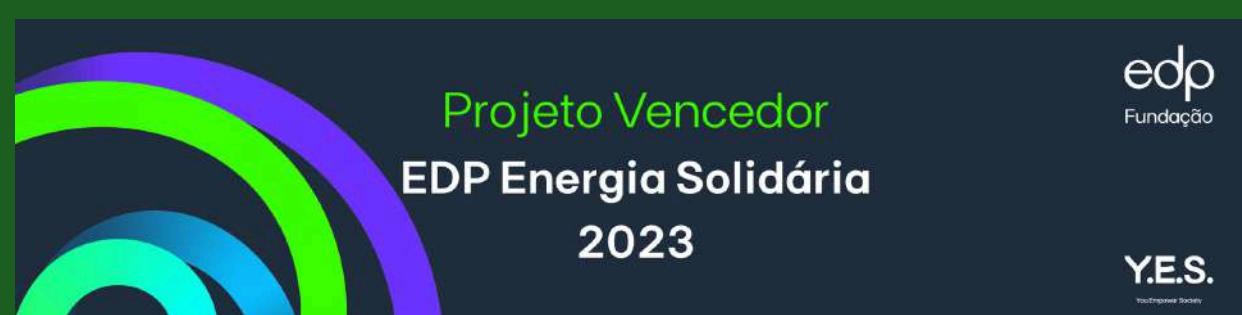




Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal

Sharing knowledge and experiences on sustainability
in the use of energy and transport



1. Framework	03
2. The Portuguese Council for Refugees	04
3. Participants	05
4. Sustainability	06
5. Methodology	07
6. Myths vs. Facts	08
7. Testimonials: Energy	09
8. Testimonials: Transport	10
9. Conclusion	11
Publication Details	12

1. Framework

The Importance of Sustainability

Sustainability is vital to ensuring a balanced and healthy future for our planet. Adopting sustainable practices, including when welcoming refugees (in the broadest sense), ensures a degree of sustainability in the present, whilst also promoting a better quality of life for current and future generations.

Commitment to a Sustainable Future

The Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR) has been integrating sustainability into its work to welcome refugees. The project “Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal”, supported by the EDP Foundation, is an example of this commitment: combining the integration of those arriving in Portugal with the promotion of greener practices in energy and mobility, reinforcing the CPR’s vision of an inclusive, humanist and responsible society.

Funded by the EDP Foundation, the project “Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal” was implemented by the CPR from September 2023 to June 2026. The aim is to contribute to the sustainability of the reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, providing the organisation and its beneficiaries with tools and knowledge in the areas of mobility and energy efficiency.

Sharing Knowledge

This e-book brings together the reflections arising from seven multicultural meetings on sustainable practices relating to energy and mobility in the various countries of origin of the refugees. These meetings served as a forum for reflection and raising awareness of the importance of the energy transition and environmental protection in relation to transport use.

The CPR organised the multicultural meetings, from 2024 to 2026, at its three Reception Centres:

- Refugee Reception Centre 1
- Refugee Reception Centre 2
- CACR / Casa para o Mundo

The cultural diversity of the participants and the numerous procedural requirements faced by those who had just arrived in Portugal posed some difficulties in terms of ensuring there was a sufficient number of people speaking the same language for the meetings to take place. Once these issues had been overcome, the multicultural meetings facilitated rich and practical exchanges, with participants unanimously expressing their satisfaction.

2. The Portuguese Council for Refugees

Mission and History

Founded in 1991, the Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR) is an independent, experienced and dynamic non-profit development non-governmental organisation, and remains a leading body in the defence and promotion of the right to asylum in Portugal. Since 1993, it has been an operational partner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and is recognised by the Asylum Act as an integral part of the national asylum system.

Fig. 1 One Organisation – Multiple Roles

Areas of intervention

We provide legal, social, psychological and integration support through direct, free assistance to applicants for and beneficiaries of international protection in Portugal. As described in this report, the CPR’s areas of intervention are wide-ranging and also include providing information and raising awareness of human rights, particularly the right to asylum.



Facilities

The CPR runs three reception centres: two centres for walk-in applicants and one specialist centre for unaccompanied children, as well as the crèche and nursery, Espaço A Criança.

