D5.8-Policy Paper 3 - Policy recommendations to promote mutual understanding between refugees and local communities in Europe

Summary

Based on the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper assesses the needs, identifies the challenges, and draws policy-relevant recommendations about the use of digital tools for the encounter between refugees and local communities in Europe. The tools foster the sharing of past and present experiences of forced displacement, and the amplification of co-created narratives, in the context of cultural heritage.

1. Introduction and background

Cultural heritage, as an element of historical continuity as well as a modern depiction of national and local consciousness, is a key point of expression of individual and collective identity. As a whole, cultural heritage represents the valuable experience that societies have accumulated over centuries. It represents a person's or group's history and especially identity. Through the recall of the past, we give meaning to our lives today. Cultural heritage is no longer just a memory or a cultural reference, or even a place or an object. Cultural heritage is used as an identity-giving guiding force for trade, professions, entertainment, politics and general public spheres of the places where it was created.

The cultural heritage of forced displacement forms a special category, because the number of displaced people is at its highest level since the end of World War II. People tend to come to Europe from some of the poorest countries in the world, and are even more vulnerable when their displacement deprives them of education. Furthermore, there are around 40 million internally displaced people, most of them in Syria, and an additional 19 million, which have been displaced by natural disasters.

In this report, we treat cultural heritage as a field of interaction between displaced persons and host communities. The basic medium of social integration is an interaction based on cross-cultural communication, mutual understanding and recognition. When migrants come in contact with people from the local communities, they move not only between languages but also between cultures. In this process, we must include the rapid technological development, which often can facilitate this interaction.

In this context, digital tools give space for diverse narratives to emerge and spread, in the digital space but also enhancing physical encounters. As facilitators of imagining and communicating ideas, they may also be considered incubators of rethinking societal challenges. Leveraging the technological restraints of creating and sharing digital narratives, they allow non-expert users to deploy projects and populate them with custom-made content.

The digitization of cultural heritage is developed on a wide range of concepts and practices, that include new means and technologies for the preservation and study of collections and archival content, as well

as new formats of storytelling and meaning-making. Cultural and social actors are intensively exploring these opportunities in order to engage with their audience and society in general. Their active role in digitalization is manifested through the multiplication of digital infrastructures and projects that make use of online interaction, immersive media and participatory features as strategic communication and dissemination assets.

Based on the project's activities and the tools implementation and considering the experiences and perceptions of selected stakeholders, this policy paper attempts to assess needs, identify challenges, and draw policy relevant recommendations about the shared experience of forced displacement between refugees and the local communities in Europe. Specifically, the paper draws from the four pilots organised between 2021-2022 and the 15 focus groups and 197 semi-structured individual interviews conducted in 2020 across the following four EU Member States: Italy, Spain, Poland, and Greece. The historical background and the socio-political and cultural context of each country configure a unique local context for each pilot case.

Through the development of digital tools and cultural products, SO CLOSE aims at facilitating physical and virtual cultural exchanges between forcefully displaced populations from past and contemporary conflicts as well as local communities and amplifying rich, and emotional co-created narratives.

The policy brief is divided into three parts: (I) an overview of the key findings and political implications; (II) a set of policy recommendations based on findings; and (III) a concluding section.

2. Key findings and socio-political implications

The findings of this report are based on the review and the analysis of the abovementioned project activities. Some key topics include digital tools, co-creation, cultural heritage and social cohesion.

2.1 Co-designing digital solutions with stakeholders

Digital technologies are essential means of

communication, networking and community building. However, designing a digital solution is a process that has to take into consideration the familiarity, needs, and objectives of each stakeholder group.

For many refugees, digital tools facilitate access to services and new skills acquisition and allow for a greater autonomy and safety, as they provide access to trusted sources of updated information. Mobile phones and apps are often used by migrants to learn more about the culture of the host country and understand its cultural aspects and daily life. Cultural institutions make widespread use of digital tools and social media for cultural activities and outreach. This practice has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19 as a way of communicating and maintaining audience engagement.

