



Project
“INTEGRATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION
sharing best practices within 5 European context”

TRANSNATIONAL FINAL ANALYSIS

When, in the summer of 2005, we thought of proposing the “Integration through Participation” project to the European Commission, we were motivated by the belief that if we really want to transform the phenomenon of immigration into an opportunity for the growth and development of our society and the societies of immigrants’ countries of origin, the first thing we need to do is to make an effort to change our perspective: we need to try to view immigration, as well as the migrants who are increasingly populating our cities, not just as a problem, but above all as a resource for the economy, for culture and for society.

We therefore decided not to focus our attention directly on problems related to housing, employment, work permits, integration in schools, discrimination, or on the delivery of services by authorities, but rather to study how the active participation of migrants within the social fabric, through their involvement in associations and community projects, can contribute to the development of more advanced solutions to the problems themselves, and to the integration of migrants as fully entitled citizens of our cities.

Accordingly, we also decided not to carry out a standard academic research project, but to set up five separate paths of action-research in five different European cities, using a methodology that allowed associations, migrant communities, local authorities, local subjects, to be actively involved in a process of learning, mutual recognition, relationship-building, shared knowledge and projects for the future.

Thus, over one year, through interviews as well as collective and group-based work situations, we met and became thoroughly acquainted with over 100 migrant associations and groups, public bodies, individuals who were responsible for services, schools, local associations and cultural organizations ... from Madrid, from the municipalities in the outskirts of Milan, from Tübingen, Thessaloniki and from Dublin.

Notwithstanding the substantial differences between the specific research experiences in terms of diverse situations and local conditions, such as the evolution and the characteristics of migration in each country [that were presented in detail in the five national reports of the research conducted at a local level], we witnessed a very rich panorama in which the positive and important role of migrant organizations, and the participation of migrants in local associations and initiatives, are seen to be crucial for the process of integration.



Firstly, migrant associations possess a type of knowledge that is the result of direct experience and stems from their motivations, life conditions, aspirations, needs, problems, perspectives and country of origin. The associations also provide communal settings for the development and maturing of knowledge and for the understanding of the culture, mechanisms and the rules of the host society. In a certain sense, we see them as “experts”, whose experience can help migrants to understand and fit into the host society, but can also encourage that society to learn more about the characteristics, needs and potential of immigrants, rather than just relying on stereotypes and prejudice.

In all the contexts studied, migrant organizations carry out a number of very important activities for the integration of immigrants, though they have varying levels of structure, ability and organization: they provide the security of a relationship network, as well as the moral and practical support it entails; they offer help in overcoming problems linked to arriving in a new country; their knowledge of legislation, procedures and services allows them to offer guidance and to allow people to take advantage of the existing possibilities; and when they reach a certain size and a ‘good’ level of organization, they carry out projects and services for migrants directly, attempting to address their most important problems and needs (learning a new language, maintaining their language of origin, counselling services, legal support, school support, educational activities, work training, job mediation...) through self-financement, donations and, where possible, through government grants for specific programs and projects.

In addition, all the associations and organizations that we encountered organize a wide range of activities that often stem from the need to preserve their own cultural, ethnic, national and religious identity. Driven by the willpower and the efforts made to promote and demonstrate their best aspects to society, these activities finally lead to a meeting or comparison with the host society and to the difficult process of reshaping a new and more complex identity for both groups: immigrants and hosts. Some of the activities carried out by the associations are: schools for their language and culture of origin; bilingual schools and courses; cultural events, festivals, shows; the study and promotion of music, literature, dance and art; cultural centres. Even more importantly and especially where multi-ethnic associations are concerned, they act as instruments for the sharing, shaping and enhancement of the most broad-based type of migrant identity

By organizing responses to individual needs at a collective level, the associations are often the main instruments that make migrants ‘visible’ and allow the nature of their problems to be recognized by the host society, and particularly by those responsible for defining and ensuring the success of integration policies. Migrant organizations have an important representative role and offer immigrants the opportunity to participate actively in shaping the choices that affect them as well as the host society, an opportunity that migrants would otherwise not have. The organizations give immigrants a ‘face’ and a ‘name’, and turn individual needs into collective issues, or issues of general interest, especially in contexts where any form of voter participation, even at a local level, is not allowed.