What do we do?



Guided by the values of diversity and humanism, the CPR’s work with applicants for and beneficiaries of international protection aims to support their integration, promoting non-discrimination and a multicultural and cohesive society that rejects discrimination and xenophobia.

Fig. 2 – 34 years supporting refugees

3.Participants

The multicultural meetings were facilitated by professionals from various departments, including socio-cultural mediators and CPR trainees. They brought together applicants for international protection from diverse cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Applicant for international protection — An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country and lodged a formal application for international protection in another state, but is still awaiting an official decision from the authorities. Thus, the applicants hosted by the CPR are people who have formally lodged an application for international protection with the Portuguese authorities and are awaiting a decision on their application.

The cultural diversity of the asylum seekers accommodated in the centres brings a wealth of experiences and knowledge. However, the low number of people who spoke the same language at any given time limited the organisation of further meetings. Six languages were used for communication across the seven meetings: Arabic, Spanish, Farsi, French, English and Portuguese.

Nevertheless, 41 applicants for international protection from four continents and 20 countries took part. It is worth noting that nine were children or young people (one accompanied and eight unaccompanied). Children who attended with their families but did not participate were not counted.

Table n. 1 - **Participants gender**

Male	Female
26	15

4. Sustainability

Sustainability was the central theme of the project, addressed across all sessions.

What we explored:

Each person’s understanding of sustainability, sustainable development, the 5 Rs of sustainability, and the participants’ realities in their countries of origin, as well as in the countries they had fled to and their host communities.

Some understood that “Sustainability is also about living well with others, with respect and balance, and that this is deeply linked to the way we look after the planet”.

To ensure everyone was on the same page, we agreed on the following definition of sustainability:

“The ability of a system to maintain balance, consciously using natural resources without compromising the well-being of future generations.”

Thematic areas:

- Energy — responsible consumption, energy efficiency and renewable energy
- Transport — sustainable mobility, public transport and alternatives to private cars

The sessions combined theory and practice, with visits to relevant sites and collaborative exercises that enabled participants to apply their knowledge in their daily lives.



1 August 2025 – A discussion on sustainability amongst five adults, outdoors, enjoying the shade of a tree, at CAR1.

Fig. 3 – Multicultural gathering at CAR1

5. Methodology

The methodology used varied according to age group.

Preparation:

- Selection of a time that would bring together as many applicants as possible who were being supported by the CPR, recent arrivals in Portugal, and who spoke one or two languages in common.
- Invitation to asylum seekers (voluntary participation).
- Methodology including a presentation, ice-breaker activities, brainstorming on the concept of sustainability, reaching a consensus on sustainability, and a mind map of the practices they are familiar with regarding transport and energy use.
- Wherever possible, incorporate practical hands-on elements during the activity, particularly with children and young people (e.g. holding the activity outdoors, using public transport, utilising sunlight, etc.).
- Use cultural mediators where necessary.
- Evaluation using a coloured ball system (traffic light).

Guiding principles:

- Active listening — valuing all voices and experiences
- Respect for diversity — recognising different points of view
- Collective decision-making — decisions made together
- Inclusion — ensuring everyone’s participation
- Experimentation — practising and reflecting

How it worked:

In each session, participants were invited to share their perspectives on the topics under discussion, seeking common ground and building collective agreements. Sociocultural mediators were used for the sessions facilitated in Arabic and Farsi. The remaining sessions took place in Portuguese, French, Spanish and English

This process made it possible to create a safe space for intercultural dialogue, where applicants for international protection were able to share their experiences and learn from one another.

1 May 2024 – Unaccompanied young people and members of the CACR / Casa para o Mundo team used various forms of public transport as they made their way to Cacilhas. Making the most of the space and the sunshine, they reflected together on sustainability.



Fig. 4 - CACR’s youth gathering in Cacilhas

6. Myths vs. Facts

Throughout the project, we identified several myths about sustainability, which were debunked with facts and evidence.

Myth 1: “Being sustainable is expensive.”

Fact: Many sustainable practices save money — such as switching off devices on standby or using public transport.

Myth 2: “One person alone makes no difference.”