Policy makers and academics highlight the potential of digital tools and storytelling for raising social awareness regarding the realities of forced displacements and prompting interactions.

The barriers are, however, different when considering the use by refuges and migrants in comparison to institutions. The lack of stable funding or the limited dedicated resources and technical skills are the basic reasons preventing cultural institutions and NGOs from making a more intensive use of technology. For individuals, the main challenging factors are the digital gap, the unequal access to rights and services, and the digital exclusion linked with power asymmetries and discrimination.

2.2 Co-creating content with the communities

Different methodologies were applied by cultural institutions (CIs) to co-create content together with the participants. Such methods were crowdsourcing, co-scripting, workshops at schools, memory paths with past and present testimonies, refugee artists and curators, and others.

On the one hand, digital technologies have the potential to play an important role in creating networks and channels of communication between refugees and local communities and in enhancing the intercultural exchange of information. On the other hand, taking into account the specific circumstances

of each country, each CI had the possibility to use a different methodology of co-creating content with the participants and targeting specific groups or aspects. Below are some examples of strategies of co-creating the cultural heritage of forced migrations in a dialogue between former and current migrants and refugees.

Through digital mapping and digital historical walks, life experiences and memories were exchanged, while at the same time the dimensions of analogy between past and present, and their connection were highlighted. In addition, arts-based activities were designed and implemented in schools, with the main focus on enhancing the interaction between refugees and young people from the receiving communities.

Equally important is the co-creation of content, such as recording and presenting the routes that exiled populations followed. At the same time, guided visits to historical places were carried out, where testimonies of forcefully migrated populations of the past and present were shared.

Finally, in some cases, testimonies of new arrivals were recorded while in others on-site "ambassadors" as representatives of the communities were called to create the digital stories in the tools through their perspective, and artists were invited to include and present their work, inspired by the experience of deportation, exile or political persecution.

2.3 Sharing narratives to reach a common ground

The digital tools gave room to the narratives of the displaced populations. Their main goal was to bring forward common life experiences of the past and present. Negative narratives were replaced by positive personal and collective effects, through sharing personal experiences.

In some cases, narratives emerged about the motivations and preconditions of displaced populations, with particular emphasis on the emotional transition from leaving family, friends and a familiar cultural environment to a whole new environment where they have to face the challenges of language, different cultures, bureaucracy and a difficult social inclusion process. The physical and emotional transition was shared mainly through the story map and illustrated through the journeys of the protagonists, with multimedia describing the significance of each stage.

Past and the present were the main axis of the narratives. For example, in the case of MUME (Spain), the narratives of the past focused on the Spanish Civil War mainly from 1939, when it ended, and the forced displacement of part of the Spanish population through the process of claiming a new life, as well as through the negotiation of identity (national, cultural, etc.). Generally, special emphasis was given to the relationship of the population with the country of origin through the possibility of returning or not. Regarding the present, the highlighted dimensions were the same, with the only notable difference being that the reference countries were Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The tool that served the most for the juxtaposition of past and present perspectives was the web-doc, as it allowed to integrate video galleries and exhibit audio-visual material – re-used or co-created.

Another important element of the narratives was the connection of the past with the present, through the emergence of shared life experiences. Taking as reference the case of GFR (Greece), the connection of Trikeri, an island in Greece, which was used as a women's concentration camp during the Greek Civil War, with the current refugee camps, provided realistic narratives about forced displacement and at the same time highlighting the common ground of refugees of the past to the present. The shared points that emerged concerned the living conditions in the camps, the personal skills and educational background of the refugees, the religious and cultural diversity of the population as well as the need to promote positive personal stories in order to tackle negative social stereotypes regarding refugees. Finally, an equally important outcome of these narratives concerns the strengthening of existing action groups aimed at empowering refugee and immigrant communities. All these aspects were communicated in the different virtual exhibitions created by the cultural institutions, illustrating panels with archival materials, photographs and 3D objects.

