

## Risk Communication and Community Engagement: Positive Practices from Europe during COVID

In the context of the COVID pandemic, information can be life-saving and is crucial to ensure equal and non-discriminatory access to health and other basic services. Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced (IDPs) and stateless persons should have access to clear, factual and updated information to be able to protect themselves, their families and the communities in which they live. In Europe, one of UNHCR's operational priorities in response to the pandemic is therefore to support public health efforts by ensuring that all persons of concern to the Agency have access to information in languages, formats, and media that are contextually appropriate and accessible to all groups within the different communities.

Moreover, two-way communication is essential to enable persons of concern to share their feedback, ideas, and proposed solutions to be part of the COVID response. In Europe, as in other parts of the world, refugees and other persons of concern have mobilized in different ways to support the response. In Europe, refugee networks have been essential in the development and dissemination of prevention and hygiene messages. Volunteers are supporting outreach to the most vulnerable and are filling gaps in service provision created by movement restrictions and office closures, including through peer-to-peer support, developing online activities and the distribution of material support. An increasing number of refugees with medical profiles are engaged in the medical response, while others are involved in the production of masks and other essentials. UNHCR's continued engagement with communities allows for its activities to complement and reinforce such initiatives.

UNHCR's continuous dialogue with communities during the COVID response in Europe has also facilitated monitoring and analysis of the dynamic and rapidly changing situation in each country and evolving protection risks facing persons of concern with a view to develop targeted operational responses and advocacy approaches. While the issues raised by persons of concern vary depending on their specific situation and across operations, many of their questions relate to ongoing government restrictions and access to services, including health services, as well as changes in asylum procedures and procedures to obtain or renew documentation. Across the continent, persons of concern are also increasingly raising concerns about the loss of livelihoods – often in the informal sector that does not provide safety nets - and other socio-economic difficulties caused by public health measures to combat the pandemic.

Many government authorities, UNHCR offices and partners, as well as communities themselves, have developed new and innovative communication approaches as part of the COVID response. These positive practices, if maintained and adapted as needed, can contribute to enhanced community engagement across Europe also after the public health emergency has subsided.

This paper is an initial compilation of the promising practices on risk communication and community engagement that have developed in Europe during the COVID pandemic, in complementarity to the UNHCR's Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>1</sup> It seeks to document and share such practices, but also to inspire new initiatives, foster exchange, and further develop a community of practice within the region.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 9 April 2020, available online at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/75453>

## Adapted and innovative approaches

In response to the exceptional situation created by the COVID pandemic in Europe, a number of innovative and flexible approaches have been initiated to address the changing information and communication needs of persons of concern against a backdrop of physical distancing and movement restriction. These restrictions have required government authorities, UNHCR and partners to enhance and diversify the ways in which they reach out to persons of concern, and vice-versa.

Persons of concern are benefiting from a rapid increase of online tools and platforms to connect, inform and support them during lockdown and isolation. However, not everyone has the connectivity or equipment to use such resources. Children, older persons and persons with disabilities are often left behind, as are asylum-seekers, refugees, IDPs or stateless persons that are homeless, staying in informal settlements or in reception centres that are not technically equipped. Concerted efforts are therefore required to effectively reach all populations of concern.

Due regard should also be given to data protection considerations when using online platforms, including by opting for privacy-friendly platforms and tools whenever feasible. When these are not available and/or accessible by persons of concern, data protection risks should be mitigated as much as possible by minimizing the transmission of personal data, and persons of concern should be informed of such potential risks to be able to provide informed consent.

