The COVID-19 Catalyst

Learning from pandemic-driven innovations in immigrant integration policy

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout have triggered the perfect storm for immigrant integration, posing disproportionate risks to migrants and refugees while upending policymakers' and practitioners' usual policy toolbox by suspending in-person service delivery and shifting work online. Taking a look behind the scenes at how government strategies, practices, and instruments of integration policymaking have changed in both Europe and North America sheds light on innovations that aim to ensure effective and agile responses in a context of COVID-19-induced disruption. It also points to lessons that could promote cost-effective integration policies moving forward.

The digital transition runs like a common thread through the innovations sparked during this period. Despite the many challenges associated with online services—including the risk of excluding the most vulnerable who lack digital access or literacy, the obstructed delivery of sensitive services, and policymakers' reduced opportunities for on-the-ground learning from observing different integration initiatives—the digital shift also had notable benefits. Among them were the unexpected increase in participation rates for integration courses and the ability to bring new voices to the table as geographically dispersed actors found it easier to engage with (inter)national platforms and trainings on migrant integration that had moved online. To seize these opportunities and make the digital shift more inclusive, many promising efforts were launched to bridge the digital divide, invest in digital inclusion, and support the digitalisation of the day-to-day operations and service delivery of governments and other stakeholders.

Taking a look behind the scenes at how government strategies, practices, and instruments of integration policymaking have changed in both Europe and North America sheds light on innovations that aim to ensure effective and agile responses in a context of COVID-19-induced disruption.

The pandemic also changed the actors involved in the migrant integration playing field and the partnerships amongst them. Nongovernmental actors—from the private sector to civil society—took centre stage in responding to migrants' needs, often leading to formal partnerships with governments. At the same time, governmental collaboration increased both across levels of government (vertically) and across policy sectors (horizontally). Effective coordination in an increasingly complex field such as this is key, yet only a few countries were able to leverage existing collaborative platforms; others did not have such partnerships in place and had to launch new ones. This took precious time during the crisis response, but these countries may be able to benefit from and build on these brand-new partnerships going forward.

New challenges posed by the pandemic also elevated certain policy priorities, from supporting migrant health to addressing discrimination; placed new target groups, such as irregular migrants and migrant women, on policymakers' radar; and sparked a move towards multilingual communication and innovative outreach while making funding requirements more flexible. Broader shifts in the discourse, such as the renewed public appreciation of low-skilled migrant workers and the crucial role they have played in the pandemic response, may resonate in migrant integration policies for years to come.

These changes and innovations point to cost-effective ways to enhance immigrant integration governance, and ultimately promote the integration of migrants and refugees. Among them, governments should seek to:

► **Evaluate and scale up promising innovations sparked by the pandemic.** The COVID-19-era boom in innovations may end in a bust without decisive government action. To leverage the wide range of innovations in online service delivery, flexible funding requirements, and communication and outreach, governments should invest in evaluating these innovations, sharing evidence, and scaling up best practices.

► **Leverage newly launched and existing multilevel, cross-sectoral, and public-private partnerships to coordinate the increasingly complex migrant integration playing field.** Governments should formalise partnerships with local governments, civil-society organisations, and migrant community groups, and support their work with resources. Collaborative platforms should be made sustainable and emergency-responsive by taking advantage of both online and in-person exchange models, focusing on issues that require a coordinated multistakeholder approach, and adopting flexibility in which topics are covered, which stakeholders are involved, and how convenings are structured.

► **Take steps to make migrant integration policies and funding mechanisms emergency-responsive and sustainable.** This can be done by developing short- and medium-term policy and budget plans that are embedded within multiyear strategies. This can provide long-term stability, while also creating room within the annual implementation of the broader strategy to respond to changing realities on the ground.

► **Build on pandemic investments in multilingual information provision, innovative outreach methods, and community partnerships.** This is particularly important if government initiatives are to reach the most vulnerable migrant populations. Maintaining and strengthening collaboration with civil-society actors and migrant community groups, who often have a better understanding of the situation on the ground and who may have well-established, trusting relationships with immigrant populations, will be crucial. Furthermore, striking a balance between digital and in-person communication and outreach strategies is important to ensure that no one is left behind and that all target groups are able to access vital information.

Immigrant integration policies are often forged in the heat of crisis. Taking a step back to reflect and build on crisis-induced innovation after the emergency has passed is challenging, especially when resources are stretched thin and stakeholders have begun to move on to address new challenges. Yet, without efforts to learn from previous innovations, important lessons may get lost. Taking these steps to scale up and build on promising practices that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic will help extend the lessons learnt and may promote more effective, inclusive, and emergency-proof immigrant integration systems in the future.

