

## Migration crisis: communicating refugee integration locally

### Working with and for refugees and migrants Communicating Support to Unaccompanied & Separated Children

Hello, I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in this challenging workshop.

I work for METAdrasi, an NGO founded in 2010 with the aim to fill long standing gaps in the reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Greece.

Among my colleagues there are over 300 interpreters in 37 different languages. Most of the interpreters, and some of the administrative staff of METAdrasi, are refugees or migrants themselves.

In our multi-cultural team each one is different, but we share the same values and principles in our everyday lives.

We recruit our interpreters via the social media, as well as by distribution of posters & leaflets in popular locations (as you see on screen).

So, after three years of working **with** refugees and migrants **for** refugees and migrants, I have a few suggestions, in regard to communicating with them. In making this list I also consulted my multi-national colleagues as well as the greek language teachers who consulted their students, so **I have included their own views about how they would like to be addressed:**

- before you address them, **put yourselves in their shoes**. These people are just like you and me, only more vulnerable. Imagine being in the same position in a foreign country.
- **hear what they have to say**. Communication is a two way street.
- **get to know them**: their beliefs, traditions, norms, culture
- **avoid stereotyping**
- **don't underestimate them**

The fact that they might not speak our language doesn't mean that they are not intelligent. They have already proven their endurance, strength and determination, by surviving conditions we wouldn't even dare to think of and by re-building their life from scratch.

- **make sure there is consistency between words and deeds** As long as they feel misinformed and disappointed, they will not be willing to hear anything from any authority. Their desperation might sooner or later turn into justified rage.
- **be careful with your tone of voice.** Respect in order to be respected.
- **be frank and honest with them.** Half a truth equals a lie. Don't tell them anything unless you can provide all the pieces of information.
- have an absolutely **clear and straightforward** message, expressed as **simply** as possible. Avoid the use of complicated terminology.
- **use images and symbols.** Images may speak louder than words, but you have to be very careful and take into account other cultures' particularities

Example no1: when we invite our team to parties, we avoid using images that indicate alcohol (of course we don't mention alcohol!), because some people, for religious reasons, might be offended or think that this party is not suitable for them.

Example no2: I remember a story from my advertising days, years ago: an agency was advertising a medical product, so they were using a series of three images, placed in horizontal order, showing at first a man suffering, then the man taking the medicine and at the last image the man being cured and happy. They thought "why not launch this campaign abroad". People in Arabic-speaking countries, trained as they are to read from right to left, were given exactly the opposite message: they saw a healthy man taking the medicine and getting ill!

Also, **focus on the common elements rather than the differences**

What I mostly think is important, is to give these people **voice and freedom of expression and promote intercultural dialogue.**

Let me tell you about a project we realized:

To celebrate Mother Tongue Day, we asked our colleagues to send texts in their language, translated also in Greek: a part of a poem or a literary work, a popular saying, whatever inspired them. We asked Graphic Design students to design posters with these multi-lingual texts. The result was the impressive group work of over 100 people that illustrated

culture from all over the world. We presented 120 selected posters in an exhibition and via an e-book.

## **Now, allow me to focus on two of our projects for the unaccompanied & separated children and tell you how we dealt with their communication needs & issues**

Today, due to closed borders, more than 3,500 registered unaccompanied and separated children are trapped in Greece, while many of them are not receiving proper accommodation, care and protection.

In order to offer support to these children, METAdrasi developed in 2015 two groundbreaking projects, bringing to action, for the first time in Greece, Guardianship and Foster Care. These two projects are linked and interacting, as the Guardians remain the children's point of reference for as long as they are hosted in a foster family.

In the context of these projects, our team communicated with the children with the support of our interpreters, but we discovered many ways to communicate beyond words, as you see on screen.

