

REFUGEES AS CREATIVE CHANGE- MAKERS

**EVALUATION REPORT OF
DFT AND WTRE PROJECTS**

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2024

Acknowledgements

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London Borough of Waltham Forest

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Rosetta Arts

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Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat

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Kellie Tonkyn

Team Leader of Welcome Newham, Public Health London Borough of Newham

“I am honoured to endorse the ‘Weaving The Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs’ project, a remarkable initiative dedicated to empowering refugees through creative activities centred around textile making and social entrepreneurship. This project not only provides vital skills training but also opens doors to meaningful employment opportunities, fostering a sense of dignity and self-reliance. By addressing mental health and nurturing creativity and talent, the project transforms lives, builds stronger communities, and enriches our cultural landscape. I wholeheartedly support their mission and commend their commitment to making a tangible difference in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.”



Jan De Schynkel

Chief Executive
Rosetta Arts

“Rosetta Arts exists to deliver a high-quality visual arts and crafts programme that addresses barriers and systemic inequity for underrepresented communities in Newham and East London. We give access to the transformative benefits of the arts by empowering, upskilling, and acting as a catalyst for creative talent. Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs (WTRE) is a heart-warming example of that mission; and of the impact of strong collaborations that strive to enrich the fabric of places and communities. Not only has the project reduced isolation and improved wellbeing (a key driver for London Borough of Newham’s ‘50 Steps to a Healthier Newham’ strategy), but the project also unlocks potential, provides ladders of achievement, and ultimately, increases creative enterprise and employment opportunities.”



Dilys Williams

Professor of Fashion Design for Sustainability
Director of Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL

“As a community of researchers, practitioners and educators exploring what equity in a more than human world looks like in fashion, the ‘Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs’ (WTRE) project exemplifies a careful considering of the contextual personal, social and societal ecologies at play in material, product and livelihood making. Applying Centre for Sustainable Fashion’s four-fold framework of sustainability that maps the interdependencies between cultural, social, economic and ecological prosperity, WTRE centres issues of agency and concern in the lives of the project participants. Through this work, we learn, discover and amplify the realities of participatory practice, what we can change and what we can influence towards a genuine sense of mutuality”

1. Introduction

With the mass displacement of people on the rise, it is clear that we need to rethink and address the needs and aspirations of refugee communities and find ways to honour their diverse cultures. Until now, the textile heritage of minorities has often been the object of abusive cultural appropriation practices undertaken by fashion brands or has been systematically undervalued as ‘non-fashion’ produced by ‘the other’. Moreover, besides the three commonly recognised pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic, and social), there is a need to consider a cultural dimension as an essential component of a sustainability agenda. There is growing discourse and action aimed at challenging dominant practices of designers being ‘parachuted’ into marginalised or disadvantaged communities with the assumption that they can bring their own knowledge and expertise to solve other people’s problems. There is growing recognition of the need to ‘decolonise’ such dominant design approaches, challenging colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, and leveraging the values of equality, diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability of cultures.

Within this context, the AHRC-funded project ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities’ (DFT) was led by Dr Francesco Mazzarella (from Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL) across three east London boroughs (Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest) from 2022 to 2024 (ref. Timeline, pp. 10-11), with a wide range of partners

(Arbeit Project Ltd; Bow Arts; the London boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest; Poplar HARCA; Rosetta Arts; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees). This participatory action research project explored the concepts of cultural sustainability and community resilience through the lived experiences of London-based refugees and asylum seekers. The project created a safe space for the participants to share their stories and shift the prevailing negative narratives around refugees, while challenging dominant design practices and bringing to the forefront the refugees’ shifting identities, cultural heritages, and collective visions for a more equitable and sustainable future. For more information, please visit the project webpage: sustainable-fashion.com/decolonising-fashion-and-textiles

Building on the success of DFT, the ‘Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs’ (WTRE) project was delivered by Rosetta Arts in partnership with London College of Fashion (LCF). WTRE aimed at amplifying the previous project by involving a new cohort of East London-based refugees and asylum seekers in creative activities centred around textile-making and social entrepreneurship. WTRE involved delivering design and crafts workshops to participants, focusing on cultural identity and diversity, and incorporating elements of design thinking and entrepreneurship. The focus was to develop participants’ skills while fostering social and cultural integration.



Photo by JC Candanedo

“Thank you for giving me a platform to share my story”

A key aspect of the WTRE project was the provision of opportunities for employment and skill development. Previous participants from DFT were hired to assist in delivering WTRE workshops, and individual counselling sessions were offered to some interested participants. Financial barriers were addressed by reimbursing travel expenses for asylum seekers who are not allowed to work.

2. Methodology

During the delivery of DFT, researchers were engaged in a reciprocal process of textile and fashion making with participants, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community, framing collective visions for the future, and co-creating culturally significant fashion and textile products and artworks. It created a safe space to share their stories and shift the prevailing negative narratives around refugees.

The use of Rosetta Arts and LCF's joint networks within the borough of Newham served to amplify individual voices amongst relevant organisations and create interest in future work with

local refugees. As a result, an exhibition at Rosetta Arts was designed and delivered to showcase the participants' fashion creations made during the WTRE project.

This evaluation report documents the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of participatory action research with refugees and asylum seekers (based in East London), delivered through both DFT and WTRE projects. The findings will support recommendations for improving refugee-related service delivery and policy-making addressing locally experienced issues.



6 Photo by JC Candanedo



Photo by JC Candanedo

The methodology employed in this evaluation report incorporates a multifaceted approach to comprehensively gather insights and perspectives. The process began with data collection through the distribution of questionnaires, designed to collect qualitative feedback from participants in the first and last session. Drawing on the participants' comments, there was a need to update it, rewording and deleting questions that were too specific or unnecessary for them.

The methodology includes also interviews with selected participants to gain insights and a deeper understanding of their diverse perspectives. Through it, the participants were encouraged to articulate their thoughts, experiences, and recommendations.

The methodology integrated also qualitative exploration through

participant observations throughout the workshops and an art evaluation workshop. Such an approach provided a dynamic platform for participants to engage experientially, fostering in-depth discussions, and enriching the evaluative process.

While questionnaires and interviews were useful in evaluating the project, the art evaluation workshop helped provide a wider picture of the impact of the project on participants. It also proved to be a useful tool for participants who have English as a second language. Since they experienced difficulty in expressing themselves verbally, through the power of creativity, they could break down language barriers and articulate their thoughts with more ease, providing further insights on their experiences and perspectives.

