

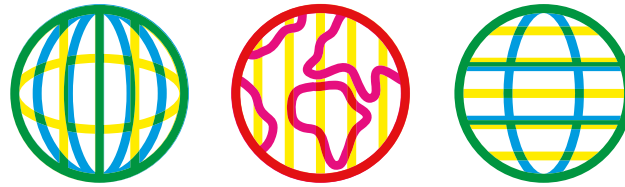
Voices of Migrants: From Cross Talks and Exchange of Narratives to Policies for Migrants

M. Messkoub and M. Debruyne



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1. Introduction.

Migrants have been generally passive occupants of the social science studies of migration. Most social scientists writing on migration and migrants draw on analytical frameworks such as push-pull factors, ‘bright lights’ at destination, wage differences between origin and destination, and more specifically between rural and urban areas to discuss the motives and reasons for migration with a view to offer policies to manage migration. Macro-level studies of migration use national census and survey data or data sources of international organisations (like UN, OECD, IOM) on movement of people and complementary data on income and standard of living, etc. at origin and destination to explain a specific pattern of migration. If migrants are viewed positively as a source of labour and therefore being important for the economic development of destination, policies are suggested to improve their rights and their lives at destination and in general facilitate their integration. If they are viewed negatively as a source of overcrowding, taking jobs from the local people or as a cultural threat, curbing their movement and rights are put on the agenda. It is important to note that these positive and negative views and related policies are common to studies on national/internal and international migration studies.

To hear the voices of migrants as they narrate their stories of migration and experiences at destination has been one of the most important objectives of the OPPORTUNITIES project. Voices that have in general been absent from policy discussions and official policy making on migration around the world. The great majority of migrants, whether legal or illegal, face multitude of barriers of language, culture, bureaucratic rules and regulation to settle down and build a new life at destination, without having a say on the process of integration. “Sometimes silence can be a tool of oppression; when you are silenced [...] it is not simply that you do not speak but that you are barred from participation in a conversation which nevertheless involves you.” (Ahmed 2010, xvi; quoted in Hearn et al. 2020, 8) “Nothing about us without us” – the motto of the movement of people with disability, should become the motto of all disadvantaged and marginalized people anywhere in the world.

How can we unlock the voices of migrants and create the space to hear them needs a fresh methodology, such as the Cross Talks, that goes beyond the dichotomy between observers and researcher, on the one hand, and ‘subjects’ of research on the other; leading to the co-creation of knowledge and ideas that would put the voice and interest of the ‘subject’ at the centre of policy debate, policy making process, and policy implementation.



2. Cross Talks Exchange of Narrative

The Cross Talk methodology has its origin in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) developed by Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952), who coined the term “action research,” 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 (Olshansky, 2005). PAR has also been referred to as “a social process where people engage in, examine and interpret their own social world, shaping their sense of identity” (Hearn et al. 2019, 13).

The Opportunities research project thus starts from the beginning with the migrants, investing in their stories and creating encounters with migrants, stakeholders working on migration related issues and members of the public in different countries with a view to creating a level-telling-field to hear the voices of migrants. In this chapter we explain how this methodology was organized and provide a synthesis of the main areas of discussion and their policy implications.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In section one we provide an account of the Cross Talk methodology that has been adapted in the country case studies of the project. In section two we provide a synthesis of these case studies focusing mainly on common threads among these case studies. Section three provides the main policy lessons that emerge from these reports and section four provides a summary and conclusion.

2.1 Cross Talk: towards a fair dialogue and building bridges

In this chapter, we use different words to describe our methodology and its different components. These words are all very similar, using ‘cross’ and ‘talk’. Before we discuss ‘Cross Talks’, we will give a brief overview of these words.

When we talk about “Cross Talk”, sometimes also in the plural, we mean the whole process from the beginning to the end. This process consists of four steps: (1) building trust for confidential storytelling – migrants tell their life stories (either in oral or written form); (2) non-public re-enactment – the migrants re-tell their stories, thus ‘re-living’ what has been told; (3) public re-enactment – migrants and stakeholders tell each other’s stories (reading out loud) in front of a public audience; (4) dialogue leads to a fair conversation on migration. While steps 1-3 are part of the method, step 4 describes the goal beyond the “Cross Talk events”.

