highlighted today can be of use to other libraries, and we hope that this will help build up a network of librarians internationally who are working to serve newcomers in their communities.

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