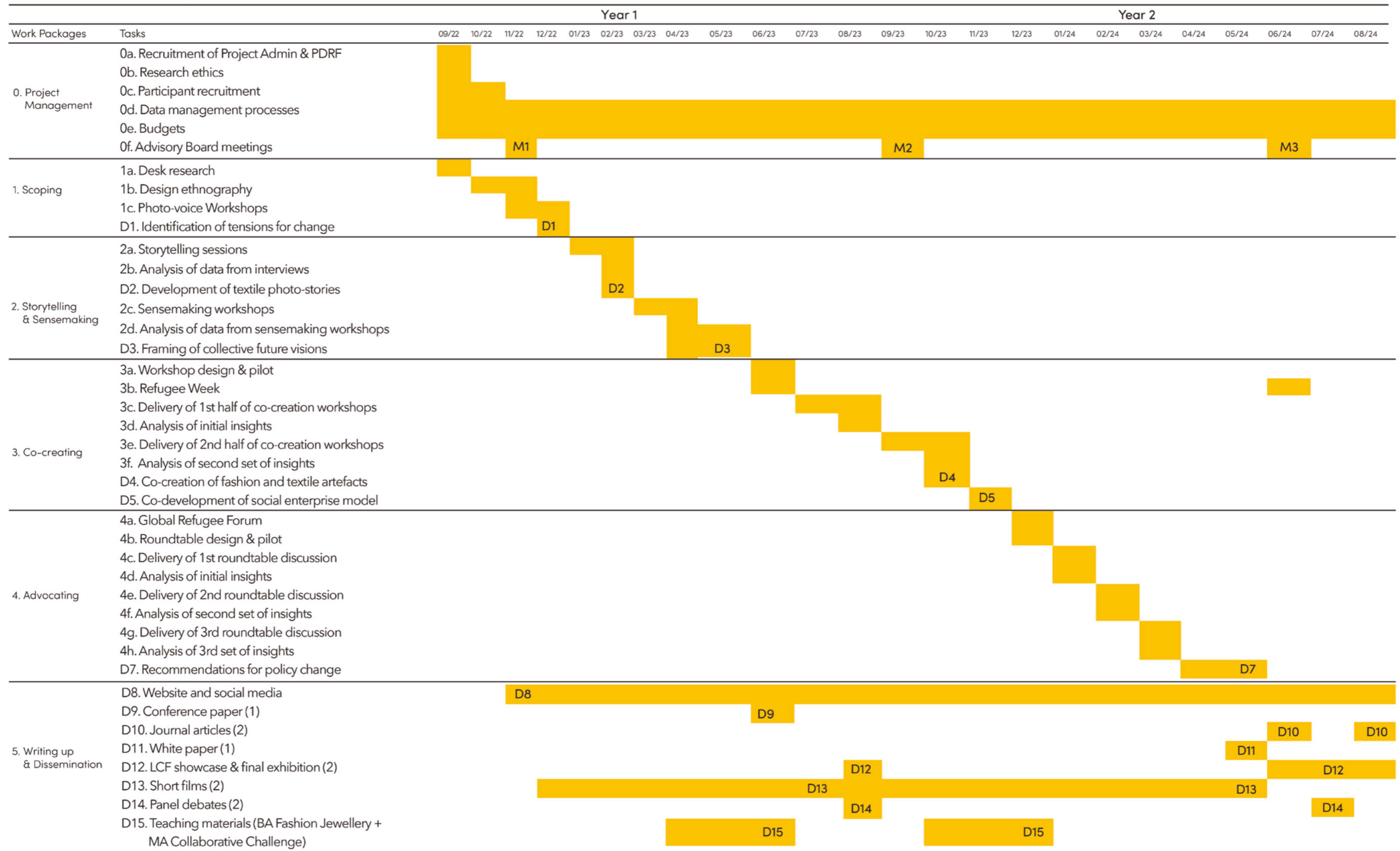
2.1 DFT Project Activities

During the delivery of DFT, the project team engaged London-based refugees and asylum seekers in a reciprocal process of textile and fashion making, mapped ways to build resilience within the local community, framed collective visions for the future, co-created culturally significant fashion and textile products and artworks, and outlined recommendations for policy change. The project team engaged with 41 participants having either refugee or asylum-seeking status and who had come to London from 13 different countries (e.g. Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sudan, to name but a few) for very different reasons (fleeing from war, gender-based violence or discrimination due to racial, religious or political reasons). The research activities were conducted in community centres (Rosetta Arts, Leyton Green Studios, and the FELDY Centre) in East London, an area with centuries of fashion and textile manufacturing heritage and home to diverse migrant communities. The project team adopted an embedded and situated approach to designing and explored cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues faced by refugees within the fashion context of East London.

Over the course of the DFT project, several activities were delivered, as listed here and illustrated in the following Timeline and Methodology images.

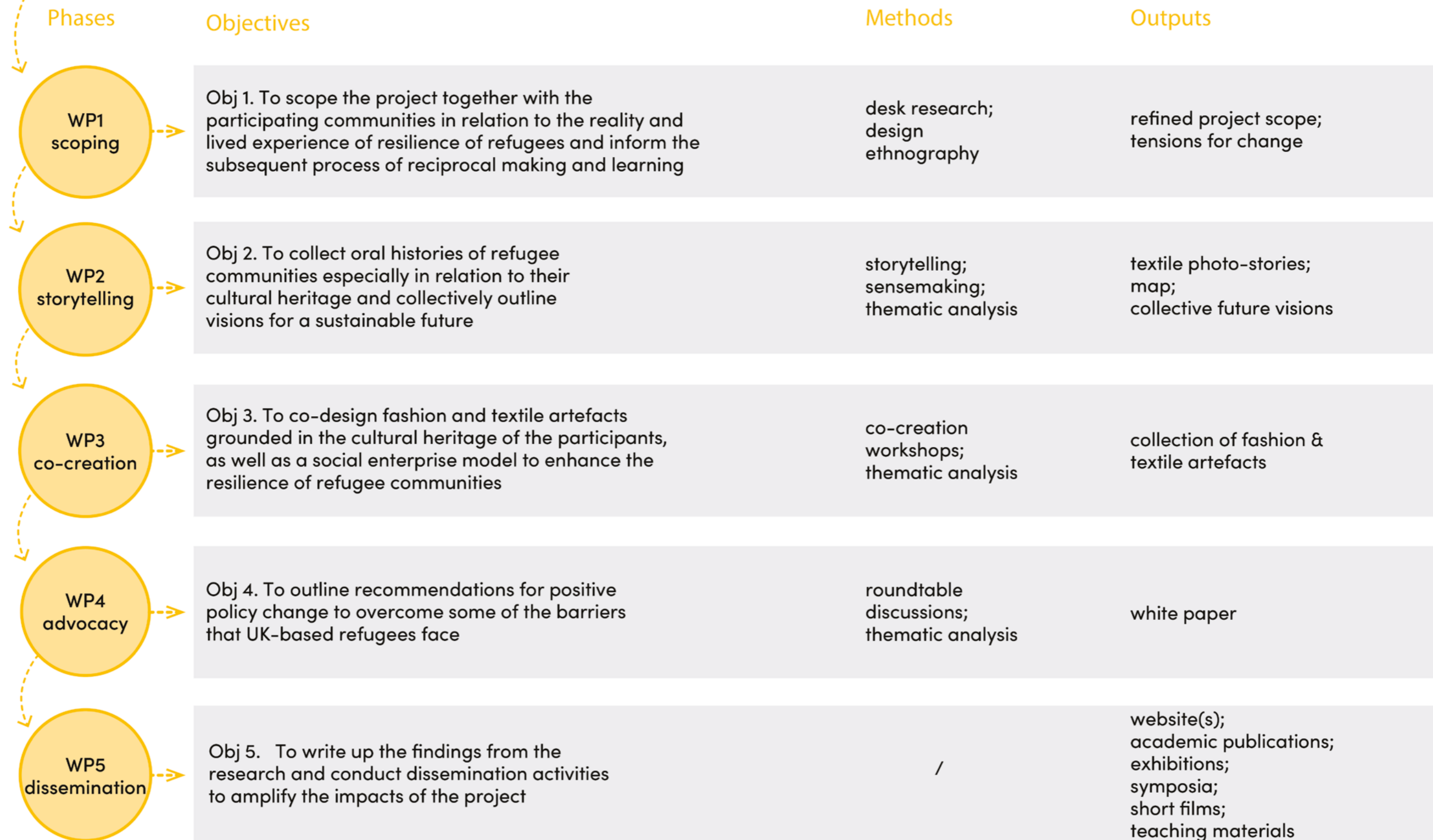


2.1.1 DFT Timeline



2.1.2 DFT Methodology

Participatory action research with refugees and asylum seekers (based in East London, aged 18-60), to explore cultural, social, economic and environmental issues in a specific context and collect qualitative data to inform the development of fashion activism interventions addressing locally experienced issues.



2.1 WTRE Project Activities

The WTRE project entailed design and creative workshops that emphasised the participants' cultural identity and diversity, fostering reciprocal making and learning, through fashion and textiles. One of the sessions specifically addressed design thinking

and entrepreneurship to provide the participants with the essential tools to develop business ideas. Throughout the process, a few participants attended 1:1 counselling sessions at the end of the weekly workshops.

“I developed new ideas and learnt that I can be creative with limited resources”



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

“I gained knowledge and confidence”

Week 1

Introduction to the project and various techniques
Sustainability – cultural and material
Designing your own product

Week 2

Resourcefulness: Do It Yourself
Upcycling
Building up confidence in own skills

Week 3

Entrepreneurship: Set up a personal brand, define your unique value proposition, how to communicate to your audience, social media, finance and partnerships

Week 4

Start designing and making an item for sale

Week 5

Continue designing and making an item for sale

Week 6

Finishing products
Evaluation workshop

2.2 WTRE Art Evaluation Workshop

Here, you can see a copy of the creative activity that was used to evaluate participants' progress throughout the WTRE workshops. In the 'Head, Heart, Hand, Bag and Bin' activity, they were invited to use drawing to give feedback on their experience.

How to do it

Each part of the body or object relates to a different question.

Head (new knowledge gained, e.g. cultural sustainability, entrepreneurship, etc.)

Heart (feelings, e.g. self-confidence, empowerment, connection, etc.)

