



Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on  
refugee integration in Croatia

## Acknowledgements

This report is based on the Participatory Assessment, which was conducted by UNHCR Croatia and the Croatian Red Cross, with 99 beneficiaries of international protection, between 16 June and 8 July 2020. UNHCR is grateful for the extensive involvement and support of the Croatian Red Cross, who undertook operational arrangements for the Participatory Assessment and contributed to this report.

Most importantly, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the resilience and strength of those forcibly displaced who have found their new home in Croatia and who continue to share with us their challenges, hopes and fears on a daily basis.

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#### COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

*The Zagreb 041 Football Club brings together children from different backgrounds, including asylum seeker children, who are all united by their love of sports. @UNHCR/Bojan Mrđenović, January 2020*

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*This Syrian couple had not seen their daughter and son in law for six years and met their grandchildren for the first time in Zagreb @UNHCR/Marko Mihaljević, November 2020*

## Introduction

This report represents the views and ideas of recipients beneficiaries of international protection (further on referred to as: refugees) expressed during the Participatory Assessment, which was conducted in the summer of 2020. UNHCR will work closely with its government counterparts and partner organizations through a multi-sectoral approach to address the protection concerns highlighted by refugees in this report. UNHCR and partners will, in particular, support operational coordination that ensures protection mainstreaming, emphasizes community involvement and supports self-reliance and inclusion of refugees in the national systems. UNHCR calls on all relevant actors to consider the recommendations stemming from this report.

# Operational Context

Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and its asylum and integration system is in line with international standards and the Common European Asylum System. The International and Temporary Protection Act enacted in 2015 is fully aligned with the EU acquis. The Act has since been amended in 2017 to further improve the allocation of State funded accommodation to refugees.

Since 2004, when Croatia established the asylum procedure, until the end of 2020, Croatia granted protection to 942 persons, including 250 Syrian refugees resettled from Turkey and 81 refugees who arrived from Greece and Italy under an EU relocation scheme.

The Croatian Government established a Permanent Commission for the Implementation of Integration of Foreigners into Croatian Society as a central body to among other issues, monitor refugee integration and suggest measures for improvement. The Commission's Working Group (WG) oversees operational arrangements, including drafting Integration Action Plans (IAPs). The Government has since adopted two IAPs covering 2013-2015 and 2017-19, while the WG is currently drafting the one for 2021-2023.

The Croatian Government provides a generous integration programme for refugees, including free accommodation with paid utilities for the initial two years upon granting international protection. Refugees have the same right to healthcare, work, social benefits and education as Croatian nationals. Refugees are entitled to Croatian language and culture classes and support with integration for three years, as well as other rights under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Some refugees however decide to depart to other EU countries, mainly to join relatives.

In March 2020, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities introduced restrictive measures to counter the virus. Just like Croatian nationals, the refugee population was also affected by the measures, particularly as the majority are employed in industries heavily affected by the pandemic, such as construction, the food service industry, warehousing, catering, etc.

In this context, UNHCR conducted this survey to assess the impact of the pandemic on refugees and identify specific needs.

## Consultations with Refugees

Refugees are at the centre of UNHCR's decision-making concerning their protection and well-being and thus directly consulted about their protection situation. Consultations with refugees are carried out through a process called a Participatory Assessment (further on: PA). The PA involves holding separate discussions with refugees divided along the Age, Gender and Diversity considerations, to gather information on specific protection risks they face and their underlying causes, understand their capacities and hear their proposed solutions. In this way, refugees have an opportunity to participate as partners in the design of programmatic responses to issues affecting their lives. The PA is normally conducted by UNHCR, NGO partners and, if feasible, governmental partners, establishing a multifunctional team (MFT) to engage in dialogue with refugees.



*UNHCR partner in integration, the Croatian Red Cross delivers IKEA donation to refugees across Croatia, @CRC/July 2020*

Since 2017, UNHCR and the MFT in Croatia, with operational support of the Croatian Red Cross (CRC), have been organizing PAs with refugees in the CRC's Integration House or visiting them in their homes. In 2020, the COVID-19 measures in place restricted encounters with refugees to mainly virtual contacts, and it was not possible to

establish the MFT and organise participation of authorities and different organizations that provide services for refugees, i.e. implementing and operational partners.

In spring 2020, IKEA made a generous donation to UNHCR, including various household items and products for children, for some 500 refugees to mitigate health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNHCR arranged with CRC to organize a door-to-door donation delivery to refugees and used the opportunity to benefit from this distribution method and conduct a PA at the same time.

