



# FOCUS Living Well Together Forum #1

## Co-creative and participatory approaches to dynamic integration

23 February 2021

Discussion with **Bilal Almobarak** | **Adnan Abdul Ghani** | **Moses Seitler**  
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The FOCUS Living Well Together Forum #1 'Co-creative and participatory approaches to dynamic integration' took place on 23 February 2021. It was the occasion to discuss with three civil society organisations active in integration work on what co-creation and participation mean in the context of dynamic integration; why and how to make integration practices dynamic, co-creative and participatory; and what to keep in mind when doing so.

## Dynamic integration: Beyond consultation & participation

Dynamic integration needs to be co-creative and participatory. This fundamental claim of the FOCUS project was echoed by the speakers, advocating for an integration practice that is not patronising and that allows arriving community members to lead the process as experts in their own matters.

**Adnan Abdul Ghani:** Integration remains an empty saying without providing the proper **tools, resources and information**. If a person does not have enough information about how to participate, not enough tools or training to lead – **not only to participate but to lead!** –, it will not be real participation.



**Moses Seitler:** We had this great moment when we connected a group of young refugees with the Forward Institute, which is made up of various governmental, business and economic leaders. The leaders were learning from the young refugees. **Focussing on that moment, speaking to them about it and making sure they don't forget it, has helped the young refugees realise they had skin in the game.** Our society is *ours* society. It is shared, and they are leaders.

### What can 'dynamic' integration mean in practice, and how to implement it?

**Adnan Abdul Ghani:** Start by **making the target group part of the planning** of any kind of project, initiative, activity. **Make them part of the implementation** by providing tools, information and resources, and open the floor for them to make it possible to lead. And **make them part of**

'Dynamic integration is not consulting, asking: "should we take this on board?" It is committing to listening, to valuing.'

Moses Seitler

**the evaluation.** Having the feedback, taking ownership, is what makes these activities and projects need-based and meaningful for the target group.

**Moses Seitler:** It is a lot easier to engender a feeling of participatory practice and get arriving communities involved in voluntary work when you **speak about it from the outset.** Otherwise, we have known young people for a few years and they have got the sense that we are the charity and they are the recipients. Then to start speaking about participatory practices makes it more difficult.

### Re:ACT

Save the Children Sweden manages the [Re:ACT](#) project, based on the initiative and grassroots work of the Support Group Network. Re:ACT is a concept about mobilisation and empowerment of refugees in asylum seeking accommodations. Through these components, refugees are encouraged to organise themselves in support groups and become actors of their own matters. In the course of four years, Save the Children Sweden applied the participatory Re:ACT model to 13 Swedish municipalities and created support groups in Germany and Norway.

## Empowerment and changing the narrative

**Moses Seitler:** I chose that first example [from the Connected through Covid campaign, see p. 3] because it is a case of a student facilitating a **shift in the power dynamic:** This wasn't a young person receiving sympathy, it was her giving advice and guiding others. We can challenge narratives which present refugees as helpless victims, but actually **forming other narratives** is equally important.

**Adnan Abdul Ghani:** The question in this co-creation matter is: **Who is empowering whom?** We are not empowering poor, unfortunate victims. It is the other way round!

'Participation is power. You empower people, and at the same time empower those working with them. Participation is empowerment and inclusion.'

Bilal Almobarak

## Challenges and how to overcome them

Motivating arriving community members to take part in volunteering activities can be a challenge as well. Some migrants come from a cultural background or have been raised in an environment where they don't necessarily practice volunteering or don't find it important.

**Moses Seitler:** One of the greatest challenges is finding that blessed space in-between: encouraging arriving communities to take on responsibility **without putting them under too much pressure.**

It is not really about *when* you provide the opportunity, it's *the manner in which* you do it. For example, [at Refugee Education UK] we use a software which allows us to send out opportunities to young people. It is the nature of this software that we are not asking: 'will you do this now with us?' It is more like: 'Here is an opportunity, if you'd like to get involved, then go for it'.

