



UMBRELLA REFUGEE COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

MEMBER COMMITTEES



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FOREWORD

Migration has become one of the central political and moral questions of our time. Across Europe, debates surrounding refugees and migrants increasingly go beyond mobility, borders or asylum procedures. They have become deeply connected to broader concerns about identity, democracy, security, economic uncertainty and social cohesion. In many contexts, migration is no longer discussed primarily as a human reality shaped by war, inequality, displacement and global interdependence, but rather as a political instrument through which fears, frustrations and ideological conflicts are projected and amplified.

In this climate, refugees are too often reduced to simplified and contradictory representations. In some narratives, they are portrayed as threats, burdens or destabilizing forces. In others, they are presented exclusively through the language of suffering, vulnerability and dependency. Although these approaches appear fundamentally different, they ultimately produce a similar outcome. Both deny complexity. Both reduce human beings to categories. Both overlook the fact that refugees are not passive objects moving through history, but individuals and communities capable of thought, organisation and resistance.

The Umbrella Refugee Committee was created in response to this reality. Our organisation was not founded on the idea that refugees should simply be represented within existing structures or temporarily included within institutional conversations. It was founded on the conviction that refugee communities themselves possess the knowledge, experience and collective capacities necessary to actively shape the societies in which they live. We believe refugee participation must go beyond symbolic visibility or performative inclusion.

This distinction is fundamental, because refugee-led organising is often misunderstood. Refugee communities are frequently approached either through paternalistic frameworks that assume incapacity or through highly emotional narratives that unintentionally reinforce dependency and passivity. At times, even well-intentioned humanitarian and integration discourses can essentialise refugees by reducing them primarily to trauma, fragility or need. Such approaches may generate sympathy, but they can also obscure agency, competence and individuality. They risk transforming refugees into permanent recipients of assistance, rather than recognising them as people capable of organising communities, creating initiatives and participating fully in public life.

At URC, we have consciously tried to build another approach. Our work is grounded in the belief that dignity is inseparable from participation and responsibility. We do not deny the realities of war, displacement, exclusion or structural inequality. Many members of our communities have experienced profound violence, uncertainty and loss. These experiences are real, and continue shaping lives long after displacement itself. However, recognising suffering should never require the erasure of agency. Refugees are not defined solely by what has happened to them. They are also defined by what they continue to build, organise and contribute in very difficult circumstances.

This annual report reflects that reality. It demonstrates that refugee-led initiatives are not symbolic projects existing at the margins of society. They are active spaces of participation, solidarity and collective organisation. The work presented in these pages was carried out not through abstract rhetoric, but through sustained commitment, volunteer engagement and concrete action. Behind every activity, workshop, patrol, football training, meeting or outreach initiative are individuals who continue dedicating their time and energy despite legal uncertainty, financial precarity, discrimination and exhaustion.

At the same time, refugee-led organisations continue operating within deeply unequal conditions. Across Europe, expectations towards refugee participation continue growing, while structural support often remains fragile and inconsistent. Refugee-led initiatives are increasingly invited to contribute expertise, mediate between communities and institutions, support integration processes and participate in policy discussions. Yet many continue functioning with limited infrastructure, unstable funding and enormous reliance on unpaid labour. Refugee communities are often expected to demonstrate professionalism, efficiency and resilience while simultaneously having to constantly justify their legitimacy and existence.

This contradiction reflects a broader tension within contemporary migration governance. Inclusion is frequently celebrated rhetorically while exclusion continues structurally. Participation is encouraged, but often within narrowly defined institutional frameworks that leave limited room for autonomy, critique or shared decision-making. Refugee voices are welcomed, but too often as testimony rather than expertise. The result is a form of participation that risks remaining symbolic unless refugee-led organisations are genuinely recognised as equal partners capable of shaping priorities, knowledge and practice.

For this reason, supporting refugee-led initiatives today is not an act of charity or goodwill alone. It is a necessary investment in democratic participation, social cohesion and more sustainable approaches to integration and representation. Refugee-led organisations possess forms of trust, lived knowledge, multilingual communication and community access that cannot easily be reproduced through purely top-down structures. They create connections between institutions and communities, but also create spaces where dignity, solidarity and participation are actively practised rather than merely discussed.

This becomes particularly important in a period marked by increasing political polarisation and the normalisation of anti-migrant rhetoric across Europe. At a time when migration is frequently instrumentalised for political purposes, refugee-led organisations offer an alternative rooted in cooperation, responsibility and civic engagement. They remind us that integration is not something delivered to passive populations through policy alone. It is something built collectively through relationships, participation, trust and shared social commitment.

The future of democratic and inclusive societies in Europe cannot be built without refugees, and it certainly cannot be built through narratives that reduce people either to threats or to objects of pity. It must be built through genuine collaboration grounded in equality, recognition and shared responsibility. Refugee-led organisations are not asking to be spoken for. They are asking to participate fully, to contribute meaningfully and to be recognised as part of the social and democratic fabric of Europe itself.

As President of the Umbrella Refugee Committee, I remain deeply grateful to all volunteers, committees, partners and community members who continue carrying this vision forward through their daily work and commitment. Their efforts demonstrate that solidarity is not an abstract principle, but a practical and collective responsibility. They also demonstrate that refugee communities are not defined solely by displacement, but by their continued capacity to organise, contribute and imagine different futures even under difficult conditions.

