



InterACT:

Evaluation, need and positive impact of refugee participation in volunteer projects

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شكر خاص لمتطوعينا الرائعين ولكل شخص شارك وخصص جزءاً من وقته للتطوع في مشروع "إنترآكت". لم يكن هذا المشروع ليكون ممكناً بدونكم.

تشكر ویژه‌ای از داوطلبان شگفت‌انگیز ما و هر فردی که شرکت کرده و وقت خود را به داوطلب شدن در *interACT* اختصاص داده است. این پروژه بدون شما امکان‌پذیر نمی‌بود.

Waxaa si gaar ah ugu mahadcelinaynaa dadka qiimaha badan e sida iskaa wax u qabsada eh noola shaqeeyey.

Iyo qof kasta oo ka qeyb qaatey una huray qeyb ka mid eh waqtigooda si ay ugu tabarukaan mashruuca *interACT*.

Mashruucaan ma suurtageli lahayn la'aantiin.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

InterACT is a pilot project created by the Icelandic Red Cross (RKÍ) Refugee Team in the Capital Area that began in October of 2023. The objective of the project is to reduce the marginalization of refugees⁽¹⁾ by incentivising their active civic participation in Icelandic society through voluntary activities alongside Icelandic-based organisations.

RKÍ has been working with refugees since the end of the 50s starting with Support Family project. Currently, there are many projects orientated for refugees, such as *Guiding Friend*, *Tölum Saman*, and various social activities (Rauði krossinn, n.d). *InterACT* is born as a response to the changes in the needs and concerns of refugees in Iceland since the creation of the aforementioned projects, seeking to build an intersectional and

holistic approach that empowers participants through civic and social volunteering. This means that refugees are trained and registered as RKÍ volunteers and implement a monthly volunteering activity with an Icelandic-based organisation.

During the project, *InterACT* sets out to create a space where:

- All participating actors have an active interaction that allow for positive dialogue and getting to know each other's perspectives, cultures and traditions.
- Volunteers highlight their skills and knowledge.
- Volunteers network with and get to know diverse Icelandic organisations.
- Icelandic-based organisations present their mission and objectives to volunteers, making them known to a wider population.
- Language is not supposed to be a barrier to participation.



From the beginning of *interACT*, a total of 94 people have registered as volunteers. At the moment of carrying out the report (July 2024), there was a total of 58 volunteers registered as active. 12 men, 45 women; 29 from Venezuela, 22 from Ukraine, two from Iran, two from Syria, one from Afghanistan, one from Ethiopia, and one from Somalia. The changing numbers of volunteers partly lies in that *interACT* seeks to offer a flexible volunteering style. This is in order to be adjustable to participants' diverse life situations, while also adapting to different cultural concepts of volunteering, as this term and the idea of volunteering activities can differ depending on people's own context or reference (Polus et al., 2022; Meijs et al., 2003). In practice, this is done in different ways; for example, volunteers are initially requested to commit for a relatively short period of time: three months.

Furthermore, volunteers are asked to participate in whatever capacity they can, such as planning the activity, implementing the activity, sharing content, or helping with translations.

1.2. Literature review

Voluntary service is one of the Seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement. This principle is based on solidarity and humanitarian motivation, and allows national societies such as RKÍ to conduct their operations and react to needs and emergencies in an organized and swift manner (ICRC, 2015).

Volunteering has shown to improve life satisfaction, health outcomes and wellbeing in populations, from youth to older adults (Van Willigen, 2000), improving self-esteem and coping abilities (Yeung et al., 2018; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Wood et al., 2019). The various research studies surrounding the

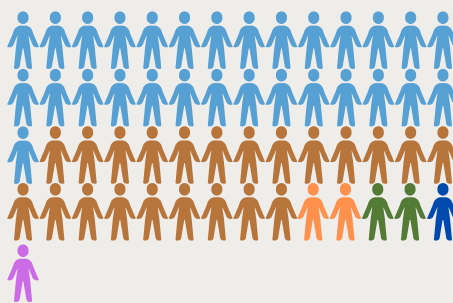
Information on volunteers

Legal status



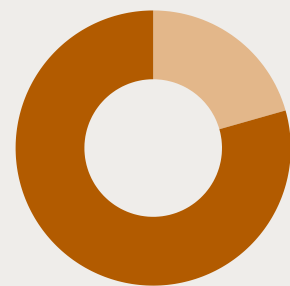
- With residence permit (62%)
- Without residence permit (38%)

Country of origin



- Venezuela (29)
- Ukraine (22)
- Iran (2)
- Syria (2)
- Afghanistan (1)
- Ethiopia (1)
- Somalia (1)

Gender



- Women (79,4%)
- Men (20,6%)

aspects of volunteering indicate that volunteer opportunities should be recognized as an important part of humanitarian aid, with Yeung et al. (2018) concluding that volunteering should be promoted as a healthy lifestyle, especially for minorities, the elderly, single and unemployed people.

In the case of refugees, there has been a recent push for meaningful participation of this group in different spaces (UNHCR, 2019; Harley & Hobbs, 2020) with the RCRC calling for the creation of opportunities for those with lived experience to join the Movement at all levels, such as volunteering (RCRC Global Migration Lab, 2024).

In Iceland, it is important to create volunteer spaces with the principle of meaningful participation in mind. Having few opportunities to contribute to society, such as volunteering, has shown to result in low self-esteem (Ingvarsson, 2015). In terms of contributing through skills and work, Gunnþórsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir (2020) explained:

“As noted in the findings, most of the [refugee] parents [interviewed] have middle or higher education. They have skills and professions that could contribute to their community, but they deplore that their qualifications are not recognized in the new country.”



Explanation box

In practice, volunteers get together and plan a prearranged activity with an Icelandic-based organization. After the planning phase, volunteers get together with the organization and implement an activity. The outcome takes many shapes and forms, from playing bingo with the elderly at different community buildings, to cleaning up the environment with former Icelandic President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson.

This highlights the insufficient spaces where refugees can implement their knowledge in Iceland. On the other side, in terms of social inclusion, barriers and lack of opportunities for participation for asylum seekers have been highlighted as an enhancer of the difficulty of living in Iceland (Ingvarsson et al., 2016; Hudson, 2022) often leading to feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, and isolation (Ingvarsson, 2015). With the creation of volunteering opportunities, these areas can be mitigated. The Danish Red Cross and the British Red Cross found that voluntary service helps enhance competencies that can facilitate the social inclusion and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees, contributing to developing skills, creating access to the labour market, and establishing a healthy social life (Red Cross EU office, n.d.). Therefore, *interACT* seeks to fill the need for the creation of volunteering spaces that empower and uplift refugees.

