

# The School Bus Project: Mobile Education for Refugees

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**Biography of Presenting Author:** *Stephanie is an educator and development practitioner, specializing in inclusive education, fragile contexts, teacher training, and the Education for All agenda. She holds a Master's from Cambridge in Inclusive Education and a Doctorate in International Educational Development from Columbia University, Teachers College. She is a Research Officer with the Health & Education Advice & Resource Team at IDS, a Postdoc Researcher with the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital, and a founding member of the School Bus Project.*

**Abstract:** Both the UNHCR and governments around the world talk about three 'durable solutions' to addressing rising refugee populations: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, local integration into the asylum country, or resettlement to a third country. However, these solutions are rarely realized and refugees instead find themselves in unstable, unsafe situations of displacement, with limited access to basic services. Up until now, the priority for many volunteers responding to the crisis has been on improving access to water, health, nutrition, and shelter, however, there is a strong argument for including education as part of the basic level response. Not only is education an enabling right, recent research demonstrates it is a priority for refugees themselves, who see it as a driver for change that they own. The objective of this case study is to support the development of innovative and inclusive educational spaces for Calais refugees that are responsive to their needs and capacities and to the changing dynamics of the camp. Using an action research approach, our innovation is to convert a bus into a mobile school that not only houses classrooms, but also serves as a basecamp for storage and recharging of 'pop-up schools' and 'lessons-in-a-box' that can be transported to different camp sections, digital technology resources that open up individual virtual learning spaces, and an access point for resources needed by the existing schools in camp. At the heart of this innovation is our commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning within these educational spaces by staffing the school with trained volunteers who share in the School Bus Project vision. Our approach goes beyond understanding education as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from an 'expert' to a 'novice' to seeing it as a process by which knowledge is co-constructed and shared by all participants.

**Keywords:** mobile education, refugees, right to education

## Full Paper

### Statement of Problem:

Between January and October 2015, 600,000 people (mostly refugees) arrived in Europe, casting a spotlight on the ever-growing global refugee crisis (Sphere Project, 2015). While the majority world has shouldered the bulk of the refugee burden, with official estimates suggesting that over 80 percent of refugees are hosted within their region of origin, increasing numbers of individuals are seeking asylum further afield, in Europe, the United States, and Canada (Bhabha, 2014). In fact, in 2014, for the first time in history, Turkey became the largest refugee-hosting country worldwide, with 1.59 million refugees, bringing the crisis to a head for the European continent (UNHCR, 2014). As there is no evidence that this crisis will subside any time soon, the pressure to find creative solutions to respond to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's 2011 challenge to "harness the unstoppable force of migration for the greater good" is at an all-time high (UN, 2014).

Both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and governments around the world talk about three 'durable solutions' to addressing the crisis of rising refugee populations: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, local integration into the asylum country, or resettlement to a third country (Demirdjian, 2012). However, these solutions are very rarely realized: it is often difficult for refugees to return home, even if the will is there, and, according to McCarthy and Vickers (2012), only small numbers of refugees are successful in integrating and resettling in the countries that do accept refugees. Most refugees instead find themselves in an extended state of limbo in makeshift spaces such as camps, with limited access to basic services, including education, and scarce or non-existent employment opportunities. As Arendt (1966, cited in Bhabha, 2014, p.238)

points out, “the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.” In other words, our “supposedly *inalienable* [rights have] proved to be *unenforceable*” (ibid).

