



SUMMARY

Migrant and Refugee Participation: Approaches to Rethinking Integration Policies

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Sophie Bilong is a consultant on asylum and immigration issues. She graduated at the University Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne in the field of evaluation of social inclusion policies. She then worked for 13 years for two human rights organizations. She acquired skills in the fields of public policies evaluation, labor market inclusion, refugee integration and asylum procedure. She is involved on the fight against poverty, decent reception of refugees and gender equality. She is interested in participative methodology offering empowerment to the most disadvantaged people.

Since June 2019, Sophie Bilong has been participating to the activities of the Observatory on Immigration and Asylum at IFRI.

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Executive summary

In France, people participating in policies and programs that affect them is not a new concept. It has been widely studied in the field of social work and the fight against poverty and takes several forms: consulting residents about development projects in their neighborhood, citizen participation in decisions that affect their town or city, or involving people experiencing poverty in evaluating public policies they will benefit from.

These experiences provide methodological and theoretical approaches for developing forums for migrant and refugee participation. Indeed, migrants and refugees, although they are sometimes affected by these measures as foreigners, residents of a neighborhood, or people experiencing poverty, are not usually consulted on how to develop programs and public assistance policies that directly affect them. Additionally, non-EU foreign nationals cannot vote in local elections which is the ultimate form of participation.

Although many nonprofit organizations or local authorities are convinced that migrant and refugee participation is essential to the success of reception and integration programs and public policies, so far, few initiatives have been developed with them based on their expertise. Programs offered to new arrivals in France are often developed in advance by people with no experience of migration without involving migrants and refugees.

Our aim is to take stock of the issue of migrant and refugee participation, which is very often discussed, but has not been systematically studied in France. We will attempt to apply the concept of participation, as described for people experiencing poverty, to migrants and refugees and to understand whether their participation has any specific characteristics.

Employees, professionals, volunteers, activists, beneficiaries of programs who are involved in running them, organization leaders, local authority and institution representatives, and founders of nonprofit organizations with experience of migration were interviewed. They described the experiences of refugee and migrant participation at work within their organizations, the motivation of the people who implemented them and the difficulties encountered.

Methodology

The study carried out by the Observatory on Immigration and Asylum is based on 33 interviews conducted between October and December 2019 with different stakeholders involved in the reception and integration of migrants and refugees in France: nonprofit organizations, organizations established by refugees or migrants, local authorities, government representatives and experts. These stakeholders were brought together at a roundtable organized in November 2019 during which innovative mechanisms, developed with refugees and based on their wishes and talents, were highlighted and the conditions for such participation analyzed. Another meeting organized in February 2020 was an opportunity to work on the recommendations presented in this study with the various stakeholders involved, representatives of nonprofit organizations, migrants and refugees and founders of nonprofit organizations and researchers.

Participation: a path towards citizenship and a challenge for effectiveness

Although migrant and refugee participation does not appear to be a priority of the French authorities, including for policies that affect them directly, such as asylum and immigration policies, several nonprofit organizations are emphasizing the importance of setting up forums for participation. These forums enable migrants or refugees to give their opinion, raise awareness of their lives, share their experience and empower themselves. Participation refers to the concept of expertise. The question arises whether you need to be an expert to participate or what types of experts are valued in participation mechanisms. However, it can also be said also that a form of expertise is acquired in the very act of participation.

Consequently, many refugees and migrants are participating in programs to become full citizens. They want to have a place in the French society they belong to. This goal to feel like a citizen and to belong, recurred frequently in the interviews. Refugees and migrants have ideas, political analysis and opinions about public policies they have experienced.

Furthermore, the initiatives of nonprofit organizations are especially relevant as they are based on the expectations of the people they are mobilizing; involving refugees and migrants enables new ideas to emerge. Therefore, it is a real challenge to develop programs, support mechanisms and public policies with refugees and migrants.