1.3. Research objectives and methodology

This research was designed to fulfil two main objectives:

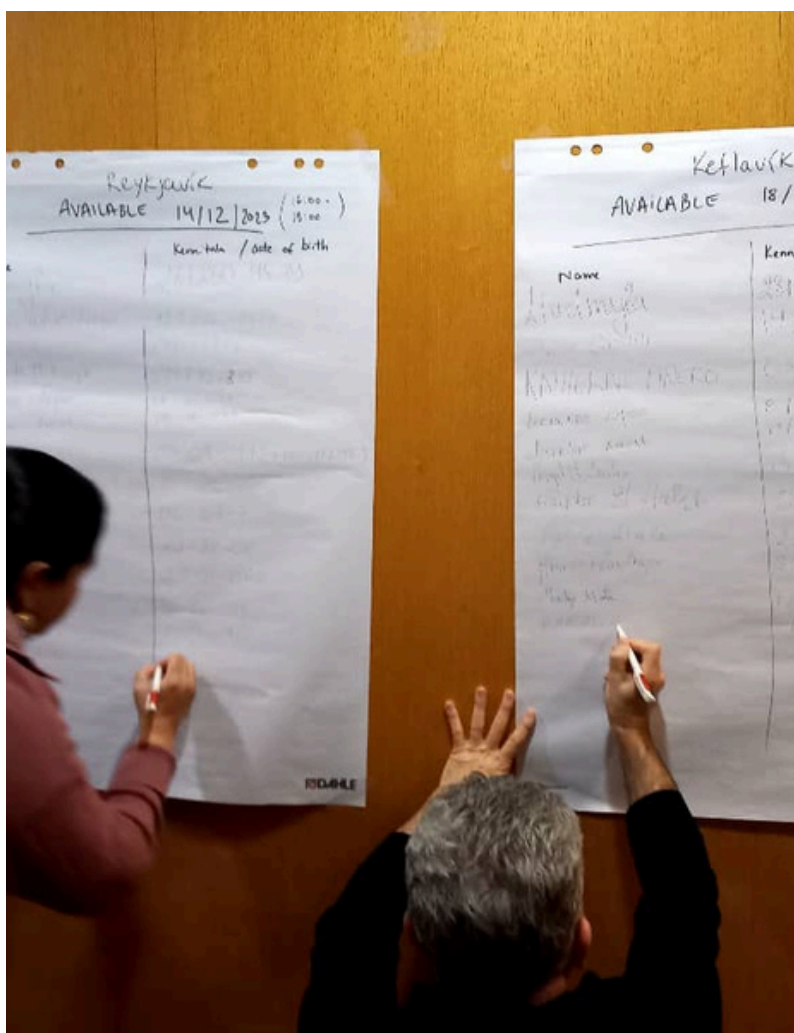
1. Conduct a general evaluation of *interACT*.
2. Understand the positive impact of the active participation of refugees in volunteering projects.

To reach these objectives, a participatory evaluation approach was used. This means that volunteers have actively been involved in the process of the evaluation. The methodology was chosen as it can be empowering for participants, leading to a feeling of ownership of the project and building their capacity (IFRC, 2024; INTRACT, 2017). The following tools were used for the evaluation:

- Questionnaire. There was a qualitative evaluation form sent out to volunteers via email and SMS. Questions revolved around their overall opinion on the project and activities carried out. The form was available in English, Icelandic, Spanish, and Ukrainian. A total of 36 people responded (62% of the registered active volunteers). The questionnaire included a confidentiality disclaimer and the possibility to later withdraw information.

- Focus groups. Volunteers were selected at random to participate in focus groups. Questions from the focus groups revolved around the importance of participation in volunteering projects, and the impact it has had on different aspects of their life.

Due to the low number of male volunteers in comparison to female volunteers, gender balance was not possible. There was a total of 4 focus groups: one for Spanish speakers, one for Ukrainian and Russian speakers, one for English speakers, and one for youth (2). The youth group was aimed at volunteers between ages 18-30; it was conducted in Spanish due to it being the mother tongue of all participants.



In order to obtain a more detailed expression of the volunteers' experience during their participation in *interACT*, participants were encouraged to use their mother tongue during questionnaires and focus groups; results from both were later transcribed and translated to English. Thematic analysis was later conducted to identify main themes and sub-themes in order to get a better in-depth insight and understanding of volunteers' perspectives. Both tools were implemented in July 2024.

