

Young Costa Ricans and refugees working together for integration

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When given the opportunity, young people can work effectively together to promote local integration.

For the International Year of Youth (2010-2011) UNHCR in Costa Rica, together with other UN organisations, civil society and government bodies, set up a project called 'Links without borders: dialogue for the integration of young migrants, refugees and Costa Ricans'. 'Links without borders' aimed to identify and raise awareness of the challenges posed by integration, and to support initiatives led by young people to meet these challenges. More than 400 young people of 13 different nationalities took part in focus groups and a three-day national conference.

Unfortunately in Costa Rica young people – especially refugees and migrants – are associated with attitudes and behaviour reflecting rebellion, drug addiction and criminality. Through the 'Links without borders' project it became clear that young refugees are, first and foremost, young people with dreams and desires like anyone else of their age, who need friendships, a sense of belonging, opportunities for self-fulfilment, and fun. As young people, they are eager to discover the world and be independent, to be taken seriously as people who are not only the future of society but part of its present. The project participants who make up the 'Network of Young People Without Borders' have identified the following as major challenges to integration:

- discrimination and suspicion of nationalities labelled as 'other' (compounding the common perception of youth as problematic)
- unequal access to education, particularly higher and technical education, and a limited range of initiatives and programmes that encourage intercultural exchange within the educational environment
- difficulty in securing documentation which confirms their migration status and protects their rights; documentation is expensive and the systems for accessing it are slow and ineffective.
- limited access to health-care services, including mental, sexual and reproductive health services; and xenophobic attitudes among health-system officials
- difficulty in securing work; decent jobs are hard to come by for young people, and even more so for young refugees because of their difficulty in proving their qualifications – as well as the xenophobia of employers.
- difficulty in getting credit from banks – for example, to set up businesses – and unequal

access to social programmes and credit or subsidy schemes for vulnerable individuals.

Only one year after it was founded, the Network of Young People Without Borders had undertaken a variety of sensitisation and integration activities such as:

- participation at university events and at festivals, with information stands, videos and workshops
- spreading messages about integration through radio and social media
- street theatre and performances for World Refugee Day
- participation in national happenings for young people, such as the first National Youth Conference
- awareness-raising for more than 200 officials dealing with migration
- active participation in national fora and networks, including being the first youth group in the National Network of Civil Organisations of Migration.

One young refugee woman said: "For a long time I was lost here. ... [now] I have found friends, companions, support, solidarity, a huge range of people who are now part of my life..." Such can be the outcomes for young people who find a way to be heard, to be part of the solution, and who are able to channel their energies constructively.

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Members of the Network of Young People without Borders – La Red de Jovenes sin Fronteras – spread their message of tolerance in San José, Costa Rica, during World Refugee Day 2011.