What is clear however, is that the quality of their contribution to the integration process is closely linked to two main factors: firstly, the ability to use their experience and knowledge capital to approach their situation and problems in a way that is not circumscribed or self-referential, but rather open to the contributions and perspectives of other social actors; secondly, the possibility of being considered as an equal partner, with legitimate and valuable perspectives, in contexts and processes that allow exchange, interaction and cooperation with the other local institutional and non-institutional subjects (stakeholders).

The best and most numerous examples of the elements that we recognized, analyzed and decided to present as Best Practices were thus provided by these local research experiences, which demonstrate some of the many different ways in which integration can be achieved through participation: all of them stress the size of the networks, both in their methodological introductions and in the objectives they have set themselves.

Thus in Germany, the instances of Best Practices that we identified and analyzed are the new and innovative processes of dialogue and cooperation between the immigrant associations and the local agencies concerned with labour market integration, which were initiated by our German partner in Tuebingen thanks to the INTEGRATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION project. This dialogue, which has allowed immigrant associations to be considered as 'knowledge carriers', has led to the creation of new tools and strategies.

In Ireland, a country that has witnessed an exponential growth in immigration in the last five to six years, and where for the past eighteen years the electoral system has allowed universal participation in local elections, regardless of nationality, we identified the "TallaZens Project" as an example of Best Practices. This initiative was based on a joint cooperation between the communities, the migrant organizations in the area of Tallaght (Dublin), the Municipal Authority and other local groups. Through a process of training and empowerment, this initiative has allowed the representatives of the different migrant communities to become agents of effective integration for their communities, and has helped them to develop a meaningful relationship with the local institutions, the agencies and groups in the area.

In the province of Milan, we believed that the Intercultural Committees and the Foreigners' Committees were the examples of Best Practices in the Italian context. By creating local networks capable of planning, the committees succeeded in bringing about practical instances of integration in their own local communities, in which the migrant associations have had a central role. Though they are small, these instances are important because they demonstrate a new way of thinking about integration.

In Spain, the Best Practices were the integration policies. Through specific plans for the integration of migrant citizens, both the national and regional institutions give the migrant associations important planning and operational functions, as well as the financial resources necessary to support them.



These policies therefore properly recognize the importance of the migrant associations' participation at an institutional level and provide a further example of how network-based operations can be viewed as effective tool for the promotion of integration.

In Greece, where the development of integration policies and services is weak, migrants and their organizations manage to devise and execute projects thanks to their very ability to create networks, collaborations and spaces for participation that also involve institutional actors. We identified the Commedia project, (which led to the creation of a multicultural community radio in Thessaloniki), and the Migrant Women's network of Northern Greece as instances of Best Practices, and as examples of practical participatory initiatives that have managed to develop in spite of the particularly difficult context.

Investigating these experiences has confirmed our belief that it is possible to consider migrants as a resource for local development and for integration, that their associations can be involved in the planning networks of their host communities and that cooperation between migrant associations and other social actors leads to real results in terms of integration.

However, the research and the dialogue with many of the local contexts has revealed that clearly, all too often, things don't work that well.

Indeed, the organizations that we met with often struggle to give their own activities a project-based perspective and fail to access institutional as well as non-institutional networks and circuits, whose input and cooperation are essential elements for the associations' growth and development.

The barriers that most of the organizations seem to encounter involve both the fragility that often characterizes migrant associations, as well as the deficiencies that in many cases make immigration and integration policies and services weak and inadequate.

Thus, while it is true that the scarce or insufficient knowledge that many associations have of the institutional political system can make it hard for them to access opportunities and resources, it is just as true that institutions rarely play an active part in promoting that knowledge.

Similarly, while the associations exhibit a certain tendency to be inwardly-focused and to remain dedicated to 'internal' needs and activities (e.g. migrant solidarity), in many cases the host societies, the institutional representatives and the social actors show a corresponding lack of interest in getting to know the associations and entering into a relationship with them.

This lack of interest is often a result of the inability to view migrant citizens and their associations as resources: the stereotypes and, in some cases, the racism that characterize the cultural climate of some of the contexts continue to portray migrants as the cause of problems and tensions.