Research from the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford demonstrates the true extent of the problem: in 2011, the average time spent by refugees in displacement due to the 30 major protracted refugee crises around the world was 20 years, up from 9 years in the early 1990s (Milner & Loescher, 2011). Not only do refugees spend extremely long periods of time in unstable displacement, the conditions of the myriad makeshift spaces they inhabit are often deplorable. A recent independent report by researchers at the University of Birmingham has argued that the occupants of the so-called Jungle Camp in Calais face conditions that fail to meet basic standards set out by the WHO, UNHCR, and the Sphere Project (University of Birmingham, 2015). In spite of some negative press suggesting that the occupants of the Jungle are not ‘true refugees’, thousands of well-meaning individuals have attempted to support the Calais refugees by volunteering their time and / or donating resources. Unfortunately, though, often potential volunteers do not understand the practical / logistical requirements of getting involved, and many resources donated do not actually match the needs of the refugees in the Jungle (Sphere Project 2015). Further, during a recent visit to the Jungle, one of our team members found the camp to be “both more organized and more fragmented”, with more structures being erected in camp and more organisation among volunteers but very little communication between individuals from different nationalities and some groups of refugees missing out on food and other essential services because they do not wish to move out of their national areas. A strong team of volunteers is coordinating the sorting and distribution of resources, however, a number of groups continue to miss out because they are more reserved, the distribution points are not close by and / or they are part of a group (e.g. unaccompanied males) traditionally overlooked by interventions.

It seems hardly surprising that the focus for many has been on improving access to water, health, nutrition, and shelter, however, there is a strong argument to be made for including education as part of the basic level response to better match the needs of the refugees in camp. Not only is education an enabling right (i.e. a right through which other rights can be realized), recent research demonstrates this is a priority for refugees themselves, because it is viewed by them to be a driver for change that they own. According to an extensive global review of the state of refugee education commissioned by UNHCR, families of refugees around the world have emphasised that education is “the key to the future,” that it will help bring peace to their countries, that despite not knowing “what will happen tomorrow,” education brings stability and hope (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Our informal conversations with refugees in the Jungle corroborate this finding, as does the fact that a number of makeshift schools have emerged in camp, which are attended by many of the camp inhabitants. Further, according to Ban Ki-moon, statistics have demonstrated that the economic contribution migrant workers can make outweighs potential costs (UN, 2014). In other words, an investment in refugee education will lead to increased capacity and earning potential among refugees and, in turn, a wealth of socio-economic benefits for individuals and the broader society.

However, in spite of its life-saving and life-sustaining potential, education for forcibly displaced persons is in a state of crisis, both in terms of access and in terms of quality. According to data from UNHCR (2016), only one in two refugees attends primary school, one in four attends secondary school, and one in 100 accesses skills-based technical and vocational education or higher education. Further, teaching capacity and support for educators is sorely lacking: many would-be teachers in refugee situations lack even the 10 days of training that would classify them as ‘trained’ according to internationally agreed definitions (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that refugees themselves and top UNHCR staff members have described refugee education as “education for ultimate disappointment” (ibid). The pressing question facing refugee education practitioners today is how to unlock its life-saving and life-sustaining potential for as many people as possible, by making educational opportunities more readily available and by improving the quality of provision.

### **Case Study Objective:**

The School Bus Project was founded in response to the growing global refugee crisis as it plays out in the Jungle. The objective of this case study is to support the development of innovative and inclusive educational spaces for Calais refugees<sup>1</sup> that are responsive to their needs and capacities and to the constantly changing dynamics of the camp environment.

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<sup>1</sup>We recognise that many different terms are used to describe the inhabitants of the Jungle, including migrants, economic migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees, however, in our communications and activities, we refer to the people we are working with as refugees, as this is the term used by most organisations and individuals working with the population in Calais. Further, the School Bus Project is a non-political and inclusive organisation, therefore, we are not involved in classifying the people we work with into these different groups.

## Our Methodology & Approach:

Our case study is designed on the principle that learning can (and does!) happen anywhere there are people. To put it a different way: while we have been conditioned into thinking about 'going to' school, there is no reason school can't come to us; educational spaces can move. The challenge is to find an appropriate and effective conduit for the movement and transformation of these educational spaces. Our innovation is to convert a double decker school bus into a mobile school that not only houses two classrooms that will provide warm, safe and dry learning environments for the education of more vulnerable members of the Jungle community, but that also serves as a basecamp for the safe storage and recharging of 'pop-up schools' and 'lessons-in-a-box' that can be transported to different parts of the camp, mobile digital technology resources that open up individual virtual learning spaces, and an access point for both high- and low-tech educational resources needed by the schools that have already emerged in camp.