## Methodology

To facilitate the PA, UNHCR prepared a questionnaire (see below). The questionnaire took into account the limited time available for interviews and challenges to conduct separate interviews with different age and gender groups under the COVID -19 context. It thus focused on the most relevant areas of life of both adults and children, and challenges faced during COVID-19 pandemic, such as access to employment and attendance to school, as well as modalities of communication with the local community, sense of acceptance and level of integration into society.

The CRC team used the questionnaire during the delivery of IKEA items to refugee families in their apartments /houses, and with single refugees who were invited to the CRC Integration House to collect the donated items. The CRC team (composed of a social worker, a psychologist and cultural mediator/interpreter) conducted a semi-structured discussion in line with the questionnaire. Refugees' participation in the PA was voluntary and anonymous. All epidemiological measures were fully respected during the exercise, which impacted on the length of interviews.

### QUESTIONNAIRE:

#### *Access to labour market:*

*Who normally works within the family, men, or women or both? What is the age? Do women face problems of lack of access to labour market? Were there any changes in access to labour market as result of the COVID-19 measures? What skills do women and men have that will enable them to earn an income? What training/education/re-qualification they need in order to find job or be more competitive in labour market?*

#### *Education:*

*What do girls and boys do with their time? Who goes to school? Who does not go to school? What do girls who do not go to school do with their time? And boys? Who stays at home? What is the impact on the family?*

#### *Integration to local community:*

*Do you know your neighbours? Do you socialize with them? Or just greet and pass by? How do you feel doing shopping or any other task? Do you feel accepted? Did you ever experience any incident? If yes, what did you do about it? What about children? Do they play with other children in the playground? If older, do they have friends? Do they socialize with them, go out and play, talk, sit in coffee shop?*

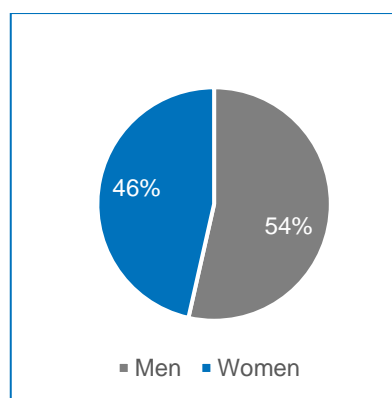
*If you face any issues, what/who may help you to solve it?*



## Profile of Refugees

The PA, conducted between 16 June and 8 July 2020, covered 99 refugees, of whom 53 were men and 46 were women (Chart 1). They represented 16 families with 83 family members, including 50 children, and 16 single refugees, of which three women. The refugees are living in Zagreb, Karlovac, Sisak, Zadar, Požega and Velika Gorica respectively (Table 1 and Map 1 below).

Chart 1: Gender breakdown of interviewed refugees:



The majority of the refugees arrived under the resettlement programme. While all the families originate from Syria, among single refugees there are 12 Syrians, and one from Iraq, Palestine, and Sierra Leone respectively.