**'You have to communicate. We need intercultural communication on volunteering and its benefits.'**

Adnan Abdul Ghani

**The main challenge is, however, to bring the receiving community on board.**

**Michelle Engels:** The typical people who put their hands up to do integration services either themselves have a migrant background or are personally motivated to welcome arriving community members. But we also want to reach out to those who may not normally have contact with the arriving community members, to try and move **beyond the usual suspects** and reach a larger proportion of the community.

**Adnan Abdul Ghani:** It can be helpful to communicate clearly **what is in it for everyone** and talk about what are the natural benefits for all. Finding those **things that we share** – it can be the love of sports or chess, sometimes we are both engineers –, those simple connections, can be very helpful. It helps engage with people, it helps create long-term partnerships, but also gives confidence to both sides.

Connected through Covid

The [Connected through Covid](#) campaign was launched by Refugee Education UK at the beginning of the first lockdown in the UK. The public was asked to send letters of hope in that REUK would then pass on to young people. And the recipients of these letters were invited to respond publicly – not necessarily a message of gratitude, but of advice to other young people in both arriving and receiving communities.

**Two videos from the campaign:**

[How To Stay Grateful During Coronavirus](#) | [How To Stay Positive If You're A Student](#)



**'These are examples of us sharing the tools of communications production, promoting the youth on our platform, encouraging them and amplifying their voices. And creating *with* them opportunities to feel like they were contributing to a national moment and a national feeling – which they were!'**

Moses Seitler

**Moses Seitler:** We have a big educational mentoring programme where we make it very clear from the outset that you are going to learn something here: **The way you see the world is going to change**, you are going to boost your communications skills and **you are going to build a connection with someone.**

'It is also about finding common ground somehow, about finding something that benefits both groups at the same time.'

Anouk Boschma

**Bilal Almobarak:** You need to show them what are the **positives in the short, medium and long run**, and what are the negatives and drawbacks of not doing so.

**Moses Seitler:** As well as appealing to the shared values, with COVID we currently have a strange opportunity to **appeal to similar feelings**: It is a surprise that now both young refugees and members of the host community are feeling isolated, lonely and scared. We can try to make host communities realise that **it's just luck that has kept them from the situation that these young people are in.**

## Psychosocial considerations in integration work

The FOCUS project puts a strong emphasis on psychosocial support and mental health (see FOCUS approach to dynamic integration p. 6). However, psychosocial considerations are not always included in integration work. How could this be done?

**Bilal Almobarak:** Usually we ask: 'How can integration improve psychosocial health?' It is the feeling of empowerment as a migrant in the host society: having the tools, the means, the information to solve my problems and to keep **acting and interacting with society**, that makes one psychosocially empowered or feeling well.

'A lot of the focus is on how integration practice improves well-being. However, it is also interesting to explore how well-being can improve integration.'

Michelle Engels

**Moses Seitler:** One way to go about things is to not only provide the service which you're providing, in our case educational support, but making them aware of the **other, 'extra-curricular' opportunities** specifically for the purpose of finding what suits them, what makes them happy.

**Anouk Boschma:** In FOCUS, we think about this psychosocial consideration in three ways: social bonds, bridges and links.<sup>1</sup> **Bonds** are amongst people with a refugee background sharing information: 'This is how

I integrated; this may help you as well'. **Bridges** are between receiving and arriving communities – exchange of information or even networks that may lead to job or educational opportunities. **Linkages** are focused on the question: how does that connect you to better access government or civil society services?

### The FOCUS project

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<sup>1</sup> See Strang, Alison/Ager, Alastair: Refugee Integration: Emerging Trends and Remaining Agendas. Journal of Refugee Studies (Nov 2010) 23(4):589-607. DOI: 10.1093/jrs/feq046

## Conclusions

**Adnan Abdul Ghani:** As FOCUS says, **integration is not one-way, it is two-way**. Or, as Commissioner Ylva Johansson said: It is a tango – we have to do it together.<sup>2</sup>

**Moses Seitler:** I think that is the main benefit: it is actually just doing the right thing [to take a participatory approach]. It is not just that arriving communities tend to know what they need best. **It is the right thing to do**. We are more than a charity providing services.

