



Across Borders

Resilience, Impact and Covid-19

Insights from Year 1

September 2021

About Across Borders

[Across Borders](#) is a Comic Relief programme supporting 19 civil society organisations and partnerships that are working to develop routes to safety for refugees. Over 3+ years, the cohort is working in direct service delivery at a grassroots level, advocating for changes to policy and legislation, and aiming to shift the general public attitudes towards migration.

This cohort has been transforming lives together since May 2020 and is set to continue its work together for three years. During this period, information-sharing, innovative practices and enhanced collaboration puts the [Across Borders cohort](#) at the cutting edge of modern refugee response. Stay tuned as we share further updates from this cohort's powerful work.

About the report

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Map (right): project activities of the Across Borders cohort

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Introduction

This report tells the story of 19 organisations and their partners, funded by [Comic Relief](#), who have overcome adversity to continue providing critical social and humanitarian programmes for people on the move.

The [Across Borders cohort](#) comprises civil society organisations from North Africa and Europe, and in this report, we look back at their response to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Here, we bear witness to the adaptability, versatility and dynamism of inspiring organisations that have continued to put human rights front and centre.

In a context of hardline political shifts, restricted international travel and daily uncertainty, the following pages draw on reports from each organisation after their first year of work in this cohort. What follows is an extraordinary story.

In numbers

Impact from the first year of the *Across Borders* cohort*

**Aggregated numbers from 15 of 19 organisations*

11,918

People on the move

have benefitted from direct support through Across Borders activities and programmes

5,460

Children and youth

have directly benefitted from Across Borders activities - that's 46% of the total of 11,918

1,422

Frontline workers

have developed new competencies, as staff or volunteers through Across Borders



Part 1 Advocacy

- 1) One step forwards, two steps back
- 2) Investing in advocacy
- 3) Taking forward key learnings

Part 1 **Advocacy**

One step forwards, two steps back

Over the past 12 months, the political and social landscape has darkened, hampering the efforts of civil society organisations.

01

Brexit and UK politics

In the UK, the fallout from Brexit and the prospect of the new ‘[Nationality and Borders Bill](#)’ are forcing many organisations to invest significant resources in lobbying for change and the protection of refugee rights.

As [Safe Passage](#) reports, children on the cusp of adulthood have now lost that additional protection they would have received when officially minors. Post-Brexit, hundreds of young refugees who previously could have reached their families in the UK have lost this right.

02

The spectre of Covid-19

In France and Greece, Across Borders partners including [Refugee Youth Service](#), [Refugee Trauma Initiative](#) and [European Lawyers in Lesvos](#) are having to step in to fill gaps arising from withdrawing government provision exacerbated by Covid-19.

The Across Borders cohort also reports how Covid-19 has not only affected direct service provision, but caused a negative shift in public attitudes. [Choose Love](#) reports how the pandemic has increased awareness of national identity and borders. As a result, Choose Love says “the political right has been able to capitalise on fear of ‘the other’.”

**"In Greece, the political situation sadly
does not provide any greater hope. We
continue to have to adapt in line with the
government's strangulation of civil
society groups."**

Refugee Youth Service

Part 1 **Advocacy**

Investing in advocacy

The events of the past year have created an urgent need for advocacy-focused activities that respond not only to chronic injustices, but to new and arising ones.

01

An extraordinary flight

[Safe Passage](#) has watched as travel restrictions across Europe have stranded hundreds of refugees awaiting relocation in dangerous camps. Government agencies have shut down. However, in early Summer 2020, the organisation achieved an [extraordinary flight from Greece to the UK](#) with people accepted under the Dublin Regulations on board.

02

Strategic litigation

In the UK, [Choose Love](#) has funded strategic litigation cases from refugee women seeking recourse to justice. [Medical Justice](#) successfully challenged the Home Office in court, forcing them to include critical questions related to trafficking in asylum screening interviews, and they have continued to highlight the plight of [asylum seekers in detention](#).

In Greece, [European Lawyers of Lesbos](#) have successfully lobbied the Ombudsman to reinstate age assessment procedures for refugees on Samos Islands, clearing a critical blockage in the asylum process.

Part 1 **Advocacy**

Taking forward key learnings

In the past year, Across Borders organisations have landed upon key learnings and insights to equip them better for the future.

01

Reactive/proactive advocacy

The last year has reinforced for organisations such as [Choose Love](#) the need for both reactive and proactive advocacy. “We need to be proactive to shift the human narrative and present visionary alternatives and be reactive to developments and public momentum, such as our work following the Moria fire and Napier Barracks.”

02

The bigger conversation

Organisations such as [Counterpoint Arts](#) have reflected on the need to situate the refugee issue in its broader historical context of racism and migration. This “can help bring fresh light to contemporary conversations, helping people to realise that migration and displacement are not new phenomena but a central part of our society and identity.”