I hope this report contributes not only to documenting the work of our organisation, but also to encouraging broader reflection on participation, dignity and the kind of society we choose to build together in Europe today.

Dr. Ahmad Wali Ahmad Yar

**President
Umbrella Refugee Committee**



About the Umbrella Refugee Committee

The Umbrella Refugee Committee is a refugee-led umbrella network based in Belgium that brings together diverse refugee communities to strengthen collective participation, mutual support, representation and advocacy. Rooted in the principle that refugees should actively shape the policies and programmes affecting their lives, URC operates as a platform for collective organisation, cross-community collaboration and direct engagement with institutions and civil society.

The URC emerged following the rise in refugees reaching Europe after 2015. In this period, formal programmes often treated refugees as beneficiaries rather than active contributors. In Belgium, refugee communities lacked structured mechanisms for collective representation, and there was often frustration, as they felt that in reality, inclusion was very limited. In this context, community leaders from diverse backgrounds in Brussels began collaborating to build a coordinated, refugee-led platform.

From the beginning, diversity and inclusivity formed central principles of the initiative. Different national, linguistic, religious, gender and LGBTQI+ communities came together to discuss shared challenges and possible forms of collective organisation. The support of UNHCR was crucial in this period, as well as the collaboration with universities including ULB and KU Leuven. Consultations and surveys were conducted to better understand the priorities and needs of different refugee communities in Belgium. One key finding was that priorities often differed substantially between communities depending on migration histories, social realities, legal situations and community structures, making a “one-size-fits-all” approach unrealistic and ineffective.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the operational value of refugee-led community structures, which remained accessible and were a crucial support system for newcomers and vulnerable individuals. This helped accelerate formalisation efforts, and in 2021, clearer and democratic governance mechanisms, representation systems and internal coordination processes were successfully adopted. In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to the large-scale arrival of displaced Ukrainians. Through rapid mobilisation and close collaboration with diaspora actors, the Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee was established as part of the umbrella structure.

Today, the Umbrella Refugee Committee brings together nine Refugee Committees representing diverse communities and groups in Belgium: Afghan, Burundian, Eritrean, Iraqi, Rainbow (LGBTQI+), Somali, Syrian, Ukrainian and Women’s Committees. In 2025, additional committees and initiatives, including Yemeni and Palestinian groups, were also in the process of development or accession discussions. This diversity reflects the broad range of migration trajectories, social experiences and community realities present within contemporary refugee communities in Belgium.

Governance and Organisational Structure

The organisational structure of the URC combines both vertical and horizontal forms of coordination. Vertically, the Umbrella Refugee Committee functions as a central coordinating body supporting strategic planning, collective advocacy, resource-sharing and organisational development across committees. Horizontally, the committees maintain their own identity and objectives, while also collaborating directly with one another through peer-to-peer exchanges, joint projects, mutual support and shared activities. This dual structure enables committees to address both community-specific priorities and broader cross-cutting challenges affecting refugee communities in Belgium, including housing, employment, discrimination, social exclusion and participation.

The URC operates according to principles of inclusivity, diversity, non-discrimination, transparency and collective responsibility. The organisation actively avoids divisive political, religious or sectarian positioning that could undermine trust and cooperation between communities. Instead, it focuses on practical solidarity, integration support, advocacy, participation and empowerment. The URC's work spans multiple interconnected areas including community outreach, social and cultural activities, language initiatives, employment support, housing support, sports activities, mobile patrols, information sessions, research collaboration, advocacy and institutional dialogue.

At the same time, URC openly recognises the challenges associated with refugee-led organising. The organisation operates largely through volunteer engagement and continues facing structural constraints related to funding, staffing, coordination capacity and increasing external expectations. Balancing the priorities and needs of multiple communities while maintaining equal representation, organisational sustainability and participatory governance remains an ongoing challenge. Nevertheless, these realities also reflect the significant level of commitment, solidarity and collective effort invested by volunteers and community leaders across the network.

The URC was established with the conviction that refugee communities should not only be consulted on matters affecting their lives, but should also actively participate in decision-making, organisational development and strategic planning. Its governance structure therefore combines democratic participation, shared responsibility and community autonomy within a single umbrella framework. At the core of this model is the General Assembly, which functions as the main decision-making body of the organisation. Each Refugee Committee designates two voting representatives who participate in the General Assembly.

longside the General Assembly, the Executive Team coordinates a broad range of responsibilities including communication, volunteer coordination, project development, fundraising, events and thematic activities related to housing, employment and education.



The governance framework identifies several operational roles within this structure, including the President, legal and finance administration, communications, volunteer coordination, thematic officers and project development functions. The President plays a central coordinating and representative role within the organisation. In addition to chairing meetings and facilitating discussions, the President supports communication between committees, represents URC externally and helps mediate disagreements when necessary. In December 2025, for the first time, the URC also recruited a part-time coordinator.

The introduction of a dedicated coordinator marked an important step towards greater continuity, sustainability and institutional capacity. The coordinator role supports partner relations, administrative follow-up, volunteer management, activity planning and communication between committees. Furthermore, building on work initiated in 2024, the URC established thematic working groups for Housing, Education, Employment, Communications, Patrols and Helpdesk and Finance. These working groups are all coordinated by designated coordinators and open to volunteers from all Refugee Committees.