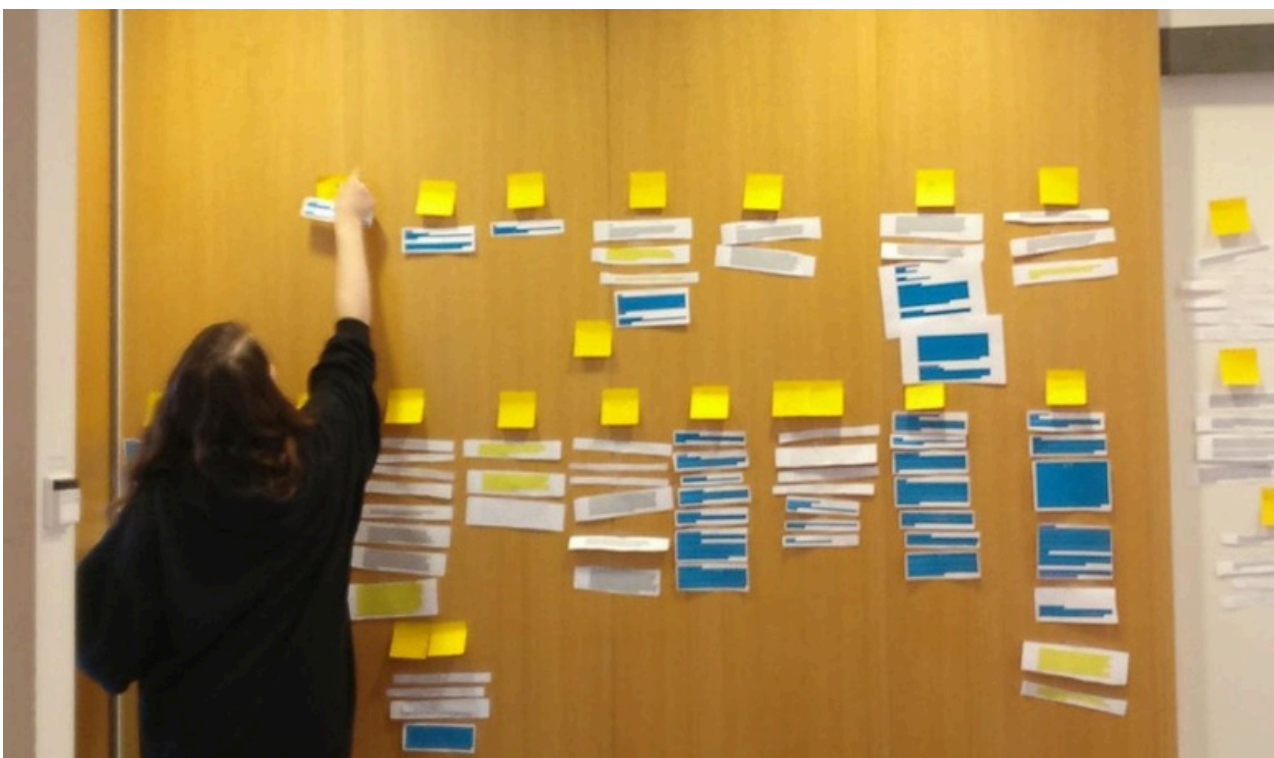
1.4. Limitations

Volunteers of *interACT* and staff members of RKI working on the project generally have a good working relationship due to the uplifting nature of the project; the report recognises that this may have influenced participants' answers. However, it must be noted that all participants were

assured that information was confidential, and they were encouraged to give their honest opinions on matters that were questioned.

Furthermore, the co-authors are a part of the *interACT* working team, which is inevitably associated with the report topic. Presuppositions will be monitored and reviewed by external actors to the project to diminish possible biases.

Additionally, it must be noted that during the time that this study was taking place various volunteers from Venezuela received their second negative decision on their asylum case. For those who participated while going through this situation, it had an impact on results that was especially noticeable in the Spanish-speaking focus group. Furthermore, this also led to the inability of some selected participants to take part in the focus groups.



2. Research findings

Three over-arching themes were identified and, subsequently, several sub-themes were identified. See Figure 1 below.

2.1. Outcome of feeling like an active part of society

During the evaluation, participants explained feelings that came with what can be defined as being a part of society. This over-arching theme includes the outcome of these feelings and consists of the following sub-themes: multicultural enrichment, positive impact on mental health and well-being, and learning and

using skills and knowledge.

• **Multicultural enrichment**

During *interACT*, people from many different countries, cultures and backgrounds come together for common goals, all while interacting with the Icelandic population during monthly activities. The positive outcome of this interaction was very present during the focus groups and evaluation, leading to multicultural enrichment as a sub-theme. Participants highlighted the positive interactions among the volunteering group. These have allowed them to get to know and learn about one-another, leading to a welcomed cultural exchange.

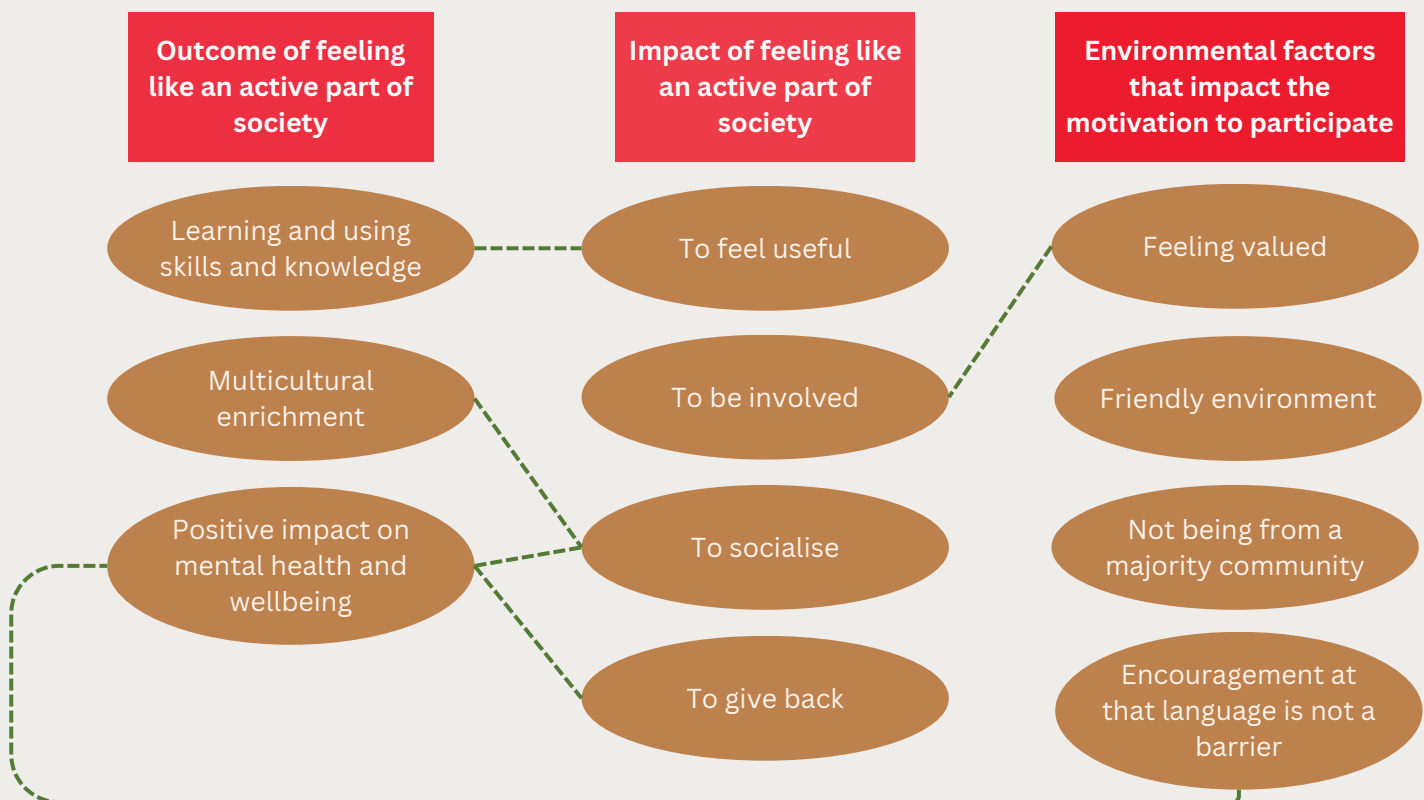


Figure 1. In red squares are the main themes identified. In brown below each main theme are each subtheme. In green semi-continued lines are the hypothesized relationships between subthemes.



