

How to Establish a Level Telling Field

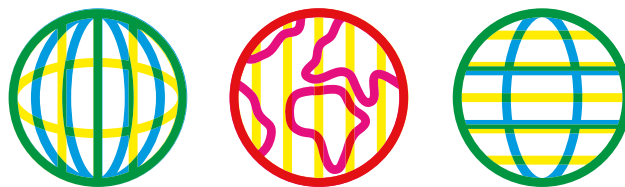
Introducing the Cross-Talk
Methodology (CTM)

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opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration



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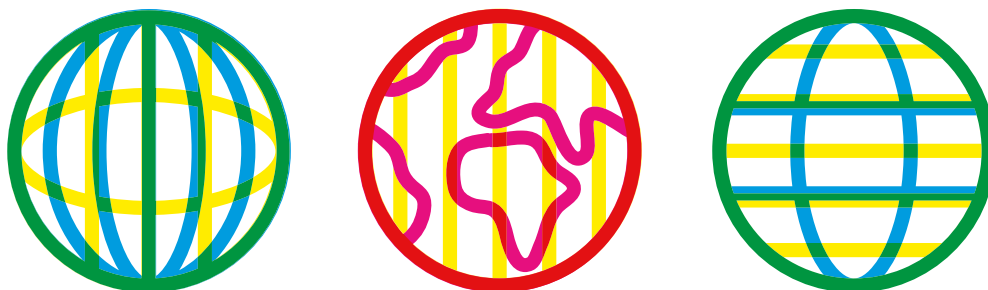
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Introducing the Cross-Talk Methodology (CTM)

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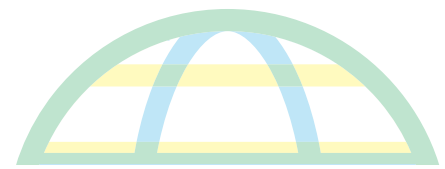
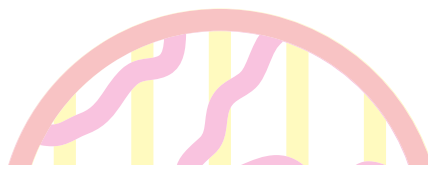
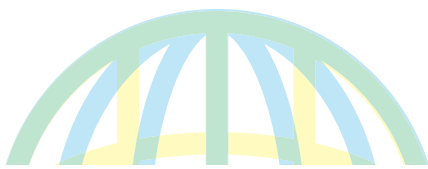
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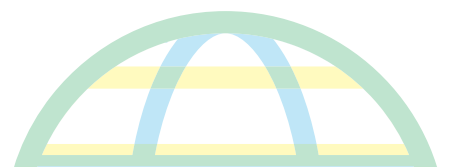
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Abstract

Migrant voices are underrepresented in migration debates. The OPPORTUNITIES project developed and implemented the Cross-Talk methodology (CTM) to create level telling fields, working toward a fair narrative on migration. This paper first presents the theoretical foundations of CTM, which is indebted to Participatory Action Research (PAR), outlining the basic principles and discussing the limits of the methodology. In section 3, the five-step process defined by CTM is explained in detail. This comprises a planning stage, interviews with migrants, the co-creation of stories based on the interviews, public events with migrants, stakeholders, and audiences, centered around a re-telling of migrant stories, and the exploitation of results, which may take various shapes, including art-based products, to initiate a new dialogue.



1. Introduction

How can level telling fields, introducing the idea of fair play to conversation and debate, be realized in practice? Taking its inspiration from the PAR-based toolkit created in an earlier project,¹ OPPORTUNITIES developed and implemented the Cross-Talks methodology. This is a format designed to initiate a dialogue between migrants and stakeholders, i.e., professionals whose work has a direct impact on migration. In real life, relationships between both groups are characterized by strong hierarchies and a lack of dialogue; migrants are rarely involved in discourses on migration.

This chapter describes how OPPORTUNITIES faced the challenge to address this gap, working toward common ground through a complex process, involving storytelling and storysharing between migrants and interviewers, groups of participating migrants themselves, and migrants and stakeholders, both in private meetings and public events, in six European and three African countries, over a period of several years. Developing the theoretical foundations of the Level Telling Field *and* putting them to practice required close collaboration between scientists and scholars from various universities and research institutions, and NGOs working with migrants.

A note on terminology: *Cross Talk (CT)* is shorthand for the five-step process explained below; if used in the plural, it describes individual projects adopting the method. The acronym *CTM* (Cross-Talk methodology) refers to the approach, including its theoretical underpinnings and methodological roots, especially Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the Level Telling Field (LTF) approach developed in the OPPORTUNITIES project. *Cross-Talk interviews* (see section 3.2) are the first point of contact with members of the target group. These interviews start a process of co-narration which can involve various art-based methods and produces *Cross-Talk stories* (see section 3.3). *Cross-Talk Events*, finally, are public events which provide a stage for stakeholders who read and discuss the stories of migration produced in Steps 2 and 3. The goal is levelling the telling field on migration, by starting a new dialogue on equal footing which affects the ways in which we think, and talk, about migration.



2. Theoretical Foundations, Basic Principles, and Limits

The Cross-Talk methodology (CTM) was developed within the paradigm of Participatory Action Research (PAR), defined as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (Reason and Bradbury 2001, 1). The guiding concept of the Level Telling Field (LTF), developed within the OPPORTUNITIES project, provides an additional methodological foundation. From this perspective, CTM can be viewed as a roadmap to facilitate a fair dialogue on sensitive issues, contributing to the future development of PAR.