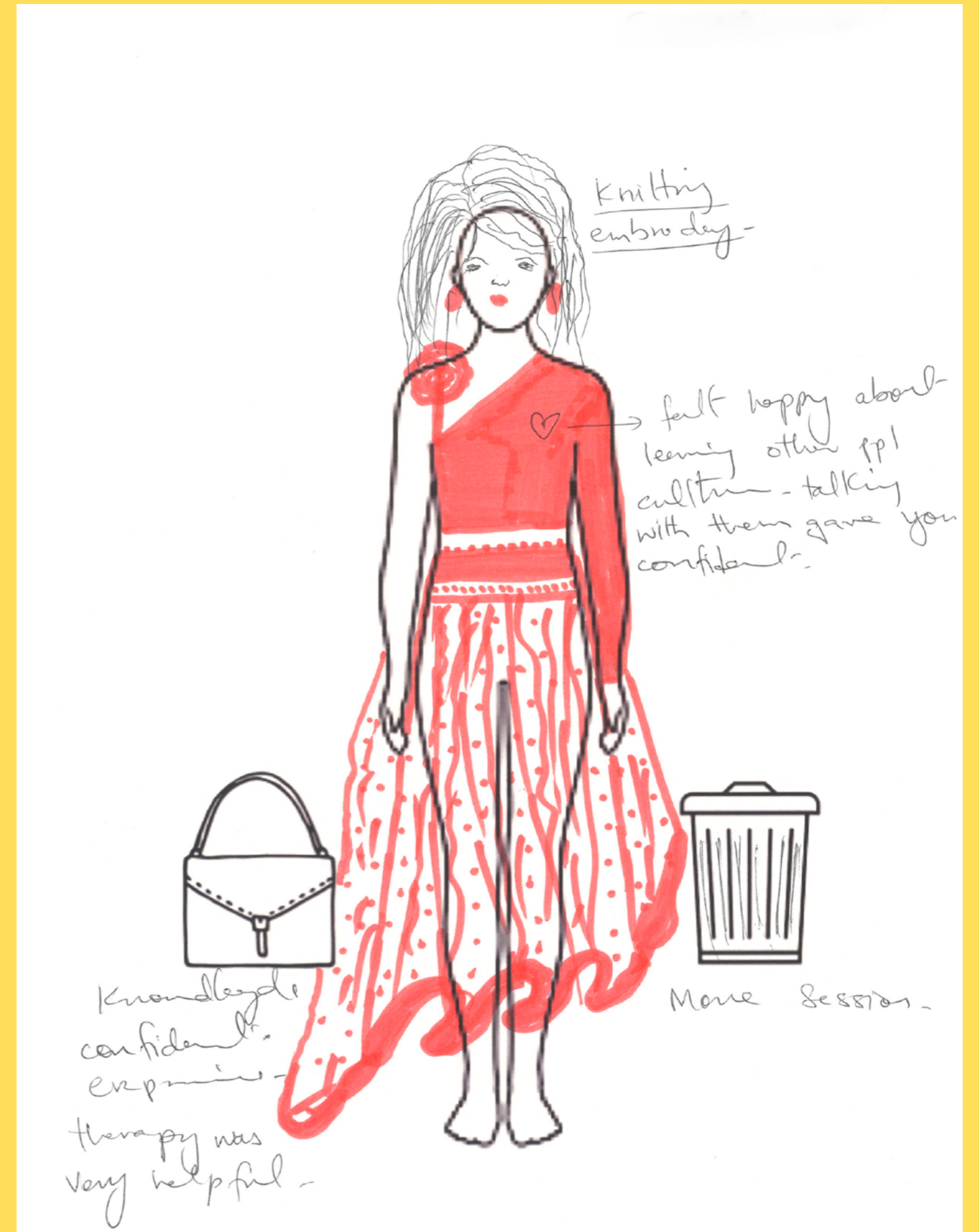
Hand (skills gained, e.g. painting, sewing, embroidery, etc.).

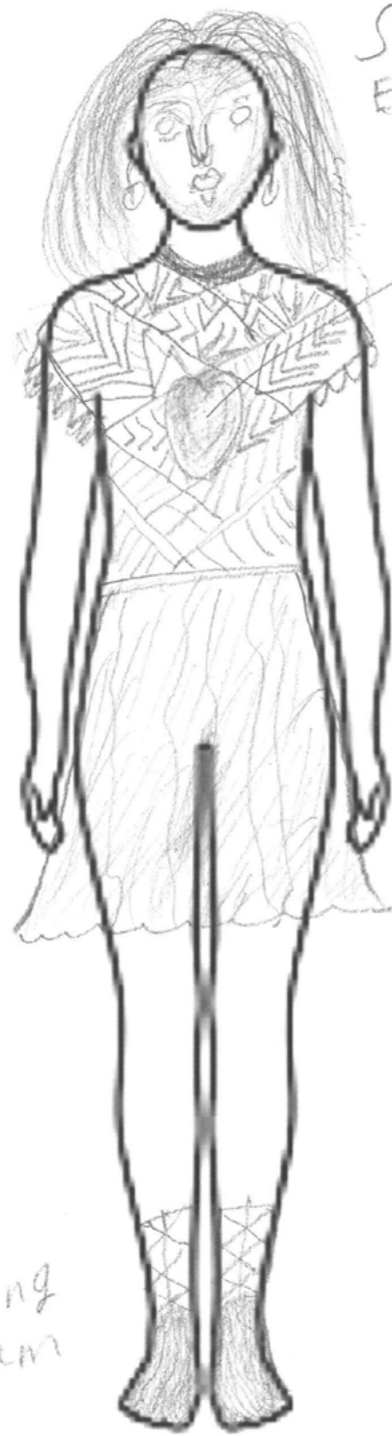
Bag (something to take away and next steps)

Bin (something not useful, which could have gone better)



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

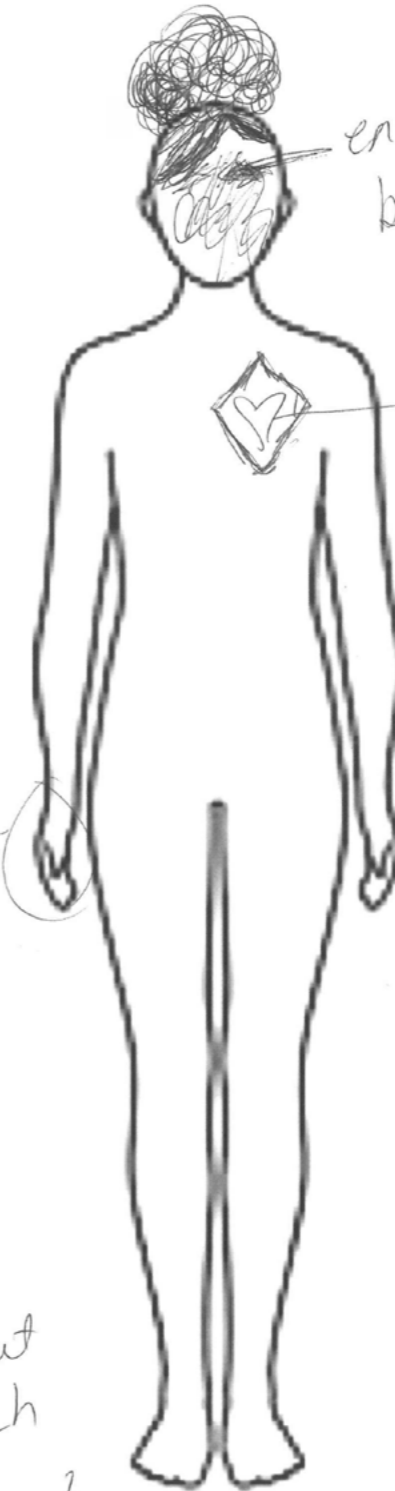




Sewing,
Embroidery

Happy

drawing
knowledge
secret/helping
skills by team
experience



entrepreneurship,
brain began to dream
again

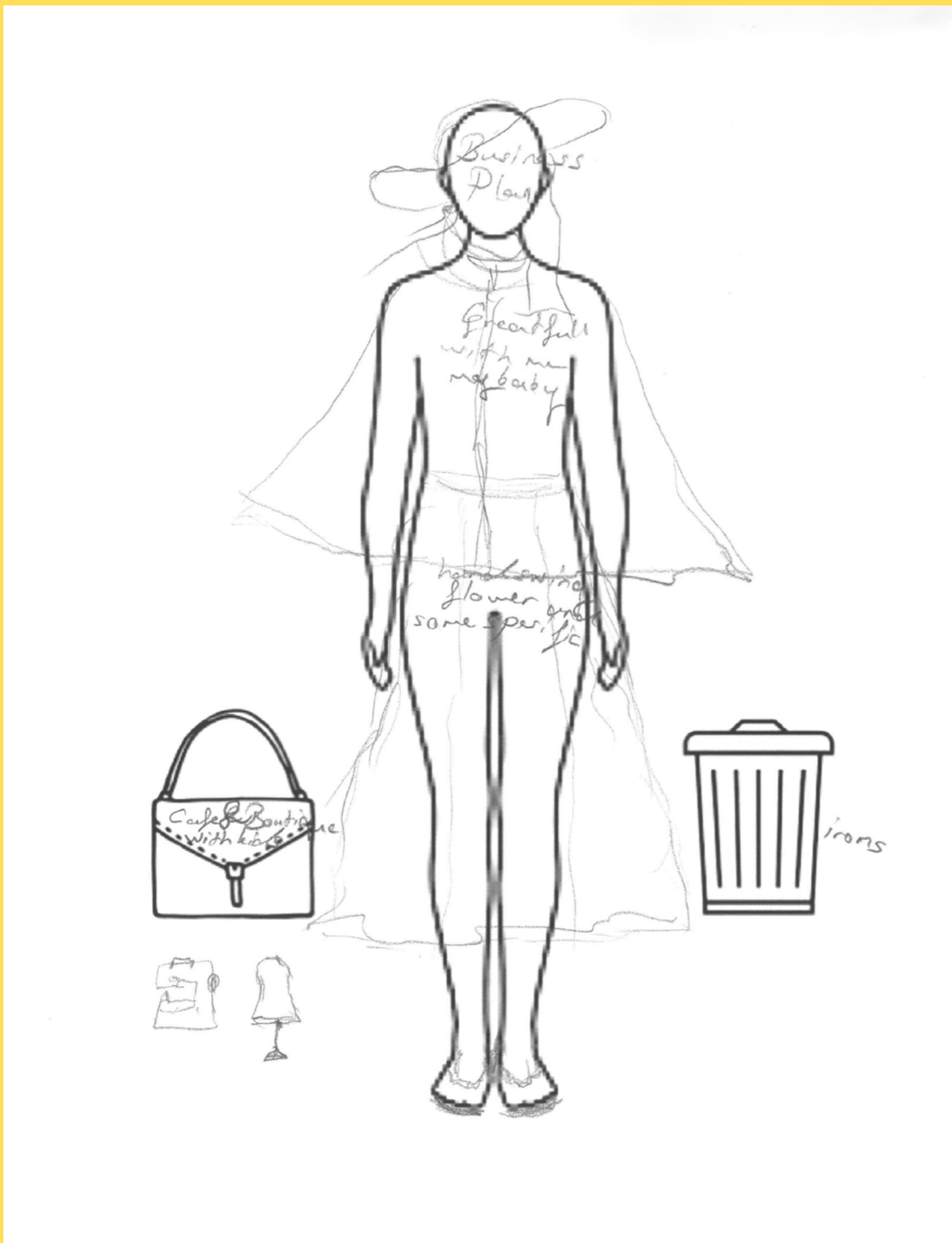
emotional
stability, gain
confidence
after
feeling
defeated

sewing

Next step
thinking about
future which
once was not
able to do previously

done better?
more time

Not feel
so tired!



