Our Response to the Refugee Crisis
Sharing a Commitment to All Humanity and Bridging Divides

In light of the growing refugee crisis around the globe, we are often asked by new funders entering this space to share our approach. This learning brief documents our grantmaking strategy and learning along the way, as well as reflections and guiding questions for consideration. This is a huge area of concern and we believe it is more important than ever to coordinate among peer funders. We welcome your partnership to meet this challenge.

Unbound’s call to action: Activating our mission

The last several years have seen a humanitarian crisis affecting unaccompanied children and families fleeing violence in Central America and Mexico, playing out against the backdrop of an intensifying global refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe. In the UK, the Syrian refugee crisis and the public’s response to it has influenced major political movements, including Brexit. In the US, new policies have cast suspicion on Muslims and the foreign-born, and the refugee cap has been set at a historic low. In both countries there has been a passionate outpouring of solidarity and support for refugees, alongside significant fears and concerns about public safety, integration, and the potential strain on limited resources in resettling refugees.

With a mission to welcome newcomers and strengthen communities to ensure that all people can live with respect and dignity, regardless of where they were born, Unbound staff and Board felt compelled to develop a thoughtful grantmaking approach. In the UK, we have funded refugees and people seeking asylum for nearly ten years and now share reflections and lessons from developing and iterating our strategy. In the US, we began developing a strategy for refugee work in 2016. In building strategies in both regions, we have sought to identify where we can best contribute to a vast and complex area of work, with a modest budget. And in both regions we have simultaneously tried to bridge divides between the immigration and refugee fields.

Defining “refugee”

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence.

A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.

War and ethnic, tribal, and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

-USA for United Nations Human Rights Commission

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United Kingdom refugee landscape

Our research shows that there are over a thousand charities and nonprofits working with refugees and migrants in the UK, largely focused on spontaneous arrivals of those seeking protection. However, multiple landscape analyses and field scans show that nonprofits are underfunded by philanthropy and institutional donors. Consequently, organizations are largely focused on service delivery to individuals in crisis and are nearly all small and voluntary. We estimate 80 percent of such nonprofits employ two or fewer paid staff.

At the same time, since 2015 when the European refugee crisis reached its apogee, we have seen significant numbers of new supporters and actors, clustering around refugee welcome in communities around the UK and new internationalists focusing on the refugee camps in Northwest France.

Among the many vulnerabilities and threats that refugees face—including extreme poverty, social exclusion, mental health needs, and unemployment, among many others—they also face a government that is ambivalent or actively opposed to supporting spontaneous arrivals seeking protection as well as to certain groups of immigrants. These policy exclusions, a hostile environment, and systems that follow pose fundamental challenges to how philanthropy can respond, as needs hugely exceed capacity.

United Kingdom Program: a decade of investments in refugees

Unbound has been active in supporting the rights of refugees in the United Kingdom for almost 10 years. We began our refugee-focused grantmaking with two main goals: to build public understanding and to improve access to justice. To advance the first goal, we funded new organizations focused on engaging with the public, such as British Future, as well as public opinion research related to refugees. We funded Women for Refugee Women for its work to provide a platform for refugee women to tell their own stories to the media and to policymakers. (Today, they are bringing those voices and experiences into the wider #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.) We funded support for community organizing, to groups such as Citizens UK, and engagement through culture, to groups such as Counterpoints Arts. We made a long-standing commitment to Student Action for Refugees (STAR), a campus-based effort to mobilize students who also volunteer on refugee projects, and supported City of Sanctuary, a network of over 80 groups across the UK who provide welcoming activities and campaign for a more just asylum system.

To advance our second goal, as part of a small ecosystem of funders, we focused on improving access to justice for asylum seekers; and improving asylum determination procedures and redress for spontaneous asylum arrivals through new advice models, training, research, and strategic litigation.

Evaluation evidence suggests grantees increased the rate of positive first decisions and substantially improved outcomes for female and LGBT asylum-seeking applicants. And the work on new advice models allowed several leading advice providers and law centers to continue to focus on this issue at a time when public legal aid was reduced.