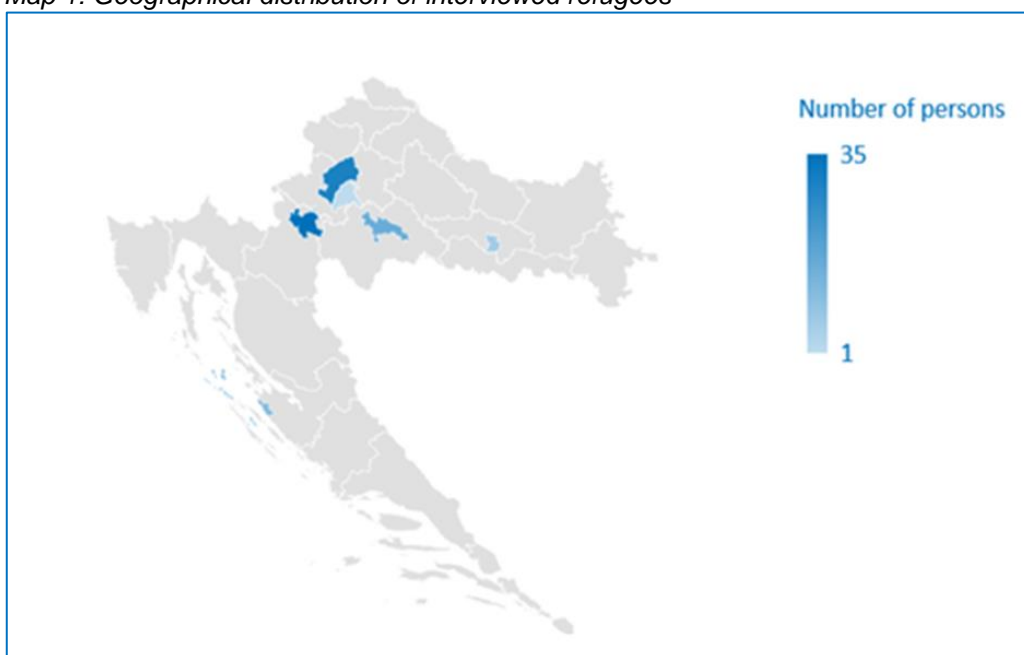
Table 1. Geographic breakdown

Location	Single refugees	Families	Family members	Number of persons
Zagreb	14	3	16	30
Karlovac	1	7	34	35
Sisak	-	3	16	16
Zadar	-	2	11	11
Požega	-	1	6	6
Velika Gorica	1	-	-	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>99</b>

Most of the interviewees were granted refugee status in 2019 after coming to Croatia through the resettlement programme from Turkey. For most of the refugee families (10) and half of the single refugees, the cost of rent and utilities are covered by the

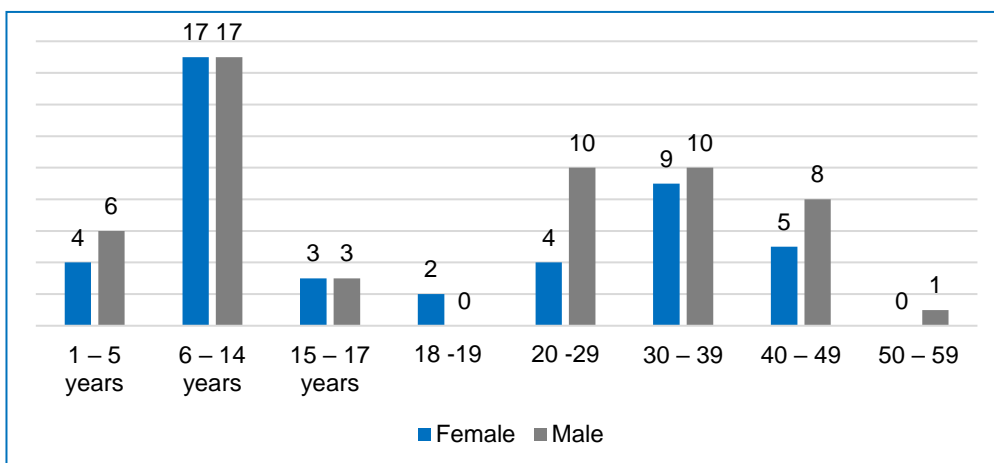
Government for a two-year period from the moment they received refugee status, while for six families and eight single refugees this period has already expired and they are covering the above costs themselves.

Map 1: Geographical distribution of interviewed refugees



The following chart shows the age and gender breakdown of children and adult PA participants (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Age and gender breakdown of interviewed refugees



# Main Findings

Despite the above-mentioned challenges in conducting the PA, analysis of refugees' responses provided a good overview of how they are handling the current situation and possible ways of overcoming the challenges they face. While COVID 19 has had an obvious impact, mainly on employment, it appears very much the same as the impact on Croatian nationals and none of the findings suggested any discriminatory treatment. In general, one of the main issues that transpired from the majority of respondents is that access to the labour market is hampered by the language barrier as well as by the lack of recognition of previously acquired skills that were undocumented. The refugee children are enrolled in schools where they feel integrated, while the survey did not provide an insight into the enrolment process or their educational achievements. Although there is a difference in family composition and the way they socialize with neighbours and the wider community, most of the refugees, including children, feel accepted and did not report any major incidents or instances of discrimination. It is noted that integration into local communities is still ongoing as the majority of refugees arrived two to three years ago.

## a) Integration into the Labour Market

Refugees often face multiple challenges while attempting to successfully integrate into local labour markets, such as language barriers, difficulties in recognition of previously acquired skills, and limited social and professional networks in the area where they are looking for jobs. They may not be familiar with workplace ethics and local businesses. In addition, there is a competition with native-born job applicants. This has been corroborated by the responses of the refugees.

