The IBM Humanitarian Response to the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe

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IBM’s Response to the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe

There are more than 65 million displaced people in the world today. More than 21 million of them have crossed international borders in search of safety and are registered as refugees. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over one million refugees and migrants came to Europe in 2015 alone. The need for assistance is great, and a crisis of this scale requires more than state action.

IBM has been actively partnering with regional and international NGOs and launching volunteer initiatives to address the critical and long-term needs of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. Driving much of these efforts is the IBM Impact Grants program, a pro bono initiative that delivers state-of-the-art technology and consulting expertise to organizations around the world. IBM has also made significant and innovative contributions through volunteer and commercial engagements. These efforts form the foundation of IBM’s cohesive strategy to provide assistance to refugees and migrants, using leading technologies and expertise.

Recognizing the need

Turkey is a major transfer point for refugees and migrants, which, from the earliest day of the crisis, has led UNHCR to partner with local NGOs to implement programs and deliver aid. With an estimated 2.5 million Syrians alone having passed through Turkey since the war in Syria began, these organizations have seen their data management needs grow significantly.

In late 2014, IBM delivered a series of customized requirements workshops and design documents to Support to Life (STL), a local implementing partner of UNHCR in Turkey. STL delivers basic needs assistance projects under the Refugee Assistance Program to approximately 30,000 non-camp refugees each month. STL collects data from refugees regarding their needs, and it sought advice to improve the management of related data. IBM delivered actionable recommendations for STL to integrate external datasets into Sahana, an open source disaster management program owned by the Sahana Software Foundation designed to help emergency management practitioners better prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. This support has helped the organization to improve its associated data management and operations.
Similarly, the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) develops interventions for legal, health and other challenges faced by refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey. It is also a local implementing partner of UNHCR and manages 1,000 staff members and 52 offices in 45 cities across Turkey. ASAM’s legacy data management approach made it difficult to properly track every user and provide required services in a timely fashion. Moreover, it hindered efforts to develop insightful reports and better understand migration trends. To address these issues, IBM delivered a custom solution to address ASAM’s data management requirements as it registers and supports refugees and migrants. The system’s user-friendly, secure, and confidential data management features allow multiple users at different sites to register and monitor refugees that receive support. Critically, the system was specifically designed to help ASAM identify issues at an early stage and intervene in a timely manner to resolve them.

**Ramping up support**

As the crisis began to take hold, IBM expanded its efforts to a wider range of organizations and regions. An early partnership was developed with INTERSOS, a not-for-profit humanitarian aid organization that provides assistance to people in danger as well as victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts. INTERSOS is active in Crotone, Italy, where it manages a reception and medical center for immigrants and homeless people who exit the region to reach other domestic and foreign locations.

To help INTERSOS, IBM provided a mobile and web-based application to enable staff to register refugees and migrants. This program was designed to capture demographic, health, family and socioeconomic information by capturing textual and image data. It is hosted on IBM’s SoftLayer® cloud and allows medical staff to collect and track medical records so that information can be rapidly retrieved and analyzed. Critically, the solution allows physicians to follow the evolution of a patient’s health condition, which is especially critical for a vulnerable and transient population.

Through the IBM Italy Foundation, a partnership was established with Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Italy to deploy a similar tool. Designed with the specific requirements of MSF’s doctors and experts, the People on the Move solution allows MSF personnel to capture medical data in real time using mobile tablets, regardless of connectivity.
Diversifying solutions

As the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe has widened, IBM’s efforts have expanded to other countries and solution types.

In France, IBM delivered a Technology Roadmap Impact Grant to Singa France, an NGO promoting social cohesion between refugees and local communities. Singa France is a leading voice on refugee settlement and was recently recognized by the French president for its Comme a la Maison platform as part of a national social innovation contest. The technology roadmap provided Singa France a detailed set of recommendations for creating a robust information management system for matching refugees with local hosts. The associated application is expected to foster wider social integration by accelerating access to accommodation and to cultural and economic opportunities.

In Germany, IBM worked closely with the German Red Cross in Mannheim (DRK KV Mannheim e.V.) and experts in Sahana to develop a solution to help manage conflicting sources of refugee information at a local reception center. This facility, which at the time had a capacity of 7,000 people, strives to transition arrivals to host cities within six weeks of registration. Among other challenges, managing and tracking data related to people passing through the center had resulted in the maintenance of files and spreadsheets that were difficult to analyze and reconcile. This delayed efforts to integrate refugees and migrants into German society, including the educational and employment opportunities considered key to addressing their long-term needs.
The effort began with a 12-person IBM team gathering for a four-day working session with 25 German Red Cross staff members, to set up an IT system based on Sahana. Using Agile practices, along with IBMers’ skills in project management, data modeling, programming, testing and training, this team delivered a customized solution that was SoftLayer-hosted. The result was a new version of Sahana that made data-driven decision making easier and enabled improved management of refugee and migrant registration, facility resources and related logistics. Within a few weeks of the solution’s implementation, the number of refugees ready to transition to their own accommodations more than doubled and the average time spent in the center was soon cut in half. Based on this success, the Mannheim center’s responsibilities and management tools were expanded to include responsibility for a permanent facility in which regional refugee- and migrant-focused support is being consolidated.