Partnerships, Accountability and Institutional Coordination

As the URC has expanded its activities and visibility, strengthening institutional coordination and accountability has become increasingly important. The organisation therefore places strong emphasis on transparency, communication and collaborative governance, both internally and externally. Member committees are expected to maintain open communication regarding their activities, partnerships, opportunities and challenges. There are also mediation and conflict resolution procedures within the organisation. Disagreements are first addressed through dialogue and informal mediation involving leadership structures.

An important aspect of URC's governance is its role as a bridge between refugee communities and external stakeholders, including public institutions, municipalities, universities, NGOs and international organisations. UNHCR continues to play an important supporting role as a permanent observer and collaborator within the umbrella structure. This collaboration includes strategic advice, technical support and capacity-building, while preserving URC's autonomy and refugee-led identity. In 2025, the URC also established a joint steering group with Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen.

As the URC's visibility and credibility have grown, the organisation has experienced increasing demand from institutions, NGOs, researchers and public actors. Refugee-led organisations are increasingly recognised as important partners due to their direct access to communities, lived expertise and outreach capacity. At the same time, this recognition creates significant expectations regarding responsiveness, availability, project implementation and administrative follow-up.

This has been quite a challenge, as many volunteers are themselves navigating employment pressures, legal procedures, housing difficulties, family obligations or integration challenges. Maintaining continuity under these conditions requires substantial coordination work and flexibility. Thus, the organisation increasingly recognises the "hidden labour" involved in refugee-led organising.

2024 IN RETROSPECT: BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

2024 was in many ways a turning point in the development of the Umbrella Refugee Committee (URC), as it continued to evolve into a more structured and visible refugee-led umbrella platform. Throughout the year, the organisation strengthened cooperation between refugee communities, expanded its institutional engagement, and laid important organisational foundations that would shape its further growth in 2025.

The URC operated in a particularly complex political and institutional context. Belgium held European, federal, regional and local elections during the year, resulting in important political transitions and ongoing negotiations regarding future governments and policy priorities. These developments created significant uncertainty for civil society organisations working in the field of migration and refugee support. Discussions surrounding asylum, reception and integration became increasingly politicised, while delays in government formation at different levels created uncertainty regarding funding opportunities and policy continuity. At the same time, the continuing reception crisis in Belgium placed increasing pressure on refugee communities themselves. Many asylum seekers and refugees faced homelessness, overcrowded reception conditions, limited access to information and growing administrative challenges.

One of the most significant developments during 2024 was the creation of the Mobile Patrols initiative. Teams of volunteers from different refugee communities began organising outreach patrols in the streets of Brussels to identify and support homeless asylum seekers and refugees. The patrols aimed to provide information, orientation and referrals to available support services, while also building trust with people who were often disconnected from formal support systems. Volunteers involved in the patrols brought lived experience, language skills and cultural understanding that allowed them to engage with vulnerable individuals in a more accessible and trusted manner. During the reporting period, volunteers from Burundian, Palestinian, Afghan and Yemeni communities participated in the preparation and training process. Initial substantive training was provided in collaboration with UNHCR, while additional discussions focused on outreach methodologies and approaches for supporting particularly vulnerable groups, including women, children and LGBTQ+ individuals.

To strengthen the sustainability and professionalism of the project, outreach manuals and an interactive map of available support services in Brussels were created, and contact was made with humanitarian and social support actors, including Bruss'Help, Samusocial, the Red Cross, BelRefugees and the Humanitarian Hub, in order to strengthen referral pathways and cooperation mechanisms. Complementary to the patrol initiative, URC also began developing a community helpdesk model aimed at improving access to information and guidance for refugees and asylum seekers. The helpdesk concept was based on the idea that people often feel more comfortable seeking support from individuals who share their language, cultural background and lived experiences.

Another important milestone in 2024 was the strengthening of institutional dialogue and engagement with public actors. In December, the URC organised a second exchange with the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS). The meeting built on earlier contacts established during World Refugee Day activities and focused on improving communication between refugee communities and asylum institutions. Discussions resulted in an agreement to organise regular exchanges through which refugee committees could collect questions and concerns from their communities and share them directly with CGRS representatives. In turn, the information and clarifications provided by CGRS could be disseminated through community communication channels.

To strengthen the URC's organisational identity and public visibility, a professional organisational brand was also developed, including an updated logo, visual identity guidelines, communication templates and social media materials. 2024 also saw the launch of the URC's official website. At the same time, the organisation's presence grew on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The organisation also launched a bi-weekly newsletter aimed at refugee communities, volunteers and partner organisations. It quickly became a vital communication tool with member committees but also for external partners and stakeholders.

The URC and its member committees also actively participated in numerous workshops, training sessions and institutional events during the year. Among these activities were legal training sessions organised in collaboration with DLA Piper under the "Know Your Rights" programme, focusing on non-profit management, housing rights and employment-related issues. Further capacity-building activities included participation in ECRE's training seminar on EU advocacy for refugee-led organisations, workshops with Avocats Sans Frontières on non-discrimination and legal rights, and collaboration with Bruss'Help during the large-scale homelessness screening exercise in Brussels.