“I had heard about Ukraine or Iran, but I didn't know how they were themselves, their culture, their idiosyncrasy, their customs. Here [in interACT] I discovered what they were like. When I was in my [home] country, I saw them so far away. <<Hey, this country exists, it is far away, I don't know>>, but here I met them. I learnt from them, they learnt from me. It was a nice cultural exchange. They ask me things, I also ask them. I opened up my knowledge, I have more knowledge.”

Furthermore, this opportunity to learn about other cultures and countries is implemented in a practical way, with being able to represent and introduce their own to fellow volunteers and Icelandic organisations.

“[During an activity] We talked about Arabic cuisine, about Venezuelan cuisine, there was a presentation. It was very interesting - when we went to a house where people had limited abilities - how they [other volunteers] represented their cultures, how we [as a volunteer group] represented them. It was such a very interesting and developing moment (...) And then we presented our culture, Ukraine - dishes, culture, dance.”

In addition, as every activity is done in collaboration with an Icelandic-based organization, volunteers get to know firsthand about Icelandic culture. At the same time, people in Iceland interact with newcomers on a personal level. A participant explained this experience, seeing it as an opportunity to get to know one-another up close and ask questions, despite barriers such as language.



Activity box

In the quote above, a participant talks about the the first activity *interACT* carried out. This was in collaboration with *Ás styrktarfélag* in November 2023. This non-profit organization provides diverse services to people with learning disabilities in Iceland (*Ás Styrktarfelag*, n.d.). Volunteers prepared and presented food and traditions from their home-countries. On their side, *Ás* introduced volunteers their mission, giving them a chance to get to know where they work and what they do. Moreover, they presented Icelandic Christmas dishes, songs and customs.

Activity box

When volunteers were asked what activities they wanted to do, many expressed they would like to spend time with the elderly, as they felt they were often forgotten by society. That is how Cultural Bingo came to be: a few weeks later volunteers came together with elderly groups at different community buildings to play a special kind of bingo. The Cultural Bingo cards were created by the volunteers themselves, with each space on the card being words from important monuments, dances, food or traditions of volunteers' home countries. During the activity, volunteers were encouraged to sit with people, interact and have a fun time playing.



“Even though they [the elderly] did not understand us, we made a click, it felt so good. Even though there were small inconveniences, they ended up loving us. There was a question like <<what are you doing here [in Iceland]?>> Then they loved us with that game [bingo], with that interaction, with that click that there was, we had a very nice experience.”

As explained in the introduction, *interACT* set out to create a space where different actors could come together, ask questions and have positive interactions with one-another. Therefore, this sub-theme confirms that the project is fulfilling a crucial objective.

However, it must be noted that this was originally orientated at the interaction among refugee-Icelandic population, that has been met in activities such as the one explained by the participant in the quote besides. Nevertheless, there has been an unforeseen positive outcome of refugee population getting to know about fellow refugees' cultures and traditions, bridging gaps among them.

- **Positive impact on mental health and wellbeing**

A recurring theme was the positive impact that participating in *interACT* activities has had on participants' mental health and well-being. This impact was described in many ways, from the

space. One participant compared participating in a specific activity to an antidepressant:

“Well, that is, this is an antidepressant. Yes, it’s such a method that allows your internal sun to shine in such rainy weather.”

This theme was especially present in Venezuelan participants who are currently in the asylum process pending a decision on their petition for protection, or who had recently received their second negative decision on their case. As mentioned in the introduction, *interACT* currently has 29 volunteers from Venezuela, representing up to 50% of the volunteer group. 20 of these volunteers are currently in the asylum process, with many of them having been in this situation for over a year. Waiting for a decision on an asylum case for a prolonged amount of time generally has a toll on people’s mental health. Studies show poorer mental health in individuals in the asylum process compared to individuals with a residence permit (Ingvarsson et al., 2016; Leiler et al., 2018; Gleeson et al., 2020), often due to the prolonged uncertainty about their decision and what this entitles for their future (Mueller et al., 2011). This state was reflected during the evaluation and focus groups. When talking about the impact of *interACT* in their everyday life,

participants explained that the project has allowed them to stay active and mitigate the negative impact of the current uncertainty of their circumstances.

“Well, for me it [being in interACT] has been fundamental. Mental health, as my colleagues also say here, is benefited because one is going through a process that is that you arrive at the airport, when you enter the country, from the moment you are landing, your mental health begins to waver a little. And so goes the day to day, right? So, there is nothing better than counteracting that, than looking for ways to keep your mind healthy. And what better than doing the things you like, such as participating in an activity that offers us interaction. We have done it with interACT.”





The need to be active also thrives from the difficulty to obtain a work permit while in the asylum process in Iceland, as explained by participants. This was especially present in participating men.

“To get out of the monotony of the lack of work. We like to be active and that's something that I think I love. I felt active [during interACT], I felt like I'm not working, but I'm working. And that at least I feel that the people who are in the project right now. We are very involved.”

Elaborating more on the topic of mental health and wellbeing, participants in the asylum process saw *interACT* as a neutral mental space where their minds can disconnect from everything revolving their asylum process. One participant explained the feeling as being in an oasis.

“The psychological stress that we are under [during the asylum process] is significant and emotional. And then it turns out that InterACT is an oasis where we come to forget all that, at least today [during the activity].”

This recurring sentiment is well reflected in the quote below, with a participant describing the process when attending *interACT* volunteer meetings and activities:

“As for the mental part, I like being here because I feel like it's a place of peace. You hear many things outside [related to the asylum process], and when you're here, it's totally different. Your mind relaxes, you're very calm, with people who are [in a situation that is] worse than you, but no one talks about it. We're all on the same path, and that's very cool.”

Furthermore, “positive impact on mental health and wellbeing” was linked to the sub-themes “to socialise” and „to give back“. This can be since the interaction with the surrounding society has a crucial impact on an individual’s well-being (McMillan and Chavis, 1996). While the aforementioned sub-themes are a part of the overarching theme of „impact of being an active part of society“, participants expressed that socialising and giving back to the community as a part of *interACT* has consequently had a positive impact on their mental health and well-being, leading to this positive outcome and re-affirming its importance.