Among the 16 single refugees, ten of them (or 63%), including two women, are employed while the other six (or 37%) are not working. Two men reported that they lost their job or income due to COVID-19. Among those who are working, four refugees (two men and two women) reported reductions in working hours and salaries (up to 50%) due to COVID-19. Furthermore, two persons noted COVID-19 pandemic as a factor in the decline in job opportunities.

The employment rate among families is the same as for single refugees – 63%. In ten families the male head of family is the only one working, in one family both husband and wife are working while in five families nobody is employed. It is noteworthy that all the families without a single employed family member live outside Zagreb, in smaller towns

(four in Sisak and one family in Karlovac), which may be a reflection on the availability of employment opportunities.

*If I could learn the language and finish training for seamstress, I would be able to find a job.*

**Female refugee from Syria**

Most women believe that they lack skills and education and mainly identify themselves only as housewives (9), while a few of them mentioned sewing, cooking skills and knowledge of English as possible advantages in job search. Among all

interviewed women, both single and in families, only three (15%) are working (as saleswoman, assistant cook, and seamstress).

Regarding access to labour market for women, in seven families (44%) women do not know whether there are challenges in accessing the labour market, partially because they are not interested in working (two women), one has recently given birth to a baby and one has a medical problem. In six families (37%), women believe it is more difficult for them to find and keep the job; two refer to language barrier, one to lack of skills and additionally, two stated they must take care of their children. In three families (19%) women believe there is no difference in access to labour market for men and women. Of three single women interviewed, two find no problems in accessing the labour market, while one has no experience.

The surveyed refugees possess a variety of skills that may facilitate their access to labour market. Refugee men mentioned previous experience as hairdresser, cook, butcher, turner, welder, carpenter, fisherman, ceramist, shoemaker, housepainter, possessing a driving license (including for heavy vehicles), sewing skills, managing a craft shop, working with plaster boards/interior construction works, working at a quarry, experience with machinery for metal processing and with excavator.

*It is difficult to find job in Sisak, especially now, due to "corona".*

**Male refugee from Syria**

When discussing the type of training or additional education needed to be more competitive at the labour market, the men said that they would like to learn: sewing (5 persons), IT skills, language skills, Croatian language, driving, additional training or on-the-job training in construction works. The refugee women would like to educate themselves to be seamstresses, work in beauty / massage salon, and would like to have additional Croatian language classes.

Four refugees attend ongoing re-training sessions on the following skills: protection at work, creating promotional leaflets, production / manufacturing of firefighting equipment, hairdresser.

The issue of insufficient knowledge of the Croatian language has consistently been raised by refugees as one of the impediments towards successful integration during the PAs conducted in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The main reason was either refugees not being provided language classes in full extent of 280 hours (2017/2018), or not being offered language courses beyond 70 hours (2019).

## b) School Integration

Integration into the education system is important for refugee children both for their academic prospects as well as for their social and emotional well-being. Successful integration in schools can also affect the future labour market and social integration potential of the children. The PA has shown that majority of children were enrolled in the national educational system, except of one child who is attending adult education due to age (17) and previous educational records. The pandemic affected refugee children in the same manner as their peers but no serious issues with online education were identified.

*Muhammed is going to the 1st grade of elementary school and is very well accepted by his classmates.*

**Muhammed's father, Syrian refugee**

Among 16 interviewed families, 14 have children, in total 50, 24 girls and 26 boys. Most of the children (38 or 76%), are included in the education system: 33 attend elementary school (17 girls and 16 boys), two

girls attend high school, a 17-year-old boy is in a vocational training program, while three girls attend kindergarten/preschool. Among the 50 children, there are four new-born babies (3 boys and 1 girl) and six children below school age (three girls and three boys). Three children (all in one family) are with disabilities: a new-born baby, a 9-year old boy whose condition prevents him from regular school attendance and a 16-year-old boy who has undergone several surgeries but is attending school.

Table 4: Refugee children inclusion into education, per institution type and gender

INCLUSION IN EDUCATION	Girls	Boys	Total
Elementary school	17	16	33
High school	2	-	2
Kindergarten/Pre-school	3	-	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>38</b>

Two children below school age are currently awaiting enrolment into kindergarten, the family said that they asked an NGO for assistance with the process and expect the enrolment to take place soon.