As a result of the analysis of the feedback collected through the evaluation questionnaires at the first and last sessions of the WTRE project, it was clear that participants had a positive experience and most people rated the quality of the project as “very good”.

The project met everyone’s expectations and all the participants felt they had their voices heard, they valued the support received from the team and the safe space created made them feel welcome.

One of the main motivations for joining WTRE was to connect with new people. This objective was achieved as there was a generally positive response from the participants. Most people mentioned that they met new individuals and learned more about other cultures. For example, they learned about specific embroidery techniques from different countries. Some participants even brought food to share with the group.

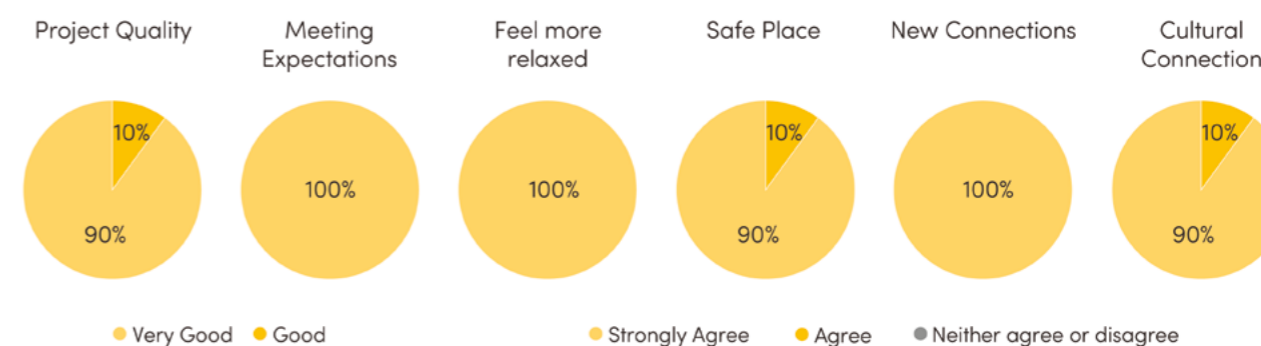
Most participants felt more connected to their personal identity and cultural heritage and inspired to design and make. Consequently, everybody was more relaxed and less stressed, with a stronger sense of belonging to a community.

“It has helped me to give me hope, keep me positive, and give me encouragement where I may not have as I go through this very difficult time.”

New participants recruited through Newham Council were motivated to join WTRE because they were already interested in fashion and sustainability and wanted to learn more about it.

In the final evaluation questionnaire, one of them expressed her desire to continue learning about a variety of techniques such as sewing, pattern cutting, painting, and more. This sentiment aligns with the general feedback from the group, indicating a strong willingness to attend additional workshops and longer sessions.

Please refer to Appendices 1 and 2 to look up the questionnaires shared with participants in the first and last weeks of the project.



3.1 WTRE Project Monitoring



20 participants enrolled

11 were participants from previous DFT project;
7 new participants enrolled through Newham Council;
2 new participants enrolled through word of mouth
(being friends with other participants)

2 participants

dropped out during the process
(due to health issues or English
language was a barrier)

7 participants
completed the series
of 7 workshops

5 participants

benefited from 6
counselling sessions each

11 participants
enrolled, but never attended
or only attended one session

7 workshops
delivered

14 products
made as a result
of the workshops

3.2 Participants' Stories of Change

Five participants were interviewed to provide a deeper perspective on what the project meant to them and how it brought changes to their lives. These

participants included individuals with diverse experiences who came to the UK as refugees or asylum seekers and joined the project at different stages.



Karuna - Empowerment



Photos by JC Candanedo

“When I heard about the project, in 2022, I was still very new to London. I had no experience in fashion. I told Francesco ‘I don’t know anything about textiles or sewing or design’. And he said, ‘It’s okay. It’s all about accessing your culture and your identity.’ He connected me to a lot

“I realised that fashion can be anything that’s your history and your culture and where the fabric comes from”



Advisor with them. We co-create inclusive healthcare policies with the NHS. From being an asylum seeker to influencing policy. This connection helped me empower myself. My background in psychology and youth work/social work, and my skills can be used in a positive way to impact others.

When I first started the project, my first artwork was quite negative. I think it unlocked this thing in me where I realised that fashion can be anything about your history and your culture and where fabrics comes from.



It was like art therapy for me to put my feelings into an artwork, into a tangible piece. It opened up my healing process, using fashion and art to heal. Because of that, I decided I wanted to do the second project.

I also got involved with another project led by Francesco, called REGO. I mostly delivered workshops and talks to young people in schools and community centres. My work in that project focused on activism, social change, and how we can use our voices, our bodies, and our existence as vehicles for social change.

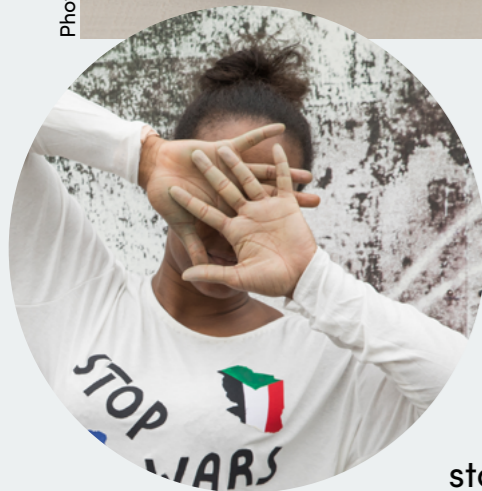
more than his first project (Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience).

I told one of the refugees (in the project) that I was having some struggles registering for a GP. She connected me to Doctors of the World. Since then, I’m a National Health

I also collaborated with MA students from LCF in the Collaborative Challenge unit, where I developed a performance to a paying audience. The costume was made by students, and they filmed it.”



Photos by Mehrdad Pakniat



"I've always had a passion for fashion. Some ladies in the contingency hotel [where I stay as an asylum seeker]

linked me up with Francesco. It helped me to get out of the hotel, and it helped me to process the feelings that I wasn't processing. The project forced me to use the other side of my brain to be creative. This has worked for me – from that point to now – almost as a therapeutic outlet that I wouldn't normally have because I tend to try to keep myself together most of the time. I could say that I'm a better person now. Stronger, more resilient, more open-minded. I've learned more

about my own culture. It allowed me to explore and define what being an African-American was outside of the popular hip-hop culture and music and clothes and stuff like that. It challenged me to go deeper and think more. And I like that.

From just meeting Francesco and doing the class, I linked up with all of the individuals in the hotel. Now I have this small community that I'm helping, linking up folks so that they can get help because one of the biggest challenges is that they don't speak English. And people will turn them away first. I don't feel like being in this process is to be alone. It's about sharing so that the journey is easier because the journey itself (i.e. being an asylum seeker or a refugee) is just hard".



"This project has made us understand that fashion is your culture. It has taught me you can create with anything, even scraps. You can be fashionista and fashionable. This project has really helped me [see] that real fashion is not just Louis Vuitton and Gucci. It is what you make, how you create and stay connected with your culture.

In this project is not like you are just going to attend another charity, work there, do a workshop and go home. It has given you skills as well as a platform to display your skills, sell your skills and progress. It gave me confidence. I had good teachers. I thought I was in the right place because I progressed. I helped people understand what we were doing (there were a lot of language barriers) and how to do it, sharing skills with them.

I've done many things for myself and with all the participants: sewing, embroidery, pattern cutting, stitching."



Photos by Mehrdad Pakniat



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

“This is my traditional bag and you can see this fabric in the east of Turkey, my country, where there are many tea gardens. When women harvest the teas they put the tea in those bags, but bigger ones. It’s also special to me to carry it. This is a traditional one, it’s about my city, a historic and religious city. I have drawn an image of the first temple in the world, Göbekli Tepe, nearly 12,000 years old. So, it’s special to me. I just want to carry it with me, my heritage, my history, and show it to everybody. (I chose to use) yellow and green because these are my city’s colours. And we have yellow flowers in Spring as well.

I’m doing art more like a hobby for wellbeing and to take my time to recharge. But here I learned how to transform my art into a business because in my country (fashion) is more like a hobby and here you can see this can be transformed into a business.

“The best thing I experienced here is to be in a social environment and smiley community”



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

“(I joined the project) because I like fashion and styling. Five years ago, I went to two courses, on modelling and styling. I was a Religion teacher, but my hobbies were styling and fashion. (My final piece for this project) is Islamic clothing, Abaya, but in kimono style, because I like the Chinese and Japanese cultures.