- **Learning and using skills and knowledge**

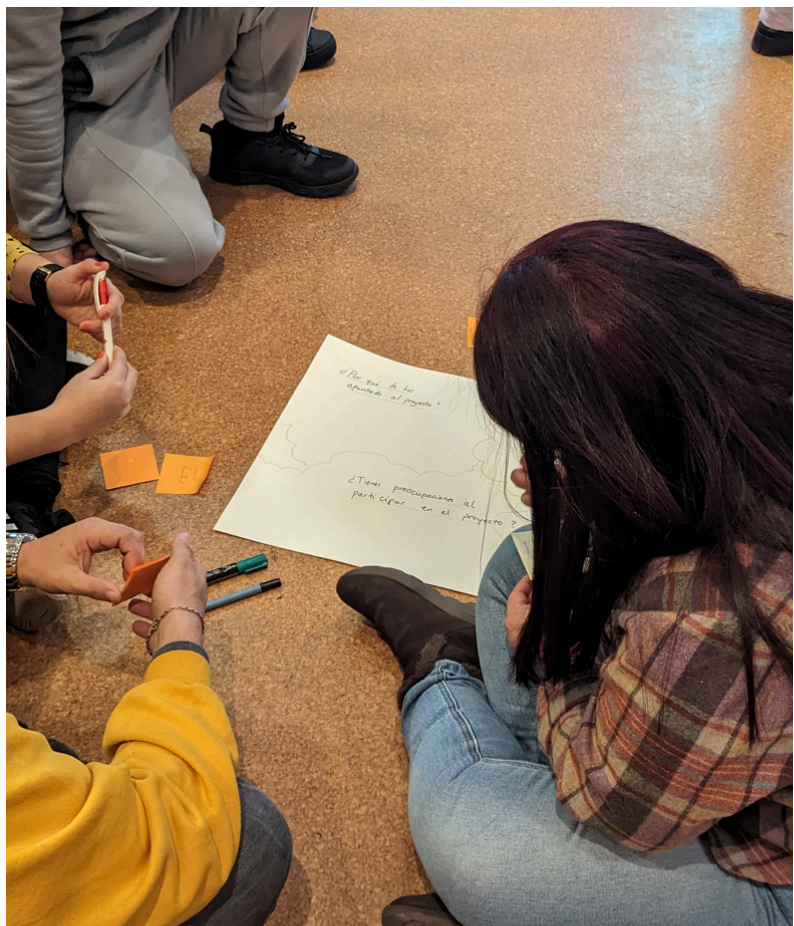
As explained in the introduction, *interACT* has sought to uplift and strengthen volunteers' skills and knowledge. During volunteer meetings and activities, people are asked to work together and come up with ideas on how to carry out activities, going beyond language and cultural barriers. This has had a positive effect: as a participant explained, it has allowed them to gain new skills.

“I mean, here you learn to be patient and tolerant, and to know how they [people from other countries] are here, and how they are culturally.”

Teamwork was a skill highlighted

throughout the evaluation – many have learnt that they can achieve more if they work together with others.

“It [being in interACT] has served me for a lot of personal things, in particular, it has helped me to work on myself. I like to do things alone, you know? I take care of this. But hey, here we have learned to work as a group, that we all have the same capacity, or great capacity, sometimes we complement each other, and we carry out the project, or the specific activity. But, especially, they helped me in that part, to learn to balance the loads, that not everything has to be on a single shoulder, if not, among all, we can.”





Apart from reinforcing skills, an important element of *interACT* has been to create a space where volunteers feel safe to explore new abilities and discover new parts of themselves. This has been done through the encouragement of staff members and fellow volunteers, while offering a diverse range of monthly activities. During one of the focus groups, a participant excitedly shared the experience of learning to make Vareniki (Ukrainian dumplings) for the first time for the activity with Ás styrktarfélag:

“Yes [the project revealed new skills]. We did not know that we could make Vareniki – we started to make Vareniki. We baked cakes! Well, that’s all, here these culinary abilities, I have never cooked in my life. It was discovered in us here.”

Activity box



At the end of every April, Iceland celebrates its big “plokking” day. Stóra Plokkdaginn is a day created where everyone who wants to organize a clean-up effort on that day, or depending on the circumstances on another day at a similar time (Plokk, 2024). In 2024, *interACT* took part. Volunteers have the opportunity to learn about this activity and later spend the big day plokking with former Icelandic President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson. Learn more about what *interACT* got up to below in the words of volunteer Julianys.

On the other hand, *interACT* has sought to strengthen volunteers' knowledge. This has been explored through different channels. One of the channels has been during the activities themselves, where volunteers have had a chance to learn on the topic at hand, allowing them to expand their knowledge, while also getting to know more about Icelandic culture.



The Red Cross and *interACT* was present during Stóri Plokkdagurinn!

”

On the 28th of April, a group of over 60 volunteers from the Red Cross joined the big plokk day. These volunteers are a part of *InterACT*, a project that provides a space for asylum seekers and refugees in Iceland to actively participate in the community.

With only vests that identified them, Plokk sticks, bags and gloves: this was the only material needed for this group to go out into the street and do this fun activity, leaving a cleaner and more pleasant public space. During the morning, volunteers went to Álftanes to carry out a plokk activity alongside President Guðni Jóhannesson. Afterward, volunteers headed to Hallgrímskirkja to finish off Stóri Plokkdarinn with a clean-up in the city centre.

Among laughter, music and sunny weather, the multicultural group spent a pleasant day collecting garbage. Among the comments from volunteers, Griselida said:

"Plokk is not complicated, it is an activity that we should do monthly, it is a good option to be able to maintain the cleanliness of the areas where we live."

InterACT is a project that started in November of 2023. Since then, it has carried out many activities and continues to grow. When asked about the project, volunteer Marlys explained:

"I find the InterACT project interesting. It is about interacting with different nationalities and languages and, since I was a social worker in my country, I wanted to participate in a project where language has not been a barrier. In this project, I have learned that language is not an impediment to doing social work"



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“I have learned to select the waste. Organic waste, plastic, paper, cardboard, what I didn't know when I was in my [home] country. Here [in Iceland] there is a [recycling] culture that is very important for them. In my ignorance, I put everything in a single bag and saw, no, it is not like that. Here I learned it, now I am more meticulous. Or I see a waste, a glass on the street, I don't know, I do my part, I take it out and put it back where it should be. I am learning that culture, that new lifestyle. I really like it and it has changed me, it has transformed me.”