### Call centres and hotlines:

Governments across Europe have established multi-lingual hotlines and call centres to immediately respond to questions from the general public on the virus. Many of these are available or have been adapted to persons of concern, for example:

- ✓ In the United Kingdom, the UK Home Office has set up a **Coronavirus Immigration Help Centre**, which responds to immigration-related queries. The National Health Service (NHS) hotline responds to any medical questions and has interpreters available.<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ The German Commissioner for Integration provides **official information on a website**, including a hotline.<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Health in cooperation with the Ethno-Medical Centre has also established a specific webpage for information related to COVID.<sup>4</sup>
- ✓ In Turkey, in addition to existing hotlines on a variety of issues, **the Ministry of Health has established a new hotline to respond to queries related to COVID**, which operates on a 24-hour basis. Government agencies also actively disseminate information about COVID through TV, twitter and the web pages of the various Ministries.
- ✓ In Sweden, **regional hotlines** have been established in Östergötland and Stockholm.<sup>5</sup>

UNHCR and partner hotlines were in place in most operations in Europe prior to the COVID outbreak.<sup>6</sup> However, a number of operations have significantly expanded their capacity to remain accessible to persons of concern during the COVID period and to respond to the increasing needs.

<sup>2</sup> The Immigration Help Centre is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents#helpline> and the NHS hotline at: [https://111.nhs.uk/?utm\\_source=nhsuk&utm\\_campaign=nhs\\_services&utm\\_content=nhs\\_111](https://111.nhs.uk/?utm_source=nhsuk&utm_campaign=nhs_services&utm_content=nhs_111).

<sup>3</sup> The official website is available at: <https://www.integrationsbeauftragte.de/ib-de/amt-und-person/informationen-zum-coronavirus>

<sup>4</sup> The official website is available at: <https://www.zusammengegegencorona.de/en/>

<sup>5</sup> The hotline for the Östergötland region is available at: <https://www.1177.se/Ostergotland/sa-fungerar-varden/varden-i-ostergotland/samlad-information-om-coronaviruset/telefonlinje-om-covid-19-pa-olika-sprak/> and the hotline for the Stockholm region is available at: <https://www.transkulturelltcentrum.se/aktuellt/telefonlinje-om-corona-for-nyanlanda/>

<sup>6</sup> In Europe, 31 out of 34 UNHCR offices have direct and two-way communication with persons of concern (hotlines/call centres and dedicated email addresses). In the remaining offices, communication with communities is maintained through partners.

- ✓ Two additional **UNHCR protection helplines were established on the Aegean islands** of Chios and Lesbos in Greece to enhance communications with asylum-seekers, and in particular to remain in contact with persons-at-risk who were relocated to hotels as a preventive measure.
- ✓ In Turkey, the **UNHCR counselling line** enables refugees and asylum-seekers to ask questions and seek counselling and information, including about COVID, in Arabic, English, Farsi, French, Hindi, Kurdish, Pashto, Somali, Turkish and Urdu.
- ✓ In Malta, **UNHCR and partners have also set up new helplines**, which are supported by interpreters in the main languages spoken by asylum-seekers and refugees, and can receive calls, voice messages, SMS and WhatsApp messages.
- ✓ In Azerbaijan, **UNHCR counselling hours have been expanded** as a consequence of a sharp increase in the number of calls from persons of concern.
- ✓ In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Red Cross is operating a hotline in six languages. Specific **guidance was provided to hotline staff** on how to respond to questions on COVID.

### Visual and auditory material:

Videos and auditory material with risk mitigation and hygiene messages have been effective tools in the COVID response, in particular when developed by, and featuring, persons of concern.

- ✓ **Informational videos** are available in Austria,<sup>7</sup> Italy,<sup>8</sup> and Sweden<sup>9</sup>. In the United Kingdom, a Local Council has also translated COVID videos into several languages.<sup>10</sup>
- ✓ The Berlin State Office for Refugee Affairs has **launched podcasts in several languages** with general information about COVID, as well as specific advice related to Ramadan.<sup>11</sup>
- ✓ In Luxembourg, the **#LIHTellMeWhy campaign of the Institute of Health** develops cartoons on a weekly basis to explain COVID in an easy and child-friendly manner.<sup>12</sup>
- ✓ In the Netherlands, the Dutch Council for Refugees is **posting weekly video blogs** on YouTube for asylum-seeking and refugee children instead of their regular activities in the reception facilities. The blogs contain information about COVID and ideas for activities.<sup>13</sup>
- ✓ In Greece, UNHCR has worked in collaboration with the NGO Solidarity Now to **develop regular podcasts** in different languages to explain prevention and hygiene messages, promote mental health and support refugee youth.<sup>14</sup>
- ✓ In the Emergency Transit Centre in Romania, a **WHO video with prevention measures** was translated into different languages and is regularly played for persons living there.
- ✓ In Ukraine, **webinars were organized with IDPs** to share information on COVID and other relevant issues, such as local housing and IDP programs.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Videos are available online at: <https://help.unhcr.org/austria/covid-19-coronavirus-information/protective-measures-and-general-information/>