Employment and inclusion also became increasingly important themes during the year. In November 2024, the Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee organised a recruitment day in collaboration with Burger King, Quick, UNHCR and be.brussels, aimed at creating employment pathways for refugees and beneficiaries of temporary protection. Towards the end of the year, URC also co-organised a major roundtable discussion entitled "Building Bridges: From Uncertainty to Clarity – The Importance of Reliable Information for Asylum Seekers," together with the Network of Afghanistan Diaspora Organisations in Europe (NADOE).

The URC also launched internship opportunities in 2024 for students and young professionals interested in supporting refugee-led initiatives. During the reporting period, eight interns contributed to various aspects of the organisation's work, including IT systems, branding, social media, workshops, patrols and helpdesk preparation. Additional work focused on the development of organisational guidelines, volunteer management systems and shared IT infrastructure. Draft Codes of Conduct and Codes of Collaboration were prepared to clarify organisational principles and working relationships between committees.

Despite these important developments, URC continued to operate with extremely limited financial resources throughout 2024. Much of the organisation's work depended on volunteer commitment, community solidarity and informal support structures. By the end of 2024, URC had laid many of the institutional, operational and community foundations that would shape its evolution in 2025. What had initially emerged as a coordination platform between refugee committees increasingly evolved into a recognised refugee-led network organisation capable of combining outreach, advocacy, institutional dialogue, volunteer mobilisation and partnership-building. The developments of 2024 therefore marked not only a year of activities, but also a year of transition towards greater organisational maturity, visibility and long-term sustainability.

2025 AT A GLANCE

2025 was a year of consolidation, growth and increasing recognition for the Umbrella Refugee Committee (URC). Throughout the year, the organisation strengthened its role as Belgium's first refugee-led umbrella structure by expanding community outreach, deepening institutional partnerships, developing new projects and further formalising its organisational structures.

The year was marked by important developments in governance, outreach, sports and wellbeing initiatives, policy dialogue, homelessness support, refugee participation and organisational sustainability. Across all activities, URC continued promoting a refugee-led approach based on participation, mutual support, lived experience and collective empowerment.

Key Projects and Initiatives in 2025

Throughout 2025, the Umbrella Refugee Committee implemented and supported a diverse range of projects and initiatives focused on community engagement, outreach, refugee participation and organisational development.

A major initiative during the year was the KICK project (Kickstarting Integration through Community and Knowledge), implemented in partnership with the Royal Belgian Football Association through the Play Together Impact Fund. The project used sports as a tool for integration, wellbeing and social cohesion by organising regular football training sessions, tournaments and community activities for refugees, asylum seekers and newcomers in Brussels.

The Mobile Patrols and Refugee Mobile Teams projects continued, in collaboration with partners such as IOM and local organisations. These initiatives focused on supporting vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers experiencing homelessness, social exclusion and barriers to accessing institutional support. Outreach teams provided practical guidance, referrals, accompaniment and community-based support throughout Brussels, particularly for individuals disconnected from formal reception and assistance systems.

Another important area of work involved employment and integration support activities organised together with institutional and private sector partners. Job days, employment workshops and information sessions created opportunities for refugees and newcomers to access labour market information, professional networks and practical guidance related to employment and integration pathways in Belgium.

Numerous cultural, educational and community-building initiatives were organised as well, including women's workshops, language classes, calligraphy workshops, community celebrations, sports tournaments and public events linked to World Refugee Day. These activities created spaces for cultural exchange, participation and collective empowerment while strengthening solidarity between refugee communities and the broader public.

Outreach and Homelessness Support



One of the most significant areas of work during 2025 remained the Mobile Patrols initiative. Implemented in collaboration with IOM and multiple refugee committees, the initiative aimed to support asylum seekers and refugees facing homelessness and social exclusion in Brussels.

The volunteers received specialised training sessions in order to provide referrals and adequate support, leading to over 550 individuals directly benefiting from support and referrals, and around 120 direct interventions to access services and appointments. Throughout the project, safety protocols existed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the volunteers and coordinators.

Sports, Inclusion and Wellbeing

In 2025, the URC further expanded the use of sports as a tool for integration, wellbeing and social cohesion through the KICK project (Kickstarting Integration through Community and Knowledge). Developed in collaboration with the Royal Belgian Football Association and community partners, the project involved regular football training sessions, tournaments and community activities bringing together refugees, asylum seekers, volunteers and local actors in Brussels. Beyond physical activity, it strengthened social connections, reducing isolation and creating safe and inclusive spaces where participants from different backgrounds could interact and build trust.



Dedicated efforts were made to facilitate the participation of women and non-binary individuals through adapted sessions and outreach approaches. Interactive workshops on inclusion, wellbeing and social cohesion were also organised alongside sporting activities. The initiative reached approximately 150 participants from refugee communities in Brussels. Participants originated from diverse backgrounds including Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Palestine, Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq, Burundi and other communities represented within the URC network.

Institutional Partnerships and Recognition

The URC continued strengthening partnerships with public institutions, humanitarian organisations, civil society actors and research institutions.

