

# VOLUNTEERS ON THE ROAD TO INTEGRATION

PRACTICAL INFORMATION  
ABOUT VOLUNTEERING FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS





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## INTRODUCTION

This information brochure is for anyone who has made an asylum application in Hungary.

In it, you can read about an opportunity that is probably not unknown to you. You have probably heard about voluntary work, which in your country is not, perhaps, considered to be work at all, but rather a way of offering voluntary assistance on a daily basis.

In what follows, we will look at what exactly voluntary work means in Hungary, which organisations are open to volunteers and under what conditions volunteers are employed. We will present the advantages to you of volunteering, why it is worthwhile for you to be a volunteer and what steps you need to take in order to work as a volunteer. Besides the advantages of volunteering, we will also consider some of the possible problems, as we help you prepare for "unexpected situations" arising during voluntary work. At the end of this information brochure you will find the organisations you should consider contacting, if you are interested in volunteering.

We trust that with this publication we can contribute to awakening your interest in voluntary work, to help you feel more at home in your new surroundings and assist you in eventually becoming a successful employee.

# THE FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTEERING IN HUNGARY

## WHAT EXACTLY IS VOLUNTARY WORK?

The fundamental conditions for voluntary work are as follows:

- Voluntary activities are primarily not carried out for pay, although the reimbursement of expenses and some nominal payment is allowed.
- It must, in all cases, be based on an individual decision, in other words, it must be voluntary.
- It must serve the welfare of other individuals or of a community (society).

The framework for public benefit volunteering is laid down by the Law on Volunteering, which was passed by the Hungarian Parliament in 2005. The Law on Volunteering determines many of the characteristics of public benefit volunteering:

- the receiving organisations, which may accept volunteers;
- who may volunteer;
- the rights and responsibilities of the receiving organisations and the volunteers;
- the allowance that may be offered to a volunteer;
- the required contents of the volunteer contract; and
- the documentation obligations.

## WHERE CAN YOU BE A VOLUNTEER?

Receiving organisations can be state, civil and religious organisations, such as local governments, publicly financed institutions, public benefit and religious organisations, social and child welfare services and educational institutions.



## **WHO CAN BE A VOLUNTEER?**

Anyone can be a volunteer who is at least 10 years old, irrespective of their nationality, which includes you as an asylum seeker.

## **WHAT TASKS CAN YOU UNDERTAKE?**

Voluntary work can include a wide range of activities (administration, childminding, physical labour, interpretation, etc.).

## **WHAT ARE YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES?**

The receiving organisation is required to provide the necessary direction, orientation, training and safe working environment for its volunteers. The receiving organisation can also reimburse any related expenses you might incur. According to the Law on Volunteering, the following allowances may be given to a volunteer, provided the expenditure can be shown to be related to their voluntary work:

- reimbursement of food and travel costs, provision of accommodation;

- provision of protective clothing;
- reimbursement of any volunteer training costs;
- besides the reimbursement of expenses, volunteers may be given a bonus.

In return, it is the volunteer's responsibility to carry out their tasks to the best of their ability.

It is worthwhile to not only discuss these rights and responsibilities verbally, but to set them out in a written contract. If you volunteer on a long-term basis or receive any type of allowance, you have a legal obligation to sign a written contract.

The contract must contain the actual voluntary activity to be undertaken, its goal, the location of the activity and the tasks to be carried out. In addition, the amount of time to be spent on the voluntary activity, as well as break times, must be determined. Besides this, the allowances to be given to the volunteer must also be agreed.

## THE APPLICATION PERIOD, A TIME OF PASSIVE WAITING

As you no doubt know, for one year from the date of submitting an asylum application you can only work at the reception centre where asylum seekers are accommodated. Unfortunately, this opportunity is only available to a very small number of asylum seekers, as there are generally fewer work opportunities at the reception centre.

How your application period passes is important in terms of both successful employment in the future and social integration. Unfortunately, for most asylum seekers, this period is spent in passive waiting and adapting to the monotonous rhythm of life at the reception centre, which is defined by the three daily meals and sleep.

