

WE EXIST, Belgium

<https://www.facebook.com/WeExistNGO/>

[Mohamed Obada Ota Bashi]



“We Exist” is an NGO created by a mixed team of volunteers, majority being refugees from Syria but also migrants from other countries. The aim of “We Exist” is to facilitate the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the labour market. We aim to promote participation in socio-economic and cultural life. We also want to raise awareness of Syrian culture and traditions. The objective of We Exist is to set up a Centre for culinary and cultural exchange and to recruit asylum seekers and refugees. We started testing our project through the organisation of Syrian fundraising dinners/brunches, and through participation at the festivals.

When I arrived to Belgium, I started building a new life. I must say that it is not easy to start from a scratch, but I was determined to create new opportunities for me and for the others. Once I got my refugee status, I started looking for a job - without any success. I already had a long working experience in Syria and Egypt, and I just wanted to continue where I stopped. I learnt a lot about Belgian asylum procedures; therefore I could also assist other asylum seekers. I was a freelance volunteer since my



arrival to Belgium. I attended many conferences where everyone was discussing about the integration of refugees into the labour market - without refugees in the room. That was quite frustrating. In my view, whatever is discussed and planned, people who are concerned should take an active part of it. That was the trigger point for me. With a group of friends, we created We Exist in September 2016. The founding members are very familiar with the situation in Syria, the Syrian culture and tradition, the asylum procedures in Belgium and civil society organisations in Belgium. We obtained this knowledge in Syria and in Belgium through a range of activities. We have continuously accompanied asylum seekers/refugees in their administrative procedures. Thanks to our various experiences and exchanges with the people involved in our actions, we have excellent combined knowledge in the field of human rights, professionally, voluntarily and academically. I believe that we should all be treated equally and that everyone should get a chance to show their own skills. I am here to build a new life, and I strongly believe that my current activities will determine my future.

We started without expectations and we met amazing people on our journey. It all started at the Quaker house in Brussels and at the restaurants Le Damoiselle and Entre Nous where we are organising Syrian fundraising dinners/brunches. A very symbolic moment for me was when we met them and their pure human approach.

My view is that we can start changing things from our little communities in order to make and see a difference. We started We Exist by testing our culinary project. The idea from the beginning was to show our competences and skills. We also want to share Syrian hospitality, tradition and culture. We started with our first Syrian fundraising dinners last autumn. Our objective is to offer jobs for people who fled war. We started without any funding, and we are slowly collecting funds for our future centre. Our NGO is growing and becoming more active and that is thanks to our supporters - we meet now every day. Every single person who came to our dinners wanted to encourage people who fled war and they gave very concrete support. We work hard to make every dinner exceptional and to dedicate time to our guests.





What is also important - the entire Syrian crew has improved language skills since we established the NGO. We are constantly in interaction with different stakeholders and new people. The biggest success is to be in a very committed team, to meet our new supporters and to be able to show the beauty of Syrian tradition to everyone.

Like in every work, there are, of course, challenges. Firstly, it is very challenging to attract people and to keep them interested - that's why we keep a very high quality of food and we regularly change the menu. And we work daily on our promotion. We started without any funds and everything we get, we invest in our future project. Secondly, it is important to cope with a competitive market, and I believe we are doing great as we are determined, committed and we all believe in our objective.

We will continue organising dinners/brunches and participating at the festivals, and it will be with even more passion and motivation as we are very determined to have our Centre where people will get a chance to work. We will also enlarge our activities and start organising cooking classes and cultural events.