One particularly important development was the launch of the Innovation Partnership Agreement with UNHCR Refugee-Led Innovation Fund supporting the Refugee Mobile Patrols initiative. The project aims to strengthen refugee-led outreach capacities in Brussels through mobile teams supporting asylum seekers and refugees with service navigation, information-sharing and community support.

At the same time, URC continued participating in broader institutional discussions regarding reception, integration, housing and refugee participation. Through these engagements, the organisation increasingly positioned itself as a recognised refugee-led interlocutor capable of connecting institutions with refugee communities and lived experiences.



Advocacy and Democratic Participation

A key initiative in this area was the “Towards an Inclusive Belgium” dialogue event organised ahead of the elections. The event brought together political candidates, refugee representatives, civil society actors and community members to discuss inclusion, participation and the role of refugee communities within Belgian society. The URC also continued contributing to discussions surrounding reception conditions, homelessness, integration challenges and access to services.

Through newsletters, public events and institutional meetings, the organisation sought to amplify refugee perspectives and facilitate more direct communication between communities and institutions. Furthermore, the URC cooperated with universities and researchers on projects related to refugee participation, integration, homelessness and social inclusion, while promoting ethical and participatory approaches involving refugee communities themselves.

2025 TIMELINE

The year began with a General Assembly in January, providing an important moment for collective reflection on the achievements and challenges of 2024, while also helping define strategic priorities for the year ahead. Discussions focused on organisational development, volunteer engagement, partnerships, governance strengthening and future project opportunities.



From February onwards, the URC continued expanding the Mobile Patrols initiative supporting asylum seekers and refugees experiencing homelessness and social exclusion in Brussels. Patrol volunteers conducted outreach activities across different parts of the city, identifying vulnerable individuals and facilitating referrals to available services and support structures. Additional volunteer training sessions were organised on outreach methodologies, service mapping, referral pathways and protection-sensitive approaches.

Throughout the year, several major cultural events took place. The Afghan Refugee Committee organised celebrations of Nowruz (Persian New Year) and Shabe Yalda, bringing together members of the diaspora, families, volunteers and guests in Brussels. These gatherings created opportunities for intergenerational exchange, cultural continuity and collective celebration, particularly important for communities affected by displacement and separation from family networks.



Additional cultural activities included Iraqi cooking workshops, music evenings, cultural exhibitions and artistic sessions organised by different committees. Cooking workshops became particularly popular as informal community spaces where participants could exchange experiences, share traditions and strengthen social connections. Arabic calligraphy workshops organised by the Iraqi Refugee Committee also attracted broad participation and created opportunities for artistic expression and cultural sharing. The URC and the committees were also present during World Refugee Day through cultural events, music evenings, sports activities and public gatherings organised in collaboration with partner organisations and refugee communities.

Employment support activities expanded significantly as demand for labour market guidance and professional networking opportunities continued growing within refugee communities. One of the key initiatives during the year was the organisation of employment and recruitment activities in collaboration with employers such as Marriott Hotels.



Language learning and informal educational activities represented another important component of URC's community engagement work. Persian language courses ran from September to November, where participants could learn the language, build cultural connections and engage in collective learning environments.



The classes also served as social spaces where participants could meet regularly and build networks. Swahili classes were organised regularly in the community centre, involving various African communities. Informal language support and peer-learning practices also emerged naturally during community activities, workshops and volunteer engagement.

Women's Empowerment and Participation

Strengthening the participation and visibility of refugee women remained a priority for the URC. The Women Refugee Committee (WRC), together with collaborating committees and partner organisations, organised multiple activities focused on empowerment, wellbeing, participation and community-building among refugee women.



One important initiative involved a series of women's workshops organised in collaboration with the Women Refugee Committee, Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee, Oasis Belgium and NADOE during June 2025. These workshops created safe and supportive spaces where women from different refugee backgrounds could meet, exchange experiences and discuss challenges related to integration, participation, wellbeing and social inclusion. Participants highlighted the importance of having spaces specifically designed for women where they could interact freely, share experiences and develop social support networks.

Dialogue with Institutions and Policy Consultations

Throughout the year, URC engaged in regular dialogue with public institutions, humanitarian organisations and policymakers at local, regional, national and European levels. A major focus of institutional engagement during 2025 concerned the ongoing reception and homelessness crisis affecting asylum seekers and refugees in Belgium.

A crucial moment was the visit of a delegation from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) to URC's shelter and community centre in Brussels. The visit followed exchanges initiated during the European Migration Forum, where discussions focused on the role of civil society in implementing the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Following these exchanges, URC invited European Commission representatives to observe refugee-led initiatives and community-based support mechanisms developed in Brussels.

One of the most significant organisational partnerships in 2025 was the strengthening of cooperation between URC and Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, as it supported the URC in areas related to organisational development, project coordination, strategic planning, governance strengthening and institutional networking.

A major development was the establishment of a joint steering group bringing together representatives of both organisations. The steering group included the Director and Community Liaison of Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, the President of the URC and the URC Coordinator. Meetings organised approximately every six weeks created a structured framework for strategic dialogue, coordination and reflection on organisational development and long-term priorities.

External Training Sessions and Professional Exchanges

Several volunteers and committee members participated in training sessions organised by organisations such as UNHCR, IOM, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, ECRE and other partners. These training sessions addressed topics including refugee protection, community outreach, project development, fundraising, advocacy, communication strategies and organisational sustainability.