<sup>8</sup> Videos are available online at: [https://coronavirus.jumamap.com/it\\_it/video/](https://coronavirus.jumamap.com/it_it/video/)

<sup>9</sup> Videos are available online at: <https://tellcorona.com/language/english/>

<sup>10</sup> Videos are available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLggQFjpTLgplqOr7-nFO9mT6j8Yk2vKbt>

<sup>11</sup> Podcasts are available online at: [https://www.berlin.de/laf/leistungen/gesundheit/infektionsschutz/#download\\_quarant%C3%A4ne](https://www.berlin.de/laf/leistungen/gesundheit/infektionsschutz/#download_quarant%C3%A4ne)

<sup>12</sup> The website of the Luxembourg Institute of Health is available online at: <https://www.lih.lu/page/tell-me-why>

<sup>13</sup> Video blogs is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JFluy3c8Ww>

<sup>14</sup> Podcasts are available online at: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3\\_NISfsgtzTCaalHj1L4o51YdamcsZZt](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3_NISfsgtzTCaalHj1L4o51YdamcsZZt)

<sup>15</sup> All the recordings of the webinars are available on YouTube. See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw6iBsDN8AY&t=198s>

- ✓ **Multimedia (audio and video) messages** are also being regularly developed by UNHCR, in close cooperation with cultural mediators, for mass dissemination through WhatsApp networks and Facebook groups to persons of concern in Malta and in Turkey.

### Social media:

In response to the COVID crisis, refugees and other persons of concern have mobilized through social media to share information and offer support. Social media has also provided government authorities, UNHCR and partners with a rapid, effective and low-cost medium of communication with displaced and stateless communities during the pandemic.

- ✓ In Ukraine, IDPs set up **Viber groups and Telegram channels** to support communities in conflict-affected areas. A telegram channel was also launched by a UNHCR partner, to share daily government updates on the COVID situation with refugee communities in six languages, with 180 persons subscribed so far.<sup>16</sup>
- ✓ In Turkey, a **WhatsApp tree has been established** by UNHCR during the COVID period, which currently reaches 10,165 persons of concern across the country.
- ✓ **WhatsApp and Viber groups** are also used by UNHCR and its partners as two-way communication channels with communities in Georgia, Malta, Montenegro and Moldova.
- ✓ In Sweden, the Cooperative Organization for Immigrant Unions in Uppsala has set up **WhatsApp groups on COVID in 15 languages** to help people find reliable information in their own language.<sup>17</sup>

### Other digital platforms:

- ✓ **Refugies.info**, an online platform managed by the inter-ministerial delegation in charge of reception and integration of refugees (Diair) in France, provides persons of concern with updated information about COVID.<sup>18</sup> The content of the website is developed together with refugee volunteers and responds to questions raised by refugees and asylum-seekers, including through a live chat-function which offers individualized responses.
- ✓ In Italy, the **JUMA multi-lingual information portal** provides persons of concern with access to information on COVID, health advisories, regulations and movement restrictions, administrative procedures and available services.<sup>19</sup> The portal includes videos, podcasts, and service mapping. Links to the portal are available on the website of the Italian Ministry of Health and other national institutions.
- ✓ In Germany, important information on COVID in several languages has been included in online apps, such as **Integreat**, which is often used by refugees and migrants.<sup>20</sup>
- ✓ The digital **Services Advisor** in Turkey shows updated services and activities related to the COVID response, implemented by UN agencies, NGOs and local authorities.<sup>21</sup>
- ✓ In the Netherlands, a **coalition of refugee-led organizations**, the Refugee Corona Action Committee, has set up a help desk to respond to questions on COVID.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The telegram channel is available online at: [https://t.me/the\\_tenth\\_of\\_april](https://t.me/the_tenth_of_april)

