



Share SIRA

Expert group on Orientation and Integration in Rural Areas

Inclusive Territories for Integration
Building Back Better for refugee & migrant integration
in rural areas across the EU



Thursday 20 May 2021

10.00 – 12.30

Zoom



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On 20 May 2021, in the framework of our SIRA project, **35 experts** from a diverse range of organizations and institutions came together for the first meeting of the Share Network Expert Group on Orientation and Integration in Rural Areas. This meeting focused on *territorial approaches to organising orientation and integration for newcomers in rural areas and small communities as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*.

Plenary: Integration and orientation for newcomers in rural area

We provided a rapid overview of the [survey](#) that we launched at the end of 2020 to map the impact of and the responses to the pandemic in the field of migrant and refugee inclusion. We then introduced the [Share SIRA](#) project. Co-funded by the European Commission's Asylum, migration and integration fund, SIRA uses participatory approaches and pilot actions, involving both the local communities and newcomers to improve and strengthen social orientation and integration in 10 rural areas across France, Greece, Poland, and Spain.

EU Policy: Rural Territories, Integration & COVID-19

(Read the presentations [here](#) and [here](#))

Vincent Catot (DG Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission) gave a presentation on the **key aspects and figures of the [Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#)**, which addresses specific challenges faced by migrants and refugees in the EU such as low employment rate and level of education, as well as high risk of poverty and social exclusion. The Plan also acknowledges the additional challenges present in rural areas, where access to basic services is reduced and proportionally less migrants decide to settle.

In this context, the **main principles of the Action Plan** underlined were:

- The **multi-stakeholder approach** adopted to involve actors at different levels;
- The **need to promote inclusion for all and targeted support to improve access to services** for everyone in order not to foster feelings of deprivation in local communities;
- The **sectoral approach adopted to take into consideration the services available and the needs assessed** across different fields (education and training, employment and skills, health and housing).

However, the Plan also addresses some horizontal aspects, such as:

- **Building strong partnerships**, for instance the one with the Committee of the Regions to undertake some "rural mainstreaming" in discussions on migration;
- **Fostering participation and encounters with the host society**, for instance via community sponsorships and other programmes;
- **Tackling the impact of Covid-19**, which had a more severe impact on migrants and needs to be taken into account when planning for the recovery while also highlighting the essential role of migrants and refugees in society.

Matyas Szabo (DG Agriculture & Rural Development, European Commission) announced that the [EU Long Term Vision for Rural Areas](#) would be published in June 2021 following a public consultation. It will set the goal of leaving no place behind while properly acknowledging the key role played by rural areas in facing the undergoing green and digital transition the EU is experiencing. The public consultation highlighted the **challenges detected in these territories, such as depopulation and migration trends, low GDP, lower access to services, low connectivity, and increased gender gap**,



which also explain the higher percentage of people feeling “left behind” in rural areas if compared to their counterparts living in urban areas.

However, the consultation was equally useful to identify some potential answers from EU policy to tackle these challenges, including **the provision of financial support and funding access to local projects**, the **empowerment of local communities** and the **targeting of policies to local needs** (for instance via “rural-proofing”, consisting in analysing policies through rural lenses). Migration has also been identified as a possible tool to mitigate some of these issues and to contribute to the many opportunities rural areas offer in the fields of Bio and Circular Economy, Ecological and Digital transitions, Innovation and Quality of life.

Breakout room 1 - Building Back Better: new practice, partnerships and opportunities for integration in the COVID-19 recovery

Share research: COVID-19 & Integration

(Read the presentation [here](#))

In the second half of 2020, **the Share Network launched an [online survey](#) to map the impact of, and the responses to, COVID-19 in the field of migrant and refugee welcome and integration across the EU**. It also identified best practices to be taken forward during the recovery via follow-up interviews conducted with selected respondents.

With **224 responses received from 16 EU countries** mostly from civil society organisations working at the regional and local level, the survey highlighted how the major impact for migrants and refugees has been the disruption of education and training, including language learning (23%). Additionally, the lockdown has exacerbated isolation and mental health problems as well as situations of domestic violence. Digital exclusion (lack of equipment/internet access and digital and technical skills) was also widely cited, as were delays in asylum and migration procedures.

The survey identified several fields in which **local authorities, civil society organisations and migrants and refugees themselves intervened to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in an innovative way**, namely in what concerns information provision, access to digital services, volunteering activities and advocacy. For instance, new practices, formats and partnerships were implemented to respond to the needs assessed on the ground and reduce social exclusion.