The URC benefited immensely from exchanges with Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen related to project development, fundraising and advocacy work. These exchanges supported URC in navigating increasingly complex funding and partnership environments while also strengthening institutional knowledge and long-term planning capacities. Participation in broader conferences, institutional events and networking activities additionally contributed to organisational learning throughout the year.

Knack Hero of Democracy 2025



The last highlight of 2025 was the awarding of the “Knack Held van de Democratie 2025” (Knack Hero of Democracy 2025) to the Umbrella Refugee Committee. The award, organised by the Belgian magazine Knack in collaboration with the Hannah Arendt Institute, Socius, De Federatie and De Ambassade, recognises initiatives that strengthen democracy, participation and social cohesion in Belgium. The URC was selected as the winner among five finalists chosen from approximately seventy initiatives in Belgium. The professional jury recognised the URC as a pioneering refugee-led organisation and highlighted its contribution to democratic participation, inclusion and representation.

By the end of 2025, URC had further consolidated its position as a recognised refugee-led umbrella organisation combining community support, outreach, institutional dialogue, advocacy and collective action across Belgium.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

2025 was a year marked by significant challenges, tensions and structural limitations. As the organisation continued expanding its activities and partnerships, it increasingly confronted the realities and contradictions facing refugee-led organisations operating within highly unequal social, political and funding environments.

Many of these challenges were not unique to the URC alone. They reflected broader structural issues surrounding refugee participation, reception systems, civil society sustainability and migration governance in Belgium and across Europe. At the same time, the experiences of 2025 reinforced the importance of refugee-led organising, community solidarity and collective resilience in contexts where institutional systems often remain fragmented, overstretched or disconnected from the everyday realities faced by refugees and asylum seekers.

One of the most pressing challenges remained the ongoing reception and homelessness crisis affecting asylum seekers and refugees in Belgium. URC volunteers and outreach teams repeatedly encountered individuals sleeping in public spaces, abandoned buildings or overcrowded temporary arrangements, often under extremely precarious conditions. Many individuals lacked access not only to accommodation, but to basic information, healthcare, legal guidance and social support. Often, volunteers encountered people disconnected from institutional systems and relying on informal networks, solidarity initiatives and refugee-led support structures for survival and orientation.

For the volunteers, these situations were often emotionally difficult and psychologically exhausting. They frequently found themselves supporting people facing severe distress, uncertainty and isolation while simultaneously lacking the resources or institutional authority to provide structural solutions. Refugee-led organisations increasingly became spaces where the failures and limitations of broader reception systems became directly visible on a daily basis. These experiences thus highlighted the crucial role for refugee-led initiatives in creating trust, offering immediate support and bridging gaps between vulnerable individuals and formal institutions.

The year also highlighted the growing gap between institutional expectations placed on refugee-led organisations and the limited resources available to sustain their work. As URC's visibility increased, so did requests for participation, consultation, representation and operational involvement. Institutions, researchers, humanitarian organisations and public actors increasingly recognised the value of refugee-led initiatives and sought collaboration on projects, consultations, training sessions and public events.

Much of this work continued depending heavily on volunteer labour, informal coordination and unpaid emotional investment. Many of the organisation's most active members simultaneously faced unstable employment situations, legal uncertainty, housing precarity or family responsibilities. In practice, refugee-led organising often relied on individuals who were themselves navigating difficult social and economic realities while also supporting others in crisis.

This was and is the paradox facing the URC: refugee-led organisations are increasingly recognised as essential actors within migration and integration systems yet often remain among the least structurally supported actors in those systems. Expectations regarding professionalism, coordination, reporting, communication and participation continued increasing, while long-term structural funding and sustainable support mechanisms remained limited and highly competitive. This imbalance created ongoing uncertainty regarding continuity, organisational planning and the sustainability of activities heavily dependent on volunteer commitment.

Another significant challenge concerned the broader political and social environment surrounding migration debates in Europe. Public discussions surrounding asylum, migration and integration became increasingly polarised. Refugee communities often remained exposed to stigmatisation, political instrumentalisation and narratives centred primarily on crisis, security or dependency. These broader societal dynamics affected not only refugees themselves, but also the environment within which refugee-led organisations attempted to operate and advocate.

All these challenges also served as important lessons and moments of collective learning. One of the clearest lessons of the year was the importance of community trust and peer support. Throughout the year, refugee-led initiatives repeatedly demonstrated their ability to reach individuals and communities often disconnected from formal systems. Shared language, lived experience and community proximity allowed volunteers to build trust and provide support in ways that would often be difficult through purely institutional approaches.

This year also saw the reinforcement of partnerships grounded in reciprocity and mutual respect. Collaborations with organisations such as UNHCR, IOM, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, universities and local actors demonstrated that refugee-led organisations can play meaningful operational and strategic roles when partnerships are based on trust, recognition and shared responsibility. At the same time, URC also learned that growth and professionalisation should not come at the expense of participation and community ownership. Maintaining openness, accessibility and collective governance remained essential values throughout the year.