I learned new sewing techniques and about business planning. My dream

is to open a boutique. Elegant in style, with a small coffee shop and offer coffee, some biscuits, and tea, with a kid’s area. All the family members can come. Husbands can work from their computers there, and have biscuits, coffee, and tea, while the children play, so the woman can stay there for a long time and relax. This is my dream because I have two kids and my husband doesn’t like shopping.”

“The first time, I joined the project because I was at the beginning of the asylum process and I needed to socialise. Fashion was far away from me. I was into art, but I found this project it was a really interesting opportunity for me to engage with other people intellectually and build relationships. The second time, I joined because I already knew the group and developed some skills from the previous workshop. I enjoy being among this group and it’s similar to when I draw or sketch because my mind is focused on one spot and I feel like giving away or getting rid of the stress of the busy life.

I was planning to make a bag for my art materials since I am an artist. And I used the plan to make a professional one, but because of the short time, I couldn’t finish the project. I would like to keep my art materials in something made by me. Being part of the workshop allowed me to take a serious step into the business because, in the workshop with Adele (from TERN), she talked about how to build up a business, and I can also consider working in this industry.

Counselling was very useful because at that time I needed someone to talk to, someone to listen to. I was in the phase of finding accommodation after the Home Office gave me the letter of eviction [from the contingency hotel].

[For the DFT project] I customised my own jacket, which I have been holding

“Being part of the workshop allowed me to take a serious step into business”

for a long time, it was with me in good and bad times. I am very attached to it. When I arrived in the UK, it was Autumn, the trees started to take off their leaves, they were in shades of orange and yellow. I used the sycamore leaf as a symbolic start of my asylum claim journey. I created these leaves on linen patches, and used chain and straight-line embroidery. I represented two faces by drawing them first, then embroidering them. These two faces represent the phases that I have been through during my stay in the UK as an asylum seeker – evoking feelings of uncertainty and loneliness. I drew the prophet Mohamed’s Mosque which is located in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. It represents my identity as a Muslim. Besides this, I drew European houses. The green plants are rooted in both buildings; they show that a new chapter has been opened in my life. In addition, I attached an embroidered Saudi flag on one sleeve, and on the other a beech leaf tree.”



Photo by JC Candanedo

3.3 DFT Project Outputs

A wide range of outputs were produced throughout the 2-year-long DFT project. Multiple formats were used to reach diverse audiences, as listed below:

For the general public

2 Webpages, and press coverage

7 Blog posts

42 Textile autobiographies

1 public action

3 Textile maps

21 Fashion artefacts

3 Performances at V&A

1 Zine

2 Short films

4 Showcases

For academics

1 Project Report

1 Conference paper

**1 Special Issue of
DISCERN Journal**

2 Symposia

**Numerous talks
and panel debates**

For students

**2 Student
project briefs**

1 MSc dissertation

For policy makers

1 Policy paper



Photo by JC Candanedo

3.4 WTRE Participants' Creations

Eight participants designed and made 14 products, some displayed at the final exhibition as part of Refugee Week and Newham Heritage Month at Rosetta Arts in June 2024. What we can loosely define as a 'fashion collection' doesn't follow the value of the Western commodified fashion industry; rather it amplifies the peripheral fashion systems embracing 'othered' identities. Resulting from a series of 7 design and making workshops, the 'collection' exemplifies a process of unlearning inherent knowledges, and relearning new viewpoints, as well as gaining new skills, becoming a source of confidence and pride to be shared with others. These artefacts also act as a statement of resilience and empowerment, a call for social justice, a manifestation of a vision for a freer and fairer society, where people can reclaim their agency and identity, through fashion.



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

Stop Wars! *By Rawia*



Photo by Sylvia Morgado

Journey to the past

I sewed a linen bag that reflects the traces of the religious history of my hometown in Turkey, dating back 12,000 years. Its name is Gobekli Tepe. The bag I designed and sewed by myself represents my longing and carrying the beautiful traces of history into the future. *By Nermin*

Reborn



I made this African print overshirt cause I love African prints. I feel comfort in it. I believe and feel that in my previous life I was African. And I feel the connection through African people's art and culture. *By Sahira*

Blanket *By Sahira & Bilal*



Photos by Mehrdad Pakniat

Comfort

These pillows mean comfort to me, comfort of the home I just left behind. These pillows are made with leftover material which I have kept for a very long time. I didn't know what to make of it and then this project came. The pieces represent different people coming together supporting and comforting each other. *By Sahira*



Kimono Style Abaya

There is a parallelism between Far Eastern civilization and Islamic civilization. This parallelism has always aroused sympathy between the people of the two civilizations. I have always felt a deep admiration for this harmony. Muslim women want to strengthen their hijab with the nobility of black fabric. By adapting it to the Kimono, the traditional Japanese dress, I referred to the harmony between these two deep-rooted civilizations. Finally, I wanted to remind you that colourful flowers are blooming inside the hijab-wearing Muslim woman, so I hand stitched a pink flower that you can easily pin wherever you want. The Abaya becomes a stylish outerwear for all women, and the borders of religion, language and race are transcended. **By Saliha**



Photos by Mehrdad Pakniat

Artist's bag

My product is an artist's bag which I made using black fabric. I added an embroidery drawing to the front side of the bag. I came up with this idea because I am an artist and I would like to carry my art stuff in something that was made by myself. **By Zeej**



Belonging

From time to time, one thing or another happens in our life journey which has a special place for us, and a unique relationship or feeling is formed. Just like colours exalt the importance of everything. I have made this jacket keeping colour and culture in mind. Through this jacket, I have tried to express my culture and heritage. Just as there are many different types of flowers of different colours and they give us happiness and peace, similarly different cultures keep giving us a feeling of belonging. **By Sukhwinder**



Photos by Mehrdad Pakniat

Pouches

By Brihan



4. Key Findings

The broader DFT and the WTRE projects have demonstrated significant positive impacts on the participants, creating a safe space and a place of social belonging. The projects contributed to amplifying refugees' voice and agency, whilst shifting prevailing narratives around refugees. The participants used fashion and textiles to express themselves, learned new technical and soft skills, enhanced their self-confidence, meet new people and built resilience, in themselves and within the local community. The following paragraphs summarise the key findings from the research project.

4.1 Positive Impacts on Participants

Safe Space: The project created a safe and supportive space for sharing stories and expressing emotions. There was space for listening, and participants felt valued. They discovered new coping mechanisms through engagement in design and textile-making workshops, helping them manage trauma and emotional challenges.

Self-Perception and Personal Growth: There was a notable improvement in self-perception, with participants recognising and appreciating their own abilities and creative potential. The creative making space offered an opportunity to rebuild shattered self-confidence as well as relocate oneself within a vastly different social structure and as valuable contributing members of society, whilst raising awareness of 'others' and the othered 'self'.

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Engaging vulnerable people in co-creation workshops might highlight the trajectory of trauma. In fact, asylum seekers generally experience more trauma than refugees who are more settled, have

less fear and can be more creative. In the DFT and WTRE projects, survey responses collected before and after the creative research intervention indicated an improvement in the mental health and well-being of participants who took part in the workshops and counselling sessions.

4.2 Inclusivity and Accessibility

Recruitment through Local

Organisations: Collaboration with local organisations, such as Newham Council and Rosetta Arts, facilitated easier access to refugees and asylum seekers.

Childcare: Participants with childcare responsibilities were able to bring their children to the workshops, which was appreciated and made the environment more welcoming.

Travel Reimbursement: Reimbursing travel expenses in cash was beneficial for asylum seekers who do not have bank accounts, addressing financial barriers and facilitating participation.

Community Connections

Ethical and Cross-Cultural Connections:



Photo by JC Candanedo

The initiative played a crucial role in fostering ethical connections across cultures. The project team facilitated dialogue and understanding that transcend cultural differences and perspectives.

Community Resilience: The project allowed refugees to break from isolation and build networks, fostering mutual support despite the challenges they face, and demonstrating courage and community resilience, which serves as an inspiring lesson for everyone. Here, community resilience was defined as the collective ability to react to experienced oppression and exploitation, challenging existing power structures and activating social change, through community efforts. The project also highlighted that refugees are not a homogeneous community, and they build resilience to react to adverse situations. However, resilience should not be used by other organisations – such

as local authorities – to deflect responsibilities.

Reciprocity: In projects engaging vulnerable people like refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to work with 'credible messengers' who can draw on their lived experience to build empathy and facilitate co-creation processes for social change. Design researchers should constantly reflect on their positionality, challenge their own privilege and consider the power dynamics at play in such collaborative processes. In the DFT and WTRE projects, the team actively engaged in a reciprocal process of making and learning 'with' project participants rather than studying 'them' or even assuming a 'helper' attitude.

Shifting Narratives: The project contributed to shifting narratives from what displaced people lack to what they can bring to host communities (in terms of skills, values, material culture, community resilience, etc.).



Photos by JC Candanedo

4.3 Cultural Roots and Routes

Reframing Fashion: In the DFT and WTRE projects, fashion refers to the social and cultural practices and related material objects created in the peripherals where diverse multi-ethnic communities flourish. The practice of textile and fashion design can be a storytelling tool and a vehicle for social change, supporting the process of ‘becoming’, rebuilding a life, expressing shifting identities, and challenging colonial legacies.