<sup>17</sup> SIU is an umbrella organization of about 40 immigrant associations in Uppsala; their website is available at: <http://www.siupsala.se/>

<sup>18</sup> The online platform can be accessed here: <https://www.refugies.info/homepage>

<sup>19</sup> The online platform can be accessed here: [https://coronavirus.jumamap.com/it\\_it/](https://coronavirus.jumamap.com/it_it/)

<sup>20</sup> The application is available online at: <https://integreat-app.de/>

<sup>21</sup> The Services Advisor is available online at: <https://turkey.servicesadvisor.org/en>

<sup>22</sup> The helpdesk of the Refugee Corona Action Committee is available online at: <https://www.facebook.com/C19helpdesk>

- ✓ The NGO Right to Protection in Ukraine has elaborated **chat bots with legal information**, one for refugees<sup>23</sup> and one for IDPs<sup>24</sup>, which includes questions and answers related to COVID.
- ✓ In Austria, the authorities have supported an **innovative app** which enables refugees and asylum-seekers to access real-time and updated news, including COVID information, from the authorities, as well as translated TV content through sub-titles in different languages.<sup>25</sup>
- ✓ **Diaspora TV Switzerland**, an independent TV station, provides broadcasts for refugees and migrants in Switzerland in 8 languages, which also includes information about COVID.<sup>26</sup>

### Remote survey and feedback mechanisms:

- ✓ UNHCR in Spain has launched a **COVID online questionnaire** to consult 750 refugees and asylum-seekers on protection concerns during the COVID crisis. These consultations allow UNHCR to reach out to a broader range of individuals and to assess the specific situation of at-risk groups, such as older persons and persons with disabilities.
- ✓ In Germany, UNHCR has conducted **two virtual focus group discussions** to obtain information from persons of concern regarding their current situation and needs.
- ✓ In Moldova, the NGO Law Centre of Advocates is **contacting every refugee family by phone** to compile their feedback and provide socio-economic counselling, if needed.
- ✓ In other operations, such as Azerbaijan, **remote household surveys** are conducted to identify and support persons with specific needs, including through cash-based interventions.

### UNHCR help page and official webpages:

- ✓ 11 UNHCR offices in the region have a **dedicated UNHCR help page**.<sup>27</sup> All of these pages now include information about COVID, current restrictions and available services.
- ✓ Other offices have included **information about COVID on their websites**, for example in Belgium<sup>28</sup>, Bulgaria<sup>29</sup>, France<sup>30</sup>, Germany<sup>31</sup>, Ireland<sup>32</sup>, Poland<sup>33</sup> and the United Kingdom<sup>34</sup>.
- ✓ In Northern Europe, **links to the national authorities' official websites** in the eight countries in that region are shared through the UNHCR website.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The chat bot for refugees is available online at: <https://www.facebook.com/RefugeeHelperBot/>

<sup>24</sup> The chat bot for IDPs is available online at: <https://www.facebook.com/IDP.legal.aid>

<sup>25</sup> The application is available online at: <https://www.uugot.it/>

<sup>26</sup> The website of Diaspora TV Switzerland is available at: <http://www.diaspora-tv.ch/>

<sup>27</sup> These 11 offices are in Austria, Bosnia Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine. The UNHCR HELP page is available online at: <https://help.unhcr.org/>

<sup>28</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Belgium and Luxembourg is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/be/26347-guide-covid-19-pour-les-demandeurs-dasile-et-les-refugies-en-belgique-et-au-luxembourg.html>

<sup>29</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Bulgaria is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/bg/info-covid-19>

<sup>30</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in France is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/avec-les-refugies-en-france-face-au-covid-19.html>

<sup>31</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Germany is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/dach/de/aktuelles/coronavirus>

<sup>32</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Ireland is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/news/updates/2020/3/5e81d1ce4/information-on-covid-19-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-ireland.html>

<sup>33</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Poland is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/pl/3675-covid-19-informacje-dla-cudzoziemcow.html>

<sup>34</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in the United Kingdom is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/unhcr-uk-fags-on-covid-19-in-relation-to-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.html>

<sup>35</sup> The webpage for UNHCR in Northern Europe is available at: [www.unhcr.org/neu/35623-information-on-coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html](http://www.unhcr.org/neu/35623-information-on-coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html)

## Participation and community mobilization

The engagement of refugee, IDP and stateless communities in the COVID response is critical to effectively develop, disseminate and evaluate public health campaigns, as well as to identify protection risks and reinforce community initiatives. Building on existing networks in the region, UNHCR and its partners seek to mobilize and empower refugees and other persons of concern and identify further opportunities to promote meaningful participation and broader community engagement in the COVID response.