PAR has its roots in the work of Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952), who coined the term “action research” to describe projects in which researchers and ‘subjects’ of research try to create a social and intellectual space for dialogue and exchange of ideas in order to understand and seek solutions for particular problems (see Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008, 427, and Olshansky et al. 2005). An introduction (Greenwood and Levin 2006) and a handbook (Reason and Bradbury 2001) have been published; in addition, Julie L. Ozanne and Bige Saatcioglu (2008) offer a concise overview of the axiological, ontological, and epistemological foundations. It is important to bear in mind, however, that PAR is not a normative methodology, defining standards and best practice, but a decentralized, cross-disciplinary effort at changing the relationship between academic researchers and the people whose behaviors, attitudes, or needs are studied. Another vital component is the premise that research should be conducted with the goal of implementation and affecting change. Hence, the implementation of PAR always depends on the specific context and disciplinary embedding of the project in question (see, for instance, the open discussion of the difficulties encountered in practice provided by Nina Lilja and Mauricio Bellon 2008). As PAR is a broad umbrella, subsuming “many threads of participatory research and action research, and a variety of ethical and philosophical stances” (Billies et al. 2010, 277), it is important to reflect on how OPPORTUNITIES implemented participatory principles. We focus on three issues here, the goals or points of CTs, the five-step process, and the reflection of the influence of the research process on all parties involved.

PAR has always been engaged in creating knowledge for change. Reflecting on the role of PAR in geography, Rachel Pain and Peter Francis (2003, 46) emphasize that the approach is more than a methodology for generating knowledge: “The defining characteristic of participatory research is not so much the methods and techniques employed, but the degree of engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter. Participatory approaches did not originate as a methodology for research, but as a process by which communities can work towards change.” This transformative aspect of PAR informs CTM, too; the point of conducting interviews with migrants is not merely to document their story or to collect data for a sociolinguistic analysis of storytelling processes or the sociological study of recurrent frames and emerging thematic patterns. Instead of archiving experience in order to conduct further text-based research, the initial CT interviews serve as raw material for the co-construction of migrant stories which are then used for performative readings in public events. The goal of this endeavor is to create a fair, shared narrative, which challenges, and potentially changes, the toxic debates on migration.

The PAR process is often represented as a spiral of iterative steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, observation, and the evaluation of results (McTaggart 1997; McIntyre 2007). CTM consists of five steps which will be introduced in more detail in section 3: (1) Participating researchers



reach out to potential interview candidates and build trust to prepare the ground for confidential storytelling; (2) migrants tell their life stories in a semi-structured interview; (3) migrants and researchers co-create a written story on the basis of a transcript of the original conversation; (4) migrants share their stories, thus 're-living' their experiences, in a safe space with researchers and other migrants; and (5) migrants encounter stakeholders in public events, reading each other's stories in front of an audience. This public re-enactment of lived experience fosters perspective-taking and enables a fair dialogue on migration.

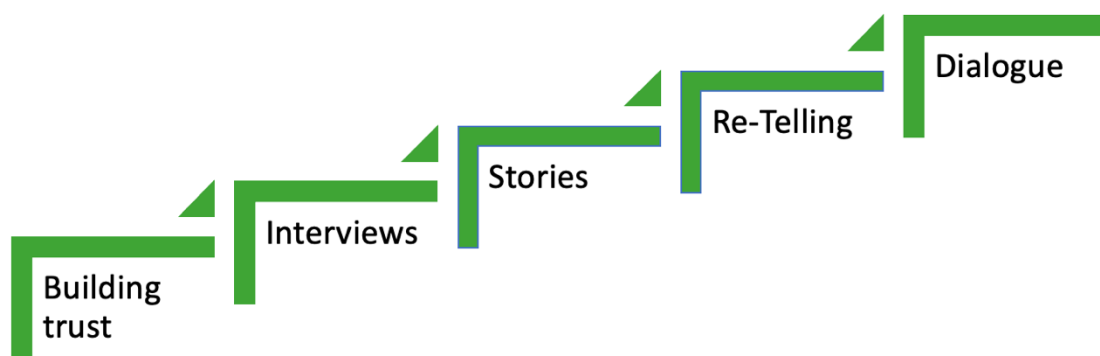


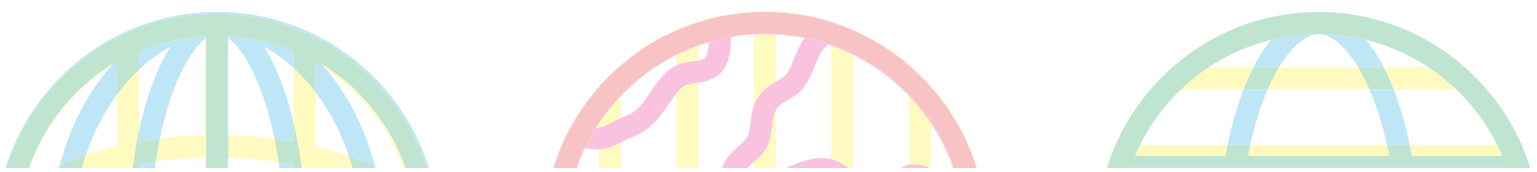
Figure 1: Five Steps of the Cross-Talk Process

Although CTM uses a five-step framework, there is no fixed set of procedures for each of these steps. For example, visual methods may be used for trust-building, or a World Café method can be used to stage the dialogue. Oral and written storytelling (interviews and co-narration or retelling) can be inspired by the use of artistic methods such as drama or dance, which may also be used in step 4. This methodological openness makes it possible to adapt the framework to the local context, the goal of the project (CTM was developed for a project on migration, but it is not restricted to this topic), and the specific skills, capabilities, or interests of the participants.