“Cross Talk interviews” are at the core of this process; they are narrative interviews that create migrant stories, so-called “Cross-Talk stories”. “Cross-Talk interviews” strive to circumvent the dark side of tellability (i.e., trauma and taboos), which often produces broken narratives, by enabling migrants to form resilient narratives based on their experiences. They do this by using different creative methods.

“Cross-Talk stories” are the result of narrative co-construction, a process in which the interviewer helps the interviewee to share their experiences without curtailing their narrative agency. “Cross Talk stories” are thus reworked, condensed, interviews that can be used during the “Cross Talk events”.

These migrant stories are reenacted in “Cross-Talk events” to make them heard by a wider public. “Cross-Talk events” include migrants, NGOs, and stakeholders from civil society.

Cross Talks set the stage for “allied storytelling” in order to create a new, more inclusive narrative on migration that is recognized and supported by all participants.

A Cross Talk is thus in essence a process in which all participants not only have equal rights to voice their views, but they actually do so and have their views heard, shared and taken note of. Note that a Cross Talk is not simply about having an equal opportunity or the equal right to voice an opinion, but as important is the equal outcome of speaking, being heard and taken note of.

Such an equitable dialogue requires that participants be willing to engage in dialogue, listen to others and be open to different points of view. Moreover, these meetings should always result in concrete changes for those involved or for the community.

“Cross Talks” is highly indebted to previous experiences gained in other projects: the RE-InVEST project in which a broad and useful critical methodology was designed; the REGAL project in which a successful use of narratives was demonstrated; and especially the inspiring work of Fiona Whelan who developed a socially engaged and public participatory art-project in Dublin.

2.2 Theoretical foundations of the Cross Talk methodology: Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The Cross Talk methodology is based on three key pillars: Participatory Action Research, Representative storytelling, and the idea of a ‘Common Ground.’

Participatory Action Research (PAR) replaces the traditional distinction and distance between the ‘researcher’ and ‘the researched’ by a committed partnership (Lincoln 2001; Stigendal and Alwall 2015). Such a research is not simply concerned with academic debate, but also engages with the people whose lives the research project would try to address. PAR views research participants not simply as providing raw data, which can then be transformed into knowledge by researchers, but instead values research participants’ knowledge and experiences and aims to actively involve them in the process of co-constructing knowledge. The participants (who would normally be considered the “objects of the research”) act as co-researchers so that they might come “to a critical form of thinking about their world” (Freire, 1970). PAR emphasizes that researchers and participants create knowledge together, focusing on knowledge that makes a positive difference to the lives of the people it involves.

The three terms ‘participatory’, ‘action,’ and ‘research’ are all equally valued. The methodology often used is often represented as a spiral of iterative steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, observation and the evaluation of the result of the action (McTaggart, 1997; McIntyre 2007).

Cross Talk starts with building trust with NGOs and migrants. Once there is trust between researchers, NGOs and migrants, we can start discussion groups, where we talk about the project, the goals of the project and, importantly, the wishes of the migrants. The discussions can influence the implementation of the project (timing, resources, choice of stakeholders). Next, the narrative interviews begin. These interviews form the core of the project. Together, we create narratives based on these interviews that can/will be used during the dialogue phase. Migrants write their stories which are discussed in discussion groups of migrants. During these discussions, they focus on their social world, the political and social context, how they can influence, what they think is important to change, and at the same time they learn or practice to speak in group or public. These stories are the starting point of a conversation about how the participants see living together. The result of the dialogue should be political recommendations.

The Cross Talk methodology emphasizes the active role of both migrants and practitioners (social workers, NGOs) and stakeholders involved in the research process (Bradbury-Huang 2010; O'Neill and Harindranath 2006). Migrants voice their practical and lived experiences of inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. Thus social



diagnoses of inequality, exclusion, and discrimination, and ideas for valuable coexistence emerge from their lived experiences. This is particularly relevant to OPPORTUNITIES' goal of building a more inclusive, diverse and gender-equal Europe.