3. Voices from the field: policy recommendations

Several implications arise from the findings of this research. Taking these outcomes into consideration, we suggest a number of policy recommendations.

3.1 Foster the digital capacity of cultural and social actors.

- Promote the creation of digital strategies for cultural institutions and social organizations. The strategic goals should be set according to a critical use of technology and the expected impact should be socially relevant, targeting inequalities – digital and other.
- Offer funding for the implementation of digital strategies. Funding should foresee different needs related to digitization: the purchase, maintenance and upgrade of equipment and infrastructures, and most importantly, the recruitment and training of professionals in the use of technologies.
- Design the digital tools according to the needs, values and experiences of their future users. It is important to consider that the use of technology does not only rely on technical components, but also on methodologies adapted to each context. In this sense, technological applications may consist of several digital tools that, combined, offer innovative and meaningful solutions.
- Better exploit tools created by European innovation and research projects. These tools offer specialized and research-based solutions that should be channelled in a more effective way in order to reach a wider potential audience.
- Empower digital humanities infrastructures and recognize them as knowledge-producing tools that can inform human-centred decision making and policies.

3.2 Utilise digital storytelling to create, communicate, and promote inclusive narratives.

- Promote digital narratives that build up shared imaginaries. The communities' concept and definition should be based on values and not characteristics.

- Utilize the emotional potential of storytelling as a tool for mutual recognition. Appealing to emotions is a powerful communication strategy that, if accompanied by critical thinking, can contribute to tackling social challenges.
- Foster collaborative approaches to digital storytelling, as means of interaction and listening.
- Use interaction, gamification, and contribution, as co-creation features that add value and are able to engage the audience.
- Consider the importance of language and accessibility as elements of inclusive communication.
- Consider the importance of smartphones as communication channels and adapt the storytelling formats.
- Recognize the agency of migrant communities when creating stories and narratives that involve them and reduce power inequalities of the storytelling-making processes.

3.3 Improve access to digital services for refugees.

In order to improve access to services for refugee populations living in the EU, there has to be a functional common integration plan across the member states. The logic of keeping the displaced people isolated can only hinder any effective effort of integration and inclusion of the refugee population in their host countries.

- Ease access on new technologies for refugees.
- Stable internet connection.
- Participation in the collective life of their city through events, joint actions/activities with locals etc.
- Respect human rights regarding access to health, education, civil services.

3.4 Foster refugee agency on narratives and decision-making.

The negative narrative on migration that prevails throughout the EU is arguably the biggest issue to be tackled regarding the inclusion of displaced people in the host societies.

- Highlight the similarities shared by displaced people and local communities.
- Changing the narrative from a negative one to a "shared experiences" one will likely influence policy makers in the long run.
- Bring people together and create a common narrative by using technological tools.
- Implementation of workshops for refugee and migrant leaders on EU values.
- Offer training to refugees and migrants on digital storytelling scripting and development.

4. Conclusion

As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said regarding the World Refugee Day: "100 million people have now been forced to flee their homes. The war in Ukraine, as well as new or continuing emergencies in places such as Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have all contributed to this staggering figure. The solutions deficit continues to grow as more people are forced to flee than are able to return home, resettle to a third country, or integrate fully into the country where they have sought safety. In other words, forced displacement is outpacing solutions for those on the run."

Forced migration has played an undeniable role in forming the European Union's past and present. Member States need to address these movements with a set of actions that will ensure refugees a safe passage to the host countries and at the same time a substantial and effective integration process at social, cultural, and economic level. Member states have the capacity to create inclusive policies with a view to promote social cohesion into European societies.

Digital tools can facilitate co-creation, and the dialogue between refugees and host societies, and between past and present as they open new communication channels and they allow for diverse narratives to emerge. In this sense, they can be considered as useful mediators and amplifiers for heritage-making processes.

In conclusion, promoting cultural heritage through digital tools, as well as highlighting shared life experiences between local communities and refugees and fostering the exchange are highly important and effective tools in strengthening the creation of social cohesion and integration.

5. References

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