Fact: Small individual actions, when multiplied by thousands of people, have a significant impact. Everyone can join forces with others and push for the creation and implementation of sustainability policies within companies and society as a whole.

Myth 3: “Public transport is always worse than a car.”

Fact: In many cities, the underground and buses are faster, cheaper and less polluting. There are even forms of public transport that already use energy sources that are less polluting than diesel or petrol.

Myth 4: “Sustainability is only about the environment.”

Fact: Sustainability includes social and economic dimensions — such as inclusion, justice and equity.

Some of the participants at these meetings also expressed the view that sustainability is linked to freedom, security and mobility.



Fig. 5 – Multicultural Gathering at CAR2

18 March 2024 – A reflection session involving seven adults, held in the CAR2 training room, using sociocultural mediation. One of the participants brought her son along.

7. Testimonials: Energy

01 Use natural resources in a balanced and sustainable way

03 Do not pollute

05 Planting sustainable vegetable gardens

07 Use specific vegetation to attract oysters

09 Building houses from adobe or rammed earth

11 Unplug appliances from sockets and use energy-efficient household appliances (to reduce the use of coal, gas or electricity)

13 Recycle (shopping bags, etc.)

15 Reuse (clothes, shoes, etc.)

17 Cook enough for more than one meal and store it (to save on gas/coal/electricity)

02 Making the most of natural light

04 Use LED bulbs and switch off the lights before leaving a room

06 Use solar panels

08 Drying clothes in the sun, without a tumble dryer

10 Using Wind Turbines

12 Building hydroelectric power stations

14 Collect rainwater and bathwater (whilst the water is heating up) **and reuse it** (for cleaning, watering, ...)

16 Save water

- Turn off taps properly
- Keep your plumbing in good condition to prevent leaks
- Use a cup of water to brush your teeth, rather than leaving the tap running
- Take shorter showers

8. Testimonials: Transport

01 Journeys made without using fuel (walking, running, cycling, using a scooter, electric vehicles, etc.).

02 Plan journeys to reduce the number of trips and work out the best way to travel.

03 Sharing transport (carpooling or public transport).

04 Work from home whenever possible

CROSS-CUTTING ACTIONS

01 To press for the creation and implementation of sustainability policies

02 Setting Boundaries

03 Support organisations during the implementation of sustainability initiatives

9. Conclusion

The multicultural meetings held as part of the project “Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal” demonstrated that the reception and integration of refugees (in the broadest sense) can go hand in hand with sustainability.

Key achievements:

- Creation of spaces for intercultural dialogue between refugees and the reception team;
- Raising awareness of sustainable practices in everyday life — energy and transport;
- Debunking myths and sharing practical knowledge;
- Strengthening the sense of belonging and civic participation;
- Valuing each individual’s knowledge and experiences;
- Boosting participants’ self-confidence and empowerment;
- Joint learning (participants and the facilitating team).

Impact:

Initially, the participants believed that the issue of sustainability was not relevant to the situation they were experiencing. The uncertainty surrounding their ability to obtain protection, the resulting emotional and social instability, the struggle to understand and adapt to their new reality, and the need to learn the language, procedures, and cultural and legal norms of their host country — all of this is extremely stressful, draining and all-consuming.

As the sessions progressed, sharing experiences enabled participants to feel respected, valued, listened to, better informed, more confident and better prepared to adopt and promote sustainable behaviours in their daily routines.

At the end of the sessions, everyone rated the multicultural sessions positively: “useful”, “enjoyable”, “meaningful”, “made my day”, “allowed me to reflect more deeply on the topic”, “generated not only awareness, but also connection, trust and a desire to continue thinking and acting sustainably”, “it is our duty to care about sustainability; to enjoy a good quality of life, we must live in harmony with the environment, without overusing resources”.

Future:

This eBook serves as a record and source of inspiration for refugees (in the broadest sense) and organisations wishing to combine social inclusion and sustainability in future projects.

Publication Details

Title:

Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal - Sharing knowledge and experiences on sustainability in the use of energy and transport

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Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal

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Sustainability — Energy and Transport

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Multicultural gatherings for sharing knowledge and experiences

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2026

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Conselho Português para os Refugiados



Sustainability Routes in the Reception of Refugees in Portugal



Together for a more sustainable reception.