Deepening our focus in response to the European refugee crisis: identifying gaps

In 2015, Unbound increased our spend on refugee-specific work in response to the European refugee crisis. We also sought to encourage online and offline movement building of support for refugees and refugee welcome. We maintained a focus on access to justice by supporting advocacy in several additional areas in response to our assessment of the policy gaps, which include: (1) refugee and migrant family reunion; (2) refugee resettlement (especially private sponsorship of refugees); and (3) refugee integration post-settlement (e.g. refugee children’s education).

Major grants in these areas include: establishing, with other charities and funders, a new initiative with the British Red Cross to improve refugee family reunion; several organizations working on community refugee sponsorship (known as private sponsorship in the US), including Citizens UK and Social Finance Ltd, which incubated the new organization RESET; and the Education Policy Institute for refugee education.
What we have learned

Our general approach at Unbound has been not to give preference to refugees over other groups in terms of funding. While recognizing that there is a specific legal status and a moral case, we also note that the public doesn’t make such hard and fast legal distinctions and it can lead to trade offs between groups and a lack of holistic thinking on systems, especially integration support. Of course not all refugee- and asylum seeker-serving organizations, or their funders, are willing to broaden their focus beyond refugees but it remains an important anchor in our approach.

We have consistently found that our work must reflect the dynamism of the field and actors in it. New organizations and allies, some of which we had a hand in birthing, have changed the conversation in the UK substantially. However, it is clear too that persistent, skillful work of nonprofits who have been in the space for the long haul, have been at the center of several key changes, such as on detention.

Finally, we have found it to be important to work towards building public support in concert with access to justice. Both are focused on changing the system rather than underwriting service delivery activity. We acknowledge the interaction between case work and on-the-ground volunteering with advocacy, but believe there has been insufficient focus on government policy and systems and how they can be built to better serve need. This remains our most crucial insight.

Launch of Citizens UK Foundation for Community Sponsorship of Refugees, which included a Jewish Succah tent assembled in the East London mosque.

UK Program Grantee Spotlights

British Red Cross

British Red Cross is heading a major new initiative in refugee family reunion

Together with a group of funder partners, Unbound is supporting the British Red Cross to create a major new initiative for the reunion of refugee families in the UK. The initiative is using applied research, communications, policy advocacy, and service delivery to build a system that allows families to be together and to be treated with dignity.

The initiative has assembled an expert panel from leading organizations and has established a grantmaking procedure to grant to specialist providers and advocacy organizations.

Citizens UK is a leader in community organizing in the UK, and is now spearheading a refugee community sponsorship initiative

Citizens UK is a longtime grantee of Unbound (since 2009). Today, we are supporting Citizens to develop a community refugee sponsorship program. As Tim Finch, director of Sponsor Refugees at Citizens UK says, “Everyone who hears about community sponsorship is enthused by it, as it gives ordinary people a chance to directly transform the life of a refugee family, not at arms-length, but in their own neighbourhood.”

Citizens is working to increase national uptake of community sponsorship by publicizing and securing sponsors amongst its members, their communities, and their respective national networks. Citizens is partnering with RESET, a new institution which was incubated at Social Finance Ltd, a grantee of Unbound. RESET, along with a coalition of 11 actors, including Citizens UK, was recently awarded 1.2 million GBP from the Home Office to support sponsors.

Launch of Citizens UK Foundation for Community Sponsorship of Refugees, which included a Jewish Succah tent assembled in the East London mosque.
United States refugee landscape

The US has been an international leader in the protection of refugees, providing significant funding to international agencies and consistently resettling the largest number of refugees. Today, our refugee resettlement system is at serious risk of being dismantled.

There are a number of immediate and long-term challenges that will arise with the US cutting back its resettlement system. First, significant cuts could mean other nations will follow our lead, having a global chilling effect on refugee resettlement. Historically, when the US has increased our commitment to resettlement, and raised the annual admissions ceiling, other countries have increased their numbers as well. Similarly, when the US reduces its annual admissions ceiling, other countries have often reduced their commitment.