At the heart of this innovation is our commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning that happens within these educational spaces by staffing the school with trained volunteers who share in the School Bus Project vision. Our approach to teaching and learning goes beyond understanding education as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from an 'expert' to a 'novice' to seeing it as a process by which knowledge is co-constructed and shared by all participants. We have identified four (at many times overlapping) dimensions of educational activity that we believe make up a comprehensive quality education:

1. Activities that are psychosocially protective;
2. Activities that are basic skills-oriented;
3. Activities that facilitate the development of employment skills; and
4. Activities that build the capacity of educators (both refugees and our UK volunteers) to facilitate meaningful educational experiences.

We have formed a school executive to more effectively coordinate our activities in six key areas to ensure success: fundraising, communications, technology, resources & equipment, teaching and learning, and bus conversion (School Bus Project, 2015). Significant progress has been made in all areas, including the design of a training course for UK volunteers, the development of teaching and learning resources, and bus conversion. We have also appointed two trustees to oversee our activities and provide impartial advice and support as needed.

As educators, our case study is informed by an action research approach, which has long been the cornerstone of effective, high quality educational practice. Simply put, action research can be conceptualized as a spiral of self-reflective cycles which involves recognizing a problem, planning a change, acting to affect that change, observing the consequences and processes of that change, reflecting on the consequences and processes of that change, and then revising the plan based on what has been learned before beginning again (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Such an approach, which is founded on principles of reflecting on and learning from change as it happens, is particularly suited to this case study given the fluid nature of refugee populations in general, who exist in a state of long-term displacement but often change configurations and locations (McCarthy & Vickers, 2012), and the constantly fluctuating conditions in Calais. With refugees from different countries coming and going, local, national and international policies and programmes for refugees in a constant state of flux, and ever-changing attitudes towards refugees, for interventions to succeed, they must be responsive to change and equipped to deal with any internal and external pressures that might emerge.

We are committed to the philosophy of beneficial engagement with refugees and thus throughout this planning process, we have remained in close contact with refugees and volunteers in the Jungle, both virtually and through site visits. In the words of refugees who run a Facebook page from within the Jungle:

*That will be so good to have School Bus Project here I believe it will be great educate people as I have come from a dark society know better the value of study. To move ahead & be updated & wana [sic] live in this world we got to be educated. My learning process will never end till I'm alive & in terms of need I believe we don't have enough English teachers currently at the library plus if we can arrange different workshops to bring up refugees skills or may devolop [sic] new skills.*

This quote not only highlights the value refugees place on education, but also how crucial it will be to ensure that refugees are consulted and included from the beginning of an educational intervention to ensure the relevance of the opportunities provided and thus maximise the likelihood of refugees engaging with these opportunities. Initially, we have had to proceed with caution when it comes to including refugees in any formal research for development activities where they would be documented – Wieben (2015) has pointed out the dangers facing refugees who are formally observed and documented in locations where they do not wish to remain. Ultimately,

though, we want the School Bus Project in Calais to be owned by the refugees themselves and we aim to accomplish this by building in a stepwise participatory methodology through the introduction of a form of cascade educator training. While many of our earlier lessons will rely primarily on our UK volunteers to do most of the planning of lessons and teaching, they will be trained to be observant and flexible from the first day, working with the Jungle community to identify potential refugee educators in camp and partnering with them so they can ultimately plan and lead lessons themselves. We have already forged some strong relationships with refugee leaders in camp who will be working with us on tailoring our cascade educator trainings to best meet refugees' needs and capacities, and to ensure that they are sensitive to refugees' past experience.

### Timeline of Case Study:

Table 1.1 below sets out the timeline of our case study, beginning with the founding of the School Bus Project and ending with the official launch of the School Bus.

