

D5.6-Policy Paper 1-recommendations on policies to promote mutual understanding between refugees and the local communities in Europe

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Summary

Based on the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper assesses the needs, identifies the challenges, and draws policy-relevant recommendations about the sharing of the experience of forced displacement between refugees and the local communities in Europe where they have resettled, in the larger context of enhancing the access to cultural heritage and promoting social cohesion.

1. Introduction and background

It is estimated today there are 26 million refugees in the world. According to UNCHR (2019) approximately 10% of all world's refugees are living in the EU. This represents 0.6% of the EU's total population. Most refugees arrive in Europe with few, if any, financial resources, and have to face challenges such as lack of language skills, barriers to employment or unfamiliarity with government and local services.

The integration of refugees is a complex and long process that requires a concerted effort by institutions at European, national and local levels, as well as local communities and civil society. Furthermore, different socio-political contexts

and government policies result in a high variability of integration measures among countries and regions. Despite these differences, there is a shared understanding among governments and local actors that the key domains of integration are housing, employment, education, healthcare, as well as the promotion of intercultural relations. However, a more collaborative and participatory approach, which takes into account the cultural encounters between refugees and local communities, is necessary.

The latest political and academic discourses attach more importance to collaborative and participative approaches to cultural encounters (Blank 2020; Fleischmann Steinhilper 2017). The integration of refugees is a two-way and dynamic process that involves the commitment of both the host society and the refugees themselves. We suggest that cultural heritage could be a field of interaction between the refugees and the members of the local communities. Cultural heritage and memory of forced displacement and conflicts in European history can constitute a valuable resource for the construction of common identity, based on shared values, experiences and memories between refugees and the receiving society. Particularly, the idea behind this report is that sharing the memory of past forced displacement and migration in Europe could contribute to the promotion of mutual cultural and life experience understanding between local communities and newly arrived migrants.

Through the development of digital tools and cultural products, SO CLOSE aims at facilitating physical and virtual cultural exchanges between forcefully displaced populations from past and contemporary conflicts.

Based on the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper attempts to assess needs, identify challenges, and draw policy relevant recommendations about the shared experience of forced displacement between refugees and the local communities in Europe. In total, 197 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in 2020 across the following four EU Member States: Italy, Spain, Poland, and Greece. All these countries have witnessed exile and forced migration themselves, even though the number of refugees hosted by them varies and they are not all affected in the same way by asylum requests.

The policy brief is divided into three parts: (I) an overview of the key findings and political implications; (II) a set of policy recommendations based on findings; and (III) a concluding section.

2. Key findings and socio-political implications

The findings of this report are based on the review of academic literature and the analysis of interviews. Some key topics include integration, public policy, civil society, and cultural heritage.

2.1. Integration of the refugees as a two-way process

Social integration is often a central and contested theme in migration policies. Regarding the main factors in the integration of incoming populations, there is a shared understanding among the participants we interviewed that the key domains of integration are housing, employment, education, and healthcare. However, beyond economic well-being and access to basic rights and services, integration can be seen as a relational

process, depending on the social acceptance of the environment, the possibility of sharing spaces and languages, and the mutual relationship between hosts and displaced people. This suggests that integration is understood as a two-way process that requires a willingness of the host community and refugees to know each other and develop something jointly. During interactions between refugees and host groups, shared meanings are developed. There is a general recognition that the possibility of sharing spaces and languages creates obligations and responsibilities that permit intercommunity exchanges and intercultural coexistence between refugees and local residents.

2.2. Governments' strategies and public policy

The most frequent measures adopted by governments to assist the integration of refugees and asylum seekers involve a wide variety of policy dimensions: education, health, labour, welfare and so forth. Some other measures mentioned by interviewees include language and cultural classes as early as possible following migrant arrivals; actions to raise awareness and information on culture and diversity; promoting vocational training and access to work; organizing cultural festivals and educational programs.

Although challenges for the inclusion of the incoming population are multi-dimensional, a lack of coherence in migration policies is mentioned by policymakers as the main obstacle. Gaps regarding the design and implementation of integration policies across different levels of government constitute a challenge according to policymakers. These gaps often result from difficulties in coordinating an integrated approach across sectors of policy. This lack of coherence in turn can make it difficult for NGOs and local authorities to contribute to policy implementation.

