



Engaging Migrant and Refugee-led Organizations in Policymaking in Europe

Executive Summary

The engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes is important because all people have an equal right to have their voices heard in an inclusive democracy. It is also essential because their inclusion helps to ensure that the policies reflect the needs and realities of communities, increasing the effectiveness of the policies. These benefits are increasingly recognised in EU action plans and tentative steps towards improving engagement are currently being taken. However, recent studies show that this engagement is still low, inconsistent and often superficial.

There are many barriers to the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes. These include: only non-binding legal requests to include migrants and refugees; a lack of knowledge about and trust in public policymaking processes; their involvement being seen as an add-on; and organizations being unaware of how they can get involved. Refugees are often seen as victims unable to promote change and migrants and refugees are often talked about negatively in political discussions.

Overcoming these challenges requires concerted effort from a wide variety of actors. This process has already begun and this policy brief

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The Network for Dialogue

Empowering Interreligious and Intercultural Action for the Social Inclusion of Refugees and Migrants.



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highlights some examples of recommended approaches. Among the significant tools that can aid this process are intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which can help stakeholders understand each other's needs, interests and ideas and hence aid the development of more inclusive and effective public policymaking processes.

Local, national and EU policymakers play a key role in facilitating these improvements. However, the brief argues that due to their resources, experiences and influence at the local, national and international level, religious organizations, congregations and leaders can also contribute significantly to these essential changes.

The identities, interests and skills of migrants and refugees are unique and varied and many are experts in their fields, meaning their consultation would be useful. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an important example of the need to work with healthcare experts from minority groups to ensure the well-being and safety of everyone. Likewise, new arrivals will have different identities and deserve some measure of representation in the public sphere. Migrants and refugees should be included in the processes that shape their lives – they should be welcomed into discussions that involve us all.

This policy brief was developed for and further discussed at the 3rd European Policy Dialogue Forum on Refugees and Migrants in Lisbon, Portugal, on 19-21 October 2021, organised by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), the Network for Dialogue and the European Council of Religious Leaders/ Religions for Peace Europe (ECRL/RfP), and supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

Key Recommendations:

Policymakers in the EU should:

- Map migrant and refugee-led organizations in an accessible database to enhance visibility, engagement, inclusion and cooperation.
- Develop strategies, structures and action plans to ensure continuous, meaningful and impactful engagement with diverse migrant and refugee-led organizations aiming at making them co-creators.

National policymakers should:

- Make migrant and refugee organizations full partners in the development of strategies and structures tackling issues in this area. Beyond addressing issues of integration, include representatives from these communities in wider policy engagements.
- Support capacity building of migrants and refugees and their organizations, aiming to equip them with the necessary skills, knowledge, trust and confidence.
- Make funding available for migrant and refugee-led organizations.

Local policymakers should:

- Support capacity building of refugees and migrants and their organizations, seeking to provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills, confidence and trust.
- Develop strategies, structures and action plans to ensure continuous, meaningful and impactful engagement with diverse migrant and refugee-led organizations aiming to make them co-creators.
- Make funding available for migrant and refugee-led organizations.

Religious organizations, congregations and leaders should:

- Facilitate information sharing with migrant and refugee-led organizations about public policymaking processes and how to engage in them.
- Provide guidance, support and mentoring to migrant and refugee-led organizations and offer spaces for dialogue and sharing of experiences.
- Advocate on behalf of, and along with, migrant and refugee-led organizations for their inclusion in policymaking processes.

All policymakers and religious organizations, congregations and leaders should:

- Use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations and enhance mutual understanding between stakeholders.

Introduction

The engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes in Europe

The importance of the engagement of migrants and refugees in policymaking is now widely recognised in EU action plans.¹ Tentative steps towards implementation are underway such as establishing a group of experts from a migrant background to contribute to the development and implementation of policies on migration, asylum and integration. However, despite recent advocacy from refugee and refugee-led organizations² a recent study found very little involvement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes.³ The European Migrant Advisory Board's consultation reached a similar conclusion and found that not only was there little engagement, but the “practice of tokenism, i.e. making only symbolic efforts to be inclusive to migrants and refugees, is widespread⁴”.