- ✓ In Spain, **refugee focal point volunteers** are reaching out to specific population groups who are potentially less connected with civil society and social networks, or who might face communication challenges such as limited access to connectivity and language barriers, or vulnerabilities. The feedback that is collected informs UNHCR and partner interventions, as part of an ongoing survey.
- ✓ In France, **a network of refugee volunteers** is working with UNHCR, the inter-ministerial delegation in charge of reception and integration of refugees (Diair) and NGOs to support the response to COVID. During group discussions and bilateral exchanges, refugees share their concerns and give feedback about actions taken by stakeholders. Refugees are also involved with information-sharing and translation activities, in the promotion of activities to maintain social ties, and participating in working sessions and events. A series of portraits on the engagement of refugees to help tackle COVID-related challenges is being published on UNHCR's website.<sup>36</sup>
- ✓ In Ukraine, refugee communities are supporting the **provision of food, hygienic items, financial and housing support** to the most vulnerable community members. Refugee women have also developed a **livelihoods project to produce protective masks for persons of concern** with support by UNHCR (covering production costs and the purchase of materials). Masks are distributed at Temporary Accommodation Centres and in communities as masks are not easily available on the local market.
- ✓ IDP communities in Central and Western Ukraine are **taking part in the coordinating committees led by local authorities**, volunteering to help local authorities distribute groceries to older people, running counselling hotlines, and conducting psychosocial support and art therapy classes for adolescents online.
- ✓ In Norway, **community-based organizations and NGOs hold weekly digital meetings with the municipality in Oslo** to gain a better understanding of the situation, discuss needs, and agree on further actions to ensure that everyone, including persons of concern, comply with public health measures and regulations.
- ✓ In Malta and Cyprus, **refugee representatives and outreach volunteers** act as the interface between UNHCR and communities of concern, amplifying the voices of the community and supporting the dissemination of information material. In Georgia, exchanges between UNHCR and **IDP community volunteers** ensure that needs are identified in a timely manner and conveyed to the responsible state agency.
- ✓ A **UNHCR Community Dialogue-Facebook group** was created by refugee community associations and UNHCR in Austria to maintain an easily accessible two-way communication platform to share information and good practices and identify needs. In addition, the **#CommunityHeroes** initiative presents refugees and

<sup>36</sup> The refugee portraits are available online at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/4/5e9460f74/refugees-offer-medical-experience-help-tackle-coronavirus-crisis-france.html>

migrants who are contributing to the COVID response<sup>37</sup>, and the **telephone chain COVID19** encourages and trains individuals to actively call people-at-risk, including persons of concern, and to provide them with information in different languages.<sup>38</sup>

- ✓ Diverse communities in the Czech Republic, including the Roma and Vietnamese community, as well as persons of concern, have mobilized to respond to the COVID pandemic at the local level by **sewing handmade safety masks**.<sup>39</sup>

## Prevention and risk education

Across Europe, national health authorities are taking the lead in the dissemination of risk education and hygiene measures to curb the spread of COVID, including to persons of concern. In France, for example, the Ministry of Health has translated all its prevention material into 24 languages to make sure it is accessible to everyone.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in the United Kingdom, all asylum-seekers accommodated in initial accommodation have received translated government guidance to ensure they are aware of relevant advice. In Switzerland, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health and the State Secretariat for Migration have produced various factsheets on COVID, which have been translated into 15 languages and posted in all federal reception centres.