### **How did we communicate the projects?**

#### **The challenge:**

- Unaccompanied & separated children are the most vulnerable among refugees & migrants  
These projects will affect the rest of their lives
- Our goals were to let the public know more about these children and get involved. We didn't want people to pity the displaced children, but to understand them and embrace them.  
We also needed to recruit our first candidate guardians to be trained and attract attention of families, preferably with the same cultural background as the children, to offer hospitality and care.
- We have responsibility to protect the children's personal details (never show their face, tell their name or give information that may lead to identification)
- Problems: racism, xenophobia, public misinformation:

“why protect foreign children and not the Greek ones”, “these people bring illnesses”, “they are fanatic and a future threat to national security”, “why should NGOs spend the state’s money”. We’ve heard all that. Regarding funding, these projects were not funded by Greece, but by EEA Grants (Norway, Lichtenstein and Iceland) so we had even more reasons to communicate the source of funding.

### **How we addressed the challenge:**

Of course, we used all the usual means: website, social media, multi-lingual material, tvcs, cooperation with the media (on screen you see a part of our international publicity).

### **But we also interacted with local communities:**

- We organized events in the 3 islands that receive the greatest number of arrivals, as well as in Athens, in order to inform, discuss, mobilize.
- At the end of the first stage of the Guardianship project, we organized an event where, besides the general project’s info, each one of our first 13 Guardians presented a case of a child, not using their real names, and after taking the child’s permission. (One of the children, a 14-year old boy from Syria, gave his consent on condition that his guardian would declare publicly that Real Madrid is the best team ever!) Story telling touched the audience. Next day, all major media in Greece were talking about this project!
- We also staged a theater play: Members of our team presented children’s stories from our actions.
- As we used children’s drawings a lot in the social media for story telling, we presented them in an exhibition, along with informational material on the way these children express their feelings, dreams, deepest fears and hopes through their drawings.

Finally, I would like to mention some **word of advice** based on **lessons learned** out of these communication actions:

- Stick to your principles: give priority to protection (of sensitive information and people) over publicity  
Story telling is extremely powerful, but you have to be very careful about personal details that might lead to identification or exposure of a person. Don't urge people to tell their story, it might be hurtful to them. Don't share it, unless they are ok with it.
- Cooperate with selected journalists that guarantee protection of sensitive information.  
In the same time, keep a distance from media that just want to "sell" children's stories and are not interested in the essence of the situation. This leads to a more focused, high standard publicity.
- Also, on the occasion of events/press releases, call journalists on the phone to let them know how exciting or important this is. We were surprised to see how much our enthusiasm was shared by the media.
- Not too much PR, don't over-advertize what you do, don't harass the media with trivial announcements:

When our president Lora Pappa was awarded the North-South Prize of the Council of Europe, it was to our advantage that we hadn't been boasting around about our work, but had been dedicated to our goal.

- Constantly monitor the internet for publications that might be misleading or negative – react instantly. Example: a lady followed the families' information meeting concerning the foster care project. With the best of intentions, she shared on facebook information about how the project is being implemented. It was shared by thousands in no time. Bad news: it contained misleading information that threatened our relations and cooperation with the district attorneys, so we had to act fast and try to trace all posts.

On the other hand, sometimes accusations or hate speech are so ridiculous that they are not worth bothering about. If they reveal misinformation, it is worth having a chat with the person expressing them.

- Communication is a team work - I always consult my colleagues involved in a project in order to have each one's input before a message is published. Better to know their opinion before than after. At the end of this presentation, you may read the names of people I consulted in this case.

Furthermore, engage your team in activities and events. Invite them to support the social media, explain to them why and how they may use the social media responsibly.

- Communicate using the international language of all forms of art (you saw some examples)
- Tiring thought it might be, make sure to answer politely to mails and personal messages from refugees and migrants, even if they ask for all kinds of things. Don't disappoint these people. Understand that they feel lost and need a helping hand. To them, even a kind message or a helpful advice means a lot. They will never forget your kindness!

### **Here is how they communicate with us:**

A child wrote to us in Farsi "I don't know in what language to thank you, but I want you to know that I will never forget you".

In the child's drawing the word "ΑΓΑΠΗ" means "love" in Greek...

We receive a lot of love from these people - and this keeps as going!

Thank you!