**Bilal Almobarak:** 'Dynamic' also means that it is 'live': touching upon the most current and urgent issues. The benefits of the whole package is that **it creates active citizens**.

MOVE Beyond

Save the Children Sweden participates in the Erasmus+ project [MOVE Beyond](#) about how sports can support the integration of refugees. MOVE Beyond applied the Re:ACT model (see p. 2), training refugees to become sports leaders. Together with partners from sports clubs, a training for 8-10 migrants from different backgrounds was created, providing information on how to organise sports activities and resources such as risk analysis or budget management tools.

**'We wanted to change the narrative through participatory, co-creative empowerment.'**

Adnan Abdul Ghani



<sup>2</sup> Commissioner Johansson's opening remarks at the Action plan on Integration and Inclusion launch, 24 November 2020 <https://bit.ly/3mSJfXM>

Encourage and amplify **voices**    Make projects need-based and meaningful  
 Our society is **our** society    Who is **empowering** whom?    Listen  
**Active citizens**    Intercultural communication    **Participation is power**

### Support Group Network

... is a refugee and migrant-led and -initiated organisation in Sweden. Its idea is to make refugees and asylum seekers owners of their own matters and encourage them to collaborate with the local society. SGN runs several projects and initiatives, among them the first intercultural centre in Sweden.



### Save the Children Sweden

... is a child rights organisation supporting children in vulnerable situations. Save the Children Sweden is fighting for all children to have a safe and healthy childhood and make their voices heard. Save the Children operates both in Sweden and internationally.



### Refugee Education UK

... is a UK-based organisation that helps refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people build more hopeful futures through education. REUK offers various services to support young people in their educational journey, as well as training and consultancy for practitioners and research.



## The FOCUS approach to dynamic integration

The FOCUS approach to dynamic integration includes five effective components, core pillars of what we think helps to make effective and dynamic integration practices.

### Participatory & co-creative approaches

This pillar is about community members being the drivers of their own care, and making sure to engage people as experts of their own experience. It is about meaningful engagement: don't just consult, actually listen and value what is being said. We want to see both receiving and arriving community members as active members rather than just recipients of services.

### Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

We should move away from the trauma-focussed narrative that often exists when we speak about asylum seekers and refugees. There is a wide range of experiences during and following migration that can impact peoples' well-being. When we talk about MHPSS, we speak about well-being in a broad sense.

Integration services must be provided in a manner that respects an individuals' rights, supports their dignity and is culturally informed and sensitive. Incorporating MHPSS actively in integration practices fosters bonds, bridges, links and, consequently, positive relations and trust, thus benefitting both arriving and receiving communities. On the other hand, social supports and community relationships are crucial to support overall well-being.



### Arriving and receiving communities

This pillar emphasises the crux of dynamic integration: to move away from the common perception of integration as the sole responsibility of arriving community members. Receiving community members need to be at the table as well, taking a part of the responsibility as well as of the benefits.

It is important to create opportunities for increased interactions and to engage receiving community members who do not normally interact with migrant or refugee community members.

### Volunteerism

From the Red Cross/Red Crescent perspective, we see volunteerism at the heart of community-building, as a core driver of enabling community ownership and, as a result, contributing to sustainable programmes and services within communities.

We see volunteerism as a core opportunity to bring groups and people together in positive interaction, learning and engagement between receiving and arriving community members.

### Multi-stakeholder partnerships and coordination

People arrive to communities with a broad range of needs, and migration creates new needs in the receiving communities. Offering an MHPSS service to someone to improve well-being alone does not make sense if the person doesn't have access to accommodation or to the labour market. Linkages across different support services are essential, including private enterprise, government, non-profit and civil society.