*"I'd like to get to know the people, but it is often impossible. I need to learn the language and local customs, but we live in virtual isolation here, as though in a prison. I don't need charity, I want to live and work normally, but to do this I need certain opportunities." (Nepalese refugee)*

You probably have friends and acquaintances who are past the application process and are trying to fit in and find work as people with refugee status or special protection. Many people are faced with the following difficulties while trying to find work:

- 1.** an inadequate knowledge of the Hungarian language;  
*"Since I've been in Hungary I haven't worked continuously; even black market work I only get occasionally. The problem is usually the language barrier, that I don't speak Hungarian well enough, that I won't understand what they want me to do."  
(Nigerian refugee)*
- 2.** not having Hungarian customs and social knowledge;
- 3.** the lack of information and experience in the field of Hungarian working culture and job seeking;
- 4.** the lack of Hungarian connections and contacts;  
*"The problem was that I didn't even know where to begin. My African friends faced the same problem, as at home we don't need to go to an employment office to find work. I've heard that there are people who will read the Expressz newspaper and find jobs for other people, for money."  
(Nigerian refugee)*
- 5.** professional knowledge and educational qualifications that are not acknowledged in the Hungarian labour market;  
*"I finished my legal studies one year before having to flee from Cameroon. Here, I have no possibility to work in this field or to*



*continue studying. As I cannot continue my training in Hungary to be a lawyer, I don't have any other option than to learn a simple trade, such as being a chauffeur or builder. However, even this is impossible for me. As I can't get the papers I can't get any work. They ask for the documentation of your educational qualifications everywhere."*  
*(refugee from Cameroon)*

**6.** the negative attitude of Hungarian employers;  
*"You have to be lucky to meet an employer who doesn't have prejudices about foreigners."* *(Nigerian refugee)*

Difficulties later on can, to a large extent, be traced back to the passive period spent waiting at the reception centre. The geographical location of the reception centre is isolating, making it particularly difficult to establish relationships with members of the host society. The most natural way of getting to know a new society and culture is through local people. Members of the host society – Hungarians – can also get to know you through personal contact. Knowing Hungarians can help with finding your way in socie-

ty and can also provide useful advice and information while you are looking for work. There is also more opportunity to practice the Hungarian language with locals than with the residents of the reception centre.

As you cannot undertake work during the application phase – except for the limited opportunities available at the reception centre – you are unable to use your time for activities that would either help to maintain the skills you previously learnt, or acquire new abilities and skills. A lot of people become introverted and spend most of their time worrying about family members left at home and about their own future. The unpredictable and unknown environment arouses uncertainty and fear in many. In this situation anyone may easily feel that they have only losses and that they are unable to contribute anything or become useful to themselves or their surroundings.

The opportunity of voluntary work can do a lot to help in such apparently hopeless situations.

## WHAT DOES VOLUNTEERING OFFER ASYLUM-SEEKERS - WHAT CAN IT OFFER TO YOU?

As mentioned earlier, the most important characteristic of voluntary work is that it is not primarily carried out in return for payment. In that case how can it help you, how can it benefit you?

First of all, the monotonous rhythm of life at the reception centre can be broken by some alternative activity. This applies equally to voluntary work carried out within the territory of the reception centre or outside it.

*"In my opinion, voluntary work has a good effect on your thinking. If you aren't working, you fall into depression. I have experienced this." (Kurdish asylum seeker)*

Wherever you carry it out, voluntary work:

- 1.** develops your capabilities,
- 2.** provides an opportunity to test yourself in new areas,
- 3.** results in new relationships, knowing new people,
- 4.** increases your self-respect.

*"If by some chance you get work outside, you don't have to train yourself, don't become lazy or forget how to think, just because here you are given everything on a platter." (Iranian asylum seeker)*

As a volunteer you can find a place with a local organisation either

inside or outside the camp. Voluntary work undertaken outside the reception centre undoubtedly offers greater opportunities than volunteering inside the centre, as it means breaking out of the isolation from local Hungarians.

Travelling to the location where the voluntary work is taking place, getting to know the receiving organisation's staff and activities, in itself assumes the acquisition of a great deal of new information and knowledge – and this is before we even mention what a positive effect (voluntary) work has on you.