Local, national and European policymakers are in an important position to improve engagement by helping organizations overcome the many barriers they face across Europe. These barriers are found at the institutional level and also at the organizational level placing religious organizations, some of which are already engaged in policymaking processes, in positions to help overcome these obstacles.



“They are missing the point here, because they are bringing a lot of concepts and policies that do not work. If you don't include me, you give me something that will never work!”⁵

— Participant in recent study on migrant-led advocacy across Europe.

1 Recent examples include the EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 that emphasised the importance of promoting their active participation in consultative and decision-making processes and the Council of Europe's Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe (2021–2025) that recommended engagement with refugees and migrants at local level to enhance local policy making.

2 Recent examples include the Network for Refugees Voices declaration that called for the inclusion of refugees “at every level of design and implementation of refugee-response programs” and the inaugural Global Summit of Refugees that aimed at establishing a platform where international organizations, states and civil society organizations can engage refugees in international policymaking processes. Harley, T. and Hobbs, H. (2020): The Meaningful Participation of Refugees in Decision-Making Processes: Questions of Law and Policy. In: International Journal of Refugee Law, 32:2, pp. 200–226, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeaa010>

3 European Website on Integration (2021): Mapping key migrant-led organizations across the EU. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/feature/mapping-key-migrant-led-organizations-across-the-eu>

4 European Migrant Advisory Board (2019): Ask the People – A consultation of migrants and refugees. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/ask-the-people-a-consultation-of-migrants-and-refugees>

5 P. 15 in Badran, M. and Stoker, T. (2019): Migrant-led Advocacy Across Europe: Challenges and Opportunities. European Programme for Migration and Integration. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/migrant-led-advocacy-across-europe?lang=fr>

Current challenges to engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes

Some of the challenges to engagement of these organizations in public policymaking processes are linked to context-specific factors such as national bureaucratic systems and processes that demarcate how refugees and migrants can organise and engage.

Other more general challenges include:

1. There is currently no international legal requirement to engage migrants and refugees, but only non-binding international legal instruments acknowledging the importance of this engagement. Hence, how and to what degree civil society in general and specifically migrant and refugee-led organizations can engage in public policymaking processes varies significantly and the space for engagement is currently shrinking in some countries.
2. A lack of general political education means that like many others, these organizations lack knowledge about public policymaking processes and how they can get involved. A general lack of trust in political processes and institutions and few role models such as prominent politicians with a migrant or refugee background also negatively impacts the engagement in public policymaking processes.
3. Engagement of civil society in general, and migrant and refugee-led organizations in particular, is viewed merely as an add-on, to win votes or tick boxes. Furthermore, the negative tone of political discussions about migrants and refugees and the dominant narrative that views refugees as passive victims discourages and limits the potential for migrants and refugees to act as agents of change.
4. The dominant emergency approach to migrants and refugees that focuses on their immediate basic needs and making their stay temporary also hinders their engagement in long-term political and democratic processes.
5. It is difficult to ensure representativeness of a wide and diverse variety of needs and interests among migrants and refugees. This is the result of the tendency of some migrant and refugee-led organizations to focus on the interests and needs of a particular religious or ethnic group.
6. The impact of power struggles with others on policymaking processes and how it influences the impact of the inclusion of migrant and refugee-led organizations in these processes. Obstacles include situations where migrants' and refugees' interests conflict with other stakeholders' interests, which are considered more important, or situations where the issues that are most pertinent to migrants and refugees are not on the political agenda.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:

Voicify

Voicify⁶ is a project that aims to change the current narrative that sees young refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, exiled and undocumented as passive recipients of national and EU policies and to foster their full participation in public policymaking processes.