Finally, the survey highlighted how **Covid-19 facilitated some “opportunities” for migrants and refugees** that could be taken forward in the upcoming period. These include the possibility for migrants and refugees to temporarily regularise or amend their status, increased public awareness and understanding of the role of essential migrant workers, additional evidence for new and existing campaigns as well as more opportunities for refugees and migrants to volunteer.

Presentation by Yagoub Kibeida, MOSAICO Action for Refugees (IT)

(Read the presentation [here](#))

After a brief presentation of [MOSAICO](#), its history, scope and work, **Yagoub Kibeida** provided an overview of the OASIS project supporting people who are in transit because of their migration status and/or other situations of social hardship or vulnerability in Turin, Italy. To do so, during the pandemic the migrant-led organisation has **digitalized information** about the restrictions enforced and the services available to disseminate it via an app, also **providing food, hygienic products and education**



material to the most vulnerable. In addition to that, they have also **worked with local authorities to create models for inclusive solutions, developed a coaching model for jobseekers, started a collaboration with local farmers** to sell and deliver their produce to abandoned housing where refugees were living and activated international channels to provide legal aid. On the basis of such activities, MOSAICO elaborated some policy recommendations addressing the need for continued efforts to tackle racism and xenophobia as well as the need for more cooperation between civil society organisations and local authorities to use technology to find solutions that support the whole community.

Discussions

Participants highlighted the **issue of political changes and turnover** that can affect initiatives at the local level and the importance of creating multistakeholder coordination mechanisms at a technical rather than political level to provide continuity to engagements in the field of integration and inclusion.

The **need to link the EU green transition to depopulation in rural areas** was also addressed, suggesting the mainstreaming of migration across different policy sectors at the local level as a possible solution. Additionally, it was pointed out how research and global discussions should be used to leverage on those political priorities and make them happen at the local level.

Experts from Poland then presented the work undertaken at the local level to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and disseminate information - for instance, by way of increasing cooperation with social services, hiring people with migrant background, working with schools and organizing activities involving language learning and practice. Good practices also included the extensions of residency and work permits, the set-up of info lines to prevent the passing on of incorrect information on administrative and legal procedures, the development of apps and the creation of associations in provincial centres to promote homogeneity of strategies, indicators and data collection across the country.

Finally, comments from France and Greece respectively stressed the **importance of tackling the digital divide**, and the **need to improve the accessibility to the labour market for undocumented migrants**.

Breakout room 2 - Evidence-based approaches for integration and inclusion in rural territories: tools, resources, stakeholders and partnerships

Presentation by Sona Kalantaryan, Knowledge Centre on Migration & Demography at the European Commission

(Read the presentation [here](#))

The [Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography](#) is a horizontal project working with different DGs to look for scientific solutions across sectors. They respond to policy needs of DGs in a timely manner. The first part of the presentation focused on the **NUTS System**, a hierarchical system to identify comparable regions where to collect data. NUTS 1 are major socio-economic regions, NUTS 2 are the basic regions for regional policies, NUTS 3 are provinces. This classification has **implications on policies and funding**; for instance, regions are eligible for support from cohesion policy at NUTS 2 Level.



The NUTS System is also complemented by the “**urban-rural typology**”, based on population density and more precisely on the share of the rural population. It comprises three categories: predominantly rural, intermediate and predominantly urban. However, the size of urban centers located in the regions plays a role in the definition of the corresponding typology. As this can be misleading, the Centre is currently working on redefining this categorization to be rather based on the availability of services. In her presentation, **Sona Kalantaryan** also pointed out how the share of migrants can change significantly from level to level, data being the most accurate at the local level. Despite this, the main challenge when working with this data is the different classifications and divisions across countries.

The Centre has thus collaborated with 8 EU countries to **harmonize the information available**, hoping to pave the way for other countries to do the same and join the initiative. The result of this work is accessible on the D4I platform. The Center has also recently started a **collaboration with DG AGRI to look at the presence of migrants in rural areas**, assess their conditions and needs. Interesting findings include:

- **Lower educational attainments;**
- **Lower performances in the labor market** if compared to counterparts in cities and natives in rural areas;
- **Lower economic outcomes in agriculture** (where wages are generally lower) than in other sectors.