PAR is not geared toward, or restricted to, knowledge production and academic debate, but also engages with the people whose lived experiences research projects try to address. PAR advocates a focus on knowledge that has a positive impact on the communities involved in the research. As Mary Brydon-Miller, Michael Kral, and Alfredo Ortiz Aragón (2020) remind us, this includes the researchers, too. In their survey of international perspectives on PAR, they reflect on how engaging with the methodology changed their own practice; Ortiz Aragón's account illustrates the effect PAR had on him:

I share this story because it was when I learned to see myself in relation to others – to put my personal experiences and motivations on the table and take action with others – that we were able to generate deep knowledge in support of what we each hoped to change. I went from an intellectual to an embodied understanding of PAR that continues to inspire me and help me reinvent my praxis in relation, coparticipation, and negotiation with other collaborators today. (106)

The notion of an embodied understanding of PAR resonates with the members of OPPORTUNITIES who went to Senegal and Ghana for their annual conferences in 2023 and 2024. For most of the participating European scholars, this was not only their first trip to Africa, but also an unusual deviation



from the standard protocol of academic gatherings. Meeting activists and politicians in Dakar, almost in sight of pirogues used not only for fishing but also to set sail for Europe, gave our discussions of migration, and the right to mobility, a new sense of urgency. This was increased by the political tensions preceding the elections which would soon bring a new government into power, one that seeks to fight corruption and foster independence from France. Against this background, a fashion show by local designers or a traditional dance performance incorporating modern elements were not supporting programs in a touristic sense, but framed the CT approach in a broader political manner, as befits a project grounded in PAR. Staging a confident vision of a continent ready to explore its potentials, artists and activists promoted a much-needed change of perspective – in the long run, Europe might need Africa more than Africa needs Europe.

Rethinking our relations to others also was a major goal of the Ghana conference. For instance, visiting an NGO fighting human trafficking in Accra, European partners learnt about those aspects of forced migration in the United Arab Emirates and Iraq that rarely make it into mainstream news, such as trafficking in persons for organ removal. Talks and presentations are one thing, but the agenda included meeting two survivors of human trafficking, forced labor, and abuse who recounted their stories in front of an audience moved to tears. While this practice would not be considered in European countries, to protect the survivors and prevent re-traumatization, it clearly had a strong impact; being progressive in theory is a lot easier than meeting people who had to muster incredible strength and resilience to survive regressive practices – everyone knows this, cognitively speaking, but we rarely feel it.

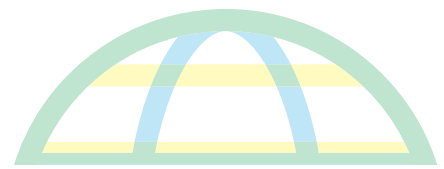
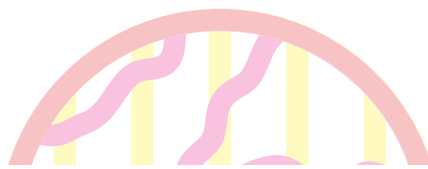
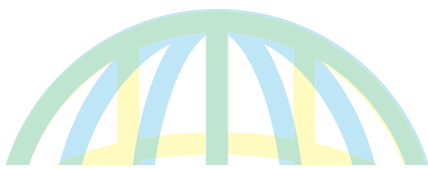
In such contexts and environments, an embodied understanding of PAR becomes almost unavoidable, and one of its potential effects is to become even more empathetic to the experiences of others. Learning about psychological tools developed to provide therapy for returned migrants at the University of Accra, for instance, highlighted aspects rarely considered in European migration discourses, i.e., the long-term effects of stress and trauma which affect most migrants in transit and beyond. How would we cope with trauma, without access to psychological support? Finally, participating in a role change exercise under the guidance of internationally acclaimed Noyam African Dance Institute, which also offers online courses through its African Arts online platform,² forced academics to move well beyond their comfort zones, albeit temporarily; an important reminder that the people they are working with, or writing about, rarely have the option to withdraw to the comfortable position of the outside observer.

At the core of the unacceptable realities which projects like OPPORTUNITIES seek to challenge and change lies the discriminatory treatment of Africans travelling to Europe. This begins long before the journey, when unnecessarily complex visa regulations, long waiting times without status updates, and high costs turn travel preparations into a humiliating experience, and continues at immigration control, where racial profiling is common practice, even though it may be unlawful.³ The experiences of some African partners highlight that provocation and discrimination affects not all of us in equal measure. Indeed, the very notion of being able to withdraw to a safe space offering full racial invisibility, in the sense of a complete absence of racial discrimination, is an effect of “white privilege,” to use Kalwant Bhopal’s (2018) pervasive term – a rare pleasure for Africans in European societies.

To conclude, CTM owes many basic ideas to PAR, beginning with an emphasis on the active role of migrants, practitioners (e.g., social workers), and stakeholders in the research process (Bradbury-Huang 2010; O’Neill and Harindranath 2006), as well as the goals, the five-step process, and the reflection of an embodied understanding of PAR. One should not forget to mention the limits of our approach, however, which are a consequence of the framework we were working in. As it was developed in an externally funded project, CTM is also subject to constraints which mean that a full implementation of PAR principles is difficult to achieve in practice. On the one hand, collaborative research projects funded by third parties provide essential financial resources to implement the CT approach. On the other hand, the fact that deliverables have to be agreed on in advance with funding agencies, means that the capability of participants to shape the research project, though welcome in theory, is rather limited in



practice. What is more, given the limited time frame of research projects, effective changes for the target communities, let alone sustainable transformation, are hard to achieve. We should not expect short-term measures to bring about long-term change, but consider research projects as a source, and resource, of new, co-created knowledge, which, in turn, inspires others to engage in further projects.