1   Introduction

Far from being a 'great equaliser', COVID-19 and its economic fallout have hit certain segments of European and North American societies particularly hard. Among them are migrants and refugees, and especially highly vulnerable groups such as refugee children, precarious workers, irregular migrants, and migrant women.[1] The pandemic not only increased unemployment rates more for migrants than for the native born, it also further increased the wage gap.[2] Without swift and resolute government intervention, COVID-19 risks jeopardising immigrant integration in settlement countries and creating durable rifts in diverse societies.

Yet precisely at a time when bold and agile policy responses are needed, COVID-19 has disrupted governments' usual ways of working. It has upended classic face-to-face approaches to the delivery of settlement services; suspended in-person opportunities for representatives of national and international organisations, civil-society partners, and community associations to meet, collaborate, and exchange knowledge; and placed pressure on integration policymakers to make rapid decisions based on scattered or discordant evidence. Suddenly faced with a surge of pressing needs for assistance, and with their usual toolbox out of service, integration policymakers have had to rapidly rethink their ways of doing business.

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Emergencies, crises, and unexpected shifts in needs and policy requirements are not new to immigrant integration policymakers. The 2015–16 European refugee and migration crisis resulted in a similar flurry of innovation and rethinking old ways of doing things. Yet limited funding, duplication of efforts, and the inability to scale up successful projects prevented many of the initiatives that grew out of this period from becoming sustainable in the long term, turning this boom into a bust.[3] Although civil-society innovations to support migrants in times of crisis have received attention from researchers in the past, governance innovation in this area remains underexplored.

This report takes a fresh look behind the scenes by reviewing how government strategies, practices, and instruments of integration policymaking have adapted over the past two years—both in Europe and North America—to ensure effective and agile responses in a context of COVID-19-induced disruption. It explores how this period of intense adaption has worked as a catalyst for innovation within local, national, and (in Europe) EU-level government, drawing in part on in-depth semistructured interviews with more than 20 senior policymakers and experts working on immigrant integration in North America and Europe. The report then distils recommendations on how to leverage these innovations to durably improve government action on immigrant integration.

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1   Jasmijn Slootjes, *Healing the Gap: Building Inclusive Public-Health and Migrant Integration Systems in Europe* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021); Julia Gelatt and Muzaffar Chishti, *COVID-19's Effects on U.S. Immigration and Immigrant Communities, Two Years On* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

2   Eurostat, 'Migrant Integration Statistics—Labour Market Indicators', updated 26 April 2021; Eurostat, 'The Migrant Pay Gap: Understanding Wage Differences between Migrants and Nationals', updated 14 December 2020.

3   Meghan Benton and Alex Glennie, *Digital Humanitarianism: How Tech Entrepreneurs Are Supporting Refugee Integration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016).

2 COVID-19 Disruption and Transformation: The forced shift online

Governments and service providers were suddenly thrust into the digital era when lockdowns upended in-person services and other COVID-19 measures, such as social-distancing rules, went into effect. This digital transition has resulted in unexpected challenges but also potential opportunities to promote cost-effective and accessible integration services for immigrants while enabling increased collaboration across different types of stakeholders. In this new context, efforts to bridge the digital divide, invest in digital inclusion, and support the digitalisation of day-to-day operations and service delivery on the part of governments, civil society, and other stakeholders are more essential than ever.

A.   *Online services and integration courses: Broadening access to some, cutting off others*

The pandemic shifted digital tools from ad hoc innovations to some of the only mechanisms available for governments to continue integration service provision—a forced reliance on digital tools that accelerated the existing process of digitalisation in the field of immigrant integration.[4] Prior to the pandemic, nongovernmental stakeholders had been experimenting with digital tools to promote integration,[5] ranging from online 'one-stop-shop' platforms with information about settlement and integration supports (such as the Ankommen[6] app in Germany) to online tools to promote language learning and help immigrants prepare for citizenship tests (such as CLIC en ligne[7] and CitizenshipCounts.ca in Canada[8]) and support labour market integration (such as the Workeer website in Germany that matches employers with refugees[9]). But these were largely exceptions to the norm or pilots delivered mostly by third parties. Most government services were delivered in person prior to the pandemic.[10]

Contrary to most worries and expectations, many policymakers have reported that the sudden, forced digital shift unexpectedly boosted, rather than harmed, integration course participation and even completion. In Austria, the Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (Austrian Integration Fund) managed to reach 75,000 eligible migrants (70 per cent of whom were women) with free online language courses during lockdown.[11] In Czechia and Estonia, both participation and completion rates increased.[12] Migrant women,

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4   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2021* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021); Caitlin McMullin, 'Migrant Integration Services and Coping with the Digital Divide: Challenges and Opportunities of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Voluntary Sector Review* 12, no. 1 (2021), 129–36.

5   Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum, and Refugees (IGC), *Digital Tools for Migrant and Refugee Integration in IGC States* (Geneva: IGC, 2020).