Another channel has been through the offering of a diverse range of training courses. These training's have generally been led or taught by fellow volunteers, who were specialists on the topic at hand. This method creates a double outcome: on the one hand, the group benefits from the knowledge taught; on the other hand, volunteers who are specialists in a specific topic have a space to share and teach their expertise. This participant highlighted both training's that were taught by fellow volunteers' during their reflection on

Activity box



In January 2024, volunteers carried out an activity with SORPA, a regional association owned by numerous Icelandic municipalities with the objective to manage waste (SORPA, n.d.). During the interaction, volunteers got to know how recycling works in Iceland, and the importance of circular economy.





the activities taken part in:

“All the activities are great, especially the First Aid training and the activity with HIV Iceland.”

Being able to teach a course to fellow volunteers using one's skills and knowledge led participants who experienced this to “feel useful”. This correlation has led to the link with the sub-theme “to be useful” of the theme “impact of being an active part of society”. Furthermore, when inquired on the topic of how *interACT* can grow and better itself, participants suggested more training courses. They showed special interest in trainings related to work and Icelandic culture and life.

“[More trainings about] Icelandic life in general, you know, education and everything because it's an absolutely separate country with unique language, unique culture. And to be, you know, to be part of this society, we need to understand, okay, what is your rules? What is your, because they are, they have own opinion and some specific culture moments that I already met in my life here in Iceland.”

Activity box



Through the initiative of a volunteer, *interACT* collaborated with HIV Iceland. This organization works with HIV-positive people, as well as educating on the topic. During this training, volunteers got to know more about the truths and myths surrounding HIV, and information on services related to HIV in the country.

These answers reaffirm the importance given by participants of new knowledge, spaces to learn, and getting to know their new home. Moreover, it highlights the need of *interACT* to offer more in this area.

2.2. Impact of feeling like an active part of society

In line with the previous theme, the second theme identified was “impact of feeling like an active part of society”. The four sub-themes that compose this topic are: to feel useful, to be involved, to socialise, and to give back.

- **To feel useful**

When participants expressed what they enjoyed the most of taking part in this volunteering project, an impact that stood with them the most was that they felt useful. To begin with, “to feel useful” was a high motivator for their participation in *interACT*. One participant described this feeling as a way of expression, explaining the following:



“I want to be useful... I want to be useful to the community by expressing myself at least somewhere, by helping with something. And perform some tasks that are given, just to help. Be useful.”

One of the most frequently reoccurring words within this sub-theme is “help”, as observed in the previous quote. Participants mentioned their desire to help others as one of the pillars of their motivation to volunteer. This can be due to that help as other-oriented type of volunteering has a greater impact on individual’s state of mental health than the self-oriented type (Stuart et al., 2020) . However, while some participants described this desire to help as their initial motivation to join the project, others mentioned they began to value further helping – and volunteering overall- after becoming a part of *interACT*.

“It [volunteering in interACT] made me more aware of the importance of helping, of volunteering. Well, there’s a lot of motivation. I like to help people.”

Furthermore, other participants aligned the feeling of usefulness and helping with the need to assist other individuals. This will to assist those in need can be aligned with their perception of social justice, and result in a strong desire to engage in volunteering to address inequality by helping

underprivileged groups of people (Meijeren et al., 2024). One participant described it as following:

“I love to work with the human part, of the abandoned, of those who need it, of the elderly, of the children, I think I was born for that, to help in that part, because it hurts me to see an old man abandoned, to see a child on the street asking, that for me is serious because I have a son. I loved that part that we developed here [in interACT].”

On the other hand, depth of an emotional experience may correlate with the extent of engagement in the activity – from participants’ answers, it seems the more an individual invests into an activity, the greater emotional feedback they get. For instance, some of the *interACT* volunteers got an opportunity to teach a First Aid course in Spanish, which was previously available in Icelandic and English only.

“I loved it, because I taught it [the First Aid Course], and because I really felt useful. I really liked participating in that one.”

As explained in the previous theme, “to feel useful” is linked to “learning and using skills and knowledge”, due to the participants having a greater sense of usefulness after putting into practice their expertise.



Activity box

The Icelandic Red Cross has the important task of spreading first aid knowledge throughout the population. During one of its monthly activities, *interACT* collaborated with Hildur Vattnes Kristjánsdóttir, the RKI First Aid specialist. This led to the creation of First Aid courses in Spanish and Ukrainian, that volunteers happily participated in. In the future, *interACT* expects to offer this courses in a variety of languages, making this important knowledge accessible to more population living in Iceland.

At the same time, some participants enjoyed being able to commit to a range of responsibilities. For many of them, having a space where everyone is equally engaged in the process of organising an event and equally responsible for the outcome was enough to feel useful while being a part of the community.

“The activity that was in Keflavík in December [a Holiday Party], I liked it a lot. We were all useful and could help in the organization.”

Consequently, “to feel useful” is a prominent component of participants’ impact of being an active part of society, consisting of their need for self-expression and desire to help.

- **To be involved**

The second sub-theme identified is “to be involved”. An essential part of this feeling of involvement is that participants sense their input, and actions are noticed and taken into consideration. Consistent communication and

implementation of participants’ ideas impacts their will to actively take part in *interACT*, since they feel like what they do, say, and think matters.

“(…) what caught my attention was that the group [managers] that lead Interact, is a very kind group, it is a group that takes into account your needs, let’s call it that, as soon as possible. I had told [the project manager] that we should work with the elderly, because they are neglected by the children, by the families that need affection, they need a moment of joy. And well, two weeks passed, when [the project manager] said that we were going to do an activity with the elderly. That gave me the desire to continue coming, and helping, collaborating here, because I knew that what one exposed would be taken into account.”

Activity box



During December of 2023, *interACT* collaborated with the Red Cross Asylum Team to organize two Holiday parties: one in Reykjavík and one in Keflavík. During this activity, volunteers organized games for children, gave out presents, and helped with logistics.



This sense of involvement leads to the feeling of being a part of something bigger. This can be crucial when finding a sense of belonging, as it can assist people to overcome feelings of isolation and allow them to “deal with their own circumstances” (Stuart et al, 2020). The sense of belonging, alongside a feeling of accomplishment, culminates in participants' satisfaction, growth, and bigger involvement.