3. Cross-Talk Methodology (CTM): Five Steps

Conducting interviews and organizing events according to the Cross-Talk Methodology (CTM) is an ambitious project which requires careful planning, continuous monitoring and adjustment, and critical evaluation. The following overview shows the original implementation of CTM in the OPPORTUNITIES project, focusing on stories of, and narratives on, migration.⁴ Other applications are certainly possible, as we argue in the conclusion, though certain adaptations will be required.

3.1 Cross-Talk Planning: Recruitment, Training, Building Trust (Step 1)

In our experience, CTM activities start with a group of active, engaged individuals working in an NGO or research institution dedicated to the field. The first step following the initial idea, which involves hearing about CTM and thinking about giving it a try – is to carefully consider the availability of resources. At this decision-making stage, three issues must be addressed: commitment, funding, and ethics. These are followed by recruitment and training of researchers, onboarding of participants,⁵ and trust-building measures.

CTM will involve reaching out to stakeholders and going public. This means, first, that applying the methodology must have the full approval and support of the leadership of the organization in question, be it an NGO or research institution. They will also have to bear in mind that CTM is not suited for short-term projects, but requires long-term commitment (Steps 1–3 can easily take two years), including careful planning, thorough preparation, and constant monitoring of the project's progress. Depending on the internal hierarchies of organizations engaging in CTM, the decision-making process may involve a longer pre-project stage with multiple rounds of talks among team members and leadership.

This takes us to a second issue: funding. CTM requires dedicated staff and specific skills, for instance in conducting interviews, which may require prior training. Of course, long-term projects are expensive; planning CTs therefore requires finding suitable funding. In the OPPORTUNITIES project, EU-funding was provided within the Horizon framework, allowing participating NGOs to form a team of employees dedicated to the CT project or to hire temporary staff for the project. Depending on previous experience of practitioners, NGOs will have to budget for training, too, as interviewers need not only be familiar with the research method of the narrative interview, but also need to understand the specific format of the CT interview that requires them to re-consider their own role. Finding sufficient funding is not a mean feat, and is certainly facilitated by teaming up with collaborative research projects. This may require some upfront-investment by NGOs or research institutions, including networking and, possibly, an initial pilot project.

The ethical implications of working with vulnerable people is a third issue to be considered in the planning stage. In the EU-funded Horizon framework, collaborative projects must have an ethics board, and for a good reason: Organizations must have a clear and transparent strategy for dealing with data (including audio recordings from CT interviews and the stories derived from them), granting confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring that CT events don't turn into traumatic experiences. Gender roles are another vital issue, especially in the context of migration, and it is highly advised to make sure that vulnerable people are adequately represented in independent bodies, such as ethics committees.



The point of CTs is to establish level telling fields on sensitive issues, by putting the experiences of silenced or marginalized groups center stage. The first step following the planning stage, which includes funding, recruitment of researchers, and training, is getting in touch with potential participants and finding a group of people willing to become engaged in the project. This onboarding phase involves, first and foremost, measures to establish mutual trust between participants (migrants) and practitioners (social workers), participants and the organization or institution organizing the CT (NGO or research institute), and among the participants themselves. It is vital to discuss privacy at a very early stage, introducing everyone to the ethical standards adopted by the project. This is particularly important in sensitive contexts like migration, which might involve undocumented people or applicants who are still in an asylum procedure. Safety measures such as using aliases must be agreed on to ensure that none of the participants is put at risk.

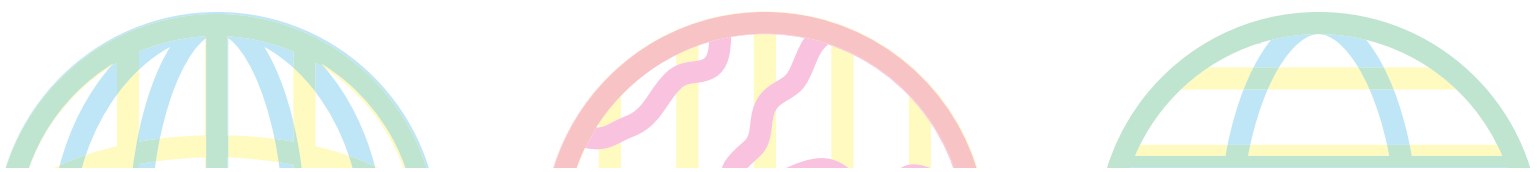
Further, all participants must be fully aware of CTM principles and procedures, as well as the goal, and they must be able to have their say about the project, its objectives, the selection of stakeholders, and forms of communication. Discussion groups provide a forum in which the goals of the project and the expectations of all participants can be discussed openly, as it is vital that everyone involved agrees on basic values and ideas. Participants gain first-hand knowledge about the NGO's commitment of resources and staff, dissemination activities accompanying the project, as well as the support and assistance that an NGO can provide. Participants are not paid for their contribution to the project, although they can be reimbursed for project-specific expenses (transport, food etc.). Organizers should expect critical comments at this stage. In Belgium, for instance, some participants questioned the point of the project ("What's in it for us?"), whereas in Portugal expectations were high, as participants hoped the project would be able to bring their concerns and recommendations to decision-making bodies, even though they knew about the difficulties of lobbying work.

