IMPACT REPORT

CONVERSATION OVER BORDERS

2022

www.conversationoverborders.org
Community Base, 113 Queens' Rd,
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IMPACT OVERVIEW

A YEAR OF GROWTH

Alongside expanding our English & Befriending Project, 2022 was a year of exponential growth at Conversation Over Borders, as we launched five new projects to meet the changing needs identified by our community:

- **Wellbeing Project**
- **Digital Inclusion Project**
- **Refugee Voices Project**
- **In-person ESOL**
- **Digital Skills for Healthcare**

We welcomed many new faces to the team, including our new Advisory Board and new staff members onto the Wellbeing Team. We developed new, fruitful partnerships with organisations across the sector, including a strategic partnership with Enjoolata Foundation which has allowed us to look to and plan for the future with increased security. We featured in national media speaking against Boris Johnson's rhetoric on male asylum seekers, campaigned for the end of the Rwanda Plan and worked to platform the voices of our community through film.

With the support and generosity of our funders, donors and sponsors, we doubled our budget in 2022, ensuring that we continue to grow from strength to strength as we step into 2023 .

KEY NUMBERS

10,000

English conversation classes since 2020

100

households connected with tech and internet

100+

asylum seekers registered for peer support groups

60

clients supported with one-to-one wellbeing sessions

WHY CONVERSATION OVER BORDERS?

Social isolation is one of the most pressing social issues of our times, shown to impact everything from **access to employment** to **healthcare** (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2020). This crisis was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of community spaces. Asylum seekers face disproportionate social exclusion through being moved regularly between hotels, emergency accommodation and Home Office housing across the UK, preventing them from putting down roots in the community and accessing regular local support. In tandem, the **stigmatisation** and **scapegoating** of asylum seekers by the mainstream media and politicians ostracises people seeking safety further, leading to **social segregation** and conflict, **mental health difficulties** and an absence of opportunities for people affected by war and persecution to access **employment** and find **community** in the UK.

Conversation Over Borders was founded to unite a community that was impervious to these challenges. By building meaningful connections and opportunities to share and learn online, we foster relationships that withstand the physical displacement people experience once in the UK. One-to-one conversations **reduce stereotypes** and build **cross-cultural understanding** and **cohesion**. Our English classes focus on an exchange of knowledge and ideas; we all bring something to teach and something to learn. In disrupting traditionally hierarchical education, we level the playing field and provide opportunities for volunteers and learners to **make friends**, with many choosing to work together for over a year.

We have been directed by the community we work in since inception, and our new projects in 2022 have been built in response to needs identified to us by our community; **digital inclusion** and **community-rooted mental wellbeing** now act in a trifecta of support with our English and Befriending project, to ensure everyone has access to appropriate support as they rebuild their lives in the UK. Our vision is of **socially cohesive communities** of people welcoming newcomers to the UK, with **equitable opportunities** for displaced people to settle quickly into society, utilise their skills and support themselves in rebuilding their lives here.

LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

DEAR FRIENDS,

*It has been a year of **change and growth** at Conversation Over Borders. We have expanded more than anyone would have believed possible at the end of 2021; **launching five new projects** and expanding our areas of work, **growing our community** and benefitting from working with some incredible **partners**, **supporters** and **sponsors.***

*As we move into 2023, we will be celebrating the achievements of the past year, while keeping our eyes focused forward. Our work has never been more critical; the crises in **Turkiye, Syria, Ukraine** and the fight for women's rights in **Iran** are impacting our community deeply and in a hostile environment, with anti-refugee rhetoric normalised in the media, providing **people-focused support** and a **human-championing narrative** on migration is more necessary now than ever. Our documentary and book, in partnership with Refugee Radio, platforms a **humanising** side of the stories of **displacement and hope** not given space in the press - and we invite you to join us on **April 1st** at **Fabrica, Brighton**, to celebrate its release.*

*The **energy and dynamism** of our community drove us forward in 2022; a team of young people who believe that any problem is surmountable, who are willing to **show up** time and again to prove that borders have no place here. The impact of **10,000 conversation classes**, the equivalent of back-to-back classes, 24/7, every day for almost 14 months, is hard to capture: hours given to mutual **learning**, building **friendships**, **reducing isolation** and **breaking down the artificial barriers** that divide us.*

*Whether you supported us as a partner, a funder, a participant or volunteer in 2022 - **thank you.** Here's to jointly building a **more welcoming world** in 2023.*

ENGLISH & BEFRIENDING PROJECT

The **English & Befriending Project** is our founding project, which seeks to boost **confidence in English** and **decrease social isolation** by connecting refugees and asylum seekers 1-1 with volunteer tutors.