Sustaining Cultural Heritage: Textiles and other materials can stimulate memories and foster a sense of belonging for refugees while they live transient lives and feel displaced. Some refugees participating in this

project felt prouder of their material culture and heritage and expressed a desire to sustain them.

Regeneration of Cultures: The project highlighted that culture is a multi-layered living reality that evolves with people as they travel, learn, unlearn, and make meaning. Some refugees have traumatic memories of their home country and want to almost erase their own cultural heritage and instead wear Western clothes as a way to feel more integrated in the culture of the place of resettlement. Some participants also mixed different materials to freely express their new identity and the mix of cultural elements they are adopting throughout their migration journey.



Photos by JC Candanedo

“This project made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with me”

4.4 Skills Development and Employability

Transformative Learning: Design education and reflexive practice imply a journey of experiential learning and transformation through critical reflection and self-consciousness. Decolonising

fashion also implies unlearning inherent knowledge and engaging wholeheartedly in learning new viewpoints.

Employment Opportunities: A key aspect of the WTRE project was providing employment and skill development opportunities. The project enabled progression pathways for two previous participants from DFT who were hired and paid to deliver certain aspects of WTRE, i.e. photography and workshop facilitation.

Change-makers: Some participants expressed a desire to be, or are involved in advocacy for policy change. This reflects a shift from being powerless (either in their own countries or while waiting for the refugee status to be approved in the UK) towards enacting their own power to achieve personal and professional goals and even engage in advocacy work to tackle broader societal issues.

4.5 Future Aspirations

Business Ventures: Some participants expressed interest in taking their newfound skills forward to start their own businesses, also building on the learning from the entrepreneurship workshop.

Right to Work: A number of participants expressed a need to advocate for granting the right to work to all asylum seekers in a more timely, fair and cheap manner, highlighting an important area for future advocacy.

4.6 Theory of Change



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat

The 'Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs' (WTRE) project emerged from 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities' (DFT). As part of DFT, 71 sessions (spanning from photo-voice, storytelling, mapping, manifesto making, fashion design and making, as well as roundtable discussions for advocacy) were delivered between 2022 and 2024 across three East

London boroughs (Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest). WTRE entailed 7 (fashion design, making and entrepreneurship) workshops delivered at Rosetta Arts in Newham in 2024, with a new group of East London-based refugees and asylum seekers. This table illustrates the Theory of Change of the DFT and WTRE projects, synthesising the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts.

Strategic Planning				The Effects		
Context	Assumptions	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Goal/Impact
<p>Legal and social frameworks affecting refugees in the UK.</p> <p>Existing narratives and perceptions about refugees.</p> <p>Social, cultural and economic conditions in East London.</p>	<p>Participants will engage actively in workshops and activities.</p> <p>Cultural heritage can be a basis for creating sustainable futures.</p> <p>Policy makers are open to recommendations from the project.</p> <p>Project outputs will effectively reach and influence stakeholders.</p>	<p>Funding from AHRC (for DFT) and Newham Council (for WTRE).</p> <p>DFT Project team: Dr. Francesco Mazzarella, Professor Lucy Orta, Dr. Seher Mirza, Nicole Zisman, Camilla Palestra, David Betteridge, Alisa Ruzavina, Froi Legaspi, JC Candanedo, Mehrdad Pakniyat, Jess Amaral.</p> <p>WTRE Project team: Marianne Tynan, Dr. Francesco Mazzarella, Sylvia Morgado, Mari Mordado, Alisa Ruzavina, Sahira Khan, Adele Meyer, Mehrdad Pakniyat.</p> <p>DFT Project partners: Arbeit Project Ltd, Bow Arts, London Boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Poplar HARCA, Rosetta Arts, UNHCR, V&A.</p> <p>Consumables (workshop materials and tools, refreshments, travel reimbursement, etc.).</p> <p>Venues for project activities (FELDY Centre, Leyton Green Studios, Rosetta Arts).</p> <p>Project-related services (transport of materials, printing, etc.).</p> <p>Comms channels (newsletter, social media).</p>	<p>(DFT) Ethnography work package: unstructured interviews and participant observations, 4 photovoice workshops.</p> <p>(DFT) Storytelling work package: 24 storytelling sessions, 3 collective show & tell sessions, 3 mapping workshops, 6 manifesto making workshops, refugee-led workshops at Bow Arts.</p> <p>(DFT) Making & Learning work package: Guided tours of 'Traces' exhibition and V&A fashion collection, full-day workshop at Art Workers Guild, 3 design consultations, 19 fashion design and making workshops, 5 Collaborative Challenge workshops.</p> <p>(DFT) Advocacy work package: desk research, 3 policy roundtable discussions.</p> <p>(WTRE) Design and Entrepreneurship: 5 design and making workshops, 1 entrepreneurship workshop, counselling sessions.</p> <p>Data analysis: thematic analysis of data collected through participant observations, questionnaires, interviews.</p>	<p>1 interim showcase of photovoice workshops.</p> <p>42 textile autobiographies; 3 textile maps, 3 textile banners.</p> <p>21 fashion artefacts made by DFT participants, 2 student project briefs, 1 MSc dissertation, 6 student teams' outputs, 3 fashion performances at the V&A.</p> <p>1 public action in Parliament, 1 policy paper, 1 public campaign, Lifeline objects and zine.</p> <p>14 products made by WTRE participants</p> <p>1 Conference paper, 1 Special Issue of DISCERN Journal, 1 project report, 5 showcases, 2 symposia, 2 short films, 2 webpages, 7 blog posts, press coverage, numerous talks.</p>	<p>Safe space for self-expression.</p> <p>Amplification of refugees' voice and agency.</p> <p>Contribution to shifting narratives about refugees in host communities.</p> <p>New or improved skills.</p> <p>Enhanced self-confidence.</p> <p>ed roles, from participants to facilitators.</p> <p>New community connections.</p> <p>Cultural exchange.</p> <p>Collaboration with other organisations.</p> <p>Advocacy for policy change to enable good work for refugees in fashion industry.</p> <p>ramed definition of fashion.</p> <p>ycled materials.</p> <p>Income from selling the products made.</p>	<p>Participants enrolled onto fashion design course.</p> <p>Participants engaged in policy meetings.</p> <p>Participants gaining work experience.</p> <p>Participant hired as community co-curator.</p> <p>Photographer participant was donated a camera and started to rebuild his career in London.</p> <p>Mentorship of 1 young East Londoner as Cultural Producer.</p> <p>UAL PhD scholarship.</p> <p>Increased resilience of refugee community.</p> <p>Regeneration of cultures through fashion and textile practice.</p> <p>Contribution to decolonising design practice.</p> <p>Contribution to a more equitable, diverse, inclusive, sustainable fashion system.</p> <p>Contribution to social and economics integration of refugees.</p>