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Building trust with potential participants takes time; repeated meetings will be necessary, and often participants will want to reconsider or discuss things with trusted persons. NGOs should therefore adopt a flexible time management scheme to recruit, inform, and get to know participants, in order to adapt to their needs in terms of timing, location, and language. It is also important to establish communication channels early on (for example, using a messenger service). Organizers should bear in mind that participants may at any point decide to abandon the project, which means that a sufficiently large group of participants should be involved from the start. The feedback from potential participants, even if they choose against participation, and reasons for deciding to drop out of the project, provide valuable information about the true concerns of the target group. Everyone should therefore be given the opportunity to evaluate every single stage of the process, from the ways in which contact is established (often using word-of-mouth and snowball sampling) to the point when collaboration has to be ended, for whatever reason; by offering multiple feedback channels (direct contacts with spokespersons from migrant groups and face-to-face communication turned out to be more important than messenger apps or e-mail), the project team can facilitate the collection of feedback. Of course, being invited openly to comment on the process from the very start is a sign of appreciation and sincerity; hence, evaluation procedures should be regarded as trust-building measures, too.

3.2 Cross-Talk Interviews: Starting a Dialogue (Step 2)

Once trust between all initial participants has been established, the interview phase begins. This is a series of one-on-one conversations between interviewers and migrants, recorded on audio. CTs use the format of the semi-structured interview to open the conversation without steering it too obviously; after all, the point is to allow the participants to talk about their own experiences. This involves granting them full control over their life stories in every phase of the interview. Having said this, the interviewer remains responsible for avoiding what sociolinguist Neal R. Norrick (2005) has called the "dark side" of tellability



(i.e., trauma and taboos); as participants will often touch on highly emotional issues and traumatizing memories, particular sensitivity is required (see also Gebauer 2025).

Setting and atmosphere are therefore particularly important: interviewees should always feel comfortable and safe. The interview is best conducted in their first language, so that a translator may be needed. This may create an additional obstacle: can the interviewee still speak freely? Such questions must be raised by the NGO in the discussion groups during the planning stage. Once the interview has started, the interviewer should keep interruptions to a minimum, allowing migrants to tell their stories without any pressure created by expectations, either implicitly or explicitly. The interviewees should be given plenty of time and space to tell their life stories: about their life in their home country, reasons for leaving, relations with their home country, the obstacles, the difficulties, the power relations, the opportunities and the successes, about their work, their neighborhood, their friends and family, and about their aspirations, how they want to make it happen.

In accordance with PAR, interviewees are not simply regarded as providers of raw data, to be transformed into knowledge by researchers through retrospective analysis and interpretation. Instead, the traditional hierarchy between agent ('researcher') and object ('the researched') is replaced by the concept of a committed partnership (Lincoln 2001; Stigendal and Alwall 2015). To take the knowledge and experiences of interviewees seriously means to actively involve them in the process of co-constructing knowledge. This has far-reaching methodological implications.

CT interviews differ from the standard procedure in qualitative research in two ways. First, though interviewers prepare guidelines and questions for the semi-structured interview, they should not consider themselves as researchers but, in the PAR tradition, as co-creators of knowledge, granting the same status to their interlocutors. The best way of achieving this is to view the interview as a conversation on equal terms, not as a method of data collection. This means that interviewees may ask questions, too. The rules governing the level telling fields thus created must be agreed on in the discussion groups during the initial trust-building phase.

Second, though the audio recording will be transcribed, the transcription doesn't follow one of the standard protocols developed in the social sciences or linguistics. Readability matters more than the authentic representation of spoken language. This means that all traces of oral storytelling, from digressions to repetitions, may be ignored. Similarly, syntax and wording in written texts can deviate from the original source, and practitioners and participants can collaborate in producing a text which represents what participants want to communicate, and how they wish to be perceived. Granting story ownership to interlocutors is the PAR way of producing authentic self-expressions, which have a higher degree of narrative coherence than the audio material recorded during the interview. CTM allows participants to retain full control over their narratives, including the textual representation of their experiences.



Table 1: Number of CT interviews in the OPPORTUNITIES project

	Austria	Belgium	France	Italy	Portugal	Romania	Ghana	Mauritania	Senegal
Creole					2				
German	15								
English		3	2	3	8		19		
French		9	13					13	19
Flemish/ Dutch		3							
Italian				24					
Portuguese					17				
Romanian						10			
160 interviews in total	15	15	15	27	27	10	19	13	19

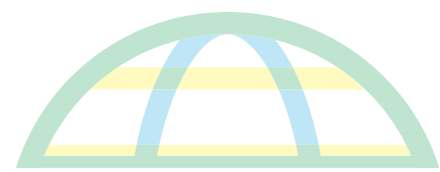
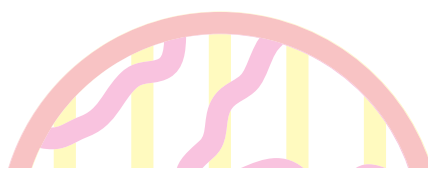
As Table 1 shows, the OPPORTUNITIES project conducted CT interviews (160 in total) in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Ghana, Mauritania, and Senegal. Conceptualized, coordinated, and organized by five NGOs – Beweging (Belgium), GRDR (France and Mauritania), Coordinamento Nazionale Comunità di Accoglienza (Italy), and the Open Network for Community Development Foundation (Romania) – as well as the International Research Center for Social and Ethical Questions (Salzburg), the Center for Migration Studies at the University of Ghana (Accra), and the Gender, Environment, Religion and Migration Studies Research Laboratory (GERM) at Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via live video calls and lasted approximately 35 to 150 minutes each. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in an anonymized form; the transcripts were shown to the interviewees who approved of the content before it was used further. It is important to note that every effort was made to ensure that there was a gender balance among the interviewing teams, the stakeholders, and migrants.

