

Instructive material on refugee issues created by youths

Public Attitudes towards Refugees – Youth Engagement

UNHCR supported a project where youths over the age of 15 worked on the creation of instructive material about refugee realities in order to raise awareness among the local community on their current and past situation.



UNHCR/M. Quesada

Background

A study conducted by IPSOS (a British market research organization) and UNHCR indicated that the majority of Costa Ricans have negative perceptions of refugees, which negatively affects the ability of refugees to properly integrate within their host communities. This is partly attributed to the media, which has been seen to convey xenophobic messages when reporting on refugees and foreigners in general.

Refugee children are often subject to discrimination in schools. This has discouraged refugees from seeking access to formal education for their children. Refugees think that discrimination against them derives from prejudices based on their nationality, their status as refugees or their belonging to a specific ethnic group. In order to address the issue of discrimination against refugees in schools, UNHCR has worked jointly with refugee, local and immigrant boys and girls to create an instructive module on refugees and their realities.

Location San José, Costa Rica

Time & Duration May – July 2011

Population Groups Refugee, immigrant and local youths over the age of 15

Actors UNHCR, Radio Nederland Training Centre and Desamparados House of Rights



Description

UNHCR and refugee and local youths worked jointly on the creation of instructive materials about refugee realities. Equal participation of boys and girls was encouraged so that the differences in their experiences and perceptions could be properly captured. The materials produced comprise one board game, five recorded radio broadcasts and an instructive module to be used in the classroom. The board game allows players to learn about the situation of refugees from two angles: 1) it presents the threats, violence and persecution refugees have been exposed to prior to their flight and, 2) it presents the hurdles to and benefits of refugees' integration in their host communities. In this way, youths are sensitized about what it means to be a refugee.

Steps to Implementation

- Once the idea of the project was presented to the youths, they were asked to volunteer.
- Local, refugee and immigrant youths got together and discussed how they wanted to be represented in the instructive material.
- Nationals expressed their ideas towards refugees, their situation, and foreigners in general.
- Refugee youths worked together on materials, explaining the particularities of their situation, namely the reasons of their flight, their experiences during the flight, and the difficulties linked to the start of a new life in a foreign country.
- Local, immigrant and refugee youths got together and discussed the differences in their daily lives; musical preferences, social conventions, food, etc.
- The ideas resulting from these discussions were printed on the didactic materials the participants designed.

Impact and results

The instructive material was recognized by the Costa Rican government as a useful tool to improve the integration of refugee children and adolescents in Costa Rican schools. Accordingly, the Ministry of Public Education decided to use UNHCR's instructive material as part of their project "El Cole en Tus Manos" (Your school is in your hands), which is implemented in the country's most vulnerable and marginalized schools to encourage students' involvement in cultural activities.

Constraints

It is quite challenging to achieve that youths empathize with refugees, given that, as a UNHCR study indicates, understanding why an innocent person would be persecuted in the first place is particularly difficult when one's own context differs substantially from such reality. This is the case for some Costa Ricans.

Lessons Learned/Keys to Success

Bringing boys and girls from different backgrounds (local, immigrant, refugee) to work together on a project can be beneficial in and of itself regardless of the final outcome. Spending time together to meet a common objective increases their understanding of each other's experiences, resulting in mutual respect and empathy.