Cross Talk relies on PAR, but cannot realize it to the full. Indeed, participants cannot shape the research project, and its temporary nature and pilot nature also limit effective changes for the target group and participants.

2.3 Representative Storytelling

During the dialogues, we use the stories as a starting point for conversation. More than a gimmick, the stories are the means to create empathy and find commonality.

This use of stories is based on the idea of “representative storytelling”. This echoes the idea of “representative thinking,” a concept originally proposed by Hannah Arendt:

“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.” (Arendt 2006 [1968]: 241)

Hannah Arendt says nothing about how different points of view are presented. OPPORTUNITIES fills this in with an active form of representation by reading the story (someone else's) aloud.

‘Representative storytelling’ is performed by someone who did not invent the story they are reading aloud themselves. They are merely the interpreter of someone else's story. But this interpreting is a narrative act: the reader has to integrate the story into their own web of stories. Reading aloud also makes the story known to the participants and the audience. The reader also becomes the owner of someone else's the story.

“Representative storytelling” challenges the performer. First, they perform. They have to listen to their own performance and to the content of the story. All kinds of emotions and intellectual reactions are then possible. The performance can then be adapted to the audience’s reactions. The performer thus becomes the owner of the story. This also challenges the writer of the story. The writers are confronted with another person performing their story. They are obliged to listen to the performer and also to the audience’s reactions. Their story is thus no longer their story. They have to revise their own thoughts, ideas about their own story. Note that not always the writer of the story is present, but then his colleagues with a similar story are present. For them, the story read aloud is a story of the whole group. At last, it also challenges the public. They hear and see the reader and those who are co-involved.

“Representative storytelling” requires everyone to process the content and reactions to a story, and to revise their own ideas and thoughts. It forms the basis for empathy, for getting into the shoes of another person. Hopefully, this stepping into someone else's shoes enables mutual understanding.

2.4 Finding a ‘Common Ground’

Reading aloud opens a window for seeking (and finding) common ground between the performer, the migrant and the audience.

Finding a common ground means reaching a point of agreement or mutual understanding with someone, especially in a situation where there are different opinions or perspectives. It involves finding shared interests, values or goals that can serve as a basis for further dialogue, cooperation or compromise. In many contexts, finding a common ground is seen as a constructive way to bridge differences and work towards a mutually beneficial outcome. Finding a common ground does not necessarily mean fully agreeing on every aspect of the issue under consideration. It often involves finding areas of overlap or compromise that can lead to a mutually satisfactory solution. Note that finding common ground determines both the start and the content of a Cross Talk event. By finding common ground, participants in a Cross Talk event have a common starting point to start their dialogue, while this common ground can help participants find concrete policies.

2.5 The steps of Cross Talks

Above, we already described the Cross Talk process. The process consists of four main steps. Looking at the practice, however, we see that there are more steps. Cross Talk always starts with building trust, and it has -not surprisingly- no clear ending.

A Cross Talk process takes a lot of time: a project can easily take more than a year. It is therefore important that from the start everyone is on board, wants to take a long-term commitment, and co-endorses the basic values of Cross Talk. These basic values underpin any democratic organization: ‘vertical multi-perspectivity, an ethics of listening, and perspective taking.’ (Gebauers and Sommer eds, 2021)

The preparatory phase of building trust is therefore an important step and prerequisite for a successful Cross Talk.

Building trust

If you are working with an NGO or another institution, it is also important that there is mutual trust. The points that should definitely be covered are: the commitment of resources and staff, the involvement in the project, the communication around the project, the support and especially the (psychological and other) assistance that an NGO can provide.

Building trust with potential participants takes time. After all, it is also about trust between participants. Participants must be able to have their say about the project, its objectives, steps, stakeholders, communication. Besides basic values, it is also important to bring up privacy; those who participate should not put other participants at risk. The latter certainly applies to people who are still in an asylum procedure or who are here without legal documents.