From consultation to shared governance

It is against this background of awareness of the importance of refugee and migrant participation that initiatives and trials are being carried out. Consequently, some nonprofit organizations are adapting their projects based on responses to satisfaction surveys or other forms of consultation. Others are experimenting with innovative initiatives that are encouraging them to integrate refugees and migrants, formerly beneficiaries, into volunteer teams and to co-facilitate actions. Projects are co-designed, co-facilitated or even led solely by refugees and migrants. All these experiences require a move from ‘doing for’ to ‘doing with’, including in the development of local or national public policies.

Historically, the reception of asylum seekers and refugees was included in the framework of the social inclusion sector. When they come to France, asylum seekers are accommodated in state-funded centers for asylum seekers (*centres d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile* - Cada) which are managed by nonprofit organizations. Therefore, French law requires that centers encourage residents to participate in the center's life, by electing representatives from among themselves, or that people are consulted via satisfaction surveys or participate in discussion groups. These forms of participation are not always suited to this group of people, who have recently arrived in France, do not always have a good command of French and have social concerns, as well as those related to the asylum procedure. Furthermore, these participation mechanisms only apply to a minority of people who have come to France, as only 48% of asylum seekers were accommodated in a Cada in 2018. Due to the insufficient number of shelter places, additional arrangements have been put in place, but they are not under any obligation to organize participation by residents. Also, people without a residence permit or those who come to France for other reasons than to seek asylum, are not included in these arrangements.

Several nonprofit organizations that run centers for asylum seekers have set up participatory frameworks. This applies to the organization Aurore that specializes in supporting vulnerable people and has a department focused on participation. The head of the ‘community life’ department is responsible for the effective development of resident participation. Secours catholique-Caritas France, a key actor in the fight against poverty in France, is also demonstrating its commitment to participation through its ‘empowerment development’ department. This team supports groups in their projects that enable beneficiaries to become involved in community life. Finally, France terre d’asile, a historical actor in receiving and integrating asylum seekers and refugees in France, conducted

a national consultation of its users in 2018. This involved more than 1,000 people and sent out a strong signal in favor of participatory mechanisms.

Refugee and migrant participation assumes a more advanced form in some nonprofit organizations. We are talking about ongoing participation in the Rosmerta collective, a self-managed social and cultural center that unconditionally accommodates unaccompanied minors and families in a squat in the south of France. Collective and cooperative organization is the founding principle of this community. Specific tasks and decisions are shared jointly by the residents and volunteers. Members of the Jesuit Refugee Service's "JRS Jeunes" program co-develop and co-facilitate workshops on an equal footing. They take turns being volunteers or participants, and experience reciprocal hospitality that does not place refugees and migrants in a beneficiary-based relationship. Similarly, the Singa community proposes projects based on establishing links that are equally led by new arrivals and locals. They do not talk about beneficiaries or volunteers, but rather community members and avoid pitting the "refugees" against the "French" and "them" against "us."

This research into co-development are also found in larger nonprofit organizations, like the French Red Cross or Secours catholique-Caritas France. The Mutual Assistance Center for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Cedre), run by Caritas France, is promoting and experimenting with refugee and migrant participation. Half of the volunteer team is made up of asylum seekers. Their expertise, based on their life experience and migration pathway, is valued and helps to accommodate and support new arrivals better. At the French Red Cross, a decision by the Board of Governors in 2018 supports and frames the commitment to integrate beneficiaries as volunteers. A guide on inclusive volunteering provides tools to increase participation by residents and among refugees and migrants.

In addition to participation in co-developed programs or ascertaining residents' opinions, in some still rare cases, migrants participate in nonprofit organizations' decision-making bodies (Boards of Governors, general meetings, management councils, etc.) They are consulted as experts. For example, Bureau d'accueil et d'accompagnement des migrant.e.s (BAAM) provides information sessions and runs many French courses in the Paris region which are readily available. Half of its Board of Governors is made up of migrants.