“(…) from the moment you arrive, from the moment the activity is organized, until it culminates, one leaves very satisfied, it is as if you entered another world, you leave where you are and you enter another world, what lasts is that reality, and then you leave and you fill yourself, you carry a lot of knowledge, because the change of culture here, you take the ideas and learn a lot from them, you grow with them”.

This shows the relationship with the sub-theme “feeling valued” as, when participants are involved in all phases, it has a greater impact on the sense of feeling valued (that will be explored in the upcoming theme).

Finally, in some cases, participants' previous experiences of being involved in their home cities seem to have been an enhancer for participation, leading to further involvement.

“Oh, involvement. Since Odessa [the volunteers home city], I got used to being involved in some movement, organization. Here, it was very important for me in Iceland to immediately find an organization that I would be involved in.”

- **To socialise**

The name of the project refers to one of its main objectives: to interact. In this project, interaction as



socialisation between volunteers and Icelandic society. This is done through meetings, activities, and training courses. Participants highlighted how *interACT* has become an important channel through which people with refugee backgrounds can get to know new people.

“And also, to meet other people. It's really, really important.”

One of the main socialising that happen during *interACT* is among the volunteers themselves. During the evaluation, participants expressed that this socialisation creates relationships with fellow volunteers outside of Red Cross activities, leading to friendship in many cases, that goes beyond language and culture.

“And socialisation [is important]. That is, here it is useful communication, which in the future, well, I don't know, all our friends from Venezuela, who are here in the project, they are all in the Salvation Army. We meet with them there, well, and at some other events.”

In this context, participants also expressed that the multicultural environment in *interACT* has helped them develop and strengthen their social skills, encouraging participants to interact with others in a neutral

space with a common objective. Furthermore, this has had a positive impact on aspects related to their mental health and well-being.

“I practise socialisation a lot [during interACT] and these activities have helped me improve my self-esteem.”

As seen above, this sub-theme is connected to the “multicultural environment” and “positive impact on mental health and well-being”. Both are an outcome that is enhanced through socialisation among peers.

• To give back

The fourth sub-theme is “to give back”. This need to give back can be closely associated with the concept of reciprocity as, traditionally, refugees have been perceived as receivers (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007). Participants expressed they wanted to give back to Iceland through their social and civic participation in the community. One of the volunteers referred to this opportunity as one of the main motives that prompted them to join *interACT*.

“For me, joining this project was a way to return to Iceland, and to the Red Cross, what they had done for me.”

This highlights how volunteering can be a space where reciprocity can arise, an important element for refugees emphasised by different

research studies (see Puvimanasunghe, et al, 2014; Mueller et al., 2011). Furthermore, for some of the participants, the number of activities implemented within the project was not enough to fulfil this need for reciprocity. One participant assured they would agree to perform a bigger number of tasks if they were asked to do so. The following quote illustrates their urge to contribute.

“I feel, for me, that interACT has worked as for me to contribute, for me to try to give something back, even if it's a little bit, but it's something. If they demanded more from me, I would do more.”

This topic was especially present among people in the asylum process during the evaluation, who expressed they felt they wanted to contribute to Iceland during their time in the process, allowing them to be seen beyond their legal status.

“For me, I think that part of showing that we are valuable, that wherever we go, regardless of the language barrier, that we are not only asylum seekers (...), that we come to contribute, (...) to return a little grain of sand to Icelandic society for everything it has given us.”

On the other hand, the ability to reciprocate seems to be linked to participants' mental health and

well-being. Participants expressed a bettering of their mental health due to being able to give back.

“So, in terms of mental health, the project has helped me a lot. Why? Because I feel like I am giving something back.”

Furthermore, this shows the hypothesised connection to the subtheme “positive impact on mental health and wellbeing”.

2.3. Environmental factors that impact the motivation to participate

The last theme identified is environmental factors that impact the motivation to participate. During the evaluation, different environmental factors were found to be both motivating and inhibiting for volunteer participation. It was noted that the perception of these factors changed depending on the home-country of the participant. This theme is composed of the following sub-themes: feeling valued, friendly environment, encouragement at that language is not a barrier, not a barrier, not speaking a majority language, not being from a majority community.

- **Feeling valued**

As mentioned in the introduction,

Icelandic society through collaborations with different local organisations. Project managers have implemented a participatory approach, including volunteers in decision-making when possible.

From the results, it can be deduced that involving the volunteers in the decision-making process has had a positive impact towards the managers and the project itself. Some participants have explained that this involvement has encouraged them to participate more actively, to propose ideas, and to get more committed to the goals of the project. Thus, this reflects how volunteer empowerment includes involving volunteers in the decision-making process and allowing them to be autonomous when carrying out their tasks (Cho et al, 2020). It has allowed participants to feel of value.

“And this project made us feel that we are valuable. And I think that is one of the most important things.”

Closely related to the subtheme “to be involved”, being a part of the organising process was mentioned during the evaluation as a motivation to keep participating in *interACT*, as they feel valued when their ideas and suggestions are heard and implemented.

“[Implementing an activity that one volunteer proposed] gave me the desire to continue coming, and helping, collaborating here, because I knew that what one exposed would be taken into account.”

Furthermore, participants expressed that feeling valuable within the project goes beyond the involvement of them as volunteers in the organisation of the activities: the relationship established with the project managers also plays an important role. Some participants expressed how the treatment and communication with the project managers has been motivating them to have an active role and participation in *interACT*, while feeling valued.

“I love [project managers’] treatment of us, really, I think they are the two little lights of the project. If they did not transmit that energy that they transmit to us, I think I would have already abandoned the project. It is really important, everything they do, so that we feel integrated, that we are worth it, in society, that we can contribute to Icelandic society, regardless of whether we speak the language.”

Volunteer management practices play an essential role in retaining the relationship between organisations and volunteers (Cho

et al, 2020), and the good relationship between the project managers and the volunteers has been also mentioned in all along the questionnaires and focus groups.

- **Friendly environment**

Friendly environment is a sub-theme very present during both the questionnaire and focus groups, and important for the implementation of *interACT*. As mentioned above, each volunteer is going through a different process, some volunteers are in the asylum process and some volunteers have been granted some kind of protection. Regardless of their situation, most of the participants have expressed a high level of stress based on their past experiences or news from their home countries, which has been mitigated with a friendly environment during their time in *interACT*.