It is the general experience that voluntary work greatly increases the chances of a volunteer finding work later on, as they:

- 1.** acquire a reference,
- 2.** prove their aptitude,
- 3.** gather new experiences,
- 4.** and employers increasingly consider voluntary work to be a positive point.

There is even more to it in your case as an asylum seeker, because you can receive support in exactly those areas where you are suffering a lack and which may help you in any future job. These include:

- 1.** Advancing your knowledge of the Hungarian language (practising the language during your work).

*"Of course I would like to work with Hungarians. I live in Hungary, I need to learn Hungarian as well as Hungarian culture – this is what I need."* (Lebanese asylum seeker)

**2.** Gaining knowledge about Hungarian customs and social knowledge.

*"Someone to explain how to live here. Because I don't know this country and the way of thinking here. I don't know what the people here like and what they don't. Or how I can get to certain places, such as parties or church. I don't know how to make friends. It would be great to learn from someone how you can find work here."* (Bangladeshi asylum seeker)

**3.** Getting to know the peculiarities of employment in Hungary through actual work experience.

**4.** Establishing new professional contacts and friendships during voluntary work.

**5.** Compensating for school qualifications lost during escaping, via a letter of recommendation from the receiving organisation.

**6.** Having a positive effect on your own receiving organisation as well as on other employers, which acts against employers' negative attitudes.

*"The advantage of voluntary work is not just that asylum seekers get to know Hungarian society, but that Hungarians get to know foreign cultures and so become more accepting."*  
(asylum seeker from Sierra Leone)

These experiences will not only help you with finding employment if you decide to stay in Hungary long-term. As a volunteer, you can acquire knowledge and skills that are useful wherever you are, even if you decide to return home or try your luck in another country.

The activities listed below, were carried out by volunteers in a recent voluntary programme run in Debrecen that involved asylum seekers. It can serve as a guide to the type of activities you can undertake as a volunteer. Among them there will no doubt be one or two that you are suitable for and would enjoy doing:

- 1.** administration, office work;
- 2.** translation;
- 3.** editing publications;
- 4.** helping asylum seeker clients in the office;
- 5.** maintaining computers;
- 6.** organising children's programmes.

These activities illustrate just a small part of the activities that can be carried out by volunteers. You can choose the voluntary work you would like to do based on your previous work experience, although it is not a requirement for you to have in-depth knowledge or lots of experience in the chosen field.



Volunteering can have various motivations. The participants in the Debrecen programme mentioned above gave the following view-points as motivating factors and you will probably find something among these that applies to you too:

- 1.** I wanted to break away from the camp;
- 2.** I wanted to make new friends;
- 3.** I wanted to establish new relationships;
- 4.** I wished for something to keep me occupied;
- 5.** I wished for some respect;
- 6.** I wanted to learn new things;
- 7.** I wanted to work with Hungarians;
- 8.** I wanted to develop my Hungarian language skills.

When the voluntary programme finished, the participants were satisfied with their achievements and felt that their expectations had mostly been met.

Some of these participants, having received refugee status, have since found work, some have continued volunteering and there have been new asylum seekers applying for the vacant volunteer posts.



## WHO CAN HELP ME BECOME A VOLUNTEER?

If you have decided that you would like to be a volunteer, but you can't decide what kind of voluntary work you would like to do, feel free to contact the staff of the organisations listed at the end of this brochure.

Organisations with experience of asylum seekers volunteering, can give concrete recommendations about your future receiving organisation and possible volunteer activities.

You will not be alone in dealing with the tasks and situations arising through voluntary work, even after finding a receiving organisation and voluntary activity. There will be someone among your new colleagues at the receiving organisation called a mentor, who is responsible for helping you in your work and with whom you will be working closely.

*"Being a mentor was a great challenge, but in a good sense. Making sure the volunteer enjoyed themselves, but also had an actual task. I tried to imagine myself in the situation of being a foreigner. I tried to see things from their point of view and to help." (the mentor from a receiving organisation)*

They will be the person who introduces you to the work and the staff of the organisation. You will work out your actual tasks and

timetable together with your mentor. You will have the chance to share your experiences and thoughts at regular consultation meetings. The mentor assesses the work carried out and gives feedback on professional development. In the case of any conflict in the workplace, you should rely on them to help clear things up.