Apart from attending school, children mentioned undertaking different activities in their free time: studying, playing computer games, language classes, sport, playing, watching TV, following school online, online English classes, reading books in English and Croatian, training martial arts, riding bicycle.

During the two-month COVID-19 lockdown in spring, schools were organised online. Lower grades of elementary school (1st – 4th) were following classes on a designated TV channel, while higher grades (5th – 8th) followed online classes on their PCs from mid-March until the end of the school semester in mid-June 2020.

None of the families mentioned any problems with the online school. Two families mentioned some challenges related to lack of space: small apartment where boys and girls share the same room and a six-member family in 65 m<sup>2</sup> apartment and only two rooms. Parents felt that lack of space had some impact on children as it was difficult for them to concentrate.

## c) Integration into the Local Community

Integration begins from the moment refugees arrive in their host country. Social integration is paramount for sustainable inclusion into the local community and is expressed through bonds, bridges and links established in social relations. There is no “unique model” of integration as it depends on both a refugee and a local community and their interaction. The PA has shown that there is a difference in the “feeling of acceptance” between families and single refugees as well as for children, as shown below.

**Single refugees:** Among the 16 single refugees, most of them (12, or 75%), including all three single women, know their neighbours. Three single men indicated they do not know their neighbours, one indicated that is because he just moved to a new location. All but one person stated that they greet their neighbours when passing by. When it comes to socializing, the majority (13, or 81%) do not spend time with their neighbours while two persons do socialize. One single woman (widow) said that so far, she has been using her hands to communicate and mentioned that the neighbours have been very helpful when her husband died, indicating that she would socialize more if she knew the language.

Most refugees (14, or 87%) stated they go about everyday errands without any difficulties and feel well interacting with others, while two persons (13%) indicated that on occasions they experienced some unpleasant moments.

Regarding the perception of being accepted in the society, the majority (13, or 81%) feel accepted, including one who feels “very welcomed”. Three persons (19%) expressed mild reservations saying that it could be due to the language barrier.

When asked whether they experienced any problems the answers differ from those received in families. Close to half (47% of the respondents) did not have any problems, some stating that people in Croatia are very kind. The remaining 44% (seven persons, including two single women) stated that they did experience some unpleasant situations such as: unsuccessfully looking for an apartment, landlords reluctant to rent out to refugees; being victim of an attack during robbery in a shopping centre; questioning the reasons for leaving their home country by locals; a woman was pushed once while walking with her husband; one single man mentioned discrimination at work related to salary.

**Refugee families:** It is positive that most of the families (14, or 88 %) know their neighbours, while this is not the case for two, a family of two brothers and an 8-member family in Zagreb. Regarding socializing, experience of the interviewees varies: half of them have social contact, while half of the families do not interact with their neighbours. Out of eight families who do socialize, six families added that it is limited to one neighbour or just two other families. In one case, it is only the husband who interacts with neighbours, while one family mentioned that socializing ceased during “corona time”.

When describing how they feel while shopping or doing any other activity outside their home, most families (11, or 69%) said that they find it normal and did not experience any problem. Three families (19%) mentioned lack of knowledge of Croatian language as an impediment in their everyday communication. One family said that first time they went shopping the locals thought they were tourists, but now they are known in their quartier. In one case, the husband mentioned that he has a feeling that the locals sometimes stare when he is with his wife, because of her hijab.

*We socialize with two local families, the rest of the neighbours we just greet passing by. We have no problems, except for not understanding well the language.*

**Syrian family living in Karlovac**

One of the key questions related to integration was about refugees' own feeling of being accepted in their new host communities. Almost all (15 families or 94%) responded to this question positively, while only one family said that they do not feel accepted due to discrimination in the society but did not elaborate.

Regarding any eventual problems with their surroundings, 11 families (69%) reported to have none, while 5 families (31%) mentioned a few unpleasant situations: one woman said that she experienced problems because of her hijab; another family mentioned an incident in school upon arrival when a local mother refused to let her child sit in the same bench with their daughter, but that this has been sorted out. One family mentioned that in their first apartment someone was constantly knocking at the door, so they decided to move to another apartment. In one case the neighbours complained about children being too loud, but the landlord's mediation helped the situation. One family stated that they had huge difficulties in finding an apartment after the expiration of two years of subsidized housing because landowners were reluctant to rent apartments to a refugee family with several (6) children.