Narrative storytelling

What is the purpose of your Cross Talk? This is an important question that you discussed with the participants and NGO. OPPORTUNITIES wants to start a conversation about a new narrative on migration that leads to more successful integration of migrants. Consequently, the stories should be about the possibilities of living together.

The setting of the interviews is important: interviewees should feel comfortable and safe. They should be given time to tell their story. The interviewer should encourage them but interrupt them as little as possible. Hints towards the main question should be found in their story. The interviewees are given plenty of 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.

The interview is best conducted in their language. A translator is then sometimes needed. This can create an additional obstacle: can the interviewee then still speak freely? This is where the NGO you work with can play a



mediating role. The interview is recorded and written out as soon as possible. It is important to keep the participants on task so that they stay with the project. Returning promptly with the interview written out is therefore a necessity.

If one of the interviewees cannot read, the interview should be read out loud.

The interviews are their property, they have the right and are given the opportunity to change their interview. This rereading now offers the opportunity to point out together those parts of the interview you want to use together during the Cross Talk event.

After singling out, these pieces can be rewritten, re-translated into a whole. We will go for stories of about 10 minutes' worth of reading.

The preparation of the Cross Talk event

The preparation consists of two steps: a non-public presentation of the stories and stakeholder engagement.

During the Cross Talk event, not all stories can be used. So we have to choose. Which stories are most useful? We use the method of re-enactment to choose. We ask participants to read out a random story. After reading out all the stories, participants discuss in a group which story they want to use during the Cross Talk event. The number of stories depends on the number of stakeholders. This step is a double exercise for the participants: they have to read out loud and they have to make the choices as a group.

During this step, we bring the stakeholders together. They too have to prepare for the event. They also write a story about how they live together today and what their aspirations regarding living together are. The stakeholders are 'any group or individual who can influence or be influenced by the achievement of the organization's objectives' of the Cross Talk. The stakeholder can be a neighbor, a supermarket manager, a social service official, a politician, etc. Each can be or is affected by living with people who have migration histories. (Freeman 1984.)

How do we choose stakeholders? During the preparatory phase, we discussed with participants which stakeholders they considered important. We ask this again after re-reading in the previous phase. And during the re-enactment phase we review this again, but this time with the whole group. From our experiences in the different countries, most stakeholders at the local/regional level are willing to cooperate.

The Cross Talk event

The Cross Talk event brings together stories of migrants and stakeholders. Participants read a story from the other group aloud. We chose an alternation: first a migrant and then a stakeholder, and so on. By doing this, they step into the other person's shoes. This part can take an hour and a half.

After reading the stories aloud, the "common ground" phase begins. How did the readers and the audience experience the stories? What touched them in the stories? All write down their emotions and comments. We collect them and read them aloud. Common ground forms the basis for a more in-depth dialogue. Words, phrases like "sad," "anger," "we don't understand each other," "we need to listen more," ... constitute in our project the impetus for a common search.

The Cross Talk event is a semi-public event. People sit in a triangle: one side of the triangle is reserved for the migrants; a second side is for the stakeholders and the third side is for the (selected) audience.

The audience consists of people sympathetic to the event: they support its democratic nature. It is important to note that migrants decide in advance whether audiences can attend.

Nevertheless, the audience is vital. After all, the audience figures as the "chorus" as in ancient Greek theater. They make the protagonists accountable for what they say. Thanks to the audience, the Cross Talk becomes relevant, a political moment.

The Dialogue

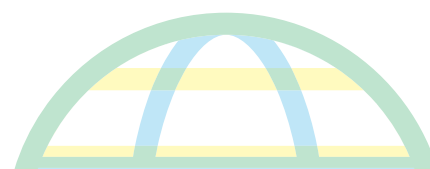
The goal of Cross Talk is to establish a fair dialogue. This happens when in a community all participants are on an equal footing. Together they define the conditions for their coexistence and from here they make political/political recommendations. The challenge is not to gloss over power differences, but to point them out and make them explicit.

Various methods, such as the World Café method, can be used to organize dialogue.