The project trains and mentors young refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, exiled and undocumented activists enabling them to build and strengthen their own organizations and their political power. This is done through a continuous online capacity-building programme that focuses on participation, human rights, organizational development and advocacy. Furthermore, the project also forms a powerful network of supporters and allies.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:

MASI

The Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI⁷) is a platform that was established to protest against Direct Provision centres (the Irish asylum seekers accommodation system) in 2014⁸. MASI was set up to pursue freedom, justice and dignity for all asylum seekers and to work to end direct provision and secure the right to work and education and oppose deportation. It was formed after meetings, one of which was held in the Methodist Church in Dublin, were held with asylum seekers to identify the main issues they faced. It was also established in a response to migrants and refugees not being properly represented in a working group that focused on these issues and that later developed the McMahon report. One of the founders, Lucky Khambule, explains, “In the first announcement of the working group, there was not a single asylum seeker in the group, and then they appointed one person who was a former asylum seeker who was already NGO-ized and was not representing us as asylum seekers; he was representing his organization and was just put there for them to show they were including us...In MASI we were opposed to this working group, because they refused to accept us as part of the working group. They didn’t let us, those who were affected by their decisions, be part of the decision-making. The government, together with the NGOs, were looking at us as noisemakers, which we were of course, we were talking about our lives. We wanted proper representation”.

In 2017, MASI started the Right to Work Campaign to improve the situation for those waiting for applications to be processed. After further campaigning and raising awareness, the Irish Minister for Justice asked MASI to join the IPAS Advisory Group. Since then, the Irish Supreme Court has ruled that the ban on working while asylum seekers are waiting for claims to be processed is a breach of the constitution. Asylum seekers gained the right to work in June 2018. However, a recent research report concluded that employment choices

6 <https://www.voicify-eu.org/why-voicify>

7 <https://www.masi.ie/>

8 Listen to the personal experiences of Donna Vuma, Bulelani Mfaco and Evgeny Shtorn in this podcast Ireland's Direct Provision System: Donnah Vuma, Bulelani Mfaco and Evgeny Shtorn. <https://player.fm/series/first-thought/irelands-direct-provision-system-donnah-vuma-bulelani-mfaco-and-evgeny-shtorn>

9 <https://www.masi.ie/>

are limited for protection applicants and refugees¹⁰.

The importance of engaging migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes

The involvement of migrants, asylum applicants and refugees is increasingly seen as a prerequisite to meaningful policymaking. From a human rights point of view, it can be argued that human beings, regardless of their citizenship, should have an equal right to have their voices heard and taken into account. From a democratic perspective, it has also been argued that “the normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes”¹¹. Including migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes allows them to present and defend their ideas and claims, potentially influence the opinions of others and negotiate their interests which may change in the process.

Involving such organizations in public policymaking processes in meaningful and impactful ways results in policies that better reflect the needs and realities in communities, and hence their design and implementation are more effective¹².

“We are experts of our lives! ... I think it’s actually unique and authentic when you get to hear from the community itself.”¹³

”

Participant in a recent study on migrant-led advocacy across Europe.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:

Vantaa, Finland

Protection Applicants in Ireland. <http://doras.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Doras-Getting-Right-to-Work-e-copy.pdf>

11 P. 5–6 in Young, I. (2006): Inclusion and Democracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12 European Commission (2020): EU’s Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/the-ec-presents-its-eu-action-plan-on-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027>

13 P. 14 in Badran, M. and Stoker, T. (2019): Migrant-led Advocacy Across Europe: Challenges and Opportunities. European Programme for Migration and Integration. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/migrant-led-advocacy-across-europe?lang=fr>

With more than 200,000 residents, Vantaa¹⁴, a municipality in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, is one of Finland’s most populous cities. It also has the highest proportion of migrants at 17%. Since 2002 the municipality has had a Multicultural Programme that includes a City Integration Programme aiming at integrating migrants into the local workforce, education system and society. Recent new arrivals have included asylum seekers as well as highly educated students and migrants.