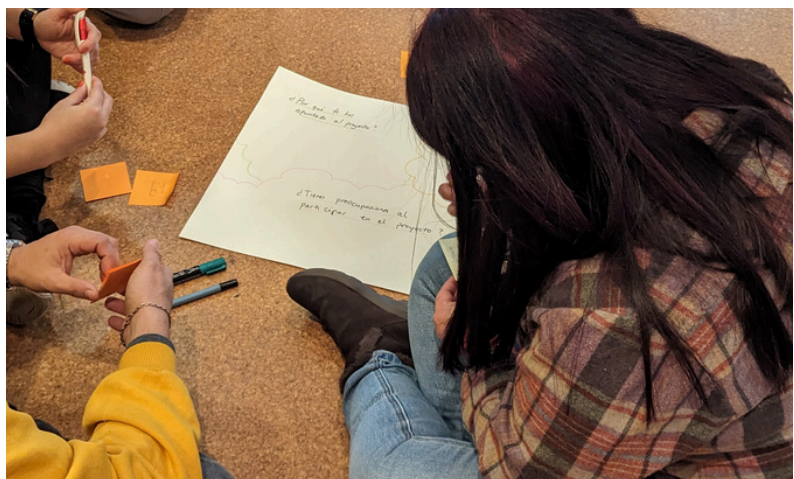
“People here [in interACT space] are always friendly and smiling, it's true.”

During the implementation of *interACT*, project managers use icebreakers or warm-up games, trying to create a fun and safe atmosphere for everyone, and facilitating interaction between volunteers. These actions have been noted by participants, who appreciate and value the friendly environment encouraged by fellow volunteers.

“We have helped each other, they [interACT volunteers from other countries] have also been very friendly, very receptive and always with a smile. I have also communicated with them in Spanish in Ukrainian or in their native language, and it feels like that good vibe, that energy.”

InterACT has provided a space to volunteer, but also to connect and establish relationships among people with diverse migratory backgrounds. Thus, participation in *interACT* has been motivated by different aspirations, such as giving something back to society –as mentioned above–, and reinforced by the relationships that the participants have forged within the project and the good times they share both in the preparation and implementation of the activities.

“I also believe a lot in energy, I come here to any activity and I am filled with a positive energy, I forget where I am, what the process is, when I arrive here, we start laughing, [the project managers] fill us with that explosive energy, and we forget all that.”





- **Not being from a majority community**

As mentioned above, the majority of *interACT* volunteers come from Venezuelan and Ukrainian backgrounds. While some volunteers feel empowered upon the encouragement of language not being a barrier, this can be difficult for others who are a minority within the volunteer group, leading to a sense of lack of connection with peers.

“I feel lonely. But the volunteers here, they are like open to meet and to integrate. So, when I came here, I tried to interact with others, but still the language barrier is there because I don't speak Spanish or Ukrainian. I speak only my local language and English. And so, I feel that I haven't connected that well because of the language barriers.”

Not being from a majority community is also strongly related to the language spoken. At the moment of writing the

report, the majority languages in *interACT* were Ukrainian, Russian, and Spanish. Participants who come from a majority community can rely on their peers to help access information and better participate during the project. From the results, socialisation process is different for those who do not speak a majority language.

“There are many problems, including the language we communicate with each other. We don't understand, it is very difficult, but everyone suffers in one way or another. So, the language is a challenging part.”

Despite the efforts to make all material accessible and encourage volunteers to communicate, the quote above highlights the need for more to be done in this area. Moreover, project managers need to make a further effort so that people who are not from a majority community feel included. Therefore, depending on their background, participants presented the same topics (language and community) from different perspectives: either as a motivation or as a barrier.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

InterACT is a project that set out to create a refugee volunteer-led project, where people can connect with Icelandic-based organisations through civic and social participation within the community. This project fills in a gap within the Icelandic community that allows participants to benefit from the positive results of volunteering.

This report gives insight into the functioning of *interACT* and explores the positive impact of refugee participation in volunteering projects. Overall, *interACT* seems to be fulfilling its set-out objectives: participation in the project has led to a stronger feeling of being a part of society, with overall positive impacts and outcomes. This feeling is surrounded by a series of environmental factors that can serve both as motivation or barriers for people to further participate in the project and feel welcomed.

Moreover, this underlines the modifications needed for *interACT* to grow in a participatory and needs-based manner. Therefore,

the following recommendations are proposed for *interACT* in its next project cycle:

- **Participants are interested in expanding their knowledge**, and the project should find ways to adjust toward this objective. Volunteers training volunteers should be prioritized.
- **Offer activities that have been successful more than once.** Activities –such as *Plokk* and *Bingo*– seem to have had a positive impact on participants, these activities can be offered monthly.
- **Make more effort for minority groups** within the volunteer group **to feel welcomed** within the project.
- **Make more effort to reach out to more refugee volunteers**, with special attention towards minority groups.

Finally, the positive results further highlight the importance of making volunteer spaces open and accessible for refugees. For volunteer-based organisations and projects, this report recommends the following:

- **Implement pathways to ensure that the participation of refugees is accessible.** It is important to revise processes to ensure the project is open for all.
- **Improve process' to ensure volunteer participation in all stages.** Including participatory methods in every step of the project, from design to evaluation, can lead to a higher sense of feeling valued and wanting to be further involved.
- **Encourage a sense of community within the project.** To do so, project managers play a crucial role. It is important to create bridges among the volunteer group themselves to create a safe space where people feel welcomed and empowered.
- **Re-think and adapt the concept of volunteering.** As stated in the introduction, the concept of volunteering is different worldwide. Re-thinking and adapting this concept will allow to explore different ways that can attract new and diverse volunteers.



Footnotes

(1) Throughout the project and this report, the term refugee follows the UNHCR definition as "someone who has been forced to flee conflict or persecution and has crossed an international border to seek safety. They cannot return to their country without risking their life or freedoms (UNHCR, n.d)." In practice during *interACT*, this refers to people in the asylum process pending a decision on their case, and people who have been granted protection (such as Humanitarian Protection, Subsidiary Protection or International Protection).

(2) RKÍ seeks to do more work with refugee youth, leading to a particular focus group to understand their experiences. According to a recent study by scholar Paola Cardenas (2023), children and young people in Iceland are more vulnerable to exposure of traumatic events during the migration journey from the home country to a hosting society, affecting significantly their development. Moreover, the author (Cardenas, 2023) highlights the importance of integration factors as it leads to a better positive migrant experience, adaptation process and mental health and well-being of this particular group.

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*All photos have been taken during the implementation of the first project cycle of "interACT".
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