Second, US resettlement agencies have developed expertise over many years that has been utilized globally. As refugee admissions have been reduced, resettlement agencies have had to lay off staff and close offices. If this infrastructure is significantly reduced, it cannot be easily or quickly restored.

While philanthropic support of refugees has increased over the past two years, there is still a long way to go. A limited research scan that Unbound commissioned among 10 leading US immigration funders shows that only four list refugees as a priority population. We also found that the funders that do focus on refugees are all working on different, specific slivers of the issue, and that a more concerted response is deeply needed. (If you are a funder interested in seeing this research scan, please contact us.)

United States Program: Entering through our strategic priority areas

In formulating our response in the US, in 2014 and 2015, we initially applied the same entry point we used to define our niche within the migration grantmaking ecosystem: funding organizations that seek to improve public understanding of asylum seekers and refugees. We made communications grants to Kids In Need of Defense and the Women’s Refugee Commission to address the dramatic increase in unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S. border from Central America, many seeking asylum due to violence in their home countries. We also funded the International Refugee Assistance Project to provide legal aid for refugees, as well as systemic advocacy.

Connecting the immigration and refugee fields: A case for bridging divisions

In conversations with leaders from immigration and refugee and asylum-seeker fields, we heard a compelling case for bridging the divisions. While legal categories, such as “refugee” or “asylum seeker” or “migrant,” determine people’s trajectories, the human faces and experiences of the people to whom we attach these terms (often members of the same family) make the distinctions unproductive for programming, strategy, and advocacy.

Unbound worked closely with other funders and grantees, including the funding intermediary, the Four Freedoms Fund (FFF), to address this divide between immigrant and asylum/refugee-serving organizations, and the silos that had long limited philanthropic investment in refugee issues. Several of our longstanding immigrant-focused grantees had already begun to work on refugee and asylum issues. FFF reinforced this trend by funding a communications and organizing project in Texas to increase public support or refugee resettlement.
Developing a strategy: Building support for refugees and strengthening their voices

In 2016, we developed an approach that leveraged our prior learnings from our immigrants’ rights grantee portfolio, focusing on civic engagement, leadership development, and targeted advocacy and communications. Under this strategy, our first grantee was Church World Service (CWS), one of the United States’ nine national refugee resettlement networks. CWS had already begun to blend its work for immigrants and refugees. The following year, we continued to fund its work to train refugee leaders in community organizing, storytelling, and leadership for social change, inspired by the trainings that helped the Dreamers so successfully tell their stories to the public.

We identified additional partners who were interested in working across silos to both rally public support for refugees and strengthen their voices and their allies. We funded a national coalition and campaign called We are All America, based at the National Partnership for New Americans, which was launched to strengthen welcoming efforts for refugees and asylum seekers nationally, grounded in state-level campaigns. We supported its work in Florida and Tennessee with grants to the Florida Immigrant Coalition and the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, and provided matching funds for a project in Arizona. And we again funded the International Refugee Assistance Project, for its policy and litigation activities. Additionally, we ensured that a major new initiative that we co-founded, the U.S.-based Pop Culture Collaborative, was designed to drive authentic, just narratives about people of color, immigrants—and refugees—and Muslims in the media.

IRAP organizes law students and lawyers to promote and enforce legal and human rights for refugees and displaced persons

IRAP, which Unbound began funding in 2014, is the first organization to provide comprehensive legal representation to refugees throughout the registration, protection, and resettlement processes. IRAP has built pro bono partnerships with 30 law schools and over 100 international law firms and multinational corporations, and operates in three cities: New York, Beirut, and Amman. IRAP plans to expand its model to Europe, beginning with a focus on unaccompanied minors seeking to reunite with parents in the UK and other countries.