To advance its integration efforts, Vantaa joined the URBACT ARRIVAL CITIES network to improve relationships between local authorities and organizations working on integration and used the URBACT¹⁵ methodology to design a migrant-focused Integrated Action Plan as part of the city’s Multicultural Plan (2018–2022). The URBACT methodology provides a comprehensive framework for designing and implementing local policies in a participative and integrated way with a special focus on how to engage multiple stakeholders and share knowledge throughout the action-planning process. Local coordinator of the Vantaa project, Margarita Sakilayan-Latvala, explained, “The URBACT methodology gave us a framework to ensure that strategic planning is cooperative, based on co-creation and participatory approaches to make sure that all the voices are heard, including those of grassroots, NGOs and residents¹⁶”.

An URBACT Local Group was formed based on a comprehensive actor mapping exercise where priority was given to local migrant-led organizations. In addition to group meetings, it also held four consultation events where representatives from local associations met and discussed issues such as how to involve volunteers in welcoming and integration activities and how to improve cooperation between local organizations, authorities and other stakeholders. Vantaa also took inspiration from practices that had been successful in other member cities of the ARRIVAL CITIES’ network.

14 <https://base.citego.org/docs/urbact-citystories-vantaa.pdf>

15 <https://urbact.eu/toolbox-home>

16 <https://base.citego.org/docs/urbact-citystories-vantaa.pdf>

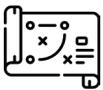
Recommendations

How and to what degree migrant and refugee-led organizations can engage in public policymaking processes at the local, national and international levels varies considerably across Europe. Therefore, it is not possible to develop a framework or model applicable to all levels and all countries. However, it is still important to highlight some recommendations that policymakers and religious organizations, congregations and leaders should consider when attempting to improve the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organization in public policymaking processes.

How EU policymakers can help improve the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes:



Mapping migrant and refugee-led organizations: building on the experience of, and data from, the Mapping of key migrant-led organizations across the EU project, EU policymakers should create a database of migrant and refugee-led organizations to facilitate information sharing and enhance their visibility, engagement, inclusion and cooperation.



Develop strategies, structures and action plans to improve engagement: as recommended in the EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 policymakers should develop and implement strategies, platforms and action plans that will enable migrant and refugee-led organizations to engage continuously, meaningfully and impactfully in public policy making processes. Inclusion must be ensured through the entire policymaking process and policymakers must continue to reflect on lessons learnt and ways to strengthen engagement. The aim should be for migrant and refugee-led organizations to become co-creators in public policymaking processes. EU policymakers must also ensure that migrant and refugee groups such as women, youth and LGBTQ+ are equitably represented. Finally, they should also use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations and enhance mutual understanding between stakeholders.

How policymakers at the national level can help improve the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes:



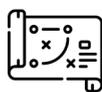
Legal provisions: national policymakers must make it a legal requirement to include migrants and refugees in relevant public policymaking processes. National policymakers must also change their emergency and temporary-focused approach to a long-term approach that focuses on integrating migrants and refugees and providing them with a permanent home and citizenship. This will encourage their engagement in long-term political and democratic processes.



Capacity building: national policymakers must support capacity building and equip migrants, refugees and their organizations with the necessary skills, knowledge, trust and confidence to enable them to engage effectively in policymaking processes. Furthermore, national policymakers must provide spaces for encounters and dialogue between all stakeholders ensuring that the capacity building is mutual. National policymakers should also make funding available for migrant and refugee-led organizations. In addition, they must also share information with these organizations about policy-making and legal frameworks – in particular any imminent policy developments that are pertinent to migrants and refugees should be provided in relevant languages.



Mapping migrant and refugee-led organizations: national policymakers must help policymakers in the EU identify migrant and refugee-led organizations within their authority.