Furthermore, migrants and refugees have not waited to be asked to participate in the reception and integration of their peers. Many nonprofit organizations working specifically in the reception and support of migrants have been founded by recent arrivals to France. These are founded from a personal network and then expand their base and become formalized over

time. This is the case of Union des étudiants exilés, founded by a Syrian refugee, which reaches out to all refugees and migrants wishing to resume or undertake studies in France, or the nonprofit Nouvelle page, founded by an Afghan refugee, which provides an information service to all Dari and Farsi-speaking asylum seekers.

While the foundation of nonprofit organizations is an established form of participation, it seems that these people sometimes become involved because they have not found their place in existing organizations. Additionally, migrant organizations based on a “community” criterion, are not as valued in France as in other countries where community action is more developed and recognized by civil society and the authorities.

Interviews conducted as part of this study highlighted that public institutions are not as innovative as organizations in terms of participation and that still too few migrants and refugees can contribute to implementing reception policies locally and even less so nationally. Currently, no participatory body is planned in France, either to ascertain refugees’ and migrants’ opinions as users of the nonprofit organizations responsible for handling their situation, or as the subject of asylum and immigration policies. In fact, consultation is not a practice that easily fits into the French political model, particularly for state policies with control and police enforcement objectives like immigration and asylum policies. However, the establishment of the Interministerial Delegation for the Reception and Integration of Refugees (Diair) in 2018 has given more prominence to refugees’ opinions.

At a time when participation in national politics is still very limited, participation initiatives for refugees and migrants have developed at local level. Some cities are part of networks that consider migrants and refugees as full citizens, regardless of their administrative status, because they live, study and work in their region. For example, the National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories (Anvita) is made up of cities that are committed to unquestioningly receiving migrants. For example, Grenoble took a clear stance on receiving refugees and migrants in 2015 and declared itself “a solidarity city.” It established a platform to collect citizens’ proposals for solidarity with migrants and the needs of nonprofit organizations on the ground. It has set up an international center to promote these initiatives, provided premises and facilitated networking. Finally, in 2019, several migrant-led projects, including some by “undocumented” migrants, were submitted as part of the participatory budget. These initiatives show that local authorities are key actors in developing migrant and refugee participation in reception and integration policies and in exploring how to involve them in the development of national public policies.

Methodological tools to promote refugee and migrant participation

Migrant and refugee participation remains a challenge and it is not easy to put into practice. Some methodological tools can be used as advice for actors working in the field or as pragmatic proposals to initiate a process of empowering assisted people.

The “moving on” process is increasingly widespread and conceptualized in social work. It involves reaching out with a program or policy to the relevant people who do not have access to their rights or do not feel entitled to participate. It is practiced both in reception and accommodation facilities for asylum seekers and refugees to encourage residents to participate, but also within a neighborhood, a town or city, or a camp to identify new beneficiaries, raise awareness of a project or provide a service to new people entitled to it.

When setting up co-facilitated actions, it is also essential to communicate with the people involved and to take their talents into account. For participation to be voluntary, it is important to ascertain their opinions and wishes, identify their skills and provide different roles, and not prejudge the abilities and wishes of people by placing them in a category beforehand.

At the same time, some nonprofit organizations are forming peer groups to facilitate refugee and migrant participation. Establishing these groups that only bring refugees and migrants together makes it possible to develop collective thinking based on individual accounts and facilitate public speaking.

It also seems that participation has an impact on the professionals’ day-to-day work. It sometimes means changing habits, rethinking action in another way than as a relationship of charity or one-sided support. For organizations working with volunteers, refugee and migrant participation goes as far as bringing about a change in institutional culture. When volunteers are invited to team up with former beneficiaries, they are being asked to change their outlook and to share the power that the act of giving conferred on them.

Finally, in nonprofit organizations founded by migrants, the question of participation by the people involved is self-evident. Nevertheless, sometimes problems may arise when it comes to representing the nonprofit organization externally or when seeking funding. Therefore, the change in culture also affects partners and society in general.