**Children:** Out of the 50 children covered by the PA, 46 are at the age where they can interact with other children, while four are new-born babies. When it comes to their playing and socializing with others, the situation varies:

In six families, children play with local children (i.e. in the playground), but a) do not have friends among them, b) have friends only at school; c) have friends only among other refugee children.

In five families, children don't play with local children, but

- a) are well accepted in school;
- b) only the girl attending high school has friends and goes out with them;
- c) only older children have friends.

In two families, children play with / have friends only among (Syrian) refugee children.

In one family with six children, parents stated that children stay at home, do not play or make friends with any other children.

The responses indicate that children from only five refugee families (15 % of total children covered by the PA) found friends among local children. One family stated that their children do not socialize with local children because there are no other children in the vicinity of their home and another

*My children play only with other Syrian children. Their Croatian is still not good enough.*

**Syrian refugee mother of four**



one mentioned language barrier as a problem in socializing. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that those children attending school feel well accepted among their peers and when they find friends, it is mostly among their classmates.

#### **d) Assistance with Integration**

Listing the organizations or persons who assisted in overcoming obstacles, civil society organizations were mentioned 17 times and a cultural mediator 7 times. Police are in the third place, mentioned six times as an institution to whom the refugees turn when they encounter problems. Neighbours and employers share equal trust (4 times each) by refugees when turning for help. Two families rely on themselves and don't ask anybody for assistance. Friends, another Syrian family, institutions, have been mentioned once. One family stated that they did not know whom to contact in a case of need.

# Conclusions and Recommendations



*Proud mother of two now sees Zagreb as their new home. Learning the language and finding a job are her top priorities now. UNHCR/Ona Opalić, January 2020*

The PA confirmed that COVID-19 had an impact on all areas of refugee lives, from language learning, access to gainful employment to social integration into local communities. Lack of language skills and the need to have additional Croatian language classes were repeatedly mentioned throughout the PA, covering employability (especially with women), additional training, communication with neighbours, doing errands and generally through their perception of being accepted and integrated into society. The PA identified several areas where interventions could enhance integration policies and lead to streamlined language learning, increased employability, empowering of refugees and creation of welcoming societies.

Based on the above findings, the following actions are recommended to authorities, the private sector, civil society organizations etc. to facilitate refugee' integration and inclusion to host communities:

## ✓ **STREAMLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING**

- Streamline the provision of Croatian language classes by early/timely enrolment;
- Ensure continuity of language learning from beginner to B2 level;
- Support refugee women by providing language learning in accordance with their needs.

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✓ **INCREASE EMPLOYABILITY**

- Develop work-preparation activities for refugees which embed sector-based Croatian language tuition;
- Organize orientation courses on refugee work rights and obligations, work environment and new regulations related to COVID-19 measures;
- Support refugees to transfer qualifications gained in their home country;
- Identify prospective employers, especially in smaller communities; and establish information services for employers;
- Provide workshops on self-confidence and self-presentation to help refugees in their integration and feeling of inclusion into their host communities;
- Support refugee women in accessing the labour market by providing women-specific training sessions aiming at empowering them through raising awareness of already existing skills (parenting, cooking, communication, etc.) and developing new sets of skills;
- Organize vocational training sessions for refugee women while securing parallel playroom/workshops for their children for the duration of training sessions;
- Organize vocational trainings in the field of information technology, particularly for young people wishing to pursue this professionally;

✓ **EMPOWER REFUGEES**

- Provide psychosocial support and legal assistance to those refugees who might be in need;
- Include refugee children into out-of-school activities, sport and cultural clubs where they can interact with local children.

✓ **BUILD WELCOMING COMMUNITIES**

- Raise public awareness about advantages of multicultural societies;
- Utilize positive examples of engaging cultural mediators in assisting refugees, training professionals and volunteers, especially in smaller communities.

# Our Work

## **WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE**

A world where every person forced to flee can build a better future.

## **OUR FUNDAMENTAL FOCUS**

Everything we do helps protect people forced to flee their homes.

## **WHO WE ARE**

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

## **WHAT WE DO**

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, leads international action to protect people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, food and water, help safeguard fundamental human rights, and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future. We also work to ensure that stateless people are granted a nationality.

## **WHY WE MATTER**

Every year, millions of men, women and children are forced to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution. We are the world's leading organisation dedicated to supporting people forced to flee and those deprived of a nationality. We are in the field in over 125 countries, using our expertise to protect and care for nearly 64 million people.

# 2020 PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT FOR CROATIA

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March, 2021



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