

Three questions to Guillaume Capelle, co-founder and director of the NGO Singa



Guillaume Capelle is an international relations graduate who founded SINGA in 2012 with Alice Barbe and Nathanaël Molle. SINGA is a nonprofit organization with branches in several cities in France and abroad that seeks to create links between refugees and host communities, creating and sharing tools available to everyone. Guillaume Capelle is currently its international director.

SINGA is a nonprofit founded in 2012 to foster refugees' integration in France by involving citizens of host communities. Can you tell us a little about the project's origins and aims?

Guillaume Capelle: The idea behind it dates back to a previous working experience that I had in Australia while finishing my Master in International Relations in 2010. I spent several months working for Amnesty International as part of a 30-strong group of legal counsellors working with asylum seekers. At the time, I was struck both by the grueling journeys these people had undertaken and by the distant, not to say the violent, treatment they were sometimes subjected to by state institutions and civil society. When you actually meet refugees, you realize what a great source of inspiration they can be for our wider societies. However, wherever they go, we are always quick to label them "refugees."

SINGA is the fruit of this observation and our mission is to liberate their potential.

The first step was to create spaces where people could simply meet up with each other and be themselves, without being labelled as French or refugee. We simply started by organizing events such as picnics, soccer matches, and so on. As a result of these encounters, a community emerged from people who would meet up, without

necessarily telling their stories or the reasons why they left, but who simply chatted and spent time together. Following on from these first encounters, we began working to build deeper ties and construct tools to help: if somebody wanted to learn French, we would put them in touch with a person who could teach them; if somebody else looked for an accounting job, we would introduce them to someone in that field, and so on. SINGA works as an involvement mechanism for citizens who want to act but do not know what to do. Our idea is to suggest that they continue doing what they enjoy, but in the company of new people: going to a museum or a concert, playing sports, cooking, etc.

Starting from otherness, we have succeeded in creating a social network that brings people together around things we all share. Our will is to promote a collaborative dynamic, working "with" not "for."

The collaborative mindset is extremely powerful, it is revolutionizing approaches and solutions to many problems. For example, we have found a workaround for issues related to refugees' accommodation and housing. Today in France there are roughly 2,400 emergency beds for 80,000 people. It is therefore extremely difficult to find emergency accommodation. Nevertheless, thousands of people own vacant properties or have spare rooms in their homes. We have tried to connect these people with refugees by creating a network called CALM (Comme À La Maison, or "just like home"). Since then, 61% of people who had been hosted through CALM have moved on to private rented accommodation and 44% have found a job.

We are now trying to take this idea of collaborative citizen mobilization to the next level. For instance, SINGA has set up an incubator for innovative projects that look at our society in new ways. Projects can come both from refugees or citizens, the idea being to develop new initiatives between the two.

In your experience, how does integrating refugees into host communities help to build models for a more resilient city?

G.C.: People who manage to overcome the institutional, cultural and interpersonal barriers they face are resilient individuals that we can learn from. Some refugees lived through experiences of extreme violence. The fact is that for years the most resilient people have been settling among us. Integrating them better and building ties between refugees and host communities can help us to look afresh at how we operate and improve our own capacity to demonstrate resilience.

At SINGA, this philosophy is grounded in three concepts that are inspired by science:

1) Homeostasis: in biology this is the phenomenon by which systems self-regulate in contact with external elements. For example, when a drop of water falls on a sheet of paper, the paper absorbs the water, it is not destroyed. Homeostasis is a fascinating biological mechanism that we can use as an inspiration to improve the ways that we welcome refugees.

2) Serendipity: making a discovery by chance, or maybe even by mistake. It was serendipity that led Irène and Frédéric Joliot-Curie to discover artificial radioactivity. A crisis, war or natural disaster will drive people away from their homelands, ending up perhaps in Paris, Montpellier or Lille, and this can have unexpected effects that may turn out to be quite extraordinary.

3) Stigmergy: ants leave olfactory cues behind them when they move, so that other ants can follow them more easily. In the same way, SINGA wants to make its methodology open to anyone, this means that motivated citizens eager to get involved would have access to it.

SINGA has grown rapidly in recent years in France and abroad. What are the main challenges facing organizations such as yours that rely primarily on citizen mobilization and community spirit?

G.C.: In six years of existence we have established a presence in seven countries and 12 French cities, and the network is setting up in a further 10 cities. SINGA was originally focused on issues surrounding asylum seekers; today its influence has grown far wider.

As a nonprofit regulated by a French law dating back to 1901, it is hard for us to raise funds. Funding and subsidies are all very target-led, very specific, whereas the richness of SINGA is its focus on people. We pay very little, which is a problem because our teams deliver outstanding work. The next challenge SINGA has to address is moving toward an economic model that will truly harness the potential of our staff.

Rather than going head-to-head with other nonprofits in an endless battle for subsidies, SINGA believes in cooperation. We think that our encounters create value, new products and services, and make us able to imagine another economic paradigm.

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