"Our legal and advocacy teams combined, a crucial element to the work funded **by Comic Relief, and we secured a key achievement that meant **positive change in people's lives.**"**

Safe Passage

Photo credit: Giorgos Moutafis/The Guardian



Part 2 Agile Responses

- 1) Agile responses in crises
- 2) Towards digital service delivery
- 3) Spotlight on online service delivery
- 4) Care for staff and volunteers

Part 2 Agile Responses

Agile responses in crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has required organisations to practice extreme agility.

01

Schools and care packs

In Egypt, [StARS](#) stepped in for the 2020 school year to support children in need with vital education grants. They additionally supported community schools to reach those without access.

Across Greece and wider Europe, partners of [Choose Love](#) and organisations like [Refugee Trauma Initiative](#) increased their support for refugees in remote camps and urban environments through [additional care packs](#).

02

Healthcare and the Arts

Responding to the surge in need for medical attention, [Medical Justice](#) provided urgent healthcare for 651 vulnerable detainees in the UK, preventing their deportation to countries by providing them with medical evidence that transformed the prospects of their asylum claims.

In the face of closed borders and global lockdown, [Good Chance Theatre](#) have forged ahead with [The Walk](#), and in the last months, Little Amal has set off, set to stop in 65 villages, towns and cities across eight countries.



"We are now stopping at **65
villages, towns and cities
across **8** countries."**

Good Chance Theatre

Photo credit: Good Chance Theatre

Part 2 **Agile Responses**

Towards digital service delivery

A defining aspect of the past year was taking services online. As a result, many organisations have been able to reach new beneficiaries.

01

Remote training

The [European Network on Statelessness](#) reached ‘more frontline actors than expected’, delivering a range of training, capacity-building and awareness-raising activities. [The Helen Bamber Foundation](#) reached new organisations, providing training for the [Care Quality Commission](#), the NHS and police.

Conversely, [Family for Every Child](#)’s training and network-building activities “took a lot longer to achieve the same intended purpose.” For [Refugee Action](#), working with volunteers online required new, appropriate, training resources to ensure high levels of continued safety.

02

Online service offerings

[UNHCR](#) were able to adapt their family reunification efforts through remote interview and case management, continuing to achieve urgent interventions in extraordinary circumstances.

[Refugee Action](#)’s ‘[Asylum Guides](#)’ programme continued to thrive with online provision, with clients rating the programme 4.6 out of 5 and reporting an average increase in understanding of their asylum rights from 2.8 to 4 out of 5.

Part 2 **Agile Responses**

Spotlight on **online** service delivery

Across the 19 organisations and their partners, specialisation has led to exemplary work done across a number of fields.

01

Legal work

[European Lawyers in Lesvos](#) provided legal assistance remotely with a team of 15 volunteer asylum lawyers. As a result, “76.2% of those assisted on Samos [were] granted international protection, compared to an average of 43% in Greece.”

02

Therapy

[Refugee Trauma Initiative](#) developed a new suite of audio, video and written materials for caregivers, distributed via WhatsApp. Online therapeutic groups for male refugees also moved online.

03

Education

[StARS](#) identified new ways to provide education online during lockdown. This included remote learning via group telephone calls, as well as the delivery of education packages to families with children.

04

The Arts

[Counterpoint Arts](#) hosted online art workshops for young people stuck in refugee camps across Greece and in the UK. [Good Chance Theatre](#) adapted their projects to online environments, such as their community poetry project, ‘[Change the Word](#)’.

"Clients were better able to advocate for their rights and present their asylum case in a way that reflects their need for protection."

European Lawyers on Lesbos

Part 2 **Agile Responses**

Care for staff and volunteers

In the new world of the pandemic, new measures have been put in place by the Across Borders cohort to support staff and volunteers in testing circumstances.

01

Working from home

Medical Justice has witnessed how the pandemic has created a ‘tsunami of unplanned, unpredictable and urgent’ medical cases requiring attention. Caseworkers have faced extremely trying conditions, dealing with stressful and often violent client liaison online “without immediate personal supervision or support in their back bedroom.”

02

A sense of helplessness

Refugee Youth Service have witnessed their team's feelings of ‘helplessness and paralysis’ caused by the pandemic. The lockdown has “taken away the most energising part of the work: direct interaction with children and young people”. In response, they’ve given mentorship and welfare-based guidance to those struggling to cope with the chronic effects of the pandemic.



Part 3 Beyond the pandemic

- 1) Collaboration in action
- 2) Keeping services online
- 3) Experts by Experience

Part 3 **Beyond the pandemic**

Collaboration in action

Over the past 12 months, many organisations in Across Borders have been able to establish more robust networks to drive forward their work in exciting ways.