In this sense, the challenges of 2025 also highlighted the resilience, solidarity and organisational strength present within refugee communities in Belgium. Despite limited resources, political uncertainty and increasing pressures, URC and its member committees continued building spaces of support, participation and collective action. The experiences of the year ultimately confirmed that refugee-led organisations are not peripheral actors operating on the margins of integration systems. They are increasingly central actors in shaping how inclusion, participation and solidarity are practised and imagined within contemporary Belgian society.

The organisation also encountered challenges linked to representation itself. As an umbrella structure bringing together multiple refugee communities with different histories, priorities, languages and experiences, URC continuously navigated questions surrounding inclusivity, balance and internal coordination. Ensuring equitable participation between committees while maintaining collective cohesion required continuous dialogue, negotiation and mutual trust. These internal processes were often complex, but they also reflected the diversity and democratic character of the umbrella structure itself.

Finally, 2025 reinforced a broader lesson regarding the importance of refugee-led organising itself. Throughout the year, refugee communities were not only recipients of support, but organisers, volunteers, mediators, advocates, mentors and community leaders. Refugee-led initiatives repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to respond creatively and collectively to situations of exclusion, uncertainty and institutional gaps. In many contexts, they acted as spaces where solidarity, participation and dignity could still be practised despite increasingly difficult social and political conditions.

OUTLOOK FOR 2026

As the Umbrella Refugee Committee enters 2026, the organisation does so with both determination and realism. The year ahead is expected to bring significant challenges for refugee communities, civil society organisations and public institutions across Belgium and Europe. Growing financial pressures, reductions in humanitarian and integration funding, increasing political polarisation around migration, and broader social and economic instability are already reshaping the environment within which refugee-led organisations operate.

During 2025, the URC increasingly witnessed the consequences of shrinking public resources, overstretched reception systems and growing social tensions. Refugees and asylum seekers continued facing homelessness, administrative exclusion, barriers to healthcare and employment, and uncertainty regarding their futures. Simultaneously, refugee-led organisations themselves were expected to respond to expanding social needs while operating with limited financial means and a largely volunteer-based structure.

A central priority for 2026 will be strengthening the organisational sustainability of URC itself. Internal discussions throughout 2025 highlighted the urgent need to move from highly reactive and volunteer-dependent forms of coordination towards more structured and sustainable systems of governance and operations. Strategic reflections within the organisation increasingly emphasised the importance of clarifying responsibilities, improving coordination between committees, strengthening leadership structures and building more stable operational capacity.

At the same time, URC remains committed to preserving the participatory and community-based foundations that define it. Discussions regarding governance, representation and institutional relations throughout 2025 repeatedly stressed the importance of fairness, transparency and meaningful participation across all committees and communities.

Funding uncertainty remains one of the organisation's central concerns for 2026. Like many grassroots and refugee-led initiatives, URC increasingly faces a situation in which expectations continue growing while long-term structural funding remains fragile and highly competitive.

URC also intends to continue strengthening its role in research, policy discussions and co-production of knowledge. Over recent years, the organisation has increasingly contributed to surveys, consultations, academic collaborations and policy discussions related to migration, homelessness, integration and refugee participation. The organisation plans to further develop this role in 2026 by strengthening partnerships with universities, researchers and institutions interested in participatory and community-based approaches to migration governance. At the same time, URC remains committed to ensuring that lived experience is recognised not simply as testimony, but as a form of expertise and knowledge production in its own right.

The year ahead will undoubtedly require strategic adaptation, careful prioritisation and continued perseverance. Economic pressures, funding reductions, social polarisation and political uncertainty will continue affecting both refugee communities and the organisations supporting them. Nevertheless, URC remains committed to continuing its work with strength, dignity and solidarity. The organisation will continue advocating for meaningful participation, equitable support systems and a society in which refugees are recognised not as passive recipients of assistance, but as active contributors to the social, cultural and democratic life of Belgium.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

The organisation's financial model remained strongly shaped by its grassroots and community-based nature. Much of URC's work throughout the year depended on volunteer commitment, informal coordination and collective solidarity across committees and partner organisations. Volunteers continued playing a central role in organising activities, conducting outreach, supporting vulnerable individuals, coordinating events and maintaining communication with communities and institutions. The substantial contribution of unpaid and partially compensated volunteer labour remained one of the defining characteristics of the organisation's functioning throughout 2025.

Main Funding Sources and Project Support

The URC's activities were supported through a combination of partnerships, project-based grants and collaborative funding mechanisms in 2025. Key support was provided through cooperation with organisations such as UNHCR, IOM, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen and other institutional and civil society partners working in the fields of migration, integration and refugee participation. These collaborations made it possible for the organisation to continue implementing outreach initiatives, community activities, support services and organisational development efforts despite highly constrained financial conditions.

Several important projects implemented during the year received targeted financial and operational support. One key initiative was the Refugee Mobile Teams project in Brussels, implemented in collaboration with IOM and focused on outreach, support for vulnerable individuals and service navigation for refugees and asylum seekers in precarious situations. Another significant initiative during the year was the KICK football project, implemented in partnership with the Royal Belgian Football Association through the Play Together Impact Fund. Many smaller community activities, workshops, outreach events and cultural programmes were made possible through partnerships, in-kind contributions and volunteer engagement.