IRAP helped lead the fight against President Trump’s harmful Executive Orders that sought to block admissions of refugees and other immigrants, and travelers from primarily Muslim-majority countries. It organized an emergency legal task force at airports around the country and led a coalition of lawyers and law students to secure an emergency Temporary Restraining Order. IRAP has been the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit, IRAP v. Trump, to challenge the different iterations of President Trump’s Executive Orders in their entirety.

CWS is leading an innovative leadership development and civic participation for refugees to elevate refugees’ voices in policymaking and in the media

Unbound began funding Church World Service in 2016 to develop an innovative leadership development and civic participation program to elevate refugees’ voices in policymaking, inspired by and modeled after the trainings that helped Dreamers so successfully tell their stories to the public.

CWS has trained over 300 refugee leaders in 10 cities across the US. It has also helped them engage in power mapping of their local communities, develop campaign ideas, learn how to tell their stories publicly, and engage in civic engagement projects.

The sites have also tried to improve public perception of refugees through the media. Two refugee leaders from Columbus were featured on CNN’s New Day program, and one of them later helped organize women to participate in the Women’s March on Washington and was featured in a Newsweek article that described refugee women who participated in the event.
A more holistic approach across all grantmaking and learning with others

While building the new US portfolio and reflecting on our UK investments, we examined our grantmaking foundation-wide and made several adjustments to foster a more holistic and integrated approach, encouraging grantees that had been primarily focused on other immigrant populations to also address refugee and asylum seeker challenges.

As in all our work, we also know that learning with our peer philanthropic partners is a necessary strategy to see beyond our own areas of knowledge. We also know that in order to make meaningful impact, we are stronger together. We have worked closely with the philanthropic affinity group Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) to support our shared learning. We invite you to join us at the GCIR’s roundtable on refugees to learn more.

Developing a Refugee Strategy: Our Guiding Questions

If your foundation is considering working in this area, we wanted to share our process to support your journey, if helpful. In hindsight, these are the questions we asked ourselves as we embarked on this work:

1. Why are you interested in supporting refugees? How does your mission and strategic plan inform why and how you can support refugees?

2. Where and how are you already supporting refugees? While you may not explicitly fund refugee-focused work to date, there is a strong likelihood that refugee communities and the issues that impact them are nested within your existing work and the communities you serve. What can you learn from your current portfolio and grantees to inform your current grantmaking?

3. Consider taking small steps to get started: Don’t let limited funds prohibit your entry. Can you expand or deepen existing trusted grantee relationships to get started and begin deeper learning?

4. Who can you partner with to learn and support this work? This could be grantee partners or philanthropic partners like us to co-learn and explore this work. You don’t need to do this alone and, in our opinion, we are much stronger when we work together.

Learn more and partner with us

We are eager to grow the resources directed at humanitarian migrants and actively cultivate colleagues to co-fund with.

With this goal, we are increasing our communications and collaboration with funders interested in this work.

Funders interested in learning more about Unbound Philanthropy’s approach should contact:

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Portions of this brief were adapted with permission from a case study written by Suzette Brooks Masters for GCIR.

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)
A philanthropic affinity group focused on informing and engaging funders on immigration and immigrant integration.

Unbound has supported Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) since 2009. GCIR plays a critical role in increasing philanthropic support for immigration and immigrant integration issues. With both a bird’s eye view at the national level and strong state and local relationships, GCIR provides funders with a holistic picture of the complex immigration landscape. Its programs and resources help funders keep pace with fast-changing policies and deploy funding to the areas of need.

Since 2016, GCIR’s membership has increased by over 50 percent. More foundations than ever participated in GCIR’s numerous webinars and briefings, and large numbers utilized its consultation and technical assistance services.

In 2017, GCIR worked with several foundations, including Unbound, to convene a national refugee roundtable attended by 23 funders. The meeting provided participants with a forum to share their current funding strategies; learn about the current US policies’ impact on refugees and asylum seekers; identify funding needs and gaps; and begin to strategize about ways to increase philanthropic support of refugee issues. GCIR recently formed a funders work group to address refugee issues.