In many cases, the nonprofit organizations aim to get refugees and migrants to participate, but because they are caught up in the timescales of a project, they organize consultations even though the project is already well underway. If migrants and refugees are not consulted from the planning or start of a project, they may feel exploited by the institution.

During this still experimental period for these issues, refugee and migrant reception and support organizations engaged in co-development approaches, are sharing their practices and will draw on methods developed in other sectors. Consequently, the “Crossroads of Knowledge and Practices” methodology, developed by ATD 4th World (Mouvement ATD quart monde), an organization to eradicate extreme poverty, is starting to be used by nonprofit migrant and refugee assisting organizations. This methodology consists of engaging three types of knowledge: the life experience of people living in poverty or who have lived in extreme poverty, the knowledge of experienced professionals, particularly social workers and the academic knowledge of researchers and academics. The knowledge of migrants and refugees could be challenged and enriched with the knowledge of people responsible for their reception and support in France and the knowledge of researchers who assess refugee and migrant reception and integration policies in France.

Approaches to rethinking reception and integration programs and policies with refugees and migrants

Although there are many experiments and they are on the increase, we have identified measures which would develop migrant and refugee participation. These measures aim to support and consolidate initiatives that promote this participation, encourage new frameworks to experiment with and help the French authorities become more involved in this issue, or even enact the need and significance of participation in law. Indeed, participation is not only a method, it is also a commitment and objective that comes under the governance of nonprofit organizations and authorities.

■ *Provide an operating budget for forums for participation.*

Allocating a budget to participatory bodies allows people to actually exercise their empowerment. This gives members of the organization the capacity to independently decide on participatory activities and to implement them. Empowering people to carry out these projects comes back to valuing their contribution.

- *Include refugee and migrant participation in internal and external evaluation criteria of the nonprofit organizations' programs.*

These evaluations should make it possible to identify forums for participation for refugees and migrants and assess their effectiveness. These evaluations will be the opportunity to ask where, how and when residents have been consulted and whether the participatory bodies have been able to collect refugees' and migrants' opinions and with what effects. The evaluations could be an opportunity to suggest improvements to raise awareness of refugee and migrants' opinions.

- *Set up training courses for social workers and civil servants run by people with experience of migration.*

The participation of refugees and migrants leads to a change in culture among people who work with this population in nonprofit organizations and government. This change in culture can be achieved through initial and ongoing training. Training courses could therefore bring together migrants and refugees who have developed their analytical capacity and professionals in social work or the asylum procedure, or even policymakers.

- *Integrate refugees and migrants into nonprofit organizations' decision-making bodies.*

Decision-making bodies decide the strategic direction of refugee and migrant nonprofit organizations. Based on the model of employee boards, refugee and migrant representatives, as well as beneficiaries of the organization, could participate in the Boards of Governors in an advisory capacity. Thus, by thinking of decision-making bodies as forums to encourage participation and build skills, refugees and migrants could be trained in how these bodies operate and develop their expertise.

- *Support the professionalization of migrants' organizations, support founders of nonprofit organizations in seeking funding and in structuring their project.*

Founding nonprofit organizations is an important factor in refugee and migrant participation, but also of their visibility as actors in the asylum and immigration sector and not solely as users or beneficiaries. Although the French system for founding organizations is voluntary and declarative, it requires a certain level of technicality and bureaucracy to file statutes and to run community life. This presupposes that organizations are supported in their foundation and development.

- *Establish a national consultation body that would bring together organizations or individuals involved in migrant reception policies.*

The migrants and refugees could be involved in designing public reception and integration policies. The expertise of migrants' organizations should be taken into account in policy-making. Refugee and migrant participation is a way of rethinking reception and integration from the perspective of those who are primarily affected.

Some of these recommendations were taken up by nonprofit organizations and authorities following the publication of the study in May 2020 by Ifri's Observatory on Immigration and Asylum. The sharing of practices is scheduled for the second half of 2020 to make these recommendations effective.