01

New networks

[Stop the Traffik](#) worked with over twenty organisations in Greece, as well as with financial institutions and businesses like Facebook to [raise greater awareness](#) around trafficking for people on the move.

[Choose Love](#) co-founded a new network, the Cross-Border Forum, bringing together UK, French and Belgian actors to share information, learnings and policy work - all in spite of restricted international travel.

02

Greater efficiencies

[Medical Justice](#) reported “spontaneous and effective collaborations” with partners such as [Helen Bamber](#) which will continue long after the pandemic. With less face to face meetings, clinicians were able to hold many more meetings with clients online.

Part 3 **Beyond the pandemic**

Keeping services online

The Covid-19 period forced many organisations into remote service delivery. For some, these ways of working will stay central to ongoing efforts.

01

Digital communication

The Helen Bamber Foundation supported clients facing digital poverty with phones, tablets and internet access. The benefits of this training and contact will continue in the coming years.

What's more, digital communication has greatly helped the Foundation to support clients with mobility issues, such as those who live far away or have childcare commitments.

02

Improved services

Boaz Trust launched an array of new services, including internet access in shared accommodation, prepaid Visa cards, home exercise equipment and group activities such as cooking classes.

Mobile communication with clients allowed for increased connectivity and understanding, while embracing the great outdoors has helped many clients develop deeper trust in the organisation.

"We've engaged with more doctors who are juggling volunteering with jobs, family and studying. After the pandemic we'll continue [like this] as it's more efficient and allows us to reach more detainees."

Medical Justice

Part 3 **Beyond the pandemic**

Experts by experience

Over the pandemic, organisations were also able to have the time and connectivity with experts by experience to develop programmes that ensure inclusivity and relevance for beneficiary groups.

01

Experts by Experience-led advice

[The European Network on Statelessness](#) facilitated the participation of stateless refugees through a new ‘Community Engagement Strategy’.

The success has led to new approaches such as their “participatory research project with five of our members now providing legal advice to children affected by statelessness.”

02

Increased participation

[Safe Passage](#) recognises an ‘unexpected positive outcome’ of the pandemic on their ‘Young Leaders’ programme, which thrived online.

“The frequency of meetings increased and with it, engagement.” Through the programme, they’ve been able to work with people with lived experience around the UK.

Celebrating Success

ICONIQ Larsen Lam Impact Award



As part of a coalition of six refugee-led organisations, StARS has been awarded a portion of ten million dollars to support their growth and to resource refugee leadership.

A winning documentary - For Sama



With funding from Choose Love to the Action for Sama campaign, this powerful new film has been nominated for an Oscar, winning a BAFTA and Emmy Award to boot!

The Ockenden International Prize



Velos Youth, in partnership with Refugee Youth Service, was one of four winners of the 2020 Ockenden Prize, an award celebrating exceptional work in support of refugees.

Market Research Society Awards



Stop the Traffik has been awarded prizes in public policy and social research “for engaging an extremely hard to reach audience” and the Liz Nelson Grand Prix Award for Social Impact in Lithuanian-UK migration research.



Part 4 Funding Excellence

- 1) Responsive funding under Covid-19
- 2) A focus on peer learning

Part 4 **Funding Excellence**

Responsive funding under Covid-19

During the difficult months of the pandemic, the Across Borders cohort unanimously appreciated the efforts and approaches of [Comic Relief](#) as a grant-maker.

01

Clear guidance

[European Lawyers on Lesvos](#) point to the clear guidance of required documentation, and together with [Family for Every Child](#) and other organisations point to the positive and approachable grant managers who have guided organisations through this turbulent time.

02

Flexible funding

Many organisations have been thankful for the flexibility Comic Relief provided for their granted funds.

Simplified reporting, budget flexibility and open ongoing conversations around activity plans all helped organisations to pivot their programmes in response to the pandemic.

Part 4 **Funding Excellence**

A focus on peer learning

Organisations have also greatly benefitted from the [Across Borders Learning Programme](#) offered to the cohort members over the period.

01

Sharing practice

[Boaz Trust](#) found “the sessions, content and opportunities for discussion really valuable”, while [Refugee Trauma Initiative](#) reports that the programme “provided us with many opportunities to learn from others about their best practices, challenges and ways to overcome obstacles.”

02

Creating networks

[Stop the Traffik](#) have established new collaborations as a result of the Learning Programme. “We’ve met and collaborated with other Across Borders grantees, including [Choose Love](#), [Refugee Youth Service](#) and [Refugee Trauma Initiative](#).” The same goes for [StARS](#), who have used cohort meetings to “network with other organisations providing similar support in Europe and other parts of Africa.”

"We have **enjoyed and benefited from the relationship and capacity building opportunities presented by the Across Borders Learning Programme, which has provided very useful opportunities **to network and learn** from other organisations funded under this programme."**

European Network on Statelessness