If they are inadequately supported, even associations that succeed in becoming recognized and appreciated by the local community (through their activities) find it hard to establish project-based relationships with other social actors.

Language barriers and (sometimes deep) cultural differences make cooperation difficult. Assigning roles and functions, coordinating timelines and people, setting and meeting deadlines, understanding restrictions, ascertaining approval and managing conflict are all characteristic elements of a project-based approach and become even more complex when placed in a multicultural context.

Thus, the relationships created by the associations and the individual local actors run the risk of failing to deliver concrete or visible results, due to the absence of strong motivation and support from the institutions and from the non-profit sector.

From their perspective, institutions, especially local ones, may possess the political willpower, but are generally not able to guarantee adequate support: thus, when there are no national integration policies to support direct local action, the institutional initiatives run the risk of appearing fragmented and incoherent. In addition, the available economic resources often prove to be insufficient for the associations' needs.

We must also not forget that migrant associations are able to carry out their activities mainly because of the voluntary nature of their members' work, and because the organizations are self-financing.

Finally, in most of the associations, the skills and abilities that are necessary for the development of those organizations are lacking. These elements limit their ability to adopt a more proactive approach or to innovate their strategies and their programs.

What then are the elements, processes and conditions that allow migrant associations to unlock their potential to aid the integration process?

Firstly, we believe it is important that migrant associations, and their representatives in particular, realize that they need to increase their own planning and organizational abilities, and their knowledge and expertise regarding policies, services, administration, as well as the initiatives and programs led by other groups and local subjects. The organizations that do realize this have the basis for an effective analysis of the deficiencies, resources, objectives and strategies for development. This realization, together with the willingness and desire to foster relationships, project-based collaborations, cooperative partnerships with other agencies, authorities, services, local groups and other migrant associations, (as opposed to restricting themselves to an inwardly-focussed approach), is a fundamental condition for the associations to become effective vehicles of integration. Therefore, from this perspective, adopting an extroverted approach and reaching towards the outside world is crucial, because it allows them to make a difference even in the absence of, or irrespective of institutional areas of cooperation and consultation.



The creation and the participation in territorial or theme-oriented networks, the search for project-based cooperation, the exchange of information and skills between migrant associations and authorities of the Third Sector, are the practical elements essential for the growth of migrant associations, and for them to be recognized as important and necessary interlocutors by the institutions.

On the other hand however, we must not forget the necessary external conditions that need to be created or improved.

It is here that government bodies, the Third Sector, voluntary work, and business all adopt fundamental roles.

We need to think about the following: firstly, the existence of a clear institutional framework, a way of planning public policies that includes the fundamental active participation of migrants and their organizations in defining strategies and interventions; secondly, the promotion of training programmes for the representatives of organizations and migrant communities, so as to allow them to behave and to be recognized as qualified agents that can interact with the host society and the local subjects; thirdly, an increase in, or the creation of, specific subsidies (at a local, national and European level) to support integration-oriented projects and services devised and managed by migrant organizations; fourthly, the organization of 'refresher courses' for people in charge of public and private (non-profit) services, which would allow an exchange of knowledge/experiences with migrants, adopting a mainstreaming approach.

We need to think about Third Sector administrative bodies, NGOs and community development agencies becoming mediators and facilitators, in order to help migrants and their organizations not only through the direct delivery of services, but also by supporting their organizational development and involving them as project partners.

We need to think about the value of directing the social responsibility of businesses and foundations toward migrant organizations, or towards the networks that involve a partnership between immigrant associations and civil society organizations, in order to increase the often mediocre availability of public funds, with a view to local community development.

Finally, we need to think about the importance of promoting all the initiatives that can help to highlight the positive aspects of immigration, different cultures and migrant organization activities, in order to reach the widest possible audience and raise awareness of the significance and positive nature of different processes of integration (events, radio, new media, newspapers, awards, promoting migrant entrepreneurship...).

As far as we are concerned, we hope that the action taken so far in Dublin, Thessaloniki, Tuebingen, Madrid and Milan, together with the dissemination of the project's results and the Best Practices identified, may provide a stimulus for all the subjects involved and for many others, towards the activation of processes that can effectively promote integration through the active participation of immigrant citizens.