*"When she arrived she was very reserved, I feel that she has opened up and come to like us. Her Hungarian has improved, which has been helped by her tasks. We treat her as a colleague. (the mentor from a receiving organisation)*

Undertaking voluntary work is a big step on the road to your integration in Hungary because, instead of passively waiting, you choose to test yourself in a foreign culture, a foreign language, among customs and rules that are new to you. Besides your feeling of satisfaction at working regularly and the new knowledge you acquire, don't forget that your presence and the culture you represent also affects your environment.

*"I was very satisfied with his work, you could see that he had already spent a number of years in this field and it is where he got his knowledge of English; we had no communication problems. He also felt that the time spent with us was useful; he learnt techniques, which he did not previously know. It was a*



*great opportunity for me and my colleagues to practice our language skills. I also developed as a mentor. I practiced my English and got to know a new culture.” (the mentor from a receiving organisation)*

Don't be surprised if within a few weeks you are the centre of attention among your new colleagues.

By getting to know you, your colleagues are likely to be far more open towards other asylum seekers as well.

*“This was my first meeting with an asylum seeker; she told me a lot about her home country, I learnt from her in this respect too.” (the mentor from a receiving organisation)*

# UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS

## 1. What should I do if one of my new colleagues at my receiving organisation rejects me from the first moment?

Definitely don't be offended, they probably grew up in an environment where they never met different cultures or people; in other words the rejection is of something new, not of you personally.

- You shouldn't be upset, because even people from the same culture don't always like each other.
- If the majority of your new colleagues like and accept you, this will have an effect on the initially negative colleague too.
- If you are, however, unsure how to deal with the rejecting behaviour directed at you, ask your mentor for help.

## 2. What should I do if one of my new colleagues gives me a task that I cannot complete?

- Don't feel bad if you have to admit that a certain task is beyond you.
- If you already have enough tasks, you can even politely refuse to take on the additional work; just because you are a new colleague it doesn't mean you have to constantly prove yourself.
- If you do have enough time for the task, but have difficulties carrying it out, ask for help from your other colleagues, with whom you can establish good working relations while solving the problem together.
- If you are unsure what to do, consult the mentor assigned to you by your receiving organisation.

## 3. What should I do if I feel that no-one at my receiving organisation is paying attention to me and I'm not being given any tasks?

- Don't let the apparent lack of a specific task at the beginning get you down. It is quite possible that the colleague responsible is just trying to finish their own work before a deadline and that you will only have to spend a few hours without a concrete task.
- Try to use the free time independently to get to know the organisation with the help of the internet and some publications.
- You should be able to find someone among your new colleagues who can spare the time to talk with you.
- You can offer to carry out a task instead of someone else. Even if it is a very simple task your new colleagues will appreciate your willingness to help.
- If despite using your diplomatic skills and friendliness, you still feel that you are not receiving any attention or useful occupation, raise the problem with your mentor.

## 4. What should I do if after a few days of volunteering my son falls ill and even after he is better, my husband will not allow me to go to the receiving organisation?

- First of all you need to let the receiving organisation know as soon as possible that you will be temporarily unavailable due to your child's illness.
- Try to persuade your husband that voluntary activity has a good

effect on you and that it offers serious long-term opportunities for anyone undertaking it.

- Think about the people you could involve in childminding your children. If your husband has never had this responsibility before, perhaps it is why he does not support your volunteering.
- Encourage other female friends with families and other acquaintances from the camp to undertake voluntary work; acting together is likely to have a more persuasive effect than just you acting alone.
- If these previous suggestions are unsuccessful, consult your mentor; perhaps you will be able to find a solution together, which does not raise opposition in anyone.

### **5. What should I do if after a week of volunteering I receive a positive decision on my asylum application?**

- This is a huge relief for you, but don't give up on volunteering because of it as you can still gain valuable experiences that could help with your future work.
- Finding work can take many months, during which you will have plenty of free time to meet your obligations as a volunteer.
- It is not impossible that you could find work at, or through, your receiving organisation.
- You can best develop your Hungarian language skills through practice, for which volunteering presents an ideal opportunity.

To help solve these and similar situations, go to the mentor assigned to you by your receiving organisation or to the reception centre's social workers.