As a commercial engagement, for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), IBM designed and developed virtualvolunteer.org. Filling a role often performed by a human volunteer, the Virtual Volunteer web application provides useful and timely information about assistance and services available in specific countries. It details procedures, rights, entitlements, legal options and safety tips; and shares relevant news and links to resources. It also enables users to get in direct contact with their local Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers for additional information, guidance and support. The Virtual Volunteer application is universally accessible with any connected device, is designed for low-bandwidth settings, and is easily adaptable to migrants’ needs anywhere in the world. IBM Cloud provides national, regional and global access to the application. By the end of 2016, the application was being piloted in Greece with plans for expanded use in Turkey, Italy and Sweden.

Examples of IBM Citizenship responses to the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe

**Engaging Employees**

As with its other corporate citizenship efforts, IBM has taken a comprehensive approach to supporting employee volunteerism focused on refugees and migrants. In Austria, for example, IBM volunteers developed the Learning Station program to provide German language training for refugee children. Working in collaboration with the city council of Vienna and Teach for Austria, 60 IBM volunteers prepared to be language teachers and mentors. The core team’s knowledge of Arabic culture and language helped sensitize the trainers to cultural differences and bridged the gap with many students. The program uses IBM
Connections™, a business social network, to share all materials and project updates. It has become a prototype for a future IBM Activity Kit to prepare and equip volunteers to assist NGOs and schools. Volunteering Activity Kits include materials such as presentations or educational modules and are available online (ibm.com/volunteer) at no cost for use by other companies, organizations and individual volunteers worldwide.

The approach to volunteerism promoted by IBM is focused on driving engagement and maximizing the impact of IBM and non-IBM volunteers. Through coordination with partner organizations, IBM volunteerism complements the work of issue-area leaders and delivers progress toward shared, strategic goals. By encouraging volunteers to leverage personal skill sets as well as company assets unique to IBM, the company promotes rewarding and impactful experiences. IBM’s volunteerism model supports employee efforts that involve colleagues as well as those conducted independently, which helps IBMers draw on personal passions and experiences. Notably, IBMers whose lives have been personally impacted by the migrant crisis—including IBMers once migrants themselves, or with family members in refugee status—have taken part in these initiatives. Finally, IBM’s sharing of resources developed by and to support these engagements, helps promote and empower volunteerism by all.

Building a brighter future

With an increasing number of refugees and migrants settling into new homes, IBM has fostered professional opportunities and pathways to self-reliance. IBM internships have been reserved for refugees/migrants in Finland, Germany and Sweden. More broadly, IBM has supported the efforts of partner organizations working to bolster the job prospects of this vulnerable population.

In Denmark, IBM launched a refugee mentoring program in partnership with New Dane, a leading not-for-profit association working to lower barriers to labor market entry for ethnic minorities and immigrants. New Dane has over 100 member companies from both private and public sectors, all of which contribute to its wider mission to support diversity and social integration. Along with other support, IBMers have provided CV/
resume development, job and university application assistance, and tips for starting businesses and adjusting to Danish life. Of the 25 people that received IBM-supported mentorships in the first phase in 2016, eight are in full-time employment, four are in higher education, five are in internships/apprenticeships and one is a volunteer. The program is scheduled to repeat in subsequent years.

In cooperation with the American Chamber of Commerce in Sweden, IBM served as a founding partner of int’Link, which focuses on the integration of immigrant-owned enterprises into the procurement processes of larger companies in Sweden. An IBM Impact Grant, which delivered project review and consulting services, was delivered to help set up the int’Link program. During its pilot phase, int’Link will offer training and tools to build faster and more secure relationships between immigrant-owned businesses and companies committed to the initiative.

In Belgium, IBM worked with a variety of organizations to deliver IT and professional skills training for refugees in Brussels and Antwerp. IBM collaborated with the NGO Be-Face and with Agoria (an IT industry professional association) to launch a refugee mentoring program. Existing partnerships with Integration Center Bon and with Duo for a Job are being leveraged to provide support for refugees and migrants including language, IT, and other skills for professional, academic, and every day uses. Further, in collaboration with Bon and the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB), IBM has been hosting orientation days for refugees and migrants with an information and communications technology background, to introduce them to the latest industry trends and support their pursuit of local careers in related industries.

**Sustaining our commitment**

IBM continues to respond to the persistent refugee and migrant crisis. IBM’s support for refugees, which dovetails with the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, is being expanded beyond Europe to include activities in the United States and Canada. IBM served as a founding organizational partner in both the White House-initiated Partnership for Refugees and IMPACT 2030, the private sector-led effort to promote volunteerism. IBM is committed to building on prior work and identifying new opportunities to address this humanitarian crisis.

“IBM’s leadership in innovative technologies has enabled our longstanding commitment to addressing humanitarian problems. Our cognitive, cloud computing, data analytics, and mobile solutions have driven effective responses to the refugee and migrant crisis – providing critical services, expanding capacities and helping partner organizations anticipate and plan for future challenges.”

— Diane Melley, Vice President, Global Citizenship Initiatives
pictures of life for turkey's 2.5 million syrian refugees,