**Table 1.1: Timeline of Case Study<sup>2</sup>**

| Dates                                   | Activities  |
|---|---|
| September 15, 2015:                     | Founding of the School Bus Project  |
| September 15, 2015 to January 20, 2016: | Initial fundraising, initial planning, site visits, training package design (online course + in-person training), development of pilot teaching and learning resources, recruitment of volunteers, networking (in the UK and France), purchase of bus and other resources |
| January 21, 2016 to June 17, 2016:      | Pilot phase (with data collection) and bus conversion   |
| June 18, 2016                           | World Refugee Day Celebration & Fundraiser & Information Session at School Bus (in the UK)  |
| June 20, 2016 (World Refugee Day):      | School Bus (fully converted) driven to Calais   |
| June 20, 2016 to September 25, 2016:    | Data collection on bus usage and volunteer and refugee experience   |
| September 26, 2016                      | Official launch of the School Bus   |

The pilot phase and bus conversion will be described in more detail below, before we discuss the potential development impact of the School Bus Project and present recommendation for future research and applications in practice.

### Pilot Phase and Bus Conversion:

As can be seen from the timeline (Table 1.1), our pilot phase is running from January 21 to June 17, 2016. During this time, work will be ongoing to convert the bus to ensure that it is completed by the time our educational resources and training programmes have been piloted. The main aim of this pilot is to ensure that the School Bus Project has a trusted presence in camp and that a tested range of our educational resources, pop-up schools, and lessons-in-a-box is beginning to circulate before we bring the bus to Calais in time for World Refugee Day on 20 June 2016. Our principal, Kate McAllister, has moved to Calais for the duration of the pilot phase, in order to oversee activities and to continue to build and nurture relationships with the Jungle inhabitants, volunteers from other organisations, local government, and the broader Calais community. Our other school executive members, Stephanie Bengtsson, Darren Abrahams, and Ali Ceesay, will be based in Brighton and will be recruiting and working with our UK volunteers, developing resources, continuing fundraising, and building our UK-based network, as well as making regular site visits to the Jungle, supporting our volunteers and further developing our educational resources. We have appointed a project manager to oversee the bus conversion. In this section, we provide more detailed information about our volunteer educator training (online and in-person), the design of our pilot lessons (with an illustrative example), and the bus conversion.

#### *Our volunteer educator training:*

We have built on our own experience as educators and teacher trainers and a review of the literature on refugee education – including useful educational training and development resources such as the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery* (2010) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) *Healing Classrooms Initiative* (2009) – to design a training programme for volunteers. The training package includes an online course and an in-person training workshop, which are described below.

<sup>2</sup> Note: the timeline is subject to change, given the current political climate in Europe and the ever-fluctuating conditions in Calais.

Online course: This course has been designed to complement the in-person training our UK volunteers will participate in to help them prepare for their work with the School Bus Project and their time in Calais. The course has been built using LearnDash, a popular and effective online platform for the creation and support of eLearning courses. Volunteers are expected to complete the course before participating in the in-person training. The course is made up four lessons:

- Lesson 1: Introduction + About the School Bus Project
- Lesson 2: The Global Refugee Crisis
- Lesson 3: The Situation in Calais/the Jungle
- Lesson 4: Refugee Education

Once they have completed the course, they will be awarded a certificate acknowledging their partial fulfilment of the training requirements for the School Bus Project.

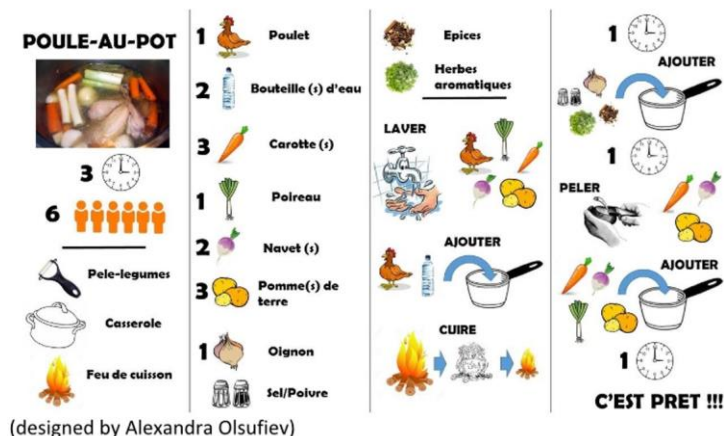
In-person training: For the in-person component, volunteers will attend a two day workshop, which will provide a comprehensive training in the School Bus Project pedagogical methodology. This will include orientation, first aid training leading to qualification (facilitated by a qualified health professional), an understanding of the identification and regulation of trauma, and pedagogical skills-building. We will also be teaching the principles of group dynamics and inquiry led learning, to enable our teachers to work in teams, and to facilitate co-creation of learning with their students. As the majority of our first wave of volunteers are already qualified teachers, we are also building goal setting (both individual and group goals), self-assessment and action research elements into our training, which will enable participants to track their own development through their time in camp and effectively use their experience as part of their own Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This training programme will ultimately enable our volunteers to deliver 3-5 day courses of study in our four key areas of educational activity that are of high quality. Quality teaching is of paramount importance, because education loses its protective dimension if it is of low quality (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Continuous critical feedback has been built into our pilot training curriculum, to allow us to learn from and adapt to the needs of our volunteers. This will form the basis of the ongoing development of the School Bus Project.