Not surprisingly, there were difficult moments during the interviews. In such cases, a time-out strategy was used which had been introduced in the trust-building phase. The participant could stop permanently or continue talking after a break. In some cases, recording was stopped or even erased. More often than not, however, there was a desire to continue. Those who did were relieved afterwards. The experience of overcoming moments of anxiety and stress strengthened trust and mutual empathy between researchers and participants.

3.3 Cross-Talk Stories: Readability and Shareability (Step 3)

There is a third crucial difference between the semi-structured interview as a method of data collection and CTM: the latter is not primarily interested in analyzing the interviews according to thematic and formal criteria, although the methodology doesn't rule out sociological and narratological inquiry. The point of CT interviews, however, is to begin a creative process of co-narration that produces readable, and shareable, stories. The role of interviewers at this stage is that of facilitators supporting interviewees by helping them to share their experiences without curtailing their narrative agency. CT stories are revised, edited interviews that can be used during the CT events.

At this stage, speed is essential. Experience has shown that once the interviews have been recorded, it may be increasingly difficult to keep in touch with interviewees and motivate them to return to the project for the co-creation phase. There are several reasons for that. Migrant lives are notoriously difficult to plan in advance, there may always be unforeseen obstacles or developments which are more essential than participating in a research project. Also, speaking about traumatic experiences takes its toll, especially if you find yourself in precarious situations such as being undocumented (*sans papiers*),



in the asylum process, or busy fighting poverty or other existential threats. Therefore, the transcription should be provided as soon as possible and the work can continue without delay.

Interviewees always remain in charge of the interviews, which includes the right and the opportunity to change things. This phase of re-reading and re-writing includes identifying those parts of the story which can be used during the CT event. Once this has been decided, the final editing process begins. The final story should not exceed about 10 minutes to ensure that audiences pay attention while reading.

The experience in OPPORTUNITIES shows that flexibility is important, allowing researchers to respond to specific challenges, such as language barriers, lack of education, or the limited time of participants. Some partners organized joint writing sessions (Belgium, Portugal, France), to turn the interviews into stories. The researchers discussed the interview with the interviewee, figuring out what they considered most important, before starting work on the stories. A storytelling platform was used by the Romanian team, to facilitate the creative process. In some cases, the researchers wrote the stories based on the interviews. The results were then returned to the participants for corrections, additions, and changes. In all cases, migrants had the final say in all decisions concerning their stories, from the wording, to the selection of passages, and the use in CT events.

Before the CT stories are read in public, non-public readings in discussion groups with all participants allow them to get used to re-telling their stories, and to learn or practice speaking to an audience. These discussions also give migrants a chance to focus on the broader political and social contexts and implications of their individual experiences, allowing them to express their expectations regarding the CT events. One key success factor is trust-building, not only in the initial planning phase, but throughout the project. In OPPORTUNITIES, informal get-togethers were organized to show appreciation for, and foster team spirit among, participants and researchers. Food and music played a key role. The benefits of eating together in shared interactional spaces are well-documented,⁶ and enjoying a musical performance facilitates bonding between members of the group. The success of such measures depends on a number of variables. In France, informal meetings with representatives of local authorities gave participants more confidence in the project. Austrian partners, in contrast, found it more difficult to overcome the barrier between different groups, which may have had to do with the language barrier, the location (a hotel for meetings), and the fact that Austrians were in the majority.

3.4 Cross-Talk Events: Inviting Stakeholders and the Public to Establish Level Telling Fields (Step 4)

CTs are public events, usually with a limited number of people (see Figure 2),⁷ in which migrants encounter stakeholders in front of an audience. The basic idea is to ask each stakeholder to read one of the CT stories, thus performing an act of “representative storytelling.” This notion is inspired by Hannah Arendt’s (2006 [1968]) idea of “representative thinking”:

I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (241)

CTM uses the metaphor of re-enactment to describe the effect of adopting, in and through the process of reading, the other person’s perspective. Perspective-taking encourages empathetic responses, not only in those stakeholder volunteering to read the stories, but also in members of the audience



witnessing how migrants respond to the stakeholders' responses to their stories. Their outsider perspective allows them to feel what Fritz Breithaupt (2009, ch. 8) refers to as "narrative empathy."

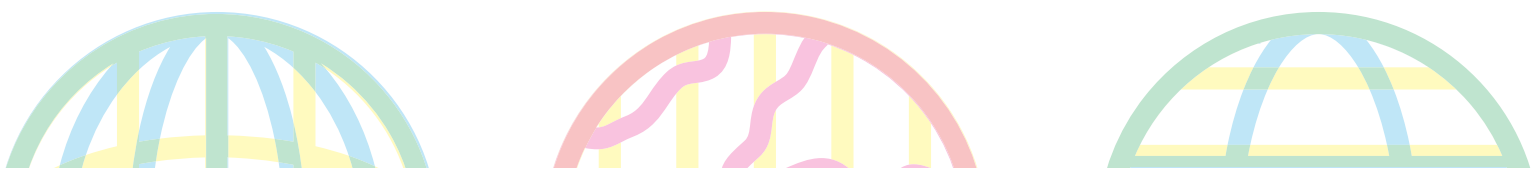
This requires careful preparation, so that all participants have realistic expectations and really benefit from the experiment which questions the status quo. The guidelines OPPORTUNITIES developed for CT events advised organizers to keep attendance numbers low, in order to create an encouraging, friendly atmosphere and ensure that migrants would not feel intimidated. They further suggested a triangular seating arrangement (with or without tables), that allowed the three groups (migrants, stakeholders, and audience) to face one another.

