



Migration Crisis: Communicating Refugee Integration Locally
20th October 2016

Speakers: Shaza Alsalmoni (Human Rights and Civil Society Researcher, UK), Mary-Laura Capodistria (Communication and Publicity Manager at METAdrasi, Greece) and Gabriella De Francesco (Refugee Coordinator for the city of Mechelen, Belgium).

Moderator: Alun Jones (Head of Press at the European Economic and Social Committee)

Governments at national, regional and local level face the challenge of providing refugees with access to healthcare, education, employment, housing, civic participation and, in some cases, a pathway to citizenship. Millions of refugees are now building new lives in their new homes. In order to help the integration process, governments need effective communication and engagement with refugees, but only a few have experience with and knowledge of the refugee audience. How should they approach this challenge?

Alun Jones opened the discussion by highlighting the crucial importance of learning the needs and habits of the target group in mapping out effective communication strategies. Issues such as communication habits, media usage and media consumption have to be considered. Cultural aspects must also be taken into account. Considering the knowledge gap faced by governments today, Mr Jones asked the speakers to present their suggestions as to how to meet this challenge.

As **Shaza Alsalmoni** has recently conducted qualitative research about communication with refugees in Germany together with WPP, she was the first speaker to map out the results of her research and bring forward concrete suggestions. The aim of her research project was to find out how governmental and third sector organisations can improve their services by taking into consideration the communication habits of this specific audience. It showed that refugees mostly rely on information from public authorities, but access to public information is often difficult. They have to struggle with various sources which provide contradictory information. Thus they also rely on information from their family, friends and opinion leaders. The research also shows a high level of social media consumption among refugees, although they believe that face to face communication is the best way to obtain relevant information.

Furthermore, Ms Alsalmoni reported that refugees would like to contribute to the design of new communication strategies, something that she considers would be a good way of better meeting their expectations. She explained that communication strategies should be tailored for each refugee group, since research shows that some designed elements are relevant for one community and irrelevant for others. Closing her presentation, she recommended that a specialized information agency be set up to involve refugees and their community leaders in the creation of a single public information channel adapted to the target group, as well as a social media account, preferably on Facebook, with translations of key messages in their native languages. Ms Alsalmoni added that

governments could better utilise the first court interview each refugee has to attend to disseminate basic information about the particular country. Civil society could also complement the communication effort by spreading relevant information through the word of mouth and exchanging best practice cases with public authorities.

Drawing from her experiences with METAdrasi, **Mary-Laura Capodistria** confirmed that new media channels (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and direct contact (for instance at public administrations, educational institutions or during events) are the best ways to communicate refugee integration locally. As such, she encouraged public authorities and civil society to promote intercultural dialogue and activities. She also considered storytelling a useful tool but emphasised the importance of protecting refugees' personal rights. Despite the effectiveness of storytelling she cautioned against urging people to share their story, as it might be hurtful to them.

She also recommended focusing on quality rather than quantity of publications. In her daily work she has positive experiences of cooperation with selected sensitive journalists. Her whole team and the refugees themselves work as multipliers of messages. She also referred to stories about active citizenship as an effective tool which should be promoted more. She advised that constant media monitoring is necessary in order to detect misleading information which could prove harmful to local communication strategy, applied with respect to refugees.

To tackle the challenges inherent in delivery of efficient communication to foster refugee integration, Ms. Capodistria finally called on our capacity to put ourselves in the refugees' position, to listen, to get to know them and to give them a voice. She pointed out that communication must always be mutual, free from stereotypes, consistent, clear, friendly, and always conscious of the meaning of images and symbols for other cultures.

Finally, **Gabriella De Francesco** presented her experience as a refugee coordinator in Mechelen, a Belgian city of 85 000 habitants, which is also home to around 200 refugees. She considered that the most effective way to communicate to refugees to be the ability to multiply information and avoid ambiguity. Refugees need to be addressed with clearly recognisable words and symbols. Social and cultural activities are also useful fora for intercultural exchange and dissemination of information. She called for the use of common sense in mapping communication strategies and agreed in many points with the previous speakers.

Following these presentations, **Alun Jones** opened the floor to questions and comments from the audience. The debate that followed confirmed that integration is a multifaceted issue, with several contributors expressing worries and pointing to drawbacks. Language skills were identified as a crucial element for successful integration, alongside the possibility of finding work. It was widely agreed that both civil society and the refugees themselves should be engaged more in the process of communication of integration by governments. While different Member States take different approaches to tackling this challenge, cooperation on research and best practice sharing would undoubtedly be helpful.

Mr Jones then closed the session by summarising the main ideas. He noted that humanity must be the starting point for all approaches; that communication is one of the most important drivers for integration, but that its tools must be improved by involving more relevant stakeholders; that governments at all levels would benefit from shared research and experience from across Europe; and that effective communication can not only make refugees' lives easier but can also make them feel warmly welcomed to their new homes.