

Making Every Talent Count

A win-win for refugees and locals



At SINGA, we believe innovation is fostered by new ideas and new perspectives. That is why we strive for inclusive entrepreneurship where everyone, no matter where they come from, can fulfill their potential and contribute to shaping an innovative economy in Switzerland.

SINGApreneur Stories is a blog series where entrepreneurs from a refugee or migrant background share their motivation, their business ideas and talk about what entrepreneurship means to them. Read their stories, told in their own words.

Hi! My name is Yasmine Sadri, I am 27 years old and I have been living in Geneva for one and a half years. I am a journalist, language teacher and communications advisor currently assisting at the International School of Geneva. Through the support of the SINGA Factory, I recently founded my social enterprise - BUT Make it Count: where refugees are able to valorise their talent and passion by pouring them into lessons and workshops, events and projects for locals.



Yasmine's initiative is part of the ten projects that were supported in the first cycle of the SINGA Factory in Geneva in 2019. Photo: James Geen.

“My story rings much like the stories of the people I am building BUT Make it Count for: I am a child of immigrants who has often experienced, whether myself or through my parents, what it is like to start over in a different country.”

I was born in Belgium, raised in the US and have always been immersed in my Iranian culture. I watched my parents struggle from country to country, first to be accepted, and secondly to find a way to support themselves and their family by pursuing a career without having recognized experience or a formal education.

My story is different from my parents. By the time I was born, my parents had been residing in Belgium for over a decade. Several older couples befriended them and took on a role like grandparents to me. I grew up with two sets of Belgian couples that made sure I had all of the necessary ingredients to successfully integrate myself in society and flourish - What does it mean to me to be fully integrated? It means happiness, contentedness and the ability to fully care for yourself.

BUT Make it Count takes refugees on a journey to finding and embracing their own talents. Things they love doing, things they did in their countries of origin no longer stay in the background while they search for work and acceptance. Instead, we use this talent, embrace it and pour it into a curriculum for workshops, private lessons, seminars and events.



Zahra (left) and Sandra (right) are among the first teachers who joined BUT Make it Count. Zahra is a professional seamstress who offers sewing classes and workshops. Sandra, as a social engineer, is giving language classes and different community service projects.

For over a decade, I have been observing what lacks in refugee accommodation: : mainly, the way we welcome people from a refugee background and how we support them to work on their future. What I have also noticed is that very often we want to teach THEM something: how to learn our language, how to learn our culture and norms, how to behave, etc. But in reality, how much could they teach us if we gave them leadership positions? How would our society look like if we offered the space and opportunity to learn from their experiences, talents, and visions? That is exactly where BUT Make it Count comes in.

“With BUT Make it count, I wanted to turn the tables for refugees.”

Without a first working experience, everyone, no matter their background, will struggle to adapt to a new environment. The goal then is to support refugees in having a first work experience in Switzerland by leading a workshop, course, event or seminar on a particular topic they already have expertise in. With BUT Make it Count they can gain confidence, expand their professional network and witness the value of their know-how locally, while also earning some income.



BUT Make it Count aims at supporting people by harnessing their talents, thereby enabling them to gain experience, while building a network and self-confidence.

Becoming a social entrepreneur is part of what I had envisioned myself becoming when I was younger. Being able to fulfill it shortly after moving to this international city, is really just a dream come true! I am realizing that the connections I have had and made all my life are now tying together and it is wonderful to see what can happen when you put your heart and soul into it.

“Through lessons, whether private or in group, refugees show themselves as leaders and find a way to become independent contractors.”

Collaborations with BUT Make It Count are possible on many levels and we have already received new demands from customers since the beginning of the year. Zahra, a seamstress working with us, currently has requests from the UN to make a display for a future exhibition that will be shown for several weeks. Our civil engineer turned teacher, Sandra, is being asked to run language workshops for international students coming from all over the world. It all seems like a win-win situation with very little needed, but with the valorisation of refugees' skills and the willingness of locals to come, learn, share, and create - all together.



Yasmine Sadri pitched BUT Make it Count for the first time during the SINGA Awards 2019 in front of more than 160 people at the Impact Hub Geneva. Photo: James Geen.

Thanks to the SINGA programs, I have learned a lot about the Swiss market and how important it is to do research before any kind of entrepreneurial step. I have learned how to segment my target customers, how to understand their needs and from there how to adapt our workshops and classes' offer. I see now that many (private) companies and organizations, even inter-governmental ones, are realizing that this project can take us very far on both sides. We are using the strengths of newcomers to strengthen local competencies, and that has been showing lately through the requests we are getting.

“SINGA helped me put my ideas into action, into a plan and into step by step practice.”

In Geneva, the international community is a big demand for us, as both language and cultural practices are highly appreciated. The more diverse our group of teachers becomes, the better we meet the needs of this international city.



Teacher Zahra from Pakistan led a pillow-making workshop with fabrics donated by Ikea Vernier, in December 2019 in Geneva.

“On the 7th of December 2019 BUT Make It Count was successfully launched. The event aimed at presenting the initiative to the public, finding new team members and teachers willing to join, as well as holding a first trial sewing workshop.”

It was priceless to see Zahra show her leadership skills and her capacity to teach sewing techniques she learned in her country of origin from a very young age in fluent French and English. There was already a large interest shown by people from a refugee background to join the project as well. The next step for us now is to meet them individually, provide personal coaching so they can identify their talents and embrace them again. From there, the options of workshops that can be organized are endless, you can learn anything from art, to cooking, to languages, to woodworking... you name it.



The result of the workshop: a homemade pillow made from scratch, with a Pakistani twist!

Being able to help people and supporting them finding meaning in their lives is what drives me the most. I have always had a lot of love and empathy for others. It is the reason behind my career, working in schools and writing stories behind the stories as a journalist: it is where the human contact comes into play. Knowing and seeing that my efforts help others - whether in language comprehension, the ability to share a story, or other things - is really what keeps me motivated to have this movement grow bigger and bigger until a large part of the population is implicated in bringing about this change.

Share your talent:

People with a refugee background who are willing to join BUT Make it Count as teachers, can get in touch with BUT Make it Count to have an interview and proceed with the entire team.

Attend a workshop :

Teachers Zahra and Sandra are currently accepting private students, groups of students, and contracts for different projects. You can contact the team from BUT Make it Count for language lessons, art lessons, sewing classes and all touch-ups for clothes as of January 2020 with a growing list of other things available that will continuously be published on www.butmakeitcount.com

Support Yasmine's initiative:

Donations can be made through the newly created GoFundMe page <https://www.gofundme.com/f/but-make-it-count-start-capital> or through direct donations to the team by attending events.

While the initiative currently has photographers, communications experts, teachers and therapists already involved, they are always looking to add to the team and increase the scale of their impact, little by little. Any marketing, communications experts or people and organizations with similar interests can contact butmakeitcount@gmail.com for a collaboration.

The pictures in this article were taken by Aude Nowak during the first public event of BUT Make it Count on December 7th in Geneva. Aude is a humanitarian, photographer and therapist who spends much time following humanitarian projects. For any photography requests, please contact: aude.l.nowak@gmail.com



(BUT Make it Count organized their first event on December 9th, 2019 at Maison Internationale des Associations in Geneva.)

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