4.7 System and Stakeholder Maps

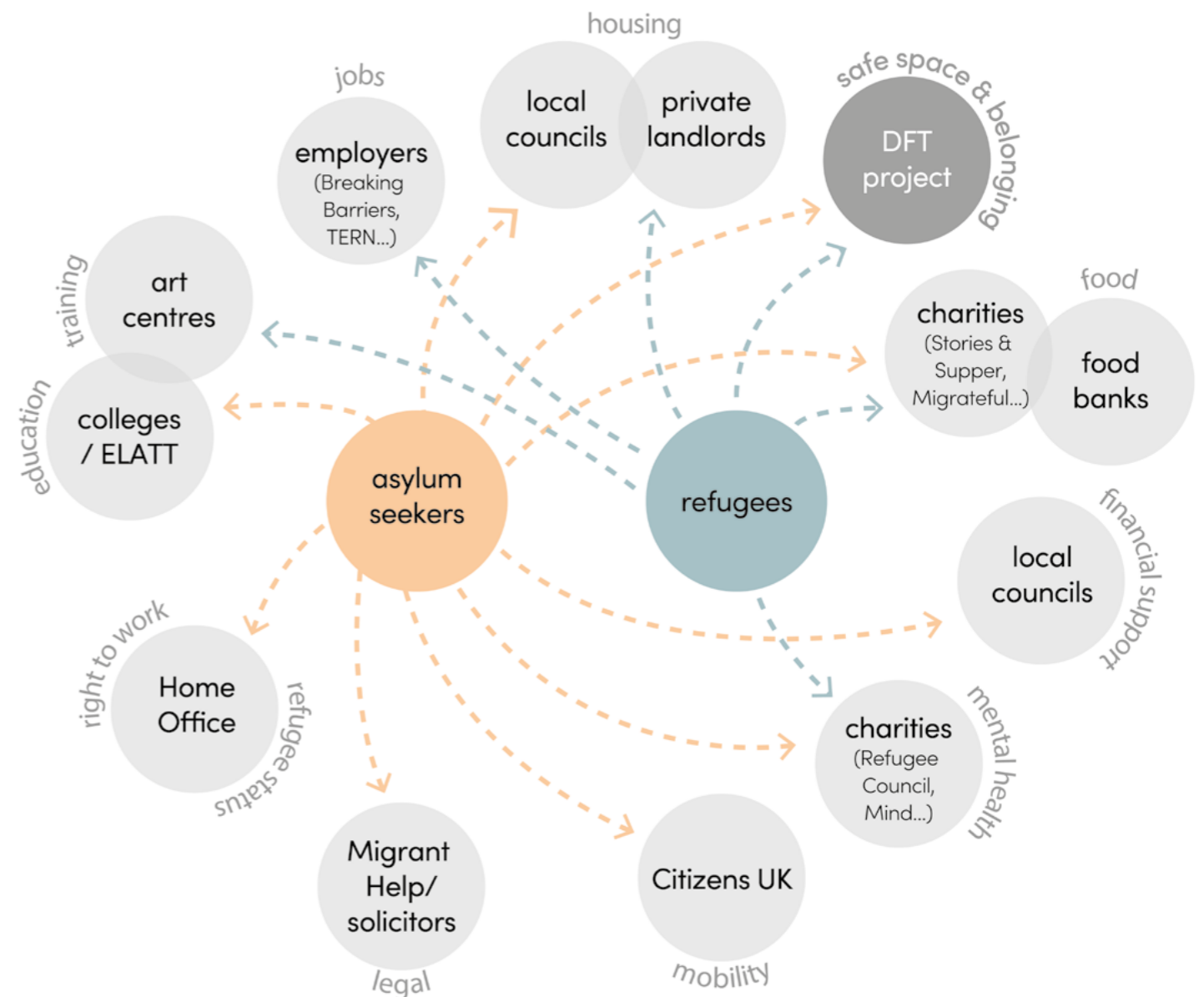
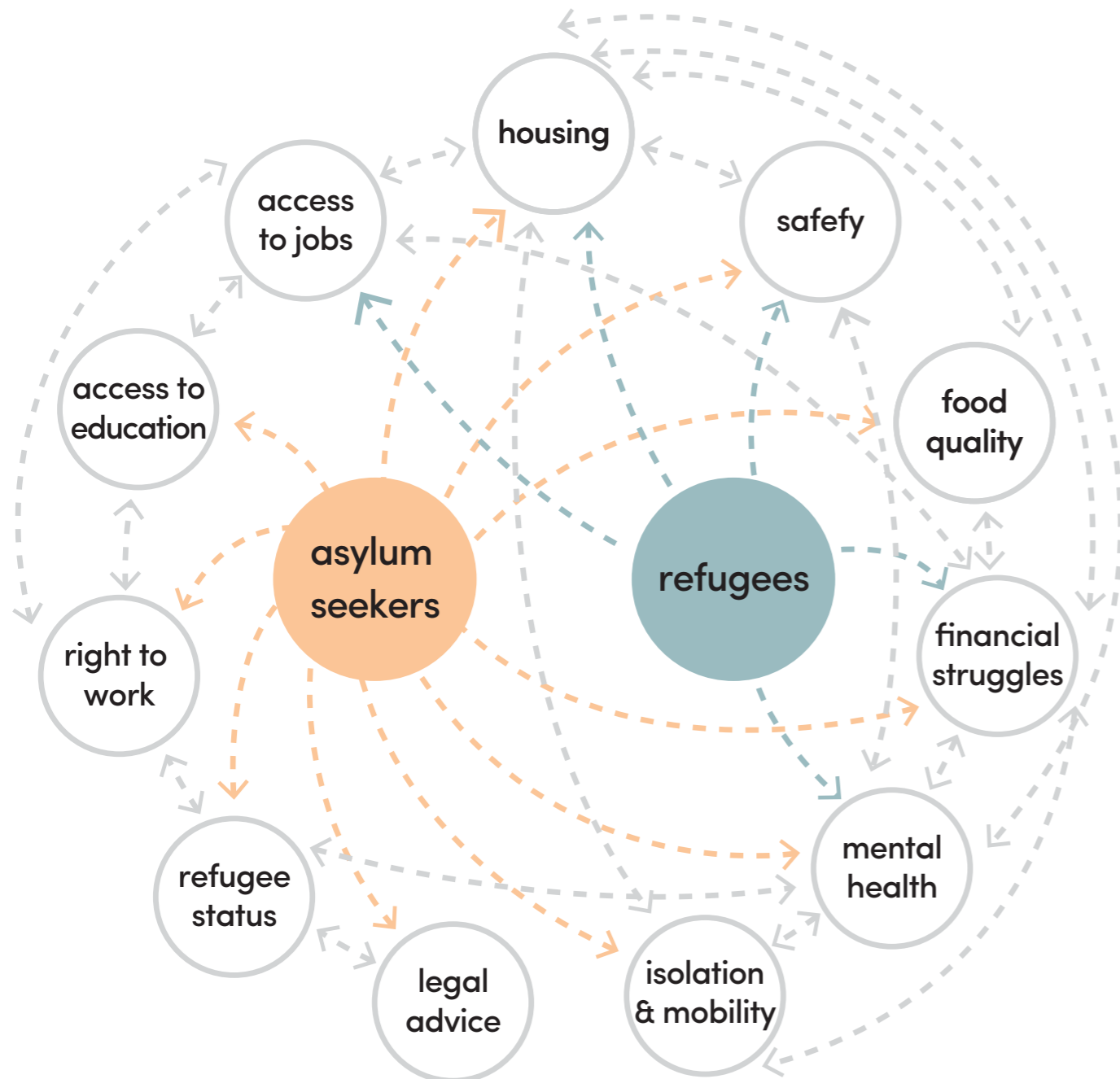
The design and making process offered a platform for listening to the needs and aspirations of the refugees and asylum seekers participating in the DFT project. This systems map synthesises the systemic challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, including housing, safety, food quality (especially considering

the food served in contingency hotels), financial struggles, trauma and mental health, mobility, legal advice, processes to gain the refugee status and right to work, barriers to access education and jobs.

The project team also mapped the various organisations which asylum seekers and

refugees in London engage with, including Local Councils (which provide housing and financial support), the Home Office (which grants the refugee status and right to work), charities (which focus on food, mental health support, etc.), other organisations (such as Breaking Barriers and TERN which provide business support

and entrepreneurship advice) as well as education and skills training providers (including Rosetta Arts), etc. The research also highlighted the shortage of safe spaces and spaces of social belonging for refugees and asylum seekers, and the project participants expressed that DFT contributes to addressing this gap.



4.8 Advocacy for Policy Change

Besides desk research and the above-mentioned activities, the DFT team facilitated three roundtable discussions engaging 38 stakeholders from across the fashion industry, policy makers, and charities working with refugees, with the purpose of advocating for policy change, in and through fashion.

It emerged that refugees and asylum seekers face systemic discrimination based on their origin and reasons for seeking refuge. Temporary accommodation further hinders their ability to secure employment. Efforts to address these issues are fragmented, occurring in silos through Local Councils and charities. Additionally, fashion and textile jobs are not listed on the UK's Immigration Salary List. Moreover, the UK fashion industry is experiencing a skills shortage that could be alleviated by tapping into the talents of skilled refugees and asylum seekers. This would not only contribute to their wellbeing, financial independence, and social integration but also benefit the UK economy.

The DFT project team developed a policy paper advocating for enabling access to good work for new refugees in the fashion industry, while addressing the

skills shortage faced by fashion businesses by leveraging the skills owned by refugees. The team identified the following stakeholders as entry points for lobbying: fashion industry, social enterprises, Local Councils, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the UK central government.

Finally, the DFT team and collaborating stakeholders outlined the following policy asks:

- Grant asylum seekers the right to work within 6 months and connect them with relevant employment opportunities in the fashion industry;
- Add relevant 'Fashion jobs' to the Immigration Salary List that includes jobs which are in short supply within the UK resident labour market;
- Build creative / fashion safe and welcoming spaces for asylum seekers and refugees;
- Develop and deliver 'skills training while you wait' programmes for asylum seekers and recent refugees;
- Develop traineeships for recent refugees paid at a real Living Wage.



Photo by JC Candanedo

5. Conclusion

Based on feedback received, the DFT and WTRE projects were a transformative experience for participants, meeting their expectations and enhancing their awareness of sustainability in fashion. They felt more empowered and hopeful for the future.

Eight refugees and asylum seekers attended the WTRE workshops, with five receiving counselling. Recruitment was successful despite some dropouts. The final number of attendees was deemed good by participants, providing ample physical space to work and share.

Counselling services were offered in response to a learning from the DFT project, which highlighted the need to work with trauma-informed professionals when engaging with refugees and asylum seekers who experience mental health issues.

A refugee participant from the DFT project was hired to co-facilitate the workshops, and another was gifted a camera and was hired to photograph the WTRE workshops, enhancing their skills, experience, and employability.

The project team facilitated workshops where participants designed and made bespoke fashion artefacts, celebrating their personal identity, diverse cultural heritage and stories of migration. Two short films were produced, and the DFT project was showcased at Bow Arts and at Somerset House as part of the London Design Biennale (in June 2024),

featured in the 'Design for Life Exhibition' at LCF (October 2023 – January 2024) and exhibited at the Barbican Library (in July 2024). An exhibition about the WTRE project was held at Rosetta Arts and launched on World Refugee Day, the 20th of June 2024, showcasing the participants' creations, which were made available for purchase, in order to raise funds to go back to the refugee makers. The exhibitions provided a platform for creative expression and community connection, helped build confidence in their work, aiding in promoting and sharing diverse cultures. Additionally, the participants received certificates for their engagement in the project.

The DFT and WTRE projects fostered a strong sense of community, significantly boosting self-confidence and empowerment. Through the creative process, participants expressed emotions, addressed trauma, and found new coping mechanisms in the arts.