We try to arrive at recommendations. One of the recommendations we got from our project was that such an event may take place again, and even multiple times. Other recommendations need to be developed further. This is a task for the NGO together with migrants and stakeholders.

The openness of the Cross Talks methodology

Although the Cross Talks methodology provides a framework, there is no set methodology for each of these steps. For example, you can use the World Café method in the dialogue phase, or you can use visual and other methods during the confidence-building phase. Note that writing or storytelling can be inspired by using artistic methods such as drama or dance. Thus, this provides an opportunity to maximize the local context and participants' abilities.



3. OPPORTUNITIES' Cross Talk events

3.1 Introduction

OPPORTUNITIES' consortium partners organised several meetings with individuals and organisations involved with immigrant communities set up Cross Talk events. They followed the general guidelines of the Cross Talk methodology and adapted them according to their local social and cultural norms and their resource constraints. Table one provides a snapshot view of the countries and participants of the Cross Talk events.

Table 1. The Cross Talk events by country, participants and their gender balance, 2023.

Country	Participants	Stakeholders	Audience	Opportunities' Team
	Immigrants			
Africa				
Ghana	I-6, II-7	I-5, II-6	I-3	2 (M-1, F-1)
Mauritania	I-II 7 (M-6, F-1)	n.a.	n.a.	1
Senegal	I-4, II-5, III-6	n.a.	n.a.	1 (M)
Europe				
Austria	5	5	3	
Belgium	10	5	5	2
France	8	3	3	4
Italy	5	4	I-8	3 (M-1, F-2)
Portugal	I-3, II-3	I-8 (M-1, F-7), II-5 (F)	7	2 (F-2)
Romania	3	5	1	3 (F)

Notes:

I and II refer to the session number.

Figures in brackets, M and F, refer to the gender of participants, based on the available information. n.a. refers to non-available.

Stakeholders include human right activists, academics, civil society organisations (NGO), government officials and representatives of international organisations.

Source: Reports of Cross Talk events by Opportunities' consortium partners, 2023.

In each local event the number of migrants involved ranged from between six and ten and those of stakeholders and audience (members of the public) between three and twelve. The main objective of all Cross Talk events was to create a 'level telling field' to hear/retell migrant stories in order to have a fair dialogue on migration issues. Particular attention was paid to the set-up of all events to ensure that sitting arrangements, conduct of the meeting,

etc., would not create a hierarchical environment with formal and intimidating relationships among different groups present.

The meetings were conducted in English, French and/or local languages with interpretation for other languages depending on available resources. In most meetings members of the consortium team facilitated and moderated the Cross Talk events.

In all cases, consortium partners organised interviews with migrants in advance of the Cross Talk events in order to solicit for migrants' stories which would later be read aloud in the Cross Talk event by migrants and other participants. Reading aloud migrant stories by others is one way of sharing experience of migrants and empathizing with them; hoping that in general by narrating our/other lives and sharing our/other 'stories' we create a social bond with our audience that help us to manage and overcome our difficulties and traumas in order to take positive individual and collective actions to solve our problems. In this connection the shared narratives may well be useful in psychological and trauma therapy.

Finally, the Cross Talk events were organised to introduce polyphony "...a musical metaphor which emphasises similar, but not identical aspects of diversity as multiperspectivity...to discourses on migration by making sure that not only narratives on migration (i.e. accounts by politicians and other public figures), but also narratives of migration (i.e. testimonials and life stories of migrants and refugees) are heard in debates on immigration and integration." (Gebauer and Sommer, eds. 2021, 54)

3.2 Voices Heard, Issues Raised: Towards a Common Ground

In this section we provide a summary of the main issues, concerns and challenges that were raised in the Cross Talk events. Migrants' stories, irrespective of continent and country, were full of references to sacrifices, hardships, pains, etc. These were part of the issues and challenges of migration that are rarely aired, spoken about and therefore NOT heard in their host community. We should emphasise that challenges of migration were common to migratory experiences within Africa or Europe or between Africa and Europe.