6   German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 'The "Ankommen" App', updated 28 November 2018.

7   Cours de langue pour immigrants au Canada (CLIC en ligne), 'CLIC en ligne, c'est quoi?', accessed 24 November 2021.

8   Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 'CitizenshipCounts.ca—OCASI Launches New Website and App to Help Youth Study for the Citizenship Test' (media release, 15 October 2013).

9   Workeer, 'Die größte Jobbörse für arbeitssuchende Geflüchtete und interessierte Arbeitgeber', accessed 27 April 2022.

10   Victoria Esses et al., 'Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery through Robust Immigration Policy and Programs', *FACETS* 6 (2021): 686–759.

11   OECD, *Language Training for Adult Migrants* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

12   Author interview with Anna Mäkinen, Chief Specialist in the Cultural Diversity Department, Ministry of Culture of Estonia, 14 December 2021.

those with children, migrants with jobs, and migrants living in remote areas especially benefitted from the digital shift.[13] Online services reduce financial costs and travel time for participants and provide more flexibility, allowing individuals to fit their use of the services around their other commitments.[14]

But the benefits of digitalisation depend on the target group and the types of services provided. Shifting services online risks cutting off the most vulnerable communities, especially because some migrants have limited access to digital technology and infrastructure or may lack the level of digital literacy needed to use them (see Box 1 on the digital divide).[15] Remote services may also increase loneliness and social isolation amongst migrants, especially newcomers.[16] Moreover, not all activities translate well to the online world—language classes generally moved online successfully, but other more sensitive services, such as mental health support, were difficult to transition online.[17] Many people may have limited privacy to talk about mental health and other sensitive issues at home, especially migrants who often live in overcrowded housing.[18] Others may find it harder online to develop the trust with service providers that is needed to discuss sensitive issues.

Countries in North America and Europe took vastly different approaches to shifting services online. They either rapidly launched ad hoc online language and integration courses to ensure access to the largest number of people, which required rapid investment of resources with limited time to carefully plan and reflect on best practices, or they took a smaller-scale approach with more time for evaluation and assessment of what works. The approach taken by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Germany is an example of the former—it quickly invested 40 million euros and approved more than 7,000 online classrooms to make language-focused integration courses available to as many individuals as possible.[19] Other countries, such as France, instead chose a smaller-scale, targeted approach that prioritised reaching small groups of migrants who had just started French courses under their integration contract, offering an intensive online language programme as an experiment to inform future e-learning offerings.[20] In interview, most policymakers described how the digital transition would have taken much longer without the pandemic, especially because of bureaucratic and political hurdles. Although the pandemic context offered limited time for reflection and evaluation, it did catalyse an impressively rapid and large-scale shift to online service provision from which European and North American integration systems can reap the benefits for years to come.

13   Author interview with Anna Mäkinen; author interview with Eleni Siopi, Head of Policy and Programme Department, Directorate of Social Integration, Ministry of Migration Policy and Asylum of Greece, 4 November 2021; author interview with Karoline Fernández de la Hoz Zeitler, Director of the Spanish Observatory for Racism and Xenophobia, Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration of Spain, 3 November 2021; author interview with Tom de Bruyn, Deputy Director, Department of Equal Opportunities, Integration, and Civic Integration, Agency of Domestic Administration, the Flemish Government, 11 October 2021; author interview with Niels Tubbing, Senior Policy Advisor Civic Integration of Migrants and Refugees, Coordinator International Social Affairs, City of Amsterdam, 12 November 2021; author interview with Sonia Pereira, High Commissioner for Migration of Portugal, 13 December 2021.

14   OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2021*; McMullin, 'Migrant Integration Services and Coping with the Digital Divide'.

15   Marianne Barker, 'Social Integration in Social Isolation: Newcomers' Integration during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* 33, no. 2 (2021): 34–45.

16   Esses et al., 'Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery'.

17   McMullin, 'Migrant Integration Services and Coping with the Digital Divide'.

18   The gap in overcrowded housing is especially large in Austria, Cyprus, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain, where migrants are 3.5 to 4.2 times more likely than native-born individuals to live in overcrowded conditions. See Eurostat, 'Migrant Integration Statistics—Housing', updated 9 February 2021.

19   OECD, *What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrants and Their Children?* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

20   OECD, *What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic?*

BOX 1
Bridging the Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many essential government services to quickly move online, but the most vulnerable migrants risked being cut off from those services because they lacked access to technology and a stable internet connection and/or the digital literacy needed to effectively use such tools.

The pandemic sparked creative approaches to ensuring these key audiences had access to technology and the internet, from laptop and hotspot lending programmes at libraries in Los Angeles to technology donation schemes for immigrants in Canada. The private sector played an important role in addressing the digital divide. The Dutch public-private initiative #allemaaldigitaal, which brings together 650 tech companies and a range of public and private partners, was launched at the beginning of the pandemic and provided 12,000 people with access to refurbished donated devices. These initiatives were crucial to preventing migrants' integration trajectories from being derailed by the pandemic's disruptions. In Greece, for example, the Secretariat for Reception of Asylum Seekers was able to ensure that 60 to 70 per cent of refugees could continue their social integration programmes online by providing access to digital devices.

