

Israel's collective farms offer a refuge to African migrants

The grassroots initiative mobilized in response to government plans to expel asylum seekers.

by [Dina Kraft](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



Rowha Dabrazion (right), an asylum seeker from Eritrea, walks along a path with her children on Kibbutz Maagan Michael in July with Ada Gross, who is helping settle the family in this communal village. Photo by Dina Kraft / The Christian Science Monitor.

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Under a canopy of jacaranda and eucalyptus trees, Rowha Dabrazion, an Eritrean asylum seeker, pushes her one-year-old daughter in a crib on wheels, a fixture of kibbutz life. Her five-year-old flashes a triumphant smile, enjoying her perch on the back of a kibbutz member's bicycle.

A week after she arrived at this cooperative community along the shores of the Mediterranean, relief that she was no longer one step away from homelessness began to set in.

Just one month ago her husband left her and the children. She had quit her cleaning job to care for her baby daughter, and she found herself with no income and no idea

where the money to cover rent and expenses would come from.

Then Dabrazion got word that a kibbutz would take her and her children in as part of a new program in which kibbutzim across Israel are welcoming refugee families facing the highest risks. Most such families are headed by single mothers struggling with dire poverty in Tel Aviv, where the majority of asylum seekers live. The program offers them housing, health care, education for their children, and “adoptive families” for social support.

“I feel better, like I can breathe,” Dabrazion said, sitting in the living room of Yael Eisner, a kibbutz member who, along with her husband, volunteered to host Dabrazion and her children.

While Dabrazion talked about her life as an asylum seeker in Israel—she crossed the Sinai desert, partially on foot, to get here seven years ago—and recounted some of the harrowing moments in Eritrea that led her to seek asylum, her younger daughter fidgeted in her lap. “Come to *savta*,” Eisner said, using the Hebrew word for grandmother and sweeping the little girl into her arms. She took the girls to visit the kibbutz cowshed.

So far 12 asylum-seeking families have been placed on kibbutzim; the goal is that 100 families will be hosted by the end of the year. The grassroots initiative was undertaken by individual members within the national kibbutz movement. They were first mobilized to help refugees in Israel early this year, amid outrage at government plans for a mass expulsion of asylum seekers, whom officials referred to as “infiltrators.”

The government wanted to deport the asylum seekers, most of them from Eritrea and Sudan, to other countries in Africa. Those expulsion plans were at least temporarily thwarted, but the fate and legal status of the asylum seekers, who number some 38,000, remains uncertain. A decision was made by some kibbutzim to host families temporarily, for 12 to 18 months, in hopes of providing them and their children with stability and support during a desperate time in their lives.

“Even though the refugees have been here for as long as 12 years, the expulsion order woke up people in a way that is hard to describe,” said Avi Ofer, a member of nearby Kibbutz Ma’anit who is overseeing the effort. “I’m more proud to be Israeli now. There are people who really are there to help.”

He started with people facing mental health and economic risks.

“There are those who have resorted to prostitution or feel so on the brink of despair that they would take the government offer to go to Rwanda,” Ofer said.

Israeli officials have encouraged asylum seekers to go to Rwanda, but migrants who have left tell of being robbed of Israel’s one-time payment of \$3,500 and of human trafficking and death as the migrants continue on toward Europe.

The kibbutzim, originally founded as socialist agricultural collective communities in the days preceding Israeli statehood, have a tradition of taking in people in distress, beginning with Jewish children orphaned during the Holocaust. Ofer’s mother was one of them. In more recent years, kibbutzim have temporarily taken in refugees from Kosovo and immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Although the kibbutzim are initially covering the cost of hosting the families, they are seeking sponsors to make the effort sustainable. An Israeli group of activists working on behalf of the asylum seekers has launched a resettlement initiative to support the kibbutz movement’s effort.

Eisner, a nurse, recently volunteered at an Israeli medical clinic located at a refugee camp in Serbia for those fleeing Syria and Iraq.

“It was there I understood I, too, could have been a refugee—that they are like me with homes, careers, and communities, but they lost everything,” she said. “All of us need to do something to help. And I have everything I need in life, a family, money, a kibbutz, a normal country even if I don’t like the government.”

Dabrazion enters her one-room apartment with her daughters. She had just stopped at the sprawling communal dining room with its views of the sea and multiple food stations offering fresh salad fixings, watermelon slices, hot meals, and even sushi once a week.

In her tiny kitchen, a cooking pan used to make *injera*, a traditional bread, sits on the counter.

“On the way to the kibbutz, I was fearful, wondering ‘where am I going?’ but when I arrived and saw how I was welcomed by people with all their hearts, I saw that things are good for us here,” she said.

In Tel Aviv she was concerned about the role reversal she saw in her older daughter, who was constantly tending to and worrying about her. "She now says, 'Mommy, we have a grandma and grandpa now. We go to the pool here, we go to the sea. You can laugh here.'"

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