*Design of our pilot educational resources:*

As part of our pilot programme, we have begun developing a number of educational resources (including lesson plans) for testing in the camp. It is important to note that we are not looking to replace or compete with current educational opportunities available in the Jungle, but rather to complement efforts – providing human, physical, and digital resources, as needed, and working to fill gaps in educational provision. The educational resources developed are all intended to support activity in one or more of our four key areas described above, i.e. psychosocially protective, basic skills-oriented, job skills-oriented, and teacher training. Below, we provide an example of one of our lesson plans.

In response to the need for both language skills and hot, nutritious food, one of our volunteers has developed a language through cooking course. The foundation lesson plan is provided below:

**Figure 1.1: Teaching French and Cooking**



This lesson teaches a small group to work together to produce a *Poule-au-pot* (chicken-in-a-pot), following a traditional, French recipe. Students will learn key target language skills (in this case, French) that enable effective communication. Further, they will have the opportunity to create something practical and delicious that can be enjoyed together as a group. The course would then develop naturally using the skill-set within each group. Every step of this process is innovative, inclusive and responsive. The refugees themselves will guide the process, while the volunteer educators will facilitate and support the process, addressing any skills or knowledge gaps and ensuring that everyone is able to participate in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, the idea is that each foundation lesson will grow into a whole pop-up school, filled with rich opportunities for learning together, for life-long skills development, and for community cohesion and wellbeing. The potential trajectory from foundation lesson to pop-up school for the *Poule-au-pot* lesson is provided below:

Stage 1: Creating a *poule-au-pot*

Stage 2: Adapting the recipe to suit individual tastes and / or coming up with ideas for ‘fusion’ cuisine

Stage 3: Shopping for ingredients (includes list-making, quantity calculations, budgeting)

Stage 4: Growing certain ingredients & composting

Stage 5: Creating a cooking pot from recycled materials

Stage 6: Building a community kitchen / restaurant

Stage 7: Creating a cookery book of one-pot Jungle recipes and selling it online

Stage 8: Managing an online business

Stage 9: Learning to modify and teach the course to different groups

As we continue to develop and pilot our educational resources, we aim to provide the skills necessary to support genuine pathways out of the camp for refugees, thus contributing to realising UNHCR’s three durable solutions of voluntary repatriation, local integration into host country, and resettlement to a third country through the power of education.

*Bus conversion:*

We are developing our bus conversion strategy in conjunction with on the ground research in the camp. There are many models for mobile education in the UK but we did not want to follow a prescribed course without fully understanding how the bus fits into the specific context of Calais and the evolution of our entire educational model. The emphasis is on providing open, flexible spaces that can be used for a variety of purposes, without closing down the potential for continued use as needs change. We have appointed a project manager with a background in educational design to oversee this process. She is working closely with a technical team from a local green energy company who will be installing cutting edge sustainable energy technologies, in order that the bus does not contribute to the already high levels of pollution in camp. This will make the bus far more cost effective in the long term and provide a new layer of learning and research opportunities for students. Fundraising continues throughout the pilot to enable the purchase of the necessary equipment needed to complete the conversion, however most of the internal furnishing and decoration is being sourced for free and installed by a dedicated team of volunteers. We imagine that the bus will have most use as a communications and technical hub for online learning and entrepreneurship, as well as serving a protective function for more vulnerable learners, and as such is an important component in the expansion of the project post pilot. Virtual learning spaces will be particularly important to address the documented dearth in opportunities to access higher education and vocational training for refugees (Gateley, 2015; Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015).