As in all steps, and in line with PAR, all partners were free to experiment with alternative arrangements. In Portugal, for instance, a circular seating was used to avoid polarization. In France simultaneous discussions on different topics, determined by the participants, were organized, in order to increase thematic variety. In Senegal, Ghana, and Mauretania, a two-step method was used: smaller CT events with participants preceded larger events with stakeholders. There was also considerable variation in recruitment methods and outcomes. The Senegalese partner (GERM), for instance, worked with a school, and in particular, a drawing class for young adults (over 14 years old), which was further involved in the CT event. Among other things, their stories were presented at a press conference in September 2024.

For the public events, most partners invited a moderator to oversee interactions and make sure that everything was going smoothly. In some cases, this was someone from outside the institution organizing the CTs, in other cases someone from within the organization took on that role. All moderators were experienced individuals. In Belgium, the moderator was a person with a migration history. This made participating migrants feel more comfortable and can be considered best practice. In Italy, a playwright experienced in working with migrants supported the project from the beginning to the final cultural translation, a performance. She attended the working groups, helped to find stakeholders, and moderated the CT event. Migrants who were involved in the CT were also acting in the performance that combined the written testimonies, displayed on large parchments, and the original audio recordings in the respective language. The performance culminated with a moment of convivial interaction, in which positive memories were shared over a joint meal.

One key problem in European countries was to find suitable stakeholders and audiences willing to participate in the CT events. In most countries, audiences were recruited through existing networks of NGOs and intercultural organizations and institutions. In Belgium, on request of participants, the audience was deliberately limited to persons they trusted. These were mostly participants from the earlier phases who did not want to actively participate in the CTs by reading their stories. CNCA, the Italian partner NGO, organized two CT events, one of them during the World Refugee Week. While there was a much larger audience than at most other events, the number of stories was limited, and there was less opportunity for dialogue.

In Senegal, a series of local CTs, in which stories were read by GERM staff members, were organized to explore the root causes of migration. These small events were followed by a large CT event with a wide range of stakeholders, in which video was used as a method to start the conversation. The project partner from the university of Accra developed a very similar procedure, organizing several small CT events, followed by a large World Café meeting with more than 100 participants. A musical performance and a series of short keynotes introduced the conversation.





Figures 2 and 3: Cross-Talk events in Brussels and Accra | © Sofie Put

In contrast to European NGOs, partners in Senegal, Ghana, and Mauritania had no problems finding stakeholders willing to participate in the CTs; in fact, often no additional audiences had to be invited, as participating stakeholders could fill both roles. This points to a key difference in European and African settings. Ghana, for instance, is an emigration country, with a negative net migration rate, despite the fact that it also attracts immigrants from other African countries, as mobility across borders is common practice.⁸ Experiences with CT in Ghana suggest that collaboration is easier to achieve than in European countries, where migration is highly politicized and toxic migration debates cause lots of uncertainty. In Austria, for instance, most migrants readily participating in Steps 2 and 3, refused to take part in the public CT event for fear of losing their residence permit.

3.5 Cross-Talk Afterlife: Changing the Narrative through Dialogue and Level Telling Fields (Step 5)

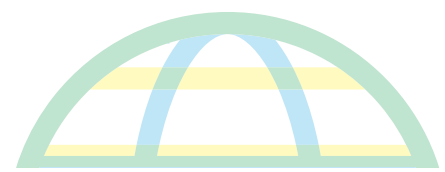
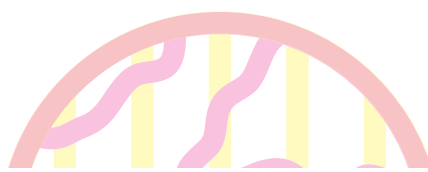
The end of a public CT event doesn't mark the end of the journey, but should be considered as the beginning of a process. The point of CTM is to create a setting or space in which storytelling is used to achieve a deeper understanding of what it means to be in the other person's shoes. Storytelling thus facilitates storysharing, and storysharing in turn enables perspective-taking and empathy, vital human resources that are key factors in establishing deliberation processes in liberal, pluralist democracies (see Sommer 2025). This conception is in line with the PAR way of bringing about change:

Participatory Action Research is an emergent process in which learning and change are embedded in both the processes and outcomes of the research. Change can, and hopefully does, take place at multiple levels in a Participatory Action Research process. It takes place on a personal level where participants gain new skills and new knowledge that enable them to be more informed and skilled advocates for themselves and their communities [...]. At the organization and community levels, the Participatory Action Research process brings people together around a shared interest or concern with the possibility of forming relationships and alliances with other groups that support sustainable efforts to continue to work for positive change, even after a formal PAR project may end [...]. PAR can also lead to action at local, regional, national, and even international levels with impacts on policy and practice. (Brydon-Miller et al. 2020, 108)



In CT events, the reading phase was followed by a dialogue phase which allowed migrants and stakeholders to engage in a conversation on equal footing, overcoming, albeit temporarily, existing hierarchies and establishing common ground. The goal is not just to provide a stage where people can have their say, an equality of opportunity, but to work toward an equality of outcome with respect to their rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the native population: stakeholders should be more committed to consider the migrants' perspective in the future, ideally involving them in decision-making processes, organizing further dialogues based on CTM in collaboration with NGOs and research institutions.

This requires an openness on all sides which can't be taken for granted; although storytelling and storysharing facilitate an open dialogue, stakeholders may quickly fall back into administrative roles and resort to rhetorical routines. The Open Network, a Romanian NGO, faced with such obstacles, noting that CTM is harder to implement in a society whose state institutions do not offer institutional transparency. Institutional representatives participating in the CT events in Romania only voiced a politically correct institutional point of view. More often than not, however, participating stakeholders appreciated the unusual experience and considered themselves ambassadors of the results.