UNHCR and partners across the region are reinforcing such public health efforts by translating, printing and adapting relevant information material from WHO and national health authorities. UNHCR also works closely with communities to ensure that messages are tailored to the cultural, language and communication preferences of persons of concern within each context, and adapted to the needs of children, older persons, minority groups and persons with disabilities. Additional efforts to ensure that risk education reaches all persons of concern include:



- ✓ In Hungary, UNHCR organises **individual and group counselling on COVID** for those who are not connected with civil society networks and might face communication challenges due to limited internet access.
- ✓ In Romania, **a self-isolation guide for asylum-seekers in reception centres**, which describes the key prevention and physical distancing measures, was translated into ten languages and is being distributed to all new arrivals.
- ✓ Along the 'contact line' in Ukraine, many vulnerable households and older persons do not have access to television, radio or internet. For this reason, UNHCR and its partner Proliska **use loudspeakers to communicate COVID prevention messages to isolated communities** in ten locations along the contact line.
- ✓ In Belarus, **a basic COVID leaflet was developed and 6,000 copies distributed** through the Belarusian Red Cross Society among UNHCR partners and in public places in Minsk city and in six regions of the country.
- ✓ UNHCR and partners in Malta are **supporting the authorities with a schedule of interpreters for relevant languages** so that asylum-seekers and refugees can call the national COVID helpline for information and support.

<sup>37</sup> #CommunityHeros is available on the website of UNHCR Austria at: [www.unhcr.at/communityheroes](http://www.unhcr.at/communityheroes)

<sup>38</sup> The website of telephone chain COVID is available at: <http://www.thisispublichealth.at/telefon-kette/>

<sup>39</sup> UN news story available online at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1060802>

<sup>40</sup> These translations are made accessible on the official website of the French Ministry of Health at: <https://www.santepubliquefrance.fr/maladies-et-traumatismes/maladies-et-infections-respiratoires/infection-a-coronavirus/articles/coronavirus-outils-de-prevention-destines-aux-professionnels-de-sante-et-au-grand-public#block-240739>, as well as on the Diar website, available at: <https://accueil-integration-refugies.fr/covid-19-la-diar-se-mobilise/>.

- ✓ In Montenegro, **2,500 printed copies of WHO material have been distributed** by UNHCR and partners in state-provided accommodation, state institutions and settlements under the Regional Housing Programme for former refugees.

## Enhancing continued access to services

Two-way communication with persons of concern has proven to be essential not only to disseminate risk mitigation and hygiene measures, but also to inform persons of concern about government restrictions and the availability of protection and assistance services. Such communication ensures regular feedback to service providers, helps detect and respond to rumours and misinformation, and to identify discriminatory practices or difficulties in accessing services. For UNHCR and other stakeholders, information gathered through these communications has also served evidence-based advocacy and operational interventions in cooperation with national authorities and partners.



- ✓ UNHCR in Ukraine has developed a **Q&A for IDPs and conflict-affected persons with the most frequently asked questions regarding the current measures**, such as movement restrictions, and practical guidance on how to access pensions and renew bank cards. UNHCR partners continue to provide language courses online, individual psychological counselling (via Viber and Skype), and remote legal assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers. IDPs and conflict-affected persons who are affected by the lockdown also benefit from legal aid provided by UNHCR and its NGO partners.
- ✓ In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees publishes updated **information on asylum procedures in the context of COVID** in 13 languages.<sup>41</sup> The German government and state authorities also provide specific information to workers and small business owners,<sup>42</sup> and a 24/7 hotline is available to women who are victims of violence in 17 languages.<sup>43</sup>
- ✓ In Austria, the **online platform weiterlernen.at** is a joint initiative of governmental and non-governmental actors to provide support to children, parents and teachers, including through the matching of 'digital buddies'.<sup>44</sup> The platform also offers technical equipment and information, tools and materials from educational institutions and NGOs. The initiative is currently planning to include a multi-lingual feature, which will also make it easier for refugees and asylum-seekers to utilize the platform.
- ✓ The **Partecipazione capacity-building and empowerment program** promotes the active participation of refugees and asylum-seekers in the social, economic and cultural life in Italy, with the support of UNHCR and Intersos.<sup>45</sup> Its online workshops, training, and other activities have proven particularly important during the confinement.
- ✓ In Moldova, UNHCR partners have compiled a list of more than 100 volunteering psychologists that provide **free of charge psychosocial and emotional support**. Most of the activities of the Community Centre continue in online form, including language classes, women's club meetings, thematic group discussions, exchanges on cooking recipes, and e-learning tools for children.