### **Potential Development Impact:**

Starting in January, our short-term goals include:

- facilitating the participation of refugees in education in three of our key areas – psychosocial support & protection, basic skills, and job skills;
- training our first cohort of volunteers;
- laying the groundwork for the fourth key area – teacher training and support; and
- converting the bus into a sustainable, environmentally-friendly, well-resourced hub for mobile education

Our mid-term goals include:

- providing a consistent presence of School Bus Project volunteers in the camp who are delivering quality teaching;

- providing a consistent quality curriculum in camp where refugees can take part in activities as often as they would like; and
- identifying refugees with skills they are willing to share to train with the School Bus Project, empowering them as teachers, and allowing us to broaden our curriculum further to provide a broad and diverse curriculum for all learners in camp.

Our long-term goals include:

- facilitating the transition of refugees into higher learning and job opportunities;
- ‘handing over the keys’ to the School Bus so that it is primarily owned and ‘driven’ by the refugees themselves; and
- scaling up our response and facilitating the participation of refugees in quality education across Europe and further afield.

As the population of the Jungle is relatively small compared with other refugee camps, and our model works within existing structures in camp and cascades outwards, our project stands an excellent chance of providing an opportunity for everyone in the camp to participate in some form of meaningful educational activity, be it as learners or educators, for the short-term or the long-term. As previously mentioned, education can be a vehicle to improve other development sectors, addressing some of the key issues identified in the University of Birmingham (2015) report mentioned above, including mental health problems, threats to good health and safe WASH practices, unsafe shelters, and basic communication problems. Every evening, many camp inhabitants risk their lives attempting to cross the border into the UK, either throwing themselves onto passing trains or trucks or by putting their lives into the hands of people smugglers. Informal conversations with refugees and volunteers have suggested that the consistent provision of quality inclusive and responsive educational spaces within the Jungle could delay these attempts and allow camp inhabitants to research their options in terms of return, settlement, and resettlement and begin to plan for a brighter future in a protective environment.

It should also not be forgotten, as has been previously mentioned, that not only is education a human right, but it is one that is often prioritized by refugees themselves (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Further, not only does participation in educational activity restore a sense of normalcy, stability and wellbeing to participants (INEE, 2010) but the acquisition of increasingly advanced skills through the School Bus Project will open up opportunities for participants, whether they return home, resettle, or remain in displacement. Research has shown that quality education can make it easier for any refugees who are resettled to integrate into communities by promoting community cohesion (McCorriston, 2011). Finally, the project directly supports teacher professional development among refugees through its cascade training model, thus addressing the lack of appropriate, sufficient, and meaningful training and support of educators (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

### **Recommendation for Future Research and Application in Practice:**

As can be seen from the timeline (Table 1.1), the fully converted school bus is due to arrive in Calais on World Refugee Day (20 June 2016). The ultimate aim is to hand over ownership of this particular bus to the Jungle community, once the relevant skills and capacity have been identified and / or developed. We believe that our approach lends itself to upscaling, and we would encourage future research into what innovative, inclusive, responsive mobile educational learning spaces might look like in other parts of the world. An action research approach allows the School Bus Project team to continually analyse, inform, and document our progress, providing invaluable process-based evidence that can be used to further build the project in Calais and that can be transferred to other contexts to help inform the development of mobile learning spaces elsewhere. Further, we argue that by utilizing a participatory cascade model in close collaboration with the Jungle community, we will be able to facilitate the continued strengthening of links with other sectors and the broader Calais community, by contributing to overall needs and capacity assessments, prioritizing support of the Calais economy, and promoting an overall sense of community cohesion. Finally, the reflective and responsive nature of our work means that every day we are not only educators, we are engaged in lifelong learning – we are learning *to* learn (Mannion & Mercer, in press). This reciprocal learning will allow us and our team of UK volunteers to take key lessons back to the UK and to educate people back home about the complex realities and the human dimensions of the refugee crisis.

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