4. Beyond Migration: Applications for CTM

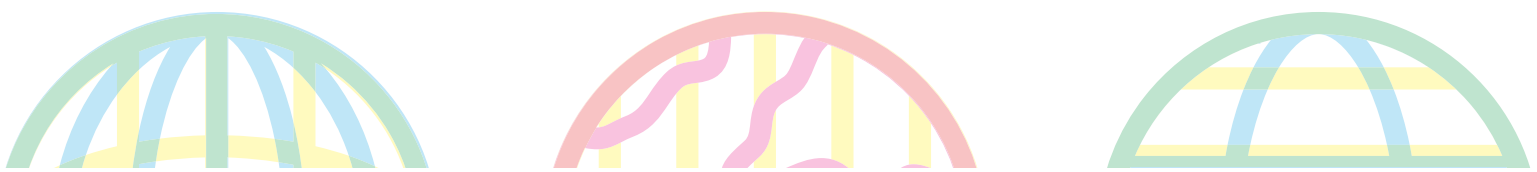
CTM has been developed, tested, and standardized in the OPPORTUNITIES project, a collaborative research project on migration narratives, funded within the EU's horizon framework. The methodology is by no means restricted to migration, however, but can be applied in other fields as well. In fact, CTM has its roots in previous experiences gained in other projects. These include the Horizon 2020 project "Rebuilding an Inclusive, Value-based Europe of Solidarity and Trust through Social Investments" (RE-InVEST),⁹ which actively involved European citizens severely affected by poverty in the co-construction of a more powerful and effective social investment agenda,¹⁰ and the collaborative project "Regaining Life for Precarious Women at Work" (REGAL),¹¹ co-founded by the European Union. The CTM approach builds on the REGAL Methodological Toolkit,¹² as well as the inspiring work of Fiola Whelan,¹³ who developed a public participatory art-project in Dublin.

These examples show that projects on social investment or the fight against poverty can benefit from CTM. Generally speaking, the methodology works whenever there is a strong hierarchy between policymakers and stakeholders on the one hand, and communities on the other; CTs may highlight relevant perspectives which otherwise would not be considered in decision-making processes. Due to the extensive expertise needed in order to implement the methodology, collaborative research projects with sufficient funding are the most likely setting for such endeavors. This doesn't exclude, however, that core ideas and practices of CTM may be adopted under more limited circumstances. After all, the PAR commitment to experimentation and development is also part of the DNA of CTM: change is a journey.

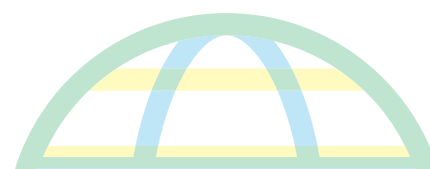


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Endnotes

¹ REGAL was a project researching the life balance of vulnerable groups; the toolkit is available online: https://www.regalproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Methodological_toolkit.pdf (date of access: February 19, 2025).

² See <https://www.africanliveart.com/product/noyam-african-dance-institute/> and <https://www.instagram.com/noyamdance/> (date of access: February 19, 2025).

³ On the details concerning profiling, see the guide published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (see https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-preventing-unlawful-profiling-guide_en.pdf [date of access: February 19, 2025]).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the distinction between stories of and narratives on migration, see Gebauer and Sommer 2024.

⁵ When speak of participants in the context of CTs conducted in OPPORTUNITIES, we always mean persons with a migration background.

⁶ See, for instance, the special issue of the Journal *Appetite* on the “Interactional Approaches to Eating and Mealtimes,” edited by Amy van der Heijden and Sally Wiggins (2025).

⁷ The size of events depends on the availability of resources. Much larger events are possible, of course. During the final conference of the OPPORTUNITIES project on January 31, 2025, a CT even was staged on the premises of the Royal Flemish Theater (KVS) in Brussels, with about 150 people.

⁸ For further details on regional agreements and data on regional migration in West Africa, see Devillard et al. 2015, as well as a recent report on West Africa by the Mixed Migration Center network (MMC 2024).

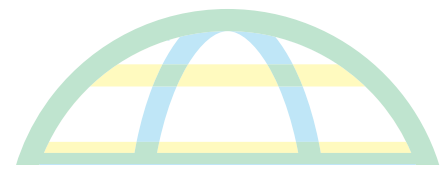
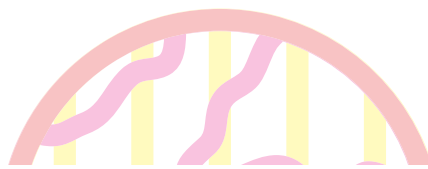
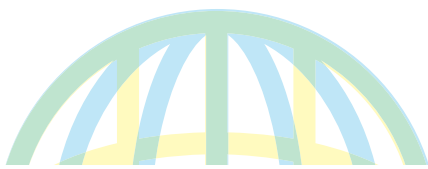
⁹ See <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/649447> (date of access: February 19, 2025).

¹⁰ See <https://www.re-invest.eu/workpackages/wp8> (date of access: February 26, 2025).

¹¹ See the link provided in endnote 1.

¹² See https://www.regalproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Methodological_toolkit.pdf (date of access: February 19, 2025).

¹³ See <https://www.fionawhelan.com> (date of access: February 19, 2025).



An abstract graphic design featuring a white background with several overlapping geometric elements. On the left and right sides, there are stylized globes or spheres composed of intersecting green, blue, and yellow lines. In the center, there are vertical yellow bars and a red circular outline. A pink, wavy, ribbon-like shape winds through the lower half of the image, passing behind the red circle and the central text. The overall composition is modern and colorful.

opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration