



# POLICY BRIEF

MAY 2024 #2

## Welcoming initiatives across Europe: What worked and what did not?

Welcoming initiatives have success factors as well as challenges. Much can be learned from both and lessons can be drawn that can be useful in developing new welcoming initiatives or even replicating existing ones in the future. Some of the success factors can also be double-sided in that they can become a challenge and may even jeopardise the long-term continuity of some initiatives. The following policy brief gives an overview of our reflections of the best practices and lessons learned on what worked and what did not. The recommendations are based on the findings of our H2020 Welcoming spaces project with research conducted into migrant newcomers in shrinking regions in The Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Spain and Italy. While noting that welcoming initiatives are carried out by specific actors, at a specific time and place, and in a specific context (geographical, historical, cultural, socio-economic, political), we recognise eight issues that are relevant for welcoming initiatives to prosper.

### 1. Role of strong individuals

There are some initiatives that are founded and driven by strong individuals who draw on their experience as migrants or have extensive experience in a particular sector, they have a lot of drive and enthusiasm or they are even considered leaders within their own communities. Such initiatives, driven by dedicated and charismatic individuals from the community, have their pros and cons. On the one hand, they have the capacity to flourish by encouraging both migrants and local people to actively participate in the activities being organised. On the other hand, however, when that person is no longer in charge of the initiative,

this often has a huge impact on the initiative and its long-term continuity. In those cases, a good generational handover is necessary and it is crucial that it is planned well in advance, whenever possible, to avoid as much as possible the possible impact of the leadership change. Remodelling is sometimes necessary in order to improve and move forward, but sometimes it is difficult to find a new format.

### 2. Importance of structural funding and investment

Across the five countries, we saw that lack of structural funding and investment in welcoming initiatives caused challenges to keep up activities, develop sustainable projects and realise long-term goals.

### 3. Local and regional embeddedness of an initiative

There are initiatives that are very well embedded in the locality in which they are carried out because they manage to involve various key sectors and have various local and regional actors contributing to their development. Moreover, the way initiatives evolve also relates to the notion of scale and context – such as number of inhabitants, culture of reception and developing innovative solutions, long-term collaborations between different actors and so on.

### 4. Media attention or lack of

The media play a key role in the coverage of migration-related matters and can be both an actor that promotes welcoming initiatives and one that fosters an atmosphere of mistrust and fear towards foreigners and even sets the society against organisations working with migrants. The latter situation, coupled with a lack of interest and support from public authorities and governments, makes it challenging to achieve lasting effects in local communities. Whereas, collaboration and regular contact with the local



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press can contribute to promoting activities and giving visibility to these activities as part of the public domain. This can encourage more people to participate, to foster a widespread sense of solidarity, and to even attract potential financial donors and partners. Moreover, by giving information about the difficulties newcomers may face, media attention can to some extent also counter xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes and actions. In some cases, initiatives prefer to organise their activities without much media attention. This also depends on the nature of the initiatives. Initiatives that address economic viability in a region through for instance selling regional products or boosting local tourism may gain from media coverage, while initiatives addressing the social well-being of vulnerable and marginalised groups may want to protect their initiative from media attention.

## 5. Initiatives across various localities/regional aspect

While some initiatives are very concrete to a specific locality due to its unique particularities, there are some other initiatives that are carried out in several municipalities and regions. The context of the region and the shared population characteristics make it interesting to intervene socially to improve the lives of the inhabitants—both migrants and non-migrants—in those different locations, provided that the implementing entity has the logistical and financial capacity to do so. If funding allows, having a wide network for the implementation of the same initiatives in several regions and municipalities allows for greater impact and dissemination, but also requires good coordination and some adaptation to the specific context of each area.

## 6. Moving beyond pilots

From our analysis, we saw many pilot initiatives. While some received follow-up and became embedded in a locality and received structural

funds, other promising initiatives did not move beyond the pilot stage, often due to lack of an actor taking over the initiative or not being able to realise structural funding. Some welcoming initiatives however do make it past the pilot phase. This stems from their initial approach: a long-term vision on sustainability from the beginning

## 7. Role of voluntarism

While volunteering contributes to social cohesion and active engagement in a community, it can also make initiatives vulnerable in the long run when they are too dependent on volunteers only. In the third sector, and specifically in organisations working with migrants, the role of volunteers is crucial. The involvement of people with awareness and willingness to engage in volunteering makes a big difference, especially in a sector with very limited resources to carry out its solidarity actions.

Reliance of social initiatives on the support, enthusiasm and commitment of people of all ages and from a wide range of backgrounds enriches the activities carried out within the framework of the initiative, but at the same time, it can lead to the burnout of volunteers and make activities highly dependent on the time availability of the people involved. Therefore, one of the main lessons learned from this is the need of taking care of volunteers so that they feel involved in the activities and have a sense of belonging while avoiding to overburden and overwhelm them with tasks of high responsibility or beyond their competencies.

## 8. Target groups and role of expectations

There are welcoming initiatives that are focused on migrant newcomers, especially those initiatives that have been launched by migrants themselves or those that are carried out in a very specific context. Within those initiatives, a



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distinction can be made between the ones aimed at migrants in general and those aimed at specific migrant profiles, i.e. exclusive to asylum seekers and refugees. Thus, the exclusivity may be due to the environment in which the initiatives are developed or the particular requirements of the funding bodies.

Some of the initiatives found specifically included a component to actively attract newcomers to certain localities characterised by shrinkage. Although some of these projects contributed to re/settlement and/or other matching activities between migrant newcomers and shrinking municipalities, its success depends also very much on managing expectations and long-term visions of both migrant newcomers and welcoming localities.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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