Finally, in response to the increasing interest in demography, the Center has also started to work on territorial diversity and the impact of ageing. An atlas of demography has thus been created, which provides data to policy makers at the local and regional level.

Presentation by Anna Piccinni, Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development

The **OECD** has been working for a few years on the integration of migrants and refugees in rural areas, highlighting the asymmetrical distribution of migrants across territories and the need of adopting a territorial lens when designing policies. The OECD thus developed a **12-point checklist to guide local authorities and actors, which include two dimensions: time and space**.

They call for local decisionmakers to acknowledge the **impact of time on population’s engagement and services needed**, particularly encouraging the overcoming of the simple response to emergencies. In turn, this triggers more reflections and questions on the “blind spots” of integration, for instance: how to track second generations? How to address the needs of the population that exited the reception systems, who did not necessarily get the asylum and may or may not remain where they have been assigned?

With regards to the spatial dimension, **Anna Piccinni** then stressed **the importance of creating spaces for integration to promote relations and a change in narrative**. **Lukas Kleine-Rueschkamp** continued the presentation by introducing a platform created by the OECD in 2017 and based on NUTS 2 regions to compare data at a cross-country level, although at times the classification chosen does not seem to fit the real needs in terms of information available. The platform is constantly updated.

Finally, the OECD also started a **collaboration with DG REGIO to understand the role of migrants in regional development** and go beyond simple indicators. To do this, they are combining NUTS 2 data with information coming from municipalities, which allows for data aggregation and for data collection on a continuous basis. It is thus pivotal to invest in research on migration, to link policy and data at the targeted level, as well as policy and outcomes to assess the impact generated.



Discussions

Participants shared their experiences with data collecting and the challenges they encountered. For instance, they discussed the **issue of scaling**, of the **urban-rural typology** (which might not correspond to reality) and **the difficulty to gather data about flows**, given that much of the information collected is static. Data must then be mobilized.

Breakout room 3 - Migrant and refugee integration in rural areas: defining the inclusive territories approach

Presentation by Annalies Zoomers, University of Utrecht (NL)

The [Welcoming Spaces Horizon 2020 Project](#) targets shrinking areas in Poland, Spain, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands by broadening support for migration, which plays a key role in the revitalization of rural areas. To do so, the project works on the **redefinition of the key concepts used in the field, such as “rural” and “integration”**. For instance, they acknowledge the **need to adopt a trans-local approach** to grasp the implications of the urban-rural nexus, as well as the importance of replacing “integration” with “emplacement”, for the latter allows to overcome the distinction between migrants and not-migrants, to bring people together and create communities in rural areas, thus bringing about transformation.

Presentation by Irene Almazán Sotillos, Fundación CEPAIM (ES)

(Read the presentation [here](#))

[Nuevos Senderos](#) is a project implemented by CEPAIM in 11 low-density and ageing provinces in Spain, to **fight against depopulation and achieve the mutual benefit of increased employment opportunities** and higher quality of life, brought by an increased presence of newcomers in these territories. The project follows 4 phases during which the organisation works with municipalities, with migrants identified by CEPAIM’s international protection team and willing to relocate, with employers and social actors.

Presentation by Eleni Bletsas (ANKA, EL) & Isabelle Mestre (Entraide Pierre Valdo, FR), Share SIRA Focal Points

These interventions focused on **regional multistakeholder engagement** in the field of migrant and refugee inclusion in SIRA territories. After a brief presentation of the [Karditsa Development Agency](#) and its activities, **Eleni Bletsas** explained how they have managed to involve 30 participants from 21 stakeholders active in education, health, employment and social life in the Karditsa Prefectural Unit. ANKA’s 30-year-old expertise facilitated contact at first, but a second level of engagement from participants has been equally encouraged via the collection of best practices to be shared across Greece.

Isabelle Mestre from [Entraide Pierre Valdo](#) provided an overview of their activities in France in the framework of the Share SIRA project. They gathered different actors in four departments, and they reflected together on the **concept of “inclusive territories”**, which local stakeholders preferred to refer to as “welcoming territories”. In addition to integration needs, their exchanges also addressed how territories can remove barriers to enable and facilitate inclusion, with some contrasting views due to the heterogeneity of the actors involved.



Discussions

In the time allocated for discussion, the group stressed once again the **need to foster cooperation and social investment between communities in rural areas** to develop a common vision and **create synergies and partnerships** to improve **access to services and remove the language barrier**.