This led to personal transformation and a deeper understanding of cultural sustainability and community resilience. The participants viewed themselves and their abilities more positively, reinforcing their sense of identity and belonging. The creative space contributed to rebuilding self-confidence and repositioned participants within a new social structure, raising awareness of their contributions to host communities and shifting narratives from deficits to assets.

The DFT and WTRE projects highlighted the role of fashion as a storytelling tool and a vehicle for social change,



Photo by JC Candanedo

supporting identity formation, life rebuilding, and challenging colonial legacies. The research highlighted that culture is a dynamic reality that evolves with people, fostering a sense of belonging in people even while they feel displaced, and embracing change to design regenerative cultures.

The research emphasised decolonising fashion through unlearning inherent knowledge and engaging in new perspectives. It promoted experiential learning and transformation through critical reflection and the use of

contextually relevant material culture. The project team moved away from the dominant practice of social designers parachuted into marginalised communities with the assumption that they can bring their knowledge and expertise to solve other people's problems. Instead, the research highlighted the community resilience of refugees who, despite the challenging lives they live, build a collective ability to respond to oppression, challenge power structures, and activate social change through community efforts and pluralism.

5.1 Limitations

Despite the project's successes, several limitations were also encountered.

Budget constraints limited the scope of additional services, such as providing mentorship and counselling, which could have further supported participants' personal and professional growth.

Language barriers occasionally hindered the clear articulation of ideas, affecting communication and the expression of cultural narratives. This issue led to participant dropout during the second part of the project. On the other hand, the making activities allowed participants to express themselves in other creative ways than through language.

These challenges highlighted areas for improvement in the future iteration of the project to better support participants. In the second series of workshops (WTRE), the questionnaire was refined based on feedback from the first session, offering the option to skip discursive questions for those with limited English skills. The team also considered the opportunity to hire interpreters, but this would be challenging considering that participants in such multi-cultural projects speak many different languages, and their attendance in the workshops is flexible; hence, it would be difficult to plan ahead which interpreter to invite at each session.

Recruitment and retainment of participants: A lack of commitment



Photo by Mehrdad Pakniat

was noted, as some individuals signed up but did not show up, taking the space of others who were on the waiting list. One participant withdrew due to language barriers, while another left the project because of health issues. Despite the dropout rate, there were enough contributions, and participants appreciated the small group size, which allowed space for everyone to work and talk.

Short-term considerations: Most of the participants expressed a desire for the project to continue and for each session to last more than 3 hours, especially since for some people the commute to attend each workshop was long and time-consuming. Some participants were unable to complete their projects because they missed sessions due to personal issues, such as court dates or moving houses.



Photo by JC Candanedo

5.2 Recommendations

To enhance future iterations of the project, some key recommendations for policy and practice have been identified. These aim to build on the project's success and address the identified limitations, fostering a more supportive and effective environment for participants.

Practical Project Considerations:

Collaboration with local organisations and community centres can facilitate access to refugees and asylum seekers. Delivering outreach activities and explaining the project while showing some potential outputs can help recruit participants who clearly understand the project's intentions and are really motivated to engage. Providing interpretation services can help accommodate non-English speakers, facilitating better communication and engagement. Allocating additional time for each session can help manage late arrivals, allowing for a smoother workflow, longer conversations, and enough time for participants to finalise their work. Adopting creative methods can help collect feedback from participants and evaluate projects' impacts effectively.

Safeguarding: The project highlighted a shortage of safe spaces and spaces of social belonging for refugees and asylum seekers. Most organisations

“In future project bids, mentorship programmes could be included to support participants' progression pathways”



Photo by JC Candanedo

perform administrative or legal functions, or may even be rejected from diasporas they identify with, contributing to confidence loss, further isolation, or mental health issues. It is advised to include a code of conduct in participation agreements to address and mitigate issues such as prejudiced comments, ensuring a respectful and inclusive environment for all. There is a need to collaborate with trauma-informed professionals, and make sure that workshop facilitators are able to read the signs of the effect of their work on others, and provide or indicate where mental health support can be accessed. Collaboration with trauma-informed professionals is essential to address the negative aspects of designing for social good. Researchers working in such contexts need to facilitate dialogue when bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, to foster an understanding that transcends cultural differences and perspectives.

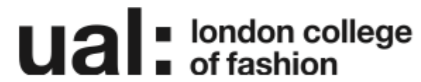
Shifting Power Imbalances in Participatory Practices: Considering that refugees are amongst the most interviewed and monitored populations, there is a need to shift power imbalances by challenging privilege and prejudice and maintaining reciprocity and responsiveness to diverse ways of knowing. Design researchers must constantly reflect on their positionality, and consider the power dynamics at play in collaborative

processes. It is important to actively engage in a reciprocal process of making and learning 'with' project participants rather than studying 'them' or even assuming a 'helper' attitude.

Advocacy for Policy Change: Grant asylum seekers the right to work within six months and connect them with relevant employment opportunities in the fashion industry. Add relevant 'Fashion jobs' to the Immigration Salary List that includes jobs which are in short supply within the UK resident labour market. Build creative / fashion safe and welcoming spaces for asylum seekers and refugees. Develop and deliver 'skills training while you wait' programmes for asylum seekers and recent refugees. Develop traineeships for refugees paid at a real Living Wage.

Legacies: Adopting creative methods, a public campaign could be developed to communicate the lived experiences of refugees and humanise policy recommendations. It is also important to address the longevity of design interventions and how to sustain relationships beyond the timeline and funding of a project. In future project bids, mentorship programmes could be included to support participants' progression pathways, offering them guidance and additional resources to further their personal and professional development.

1. Questionnaire Used in First WTRE Workshop



Evaluation Questionnaire

We would like to hear about your experience at the beginning of the 'Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs' project. This questionnaire is anonymous (*i.e.* your name will not show on it) so please be honest, and do not be afraid to express any positive or negative feelings. Your opinion is important to us and will help us to improve our project going forward.

1) How did you find out about the project?

.....

2) What were your main motivations or reasons for participating in this project? (Please select all that apply)

- a) To experience something new
- b) I was already interested in fashion and sustainability and wanted to learn more about it
- c) I wanted to share my story and contribute to building new, positive narratives around refugees
- d) I want to see my heritage recognised and valued through fashion
- e) I already have some experience in this area and thought I could help
- f) To get inspired on ways I could contribute something to my community
- f) To learn more about initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers
- h) To meet new people

Any other reasons:

.....

3) To what extent do you feel connected to the local community?

Not at all A little Average Somewhat Very Much

4) To what extent do you know the area where you currently live in London?

Not at all A little Average Somewhat Very Much

5) To what extent do you feel hopeful about the future?

Not at all A little Average Somewhat Very Much

6) What skills do you already have, that you can contribute to the project?

.....
.....

7) What other skills would you like to learn through this project?

.....
.....

8) What does 'cultural sustainability' mean to you?

.....
.....

9) How would you define the concept of 'community resilience'?

.....
.....

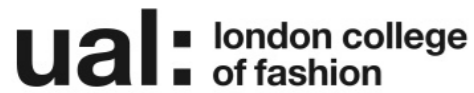
10) Are you interested in further education, entrepreneurship or employment in fashion and/or the creative industries? If so, please express your main interest below.

.....
.....

11) Would you be interested in joining the counselling sessions? If yes, please look for someone in our team to express your interest.

.....

2. Questionnaire Used in Final WTRE Workshop



Evaluation Questionnaire

We would like to hear about your experience in the 'Weaving the Threads of Refugee Entrepreneurs' project. This questionnaire is anonymous, so please be honest, and do not be afraid to express any positive or negative feelings. Your opinion is important to us and will help us to improve our projects going forward.

1) Please, rate the quality of the project

Very Good Good Average Poor Very Poor

2) Did you have a positive experience with the project?

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3) Have you connected with new people through your participation in the project?

Yes No Not sure

4) Overall, did the project meet your expectations? (Please tick one only)

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5) As a direct result of your participation in the project, do you:

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Feel your voice and story are heard	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel more connected to your cultural identity and heritage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel more inspired to design and make	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel more relaxed and less stressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel a stronger sense of belonging to a community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel more optimistic about the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6) Based on your experience of the project, how would you rate the following? (Please give one rating for each item)

	<i>Very good</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Neither good nor poor</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Very poor</i>
The organisation, communication and administration of the project	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The dates and times of the workshops	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The location of the workshops	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The feeling of being safe and cared for	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The opportunity to learn new things	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please give comments / suggestions on any of the above

.....

.....

7) Please note any specific skills you feel you have learnt through the project (e.g. communication, embroidery, hand-painting, sewing, entrepreneurship, etc.):

.....

.....

8) Is there anything else you would like to learn in the future?

.....

.....

9) Based on your experience in project, how would you define fashion and textiles?

.....

.....

.....

10) To what extent did the project give you an opportunity to value your identity and cultural heritage more?

.....

.....

.....

11) To what extent did the project improve your knowledge of and interest in entrepreneurship?

.....

.....

.....

12) What did you like the most about the project?

.....

.....

.....

13) What elements of the project do you think could be improved?

.....

.....

.....

14) From your point of view, what would the ideal next steps of the project be?

.....

.....

.....



Photo by Francesco Mazzarella

REFUGEES AS CREATIVE CHANGE- MAKERS

EVALUATION REPORT OF
DFT AND WIRE PROJECTS

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