## ORGANISATIONS

If you are interested in carrying out voluntary work, or would like further information about asylum seekers as volunteers, contact the following organisations. The staff of both organisations can also be found at the reception centres.

### **MENEDÉK – HUNGARIAN ASSOCIATION FOR MIGRANTS**

Address: 1077 Budapest, Jósika u. 2.

Telephone: 061-322-1502, 061-411-1710, 061-411-1711

Fax: 061-479-0272

Email: [menedek@menedek.hu](mailto:menedek@menedek.hu)

Website: [www.menedek.hu](http://www.menedek.hu)

### **ARTEMISSZIÓ FOUNDATION**

Address: 1085 Budapest, Röck Szilárd u. 11.

Telephone: 061-4136517 Fax: 061-4136517

Email: [artemisz@artemisszio.hu](mailto:artemisz@artemisszio.hu)

Website: [www.artemisszio.hu](http://www.artemisszio.hu)

You can also find out more about receiving organisations and current voluntary activities at the following websites, if your knowledge of Hungarian allows: [www.nonprofit.hu](http://www.nonprofit.hu)  
[www.onkenteskozpontok.hu](http://www.onkenteskozpontok.hu)

The latter website includes the contact details of the volunteer centres in various Hungarian cities. This includes the volunteer centre in Debrecen that was involved in the voluntary programme mentioned in this brochure, in which asylum seekers participated.

### **ÉLETFA (TREE OF LIFE) VOLUNTEER CENTRE DEBRECEN**

4025 Debrecen, Török Bálint u. 4. Tel: 0652-502-398

Email: [eletfa@debrecenionkentes.hu](mailto:eletfa@debrecenionkentes.hu)

Website: <http://www.debrecenionkentes.hu/>

### **REFUGEE-SPECIFIC SELF-ORGANISING GROUPS**

Besides the organisations mentioned above, there exist refugee-specific self-organising groups and organisations that can also offer you opportunities for volunteering. These self-organising groups tend to be organised based on country of origin and shared cultural traditions. Therefore, in these organisations you can meet people from your home country or culture.

These groups can help you a lot with getting to know Hungarian culture and customs as their members will include people who have lived in Hungary for a number of years.

Maintaining contacts with members from a similar culture can also help you retain your own cultural identity.

In the early days, these self-organising groups can act as a bridge between you and the host society as they “understand the language” of both sides.

Although the following list is not exhaustive, it gives the contact details of a number of refugee-specific self-organising groups.

### **MULTIKULTÚRA ASSOCIATION**

1077 Budapest, Almássy tér 6. IV/413.

Tel: 061-3432432

Fax: 061-2102111

Email: [info@multikultura.hu](mailto:info@multikultura.hu)

Website: [www.multikultura.hu](http://www.multikultura.hu)

### **EBONY AFRICAN CULTURAL, ARTISTIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS ASSOCIATION**

1082 Budapest, Vajdahunyad u. 15.

Tel: 061-2195932

Fax: 061-2195933

Email: [info@ebony.hu](mailto:info@ebony.hu)

Website: [www.ebony.hu](http://www.ebony.hu)

### **MAHATMA GANDHI ASSOCIATION**

1092 Budapest, Ferenc krt. 18.

Tel/Fax: 061-2158301

Email: [budgandhim@yahoo.com](mailto:budgandhim@yahoo.com)

**MENEDÉK**  
**HUNGARIAN ASSOCIATION FOR MIGRANTS**

1077 Budapest, Jósika u. 2.  
Tel: 061-322-1502, 061-411-1710, 061-411-1711  
Fax: 061-479-0272  
menedek@menedek.hu  
www.menedek.hu

**NEMZETI FEJLESZTÉSI ÜGYNÖKSÉG**  
**HUMÁN ERŐFORRÁS PROGRAMOK IRÁNYÍTÓ HATÓSÁGA**

1133 Budapest, Pozsonyi út 56.  
www.nfu.hu

**ORSZÁGOS FOGLALKOZTATÁSI KÖZALAPÍTVÁNY**  
**EQUAL NEMZETI PROGRAMIRODA**

1037 Budapest, Bokor u. 9-11.  
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