

Event Report

Refugees: Changing the Conversation to Untapped Talent and Greater Inclusion

On 16 October we heard from three speakers with very different routes into the world of refugees:

Paul Hutchings, Co-Founder of Refugee Support, a former market research agency boss who gave it all up to focus full time on running a charity providing aid with dignity; **Dina Nayeri**, author and a child refugee at the age of eight, and **Mike Butcher**, editor at large of Techcrunch, chronicler of technology entrepreneurs and founder of Techfugees. The insights they gave us in their conversations and story telling fell into three main take-aways:

Dignity

Paul reminded us of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. He recounted, “When we set up Refugee Support four years ago, we had a very specific vision as to how we wanted to play our part. That was partly born from our experience in Calais where aid distributions were unfair, messy and traumatic. We wanted to help, but in a way that helped restore and retain dignity.

Paul explained the progression of their thinking, codifying dignity and how they have progressed as a charity in three areas of their work:

1. Dignity in emergencies: Ensuring distributions of essentials are respectful and calm, but where people have to queue and have no choice.

2. Dignity in safety: Normalising life by distributing essentials in a shop environment, enabling choices and giving people more control over their lives. More respectful but **still a handout, not a hand up**.

3. Dignity in society: Helping people to rebuild their lives by offering activities that encourage independence and integration. In Nicosia, people can come to a 3 storey building where they can access a range of services to help them learn, create and get an income.

Dina Nayeri reinforced this from her own experience as a refugee with her mother and brother when she witnessed donated clothes being emptied from bags all over the floor in a camp where they were staying. She recalled how her mother, a doctor back home in Iran, would rather go without than scuffle around fighting over handouts.



Talent and Potential

Contextualising his observations and the need for countries like the UK to welcome more refugees, Mike Butcher reminded us that the number of displaced people is only ever going to increase due to climate change and conflict. John Sloan, the Co-founder of Refugee Support, speaking from the audience, reminded us that refugees from climate emergencies are not currently recognised in international law which leaves a huge question over policy to cope with the number of people on the move globally that is set to rise from its current 70m to 140m by 2050.

Mike spoke about Techfugees' efforts to help people with tech skills make connections that might lead to jobs, citing the specific example of Syrian refugees. He shared that before the war, because Syrians didn't have access to software like Microsoft, they adopted opensource approaches to coding and produced many skilled Linux programmers– skills that are very relevant in Europe. One of our audience, himself a Syrian refugee jumped in to verify this observation by sharing that he has a job in IT in the UK.

Dina and Paul reminded the audience that the first wave of refugees are usually those with the greatest means to escape – whether that is paying the people smugglers, or leaving in some other way, they are more likely to be educated and have professions back home. These skills are often wasted as people are held in camps where they are prevented from working.

In Cyprus, where Refugee Support has opened its first Dignity Centre, refugees are only allowed by Government to do certain low skilled jobs which has meant that they have had to be resourceful in creating opportunities for people to become more independent. Paul explained how an opportunity for refugees to repair their own clothes on a few sewing machines has blossomed into 'The Dignity Centre Sewing Co-operative' which now sells products under the 'Refumade' label online. The key to that was tapping into talent that was already there including people like a master tailor from Equatorial Guinea and women from Iraq.



Integration with local communities

There is a myth that our panel was keen to bust that refugees are an economic burden. In Greece, Refugee Support was spending £2000 a week with locally owned grocery stores buying food and nappies. Those business owners became advocates for the charity in dealing with local government because of the contribution it made to the local economy.

Paul was encouraged by his co-founder John Sloan, speaking from the audience, to talk about their efforts to build local community relations. Long term plans are to build more dignity centres in Cyprus. Locals participate by giving language lessons and helping in the centre in other ways alongside the charity's many international volunteers. The British Army in Cyprus is also getting involved to help train people in food preparation and hygiene as a steppingstone to employment. The Dignity Centre also throws street parties where as many as 300 people get together monthly, integrating refugees with the local community in a positive way.

Dina reminded us that there is much research out there that proves the economic contribution of refugees to society if they are given a chance. Mike cited an example of a refugee who has just secured funding for a tech start-up to help the 1m people accepted by Germany to access refugee services.

The panel was followed by a very engaged series of audience questions before we wrapped for some informal networking. Thanks again to the generosity of PHD and Omnicom Media Group for hosting and to Serhat Ekinici, the Managing Partner of OMG Ethnic for Chairing.