

Slovenia: working with civil society to better support and integrate refugees and migrants during the pandemic



PUBLISHED MAR 24, 2022

BY [WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION](#)

For refugees and migrants in Slovenia, the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the constraints and distress they have experienced as a result of fleeing hardship in their countries of origin.

“For the 3000 refugees and migrants hosted in reception centres across Slovenia, it has been a struggle to comply with COVID-19 protective measures such as physical distancing, as well as to access information on the virus in a language they understand,” explained Neja Samar Brenčič, Director of the IZRIIS Institute, a civil society organization (CSO). “This has put them at heightened risk during the pandemic.”

To tackle these problems, the Safe4ALL project, led by IZRIIS and supported by WHO/Europe, worked with a network of CSO representatives, asylum centre staff and volunteers to develop reliable and culturally relevant information about COVID-19 vaccination and preventive measures for refugees and migrants. The information, translated into 24 languages, was distributed to municipalities, asylum centres and CSOs in the country, and accompanied by training for those working directly with these groups.

A handbook featuring a series of pictograms was also created to help overcome language barriers when talking about medical treatments, support communication between health workers and refugees and migrants, and reduce misunderstandings.

The project has facilitated discussions and training events with 50 nongovernmental organizations working with refugees and migrants in Slovenia. Together they have been looking at ways to support and promote the integration of these groups into society, and to address

any negative views linking COVID-19 transmission to asylum seekers entering the country.

IZRIIS has also run several lively workshops for 400 children and young adults, and delivered training materials to over 500 schools to help combat discrimination against asylum seekers during the pandemic and to promote zero tolerance for hate speech.

To ensure the needs of refugees and migrants are considered in the responses to COVID-19, the Safe4ALL project has created avenues for health authorities to hear directly from the CSOs working with them. As part of this, the project has trained 50 representatives from 212 municipalities on ways to better include community voices in policy-making.

Kerstin Vesna Petrič, Director General of the Slovenian Directorate for Public Health, emphasized the importance of these efforts: “The great value of this project is that it establishes excellent connections between civil society organizations, municipalities and local communities, and young people to help reduce discrimination and better support the particular needs of refugees and migrants.”

Since the Russian military offensive in Ukraine began, IZRIIS has been working with partners, including WHO in Slovenia, the Ministry of Health and other CSOs, to identify the needs of refugees from Ukraine entering the country and plan suitable responses.

WHO/Europe’s CSO Initiative has piloted new, bottom-up approaches to collaboration with governments to give communities a say in plans that affect their lives and to ensure they are involved in policy-making processes.

The CSO Initiative has contributed to the COVID-19 response by strengthening community readiness for and resilience to emergencies, connecting vulnerable communities to services, and enhancing inclusive governance. Slovenia is among 8 countries in the Region and 40 across the globe currently piloting such approaches.

Press release distributed by Wire Association on behalf of World Health Organization, on Mar 24, 2022. For more information subscribe and [follow us](#).

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