<sup>41</sup> The website is available online at: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/AsylFluechtlingsschutz/infoblatt-antragstellung-corona.html>

<sup>42</sup> The website is available online at: <https://www.integrationsbeauftragte.de/ib-de/amt-und-person/informationen-zum-coronavirus#tar-5>

<sup>43</sup> The website is available online at: <https://www.hilfetelefon.de/das-hilfetelefon/beratung/beratung-in-17-sprachen/englisch.html>

<sup>44</sup> The website is available online at: <https://weiterlernen.at/>

<sup>45</sup> The website is available online at: <https://partecipazione.intersos.org/>



- ✓ In the United Kingdom, the NGO Off the Record has developed online support for young refugees, including the **Dear Friend Programme** where youth give advice to others on how to cope during COVID.<sup>46</sup> The Young Roots initiative is also running online youth club activities, such as yoga and girls groups, using WhatsApp and Zoom.<sup>47</sup>
- ✓ In Austria and the Czech Republic, UNHCR and partners are collecting and distributing **information about employment issues during COVID for refugees and asylum-seekers**. In Austria, for example, this includes eased legal requirements for persons with health diploma from other countries to practice their professions, options for short-time work, and guidance on how to report job loss and apply for unemployment benefits, as well as educational material and other resources.<sup>48</sup>
- ✓ **Community group facilitators in Georgia remain actively engaged in online peer-to-peer support on COVID** and other health issues. Online educational support is provided to children in the reception centre through catch-up classes for school children and activities for kindergarten children.
- ✓ UNHCR partners in Serbia provide online **psychosocial support and language classes and facilitate access to education for children** via online platforms.
- ✓ In Romania, a **targeted messaging campaign** was launched by UNHCR, the Jesuit Refugee Service and the Romanian National Council for Refugees, to raise awareness of the risks of SGBV in the context of COVID and the services available to survivors. The campaign is targeting urban refugees and asylum-seekers through short messages disseminated through social media, community organizations and NGOs, and will be followed by thematic online sessions, open to refugees, mediators and volunteers.

## Interagency cooperation

Throughout the region, UNHCR works closely with other UN agencies, NGOs, community-based and refugee-led organizations as well as national authorities to harmonize approaches and avoid duplication in relation to the COVID response.



- ✓ A **Communication Team** has been activated within the UN Country Team in Turkey, and UNHCR continues to consolidate, translate and disseminate relevant public advisories, made available through posters and social media.
- ✓ In Greece, a **CWC Working Group** is co-chaired between UNHCR and the NGO Solidarity Now at national level and in Thessaloniki to coordinate, consolidate and disseminate COVID-related information, including through strengthened outreach in social media.
- ✓ Through an **Outreach Working Group**, UNHCR in Hungary is in contact with grass-root and refugee-led organizations and other partners to assess refugees' needs in the context of the COVID response.
- ✓ In Montenegro, the UN system and the Government prepared a **joint Risk Communication and Community Engagement Strategy**, which provides immediate and long-term community engagement measures in the context of COVID.

<sup>46</sup> The website is available online at: <https://www.talkofftherecord.org/coping-with-covid-19/refugee-support/>

<sup>47</sup> The website is available online at: <https://youngroots.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Croydon-Services-during-COVID-19-shut-down.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> See information on UNHCR Austria's webpage: <https://help.unhcr.org/austria/covid-19-information/>

UNHCR and IOM ensure that refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants and persons at risk of statelessness are included in these measures.

- ✓ UNHCR is part of the **Communications Coordination Group in the Abkhazia region of Georgia** which coordinates the efforts of UN agencies, international organizations and NGOs in raising awareness on measures to prevent the spread of COVID.

**UNHCR**  
**Regional Bureau for Europe**  
**May 2020**