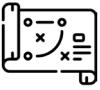


Develop strategies, structures and action plans to improve engagement: national policymakers must develop and implement strategies and platforms for inclusive and ongoing engagement with migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes. National policymakers must also establish and implement action plans for the meaningful and impactful inclusion of migrant and refugee-led organizations throughout the entire policymaking process. In addition, national policymakers should also continuously reflect on lessons learnt from including migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes. This includes reflecting critically on the degree to which existing processes and structures facilitate ongoing, meaningful and impactful engagement and how this can be improved. The aim should be to make migrant and refugee-led organizations co-creators in public policymaking processes. It is also important that national policymakers ensure that a wide variety of migrant and refugee-led organizations (including women, youth, LGBTQ+ etc. and the differences within and among these groups) are included. This may require engaging groups that have not yet formed a formal organization and using diaspora communities as a bridge to engage with newcomers. Finally, national policymakers should use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations and improve mutual understanding between stakeholders.

How policymakers at the local level can help improve the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes:



Capacity building: like their national counterparts, local policymakers must support capacity building of refugees and migrants and their organizations seeking to provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills, confidence and trust that are necessary for effective engagement in local policymaking processes. In addition, local policymakers must also facilitate spaces for encounters and dialogue between all local stakeholders including migrants and refugees to support mutual capacity building. Furthermore, local policymakers must also share information in relevant languages with migrant and refugee-led organizations regarding how they can get involved in public policymaking processes. Finally, local policymakers should make funding available for refugee and migrant-led organizations.



Develop strategies, structures and action plans to improve engage-

ment: local policymakers must develop and implement strategies and platforms that ensures inclusive, ongoing, meaningful and impactful engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policy-making processes. As recommend in the Council of Europe’s Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at the Local Level¹⁷, one of the ways this can be done is by establishing local consultative bodies consisting of migrant and refugee-led organizations which are supported by local authorities. Local policymakers must also create and implement action plans aiming to ensure ongoing, meaningful and impactful engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in the whole policymaking process. These action plans should include identifying relevant lessons learnt and a critical evaluation of the degree to which existing structures and processes allow migrant and refugee-led organizations to have a continuous meaningful impact on policymaking. In addition, local policymakers should aim to make migrant and refugee-led organizations co-creators in public policymaking processes. It is also important that local policymakers ensure representativeness and include the interests of specific groups such as women, youth and LGBTQ+. This may require helping these groups form an organization and using existing diaspora communities to establish contact with newcomers. Finally, local policymakers should use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations and improve mutual understanding between stakeholders.

How religious organizations, congregations and leaders can help improve the engagement of migrant and refugee-led organizations in public policymaking processes:



Information sharing: religious organizations, congregations and leaders should use religious spaces as hubs where information is shared with migrant and refugee-led organizations about public policymaking processes and how to engage in them. They should also use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate these conversations.



Guidance, support and sharing experiences: religious organizations, congregations and leaders should offer guidance, support and mentoring to migrant and refugee-led organizations that are, or would like to be, involved in public policymaking processes. They should also use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to enhance mutual understanding and engagement and share experiences of building platforms and engaging in public policymaking processes, especially concerning obstacles and how they have overcome them.



Advocacy, activism and allyship: religious organizations, congregations and leaders should also advocate on behalf of migrant and refugee-led organizations for their meaningful, consistent and impactful inclusion in all relevant public policymaking processes. This should include promoting and supporting the activism of others, especially the efforts of migrants and refugees.

17 <https://rm.coe.int/168007bd26>

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- **Policy Brief #1:** Supporting Teachers in the Use of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Inclusive Education for Refugees and Migrants
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- **Policy Brief #4:** Helping Migrants and Refugees Volunteer
- **Policy Brief #6:** Ensuring Migrant and Refugee Children's Access to Formal Education in Europe
- **Overview Document #1:** Overview Document on Policy Brief #4, #5 and #6



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