The key issues discussed in the Cross Talk events were related to the drivers/causes of migration, challenges of making the journey, settlement and integration at destination. In search for common grounds the Cross Talk events in Africa focused on the causes of migration, stigmatisation of migrants and challenges of integration. The search and aspiration for a better life whether because of unemployment, lack of opportunities, poverty and economic inequality or conflict and repression at origin were part of the stories of migrants.

Similar issues, especially the social and cultural challenges of integration (e.g. mastery of local languages), were also part of the common grounds in some European events. The search for the common denominators was another major issue for the European events, issues such as challenging racism and creating space for dialogue to find answers to the questions of successful integration and learning 'how to live together'.

The experience of Cross Talk event in Portugal provides a very good example of how a participatory research could experiment with new methods of opening up the space for stories of migrants. The Portuguese event closed with a very poetic ending:

'Participants [were asked] to write on the petals of the white flowers that were handed to them a word from a story they heard, a feeling or emotion. We ask them to fold all the petals to the centre of the flower (closing it), then together they all gently place the flowers floating on the water, which gradually open. The stories are like the flowers that bloom, sometimes more slowly.' (Portugal Cross Talk report, 2023-2024, our emphasis.)



3.3 Challenges of Settlement and Integration: Towards Common Grounds between Migrants and Locals

One of the most common challenge that was voiced in the Cross Talk events was the issue of settlement rules and navigating the bureaucracy whether as an asylum seeker or a legal migrant. The problem of settlement is obviously compounded for the illegal migrants. The difficulty of settlement has implications for other areas of a normal life such as accessing the housing market, education and opening a bank account,.

An equally common problem was access to the labour market. Difficulties were not only related to legal barriers to employment of migrants but as important were recognition/equivalence of education and vocational certificates, racial and ethnic prejudice, granting of business permits, etc. As a consequence most migrants would end up working illegally and in areas which are not related to their expertise and experience; that is a loss to migrants as well as the host country.

Rampant racism and prejudice in bureaucracy and law enforcement were reported in all European Cross Talk events to be serious problems for migrants, irrespective of their legal status. That made access to social housing and a range of public social services a challenge for migrants. It is remarkable that in Austria stakeholders at the Cross Talk events reported that they were not aware of these problems and actually were shocked to hear how much migrants had to deal with in their daily lives.

As far as the challenge of integration is concerned, it seems that migrants found it more difficult to integrate in Europe compared with Africa. In Ghana migrants considered learning local Ghanian languages a top priority that greatly facilitated their integration. Migrants also identified with the pan-Africanist heritage of Ghana and worked with local groups in nationalist and pan-African politics that in turn helped with their integration.

In Europe, learning local languages was reported very important for integration; that in fact has become a prerequisite for getting legal settlement status in most countries. However integration proved to be far more complicated considering the predominance of racial and cultural prejudice against migrants from outside Europe.

These challenges provided the ground for searching for common grounds at Cross Talk events. Migrants and stakeholders were unified in their call against prejudice and racism in the host country that limited the integration of foreigners, irrespective of their origin. There was also agreement on the responsibility of migrants and host country to work toward integration, in other words integration was not just the responsibility of migrants. Another important common ground was proficiency in local languages to facilitate integration.

The search for common grounds for a dialogue were not limited to policies such as integration, but also included mutual awareness, understanding, emotional connection and empathy; especially on the part of the locals in order to open the space for migrants to voice their grievances and to demand their rights. For example, the Cross Talk event in Belgium agreed on 'emotions' of anger, depression and frustration as their common ground and in Italy common feelings expressed after hearing stories of migrants were: 'strong, touching, impressive, empathy'. In Portugal participants in the Cross Talk agreed on the following areas for future dialogue: tolerance, future, respect, peace, dreams, resilience, discrimination, segregation, loneliness, activism, categorization, racism, indignation, frustration, educational system, hope and language barrier.

3.4 Policies on Migration and Migrants

The Cross Talk events concluded by agreeing on a set of policies on management of migration at origin, welfare of migration en route and their integration and welfare at destination. Given the small number of participants in Cross Talk events, which are designed as intensive exchanges using allied storytelling to foster representational thinking among individuals, one might claim that such agreements and conclusions don't amount to much. However, the project established remarkable similarities and convergences among events despite the socio-economic and cultural differences among the countries.