In 2022, the project hit some exciting and significant milestones. We have now coordinated **10,000 English classes** and connected **over 1000 people** for one-to-one English classes, building the confidence and skills service users need to navigate core services in the UK and rebuild their lives here.

Throughout 2022, we took a lot of time and care to improve our internal processes so we can **expand our reach**, and for the first time since the project began, having always been heavily oversubscribed, we are now in the position to do outreach for the service. With this new capacity and burgeoning new partnerships, 2023 should see us reaching many more milestones for the project and **expanding nationally**.

In 2022, the Coordination team welcomed lots of new faces. We inducted **8 volunteer Coordinators** who have taken project from strength to strength. A larger team has allowed us to reach more people without compromising the personal approach that is so integral to the way the project works; ensuring that learners and volunteers are paired with care and can build **long-term relationships of trust** and **learning**.

2022 IMPACT

98%

of learners felt more confident speaking English after 8 weeks

75%

of learners felt less isolated after their class

92%

of learners enjoyed their English classes 'a lot'!

92%

of volunteers learnt more about the experience of asylum seekers in the UK

FROM THE COMMUNITY

"Before I was really scared of talking in English. **This changed** when I started Conversation Over Borders. **Now I am confident** and I can talk to people even to ask directions and **I am proud of myself." - COB Learner**

"Through connecting with someone whose life is so different to my own I have **gained insight** into how challenging life as a refugee can be in the UK. It may sound ignorant but I've also learnt that **refugees are just normal people like anyone else**, perhaps I have only truly understood this now because they are so **dehumanised** in the media. Overall the experience has **broadened my perspective** and given me **a new friend**." - COB Volunteer

"I like these online classes because I can **make friends** and **feel confident** when I speak to people and can understand even with hard accents." - COB Learner

"I learn so much every time I speak with my student even though I am the 'teacher'. I feel much **better connected** to those in my community who have suffered difficulties, and it's important to me that they can have this opportunity to access the common language we use so they can improve their **opportunities in the UK** and **wellbeing**." - COB Volunteer

IN-PERSON ESOL

In the Spring / Summer term of 2022 we ran **over 200 hours** of in-person classes for **75 asylum seekers** living in initial accommodation hotels in Brighton & Hove.

This project was run collaboratively with volunteers from **Migrant English Project** and **Care4Calais**, coordinated by **Conversation Over Borders** staff and volunteers and supported with funding from **Brighton & Hove City Council.** After working with students for 6 months, they were assisted in registering onwards for further ESOL and college courses.

Volunteers from **Conversation Over Borders** and **Migrant English Project** have retained a presence at the hotels, initially running a homework club on Thursdays and more recently re-starting English classes for **55 newly arrived asylum seeking students** in Hove, with the support of teachers from the **University of Sussex** and volunteers from **Student Action for Refugees**.

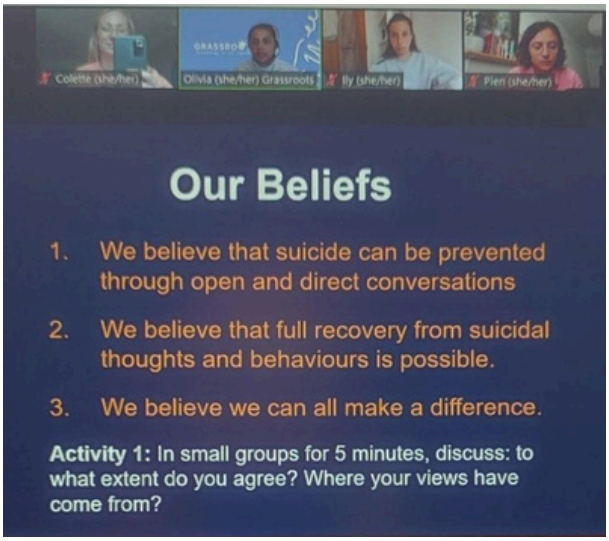
These efforts to support newly arrived asylum seekers in Brighton & Hove has shown the power in a strong and coordinated cross-sector approach, which we hope will continue with the support of the wider community into the future.

REFUGEE WELLBEING PROJECT

Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK often face significant challenges to their mental health, including past traumas, language barriers, uncertainty about their future, and difficulty accessing support services. Displaced people are shown to be **five times more likely to struggle with their mental health** than the general population.