2.3. Public opinion and engagement of civil society

According to the interviewees, the public opinion is divided on the issue of refugees. Concerning the aspect of civil society engagement in promoting values based on integration, dialogue, and tolerance, the migrant crisis has offered new opportunities to mobilize significant portions of civil society in supporting migrants. Nonetheless, in their view, the initial empathy of 2015 has been replaced mostly by xenophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric. Some interviewees describe the rising tide of xenophobic and anti-refugee sentiments as a serious difficulty and an obstacle to successful integration. In their view, part of the explanation for this may lie in concerns regarding employment and ethnic stereotypes. While many factors explain the emergence of negative attitudes towards immigrants, some argue that, within a context of strong polarization of civil society on issues of migration, social media and fake news have a damaging impact on citizen engagement in solidarity actions in the support of refugees. Others point to the connections between social indifference and the multifaceted and structural crisis in the European Union.

The main obstacles to stronger engagement by civil society in promoting values based on integration, dialogue and tolerance are the lack of recognition of diversity and understanding of others, decreasing tolerance of cultural difference and fear of “strangers.” Stereotypes and biased images of migrants, xenophobia, securitization of migration, and criminalization of migrants are cited as key challenges. In the opinion of the informants, in addition to anti-migrant rhetoric and xenophobia, the lack of a coherent policy on the promotion of cultural exchanges and practices is also frequently described as a challenge for fostering a two-way interaction between local communities and refugees.

2.4. Heritage of refugees

Even though the international system links refugee status with recognized civil and political rights, the history and heritage of refugees are often excluded or side-lined from the official representation of heritage and there is limited knowledge among the general public with regard to the experience of refugees and asylum seekers. These official and informal forms of misrecognition can systematically contribute to silencing, marginalizing, or deforming the individual and collective voices of refugees and their needs and identities. The main challenge then **lies in designing mechanisms to reinsert refugees’ heritage into the sphere of identity and belonging of the host country.**

3. Voices from the field: policy recommendations

Several implications arise from the findings of this research. Taking these outcomes into consideration, we suggest a number of policy recommendations.

3.1. Developing strategies for fostering inclusive approaches to cultural heritage and collective memory

- To prepare refugees for long-term inclusion into their host communities by making more emphasis on the cultural aspects of integration.
- To promote the conservation of the cultural heritage of incoming populations.
- To create support mechanisms for the inclusion of refugees’ heritage into the sphere of identity and belonging of the host country.
- To foster mutual interplay among communities in order to incorporate refugees’ heritage into the heritage of the receiving society.

- To advance the status and cultural capital of refugees by providing them with cultural experiences that encourage consciousness-raising through interactive and innovative activities.
- To promote the use of intangible cultural heritage of refugees, in the forms of storytelling, songs, music, recipes, oral traditions, art, rituals, or festive events, among other- as a way of transmitting information about refugees.
- To use the memory of past forced displacement and migration in Europe as a resource to facilitate mutual understanding between forced displaced populations from past and present conflicts.

3.2. Foster the meaningful participation of refugees

- Reinforce refugees' participation in framing and implementing cultural heritage practices.
- Cultural heritage should be used by refugees as a political and cultural resource to ensure greater involvement in their communities and redefine their position or place in the host country.
- Local authorities should foster and strengthen connections between refugees and cultural and educational institutions such as museums, schools, libraries, memorial sites, and cultural centres.
- Educational and cultural institutions should set up co-creative projects in order to ensure an active and vivid approach to diverse cultural heritages.
- Develop digital technologies that help to implement activities related to the integration of asylum seekers into society.
- Promote the co-design of digital technologies based on a user-centred methodology to give voice to the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees.

- Use social media more effectively as a tool to promote interaction between people from different backgrounds and community development.

3.4. Improve the efficiency of public services available to better targeting refugee communities needs

- Develop an overall specific and multilevel strategy covering all areas involved in the inclusion of refugees is necessary.
- Improvement of the reception plans, simplification of the bureaucracy, and giving as much voice as possible to third parties involved in social services provision are some proposals for reform.
- There needs to be improved equal access to welfare services and benefits for refugees and asylum seekers and their families.

3.5. Improve the capacities of non-state actors supporting refugees

- NGOs are taking an increasing responsibility to provide refugees with the necessary access to society and to foster community participation and access to culture. The financial and human resources of NGOs should be increased to facilitate these tasks.
- Improving the capacity of non-governmental humanitarian organizations involved in providing protection and assistance to refugees goes hand in hand with the need to increase the role of NGOs as a factor in integration and social cohesion.

4. Conclusion

A number of factors can impact the integration of refugees into the host country. Certainly, the specific economic, social and geographic characteristics of the host countries and regions

and the size and composition of migrant communities often influence how integration policy is set and managed at the various levels.

The main results of this paper show the need for developing and implementing multilevel and multidimensional strategies that facilitate the increased participation of refugees in the cultural life of the host country. This implies that new policies must contribute to facilitating and promoting strategies for fostering inclusive approaches to cultural heritage and collective memory in order to strengthen social cohesion through fostering a two-way interaction between local communities and refugees.

5. References

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