We should note that migrants and stakeholders did not distinguish migrants on the basis of their reasons for migration. Reasons such as improving their lives, running away from persecution or being forced to flee war zones and conflict. There were also no differences between the general policies for male and female migrants.

Whether in West Africa, Eastern or Western Europe migrants called for improved integration policies through language and general training, access to the labour market, coordination between national and local to implement migration policies. Migration through family re-union were also considered an important part of providing a stable migrant community that would support itself reducing the demand on the host community. Making residency rights and naturalisation procedure easier for migrants were also considered important for the stability and integration of migrants. They also noted the importance of regional and international cooperation to support orderly and legal migration.

As part of a policy to ease the labour market access of migrants there were agreements in all Cross Talk events that recognition of qualifications, academic degrees and experiences should be speeded up to allow migrants to work in areas of their expertise and skills.

In so far as socio-cultural integration of migrants and the responsibilities of the host country are concerned there was an agreement on promoting a positive image of migrants and open mindedness within host community while countering negative stereotype images of migrants. Importance was given to anti-racism policies in the educational system especially at school level. Diversity in all its manifestations – race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, etc. – should also be embraced. At a more specific level the culture of bureaucracy dealing with migrants had to change to see migrants as a long-term resource and not a cost and drain to the host society.

The question of 'what is to be done ?' was not limited to state policies but at individual level too. The need for openness at individual level to different cultures and offering space for exchanging views were considered important; so was lobbying for change, advocacy and direct action through demonstration and picketing ministries.

Regarding return migration, it was agreed that it has to be voluntary without any pressure by the host country. In our view voluntary return migration should not have the objective of reducing migrant numbers, as supported by anti-immigration campaigners, but for building bridges between the migrants' origin country and the host country. It is interesting to note that countries with a long colonial history, like Britain and France pride themselves for their worldwide 'cultural capital' and 'cultural reach' that owes more to the colonial dominance of the British and French people migrating overseas and spreading of their cultures and languages than appreciation of the inter-cultural exchanges and cultural contribution of colonised people who migrated to Britain or France.

In order to manage migration all Cross Talk events suggested that legal routes should be supported, encouraged and indeed organised not only to reduce dangerous and expensive routes of illegal migration but also meeting the aspirations of the would be migrants, especially the young. One recommendation referred to the importance of internal mobility for the EU integration project, especially the youth mobility through students exchange programme of Erasmus and how this model could provide the basis for migration of young people from poorer



countries. It was also suggested that visa procedure has to be made easier to facilitate travel for education, work and leisure. As part of this policy, host country should organise orientation activities in origin country for integration of legal migrants.

Involvement of migrants in public decision making was also promoted in the Cross Talk events. Hearing the 'voices' of migrants was considered the starting point of dialogue in the Cross Talk events, that should lead to their enhanced role in policy making at local and national levels in the same way other demographic and political groups are engaged by political parties and state institutions to design and implement policies.

Policies were also suggested for the origin like job creation, training programmes, promotion of ICT and improving the quality of life; as well as raising awareness of the risks of migration. This should not negate attention to the well-being of migrants during their journey by making it safer through the setting up of reception/support centres in transit countries whilst increasing international cooperation against the smuggling of migrants.

Cross Talk events were received very positively by all the participants for bringing people together to share their stories and 'hear' migrants' voices and their concerns. In most Cross Talk events participants would have liked more time and sessions to interact with each other and deepen their dialogue. There were also suggestions for organising 'general' events to bring the 'voices' of migrants to a wider public, politicians and bureaucrats.

Hearing the voices of migrants had the important objective of putting their voices on the policy agenda, albeit at a distance of time and location, with a view to changing the migration policy agenda and actual migration policies. Policies that reflect the humanitarian proclamations of the richer countries, especially in the EU, as well as meeting the aspirations of migrants and at the same time the economic and social needs of destination countries. As regards changing policies from a 'distance of time and location', we simply refer to migrants distance from the seats of power and time that it takes to have their voices heard. It is hoped that research, advocacy and of course struggle of migrants themselves makes the distance of 'time and location' shorter.