In providing mental health support, it is critical to recognize the specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers and provide **culturally sensitive support** as well as addressing the root causes of mental health problems, such as **discrimination** and lack of legal protection. The outcomes of the Wellbeing Project were devised with this is mind, delivered in the form of **weekly peer support groups** and **one-to-one advice and signposting** for asylum seekers and refugees, in English, Arabic and Farsi.

In 2022, we launched **four online support groups**, a Women's Group, Farsi Group, Monday Group (for all) and a more casual group focused on befriending. **Over 100 refugees and asylum seekers registered to access this support**. On average, **81%** of attendees at the groups gave themselves a **higher wellbeing ranking at the end of the group** than the start every week.



The Wellbeing Groups provide an **intergenerational, intercultural** opportunity for individuals with experience of displacement to discuss wellbeing, build community and share advice and experience in a safe, facilitated space. Service users who attend the sessions usually keep returning, with the **overall attendance** of the groups **increasing significantly** over the course of the year.

REFUGEE WELLBEING PROJECT

As we look to the future, we plan for the Wellbeing Project to be designed and delivered by **trained individuals with lived experience of displacement,** in the first languages of our clients. Two of our current Wellbeing groups are facilitated by individuals with lived experience of displacement, which will increase as we welcome Wafa, our new **Arabic Wellbeing Facilitator**, to the team in early 2023. In 2022, we welcomed Matt, our new **Wellbeing Coordinator**, and Lili, our **Farsi Wellbeing Facilitor**, as well as a team of six **Volunteer Wellbeing Facilitators** to the team. In May, for Mental Health Awareness Month, we undertook group **Suicide Intervention Training** and **Mental Health First Aid Training**.

In early 2023, we are launching two new support groups: an **Arabic Group** and an **LGBT+ Group**. We see this as an opportunity to provide more specialist support for most common needs identified through our community consultations and feedback.

In tandem with the groups, we delivered 1-1 support in Arabic, Farsi and English to 60 individuals in 2022. Our 1-1 capacity will increase in 2023, as we look forward to welcoming and training new facilitators and volunteers.

FROM THE COMMUNITY

"I feel like **I am with my family** in the group. **I feel confident** and people understand me. It helps to improve my English and I **learn new things** from other people."

Wellbeing Group Client

"I feel happy with my life, compared to 2 months ago **I feel 100% better mentally**. I feel happy and I am very grateful to all the friends at Conversation Over Borders for their help during this time."

Wellbeing 1-1 Client

DIGITAL INCLUSION PROJECT

Access to technology is a lifeline for many of us, allowing us to **stay connected** to friends and family, **reducing isolation** and providing **access to online information and resources**. Digital exclusion is particularly high amongst migrant and refugee communities, contributing to multiple **social inequalities** including access to **healthcare**, **education** and **employment**.

At the same time, the UK is one of the largest producers of e-waste in the world, with **23.9kg of e-waste produced per person** on average. Research shows that **33% of Brits** don't know how to recycle tech safely.

After a successful trial in 2021, we launched the **Digital Inclusion Project** in February 2022 to dynamically tackle both of these issues. The project collects donations of **disused phones**, **laptops** and **tablets** from socially and environmentally conscious individuals and businesses upgrading their tech. In early 2022, we became a **Youwipe Gold Standard Partner** for our commitment to secure data erasure; enabling us wipe, repair and redistribute devices to digitally excluded asylum seekers and refugees.

2022 STATS

100

refugees and asylum seekers given recycled phones and laptops

120

supported with internet-loaded SIM cards

8

partnerships with companies and public bodies

7

community languages accounted for in our digital literacy resources

DIGITAL INCLUSION PROJECT

In 2022, **Care4Calais** published a report exposing and condemning the Home Office's **illegal policy of confiscating migrants' phones** as they arrived into the UK. We were aware of this unspoken policy through reports from our community, but the extent of its impact - including asylum-seeking children left without any way of making contact with authorities, organisations, or their families - showed how critical Digital Inclusion services were and are.

In March we partnered with Vodafone Charities Connected, which has allowed us to distribute over **120 data loaded SIM cards**. Internet access is notoriously unreliable in many initial accommodation hotels and this support has enabled our clients to reconnect with their loved ones and access vital online services.

We have built partnerships with companies and individuals wishing to safely dispose of their technology and have it reused for social good. This meant we were able to provide **over 100 refugees and asylum seekers** with refurbished technology by the end of 2022. As our project grew, we welcomed five new volunteers to the Digital Inclusion Team, whose knowledge and passion for **tackling the digital divide** drives the project forward. We developed a drive of resources for volunteers to run their own local **Tech Drives**, and volunteer-run collections are due to take place in Belfast and Brighton in early 2023.

"After I got the phone **it changed everything.** It is now easy for me to communicate with my family and with the English language teacher as well."

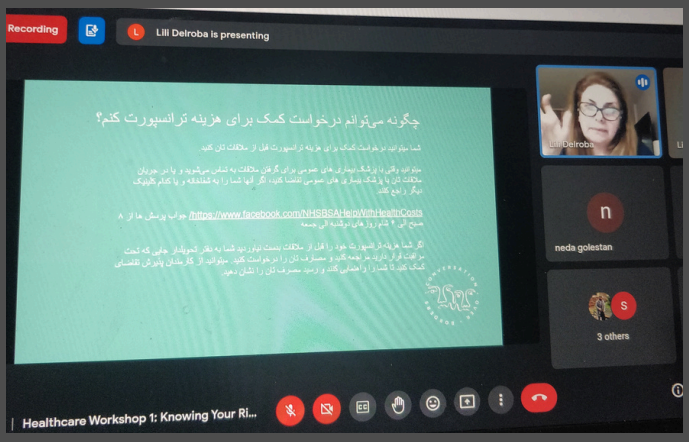
"This phone will help me so much at college and also **helps me to feel safe**. I can contact my brothers and I can go to places and walk around this city because I can now use maps. **It is the little things that I did not know I needed**, but now I have this phone it makes it easy for me."

DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR HEALTHCARE

Alongside the critical distribution of tech, our team have been expanding our digital inclusion resources, translating them into community languages and providing 1-1 digital literacy support throughout 2022.

One of our most frequent requests for support comes from displaced people seeking to access medical help; with misinformation even at GP surgeries about the documents required to register and access healthcare. With the granting of support from the **NHS Digital First** programme in September 2022, we embarked on a mission to strengthen our clients' access to online healthcare, through expanding our Digital Inclusion Project and producing resources and workshops in **7+ community languages** on **rights to healthcare**, **registering with a GP** and **accessing medical care online**.

We have launched the accompanying workshops, delivered in English, Arabic and Farsi, in early 2023, and we are using this as an opportunity to **share** and **connect** with new clients across the country, while distributing the resources to local and national organisations working in this field. The resources and workshops have been well received, with **over 80 attendees** registering for more than one workshop within the **first week of launching**. Having identified the extent of the need, we are aiming to expand this provision into other community languages in 2023.



Above: Our Farsi Faciitator, Lili, leads our Rights to Healthcare workshop.

Below: Posters showing our Digital Skills for Healthcare workshop timetables in Arabic and Farsi.

All of our resources can be accessed on our Resources for Refugees padlet:

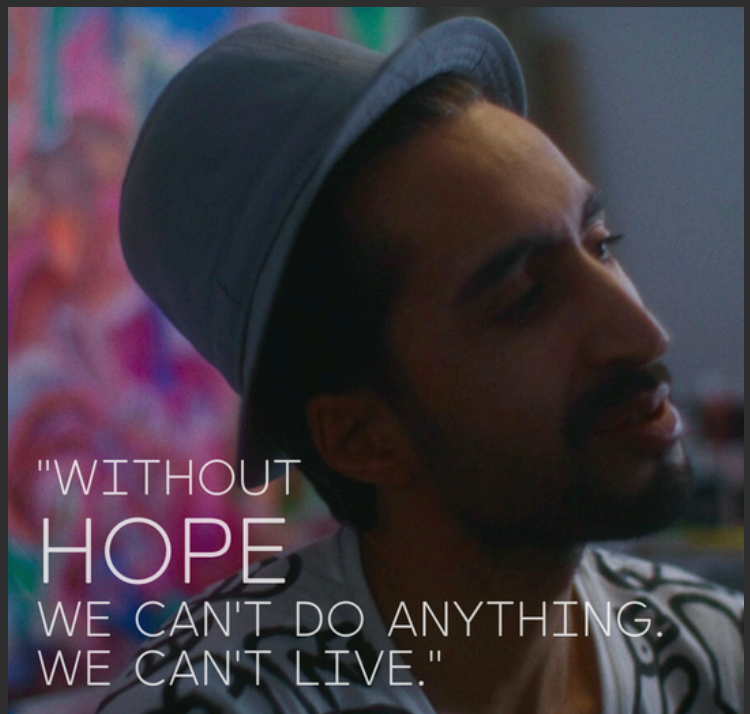
www.conversationoverborders.org/resources-for-refugees

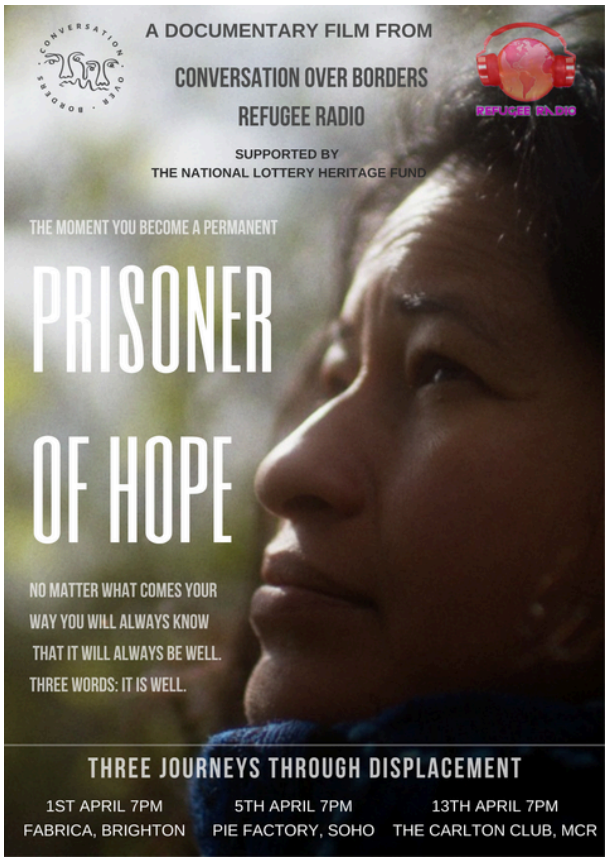
PLATFORMING REFUGEE VOICES

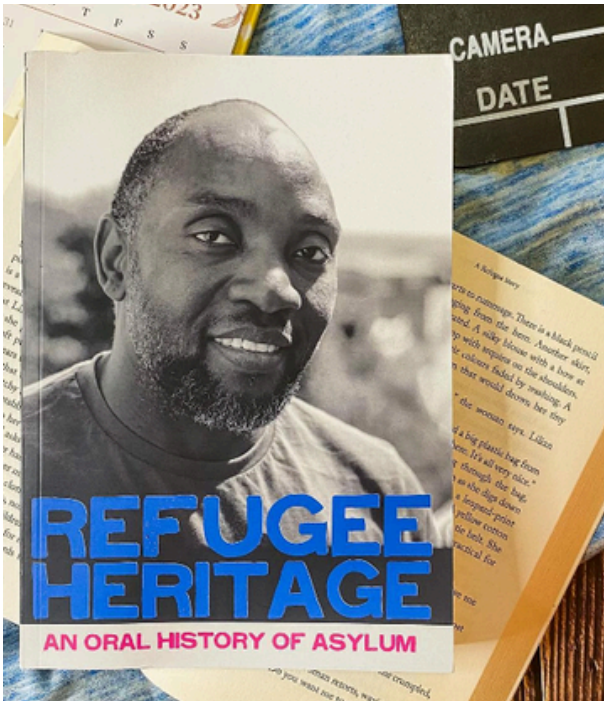
Every day the news carries stories about asylum seekers crossing the channel or about new immigration policies, but **we never hear from the people who are making the journeys themselves.**

Throughout 2022, we worked on a heritage project with our partners at **Refugee Radio** to amplify the voices of our community. The **book** and **documentary** tell some of the stories behind the headlines and reveal the humanity of the individuals caught up in the asylum process. Based on interviews with refugees and migrants, their **untold stories reveal the humanity beyond the clichés and stereotypes.**

The documentary and book will be launching with an event at Fabrica, Brighton on the 1st April 2023 - all are welcome. This project was made possible by the generosity of the Heritage Lottery Fund and by a team of volunteers from the community.







HERITAGE FUND

COB IN THE COMMUNITY

In March 2022, we were granted sponsored places on the **Brighton 10km** by our partners at **Enjoolata Foundation**, with whom we are proud to have developed a life-changing three year strategic partnership.

Runners from **Conversation Over Borders** and **Enjoolata** joined forces and ran to raise money for our **Refugee Wellbeing Project.** The donations raised allowed us to welcome Arabic and Farsi Wellbeing Facilitators from our community of people with lived experience of displacement onto the team. We will be running once again on **2nd April 2023** to raise money for our refugee-led mental health support - we hope to see you at the finish line.

In 2022, we took part in a series of **beach cleans** and **art workshops** with our sistership organisation, **the Launchpad Collective**, as part of a Welcome Mat art project - symbolising our warm welcome for sanctuary seekers. This project was generously supported by the **Enjoolata Foundation**.

In 2022, our series of live, **online cooking classes** flourished, and we welcomed different people from the community and beyond to teach us how to cook their home cuisines and to exchange cultures through food. We held **Iranian, Syrian, Sudanese and Bangladeshi** cooking classes, raising vital funds for our **Digital Inclusion Project.**

OUR ADVISORY BOARD

We were extraordinarily lucky to welcome a new Board of Advisors in 2022.

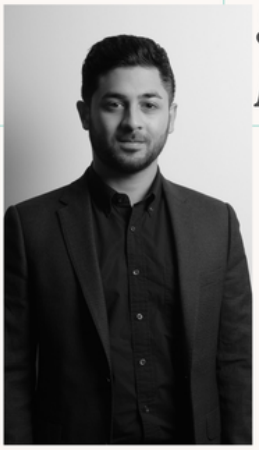
Neha Hampton, Rabab Alawadhi, Samir Mamun, Sohrab Vazir and Ouzra Karimi each bring a wealth of professional skills and backgrounds, different lived experiences, ideas and perspectives to drive forward the next stage of Conversation Over Borders' development.

Neha Patel Hampton

Neha is a prominent business woman with a wide range of strategic experience across corporate, charity and hospitality sectors. Leading from her heart, Neha works with a number of charities who are driving social change and fighting racial and gender inequality. She has a strong passion for helping organisations to thrive and develop through diversity, inclusion and anti-racism practices.

Rabab Alawadhi

Rabab has extensive experience working in the charity sector in Brighton. She is an integral part of the team at a Brighton based organisation called The Launchpad Collective (TLC). She has been with TLC since the very beginning and has helped to co-create their job seeker services. Rabab is the main point of contact for all of their clients - with her own lived experience giving her a close insight into the situations they face. Rabab is continually working to further her leadership skills through ongoing training and development.



Samir Mamun

Samir is a communications marketing leader for purpose-driven organisations. Working with both the media and London-based communications consulting firms, he advises some of the world's biggest brands, tech start-ups and non-profit organisations. Samir's work has helped to raise awareness of issues including social inequality, climate change and mental health. In his spare time, Samir appreciates the arts through his love of playing the piano and writing poetry and prose.

Sohrab Vazir

Sohrab was born in Iran and spent his childhood between Iran and Switzerland, until moving to the UK at the age of 17 in pursuit of higher education. Owing to his background, Sohrab considers himself to be a true global citizen.

After obtaining his LLM in International Law from Newcastle University, Sohrab (aged 22) went on to become a solo tech founder. He received 2 highly coveted endorsements from Newcastle University Careers Services' START UP team for an entrepreneur visa. During his time as an entrepreneur, Sohrab expanded his business to over 30 UK cities and received recognition from GBEA & NatWest. He is extremely passionate about migration, tech, entrepreneurship and current affairs.

Ouzra Kamiri

Ouzra holds a Masters in Migration and Policy studies from the University of Birmingham. She has a long-standing passion in advocating and fighting for the rights of refugees and migrants. Much of her passion to work for refugees and migrants derives from her lived experiences of displacement and conflict in Afghanistan.

She currently works for Breaking Barriers as an Employment and Integration Adviser, whereby she supports migrants and refugees in finding meaningful employment and access to education. She has experience working with NGOs in Lesbos, Greece and Bosnia. Witnessing the impact of severe and illegal border controls on refugees in the Balkan route provoked her to do more to raise awareness of the brutal reality of these borders.

OPPORTUNITIES

Interested in an area of our work and want to support us in reaching more people?

We are seeking partnerships with forward-thinking organisations, donors and Foundations who believe in our mission and the capacity we jointly hold to escalate its impact.

If you have skills, time or resources to support our work, please get in touch to discuss how we can work together.

info@conversationoverborders.org
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Conversation Over Borders
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GRATITUDE

As a small, grassroots organisation, we rely on your support.

None of our work in 2022 would have been possible without the time given by our community, team and volunteers and the immense generosity of our donors, partners and funders.

Thank you for all you do make the world a safer, more welcoming and inclusive place.