URC also continued exploring future funding opportunities linked to Belgian and European funding frameworks, including discussions surrounding AMIF-related opportunities and transnational integration projects. At the same time, the organisation increasingly recognised the structural challenges refugee-led organisations face in accessing sustainable and long-term funding. Competition for limited resources, complex administrative procedures and project-based funding cycles continued creating uncertainty for grassroots and refugee-led initiatives attempting to maintain continuity and long-term planning.

Throughout the year, volunteers also played a central role in maintaining the everyday functioning of the organisation. Much of the coordination required for community events, meetings, institutional engagement and communication depended on sustained volunteer involvement and informal community networks. In practice, many of the organisation's activities were made possible through collective solidarity, personal commitment and the willingness of volunteers to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy despite often facing precarious conditions themselves.

Internal reflections throughout 2025 repeatedly highlighted concerns regarding sustainability, burnout and operational overload. As the organisation's visibility and partnerships expanded, expectations regarding professionalism, coordination and service delivery also increased. Maintaining high levels of activity under these conditions often required substantial invisible labour and emotional investment from volunteers and committee leaders.

Financial Transparency and Accountability

Income 2025	€	Expenses 2025	€
Donations	3239.5	General functioning	3130.98
Project Funding (IOM Incentive Fund)	8000	Activities	7390.2
Project Funding (UNHCR Refugee-led Innovation Fund)	6184		
	17423.5	Total	10521.18

6902,32€ at the end of 2025

Despite ongoing financial uncertainty and increasing operational pressures, URC continued demonstrating strong commitment to responsible resource management and collective accountability throughout 2025.

The URC remained committed to further strengthening financial governance structures in the coming years while continuing to advocate for more sustainable and equitable funding frameworks capable of supporting refugee-led organisations and long-term community-based participation in Belgium and Europe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Umbrella Refugee Committee would like to express its sincere gratitude to all individuals, committees, organisations and institutions who contributed to the organisation's work throughout 2025. This year once again demonstrated that refugee-led organising is only possible through collective effort, solidarity, trust and long-term commitment from many different actors working together across communities and sectors. The growth, visibility and impact of URC throughout the year would not have been possible without the contributions of volunteers, community leaders, partners and supporters who continued investing their time, expertise and energy into strengthening refugee participation and community support in Belgium.

First and foremost, URC wishes to acknowledge the extraordinary commitment of its volunteers who dedicated their time, energy and expertise to supporting refugee communities across Brussels and beyond. They organised community activities, participated in outreach and patrols, supported vulnerable individuals, coordinated events, facilitated workshops, provided interpretation and translation, engaged in advocacy efforts and maintained the everyday functioning of the organisation. Much of this work was carried out alongside personal, professional and family responsibilities, often under conditions of uncertainty and precarity. Their dedication, resilience and solidarity remained the foundation of the organisation throughout 2025.

Special appreciation is extended to the Women Refugee Committee, Afghan Refugee Committee, Iraqi Refugee Committee, Syrian Refugee Committee, Ukrainian Voices Refugee Committee, Rainbow Refugee Committee, Somali Refugee Committee, Eritrean Refugee Committee and Burundian Refugee Committee Iteka for their active contribution throughout 2025. URC also acknowledges the collaboration and engagement of emerging and partner initiatives working alongside the umbrella structure during the year. Together, these committees and community initiatives contributed to creating a strong and diverse refugee-led network grounded in solidarity, participation and collective action.

The URC is deeply grateful to its institutional and civil society partners for their collaboration, trust and support throughout the year. The organisation would particularly like to thank UNHCR, IOM, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the Royal Belgian Football Association, local authorities, municipalities, community centres and numerous civil society organisations that collaborated with URC during 2025. These partnerships made possible a broad range of initiatives related to outreach, social inclusion, sports, employment support, advocacy, community participation and organisational development. The organisation especially values partnerships grounded in reciprocity, mutual respect and recognition of refugee-led expertise.

The organisation also extends its appreciation to European, federal, regional and local institutions that engaged in dialogue with the URC and recognised the importance of refugee-led participation and community expertise. Meetings, consultations and collaborative exchanges throughout the year contributed to strengthening recognition of refugee-led initiatives as meaningful actors within Belgium's migration and integration landscape. These engagements created important opportunities for dialogue surrounding refugee participation, community support and inclusive governance while also helping increase institutional understanding of the realities faced by refugee communities.

Particular gratitude is also extended to all community members who participated in activities, trusted the organisation and contributed to creating spaces of solidarity, dignity and mutual support throughout the year. Refugee-led organising ultimately depends not only on structures and projects, but also on the trust, participation and collective engagement of communities themselves. The continued involvement of community members in activities, consultations, workshops and outreach initiatives remained central to the organisation's work and identity throughout 2025.

Finally, the URC would like to acknowledge that the organisation's work takes place in a broader context marked by ongoing wars, displacement, social inequality and political uncertainty affecting millions of people across the world. In this context, the solidarity shown by volunteers, communities, partners and supporters throughout 2025 carries particular importance. It demonstrates that despite difficult circumstances, collective action, participation and human solidarity continue to remain possible and necessary.

The Umbrella Refugee Committee enters the next year with deep appreciation for everyone who contributed to its journey throughout 2025 and with continued commitment to strengthening refugee participation, inclusion and community-led solidarity in Belgium.

UMBRELLA REFUGEE COMMITTEE



ANNUAL REPORT

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