Such policies would have important social and political message challenging the stereotype of migrants as a 'burden' on the locals. In general cultural work was an important area for European Cross Talk events with the objective of changing the narrative on migration and migrants. In this regard involvement of migrants and hearing their 'voices' for formulating public policies was emphasized.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The OPPORTUNITIES project has tried to provide a level telling field to hear the voices of migrants using the innovative methodologies of Participatory Action Research and Cross Talk, bearing in mind that fundamental principles of a ‘level-telling-field’: ‘vertical multi-perspectivity, an ethics of listening, and perspective taking.’ (Gebauer and Sommer, eds, 2021, 37.)

Participatory Action Research is about ‘a social process where people engage in, examine and interpret their own social world, shaping their sense of identity’ (Hearn, et al. 2019?, p. 13); that are realized through a fair dialogue for sharing stories in a Cross Talk event. A Cross Talk event provides a physical and metaphorical platform/setting/space for exchange of many voices or a ‘polyphony’ in a dialogical sense so that these different voices can co-create a new vision to change their environment. The Cross Talk events could also fulfil an important psychological function in releasing the tensions which migrants feel as they try to settle down in a new environment, as we read in the Italian report: “In general, the interviewees proved to be open and capable of expressing their experiences. In this way, narration opened up a space of freedom and probably enabled an abreactionary experience, triggering cathartic processes;” (Italy Cross Talk Report 2023, 3.)

Following extensive preparatory interactions with migrants to gather their stories the OPPORTUNITIES’ partner institutions organised Cross Talk events in their countries (Ghana, Mauritania, and Senegal in Africa; and Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Romania in Europe) bringing together migrants, stakeholders from civil society, national and international institutions as well as members of the public.

The stories of migrants irrespective of their origins and destinations (note that, e.g., Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal and Romania were both origins and destinations) were full of references to sacrifices and hardships to meet a dream, that whether fulfilled or not, considered migration as a worthwhile undertaking. What migrants go through to get to their ‘destination,’ geographically and metaphorically, is not commonly acknowledged or indeed known within the host community, because there is little space for migrants’ ‘voices’ when it comes to their journeys and experiences while trying to build a new life in a different culture and often hostile and unwelcome social environment.

Despite the cultural and social differences in the origins and destinations we can observe remarkable similarities in how migrants view their circumstances, tell their ‘stories’ and come up with solutions or policy recommendations. Another common outcome of the Cross Talk events was important gaps that exist between the experience of migrants and the public perception of their lives.

Yet migrants also shared in the experience of those stakeholders at destination that mirrored migrants experience of victimhood, vulnerability, and resilience in the face of adversity. One such experience came out in the Cross Talk event in Italy. Aldo Grassini, founder of the Museo Statale Tattile Omero, which provides blind people with access to art through the sense of touch, wrote in his story that at the age of six in the post-second world war years he was blinded by a bomb explosion. His story of courage and resilience touched the migrants echoing their traumas and how one can overcome personal traumas.

Some of the main issues which were covered by migrants’ stories were: reasons for migration, the journey of migration, arriving/settling down at destination and integration, governance and policing of migration, trafficking



and smuggling of potential and actual migrants, human rights of regular and irregular migrants. One of the basic rights migrants demanded was access to the labour market, health services and education for themselves and their children. All participants at the Cross Talk events agreed that the granting of such rights and their activation would enhance the social and economic integration process of migrants bearing in mind that integration has been an important objective of host countries and a most desirable outcome for migrants and their host society. In the dialogue about integration, migrants did not view it as only their responsibility but argued that host society should also try to understand and accommodate migrants aspirations and cultures.

In our view integration should not be a one way street which migrants enter. It is best to regard integration as an open ended and dynamic process that requires continuous negotiations and dialogue between migrants and host societies. The dynamism of integration is not just about the relationship between new-comers and host society, but is a feature of relationship between different cultures and norms within a host society; which continuously negotiates integration of different cultures based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.

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