Initiatives that provide access to digital tools and stable internet are crucial but incomplete without investing in digital literacy. A wide range of initiatives, often run by civil-society organisations (CSOs), now offer free or inexpensive training programmes and on-demand tech support. These include the Code to Change in the Netherlands, the Connect Migration Network in Spain, and the Digihulplijn (a digital hotline) that was launched during the pandemic in the Netherlands. The Medici Project has mapped more than 200 such initiatives that promote digital inclusion and offers an excellent database of best practices in promoting digital literacy. There is great appetite within many immigrant communities to develop better digital literacy; for example, more than three-quarters of surveyed migrants in a Canadian study expressed interest in participating in digital literacy training.

The digital divide also affects teachers, volunteers, and professionals working in the integration sector, many of whom are older and retired and lack digital literacy themselves. There is thus a need to also provide these groups of integration stakeholders with the digital skills necessary to effectively transition their work online. A good example of an initiative to 'train the trainers' is Canada's LearnIT2teach Project, which has supported blended learning since 2010. And during the pandemic, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada increased its investment in digital literacy programming by launching Avenue.ca to assist language training providers with planning, delivering, and managing language training online. Efforts to bridge the digital divide, invest in digital inclusion, and support the digitalisation of the work of governments and other stakeholders are essential to leverage the opportunities of the digital shift in an inclusive way moving forward.

Sources: European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027' (COM [2020] 758 final, 24 November 2020); LA County Library, 'Laptop and Hotspots Loans', accessed 27 January 2022; Immigrant Education Society, 'Laptop Donations for Newcomers during COVID-19', accessed 27 January 2022; Allemaaldigitaal, '#allemaaldigitaal', accessed 27 January 2022; author interview with Eleni Siopi, Head of Policy and Programme Department, Directorate of Social Integration, Ministry of Migration Policy and Asylum of Greece, 4 November 2021; Code to Change, 'Code to Change', accessed 15 June 2022; European Website on Integration, 'Connect Migration Network—Digital Literacy for Immigrants', accessed 2 February 2022; Allemaaldigitaal, 'DigiHulplijn', accessed 15 June 2022; Medici Project, 'Mapping Digital Inclusion Landscape to Support Cohesion and Integration', accessed 15 June 2022; Immigrant Services Society of British Colombia, *COVID-19: Understanding Client Needs* (Vancouver, BC: Immigrant Services Society of British Colombia, 2020); author interview with Niels Tubbing, Senior Policy Advisor Civic Integration of Migrants and Refugees, Coordinator International Social Affairs, City of Amsterdam, 12 November 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2021* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

B. A digital transition amongst policymakers and officials

At the onset of the pandemic, governments across Europe and North America had to quickly shift and adapt to digital and online work, affecting how they work, communicate, and collaborate. The transition was smooth and quick for some governments, particularly those that had already invested in digitalisation prior to the pandemic, such as Estonia, Finland, and Belgium's Flanders region.[21] For others, having to launch a digital transition from scratch made it difficult to ensure the continuity of integration service provision during the crucial first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.[22]

EU funding for the digital transition of public administrations, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, have been instrumental in allowing European governments to make this sudden digital pivot successfully. In Portugal, for example, the High Commission for Migration was able to quickly invest in digital services and in reinforcing technological capacity by accessing EU funds available to support the digital transition of public services.[23]

Despite the many unexpected positive impacts of digitalisation (see Sections 2.A and 3.A), it has a flip side as well. In interviews, policymakers highlighted several challenges stemming from teleworking, including increased pressure on staff deriving from the expectation to be constantly available online, obstructed information flows, losing touch with what is happening on the ground, and increased distraction and loss of attention during online meetings and trainings.[24] These issues will need to be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of digital working modalities and in deciding whether online and remote work should persist, either fully or partially.

3   Shifting Stakeholders, Partnerships, and Priorities in Integration Governance

The immigrant integration playing field changed dramatically during the pandemic, which has reshaped both *how* integration policymakers work (by pushing work online) as well as *what* they are working on (by raising questions about health care, for example, that had previously been secondary to other integration issues). The pandemic widened the circle of who could participate in meetings while also making it harder

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21   Author interview with Anna Mäkinen; author interview with Helena Torkko, Senior Communications Specialist, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 21 October 2021; author interview with Tom de Bruyn.

22   For Greece, which had to start almost from scratch to digitalise public administration at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital transition was initially very slow, and the country was able to make the dramatic shift to move services and public administration online only after the first month. But countries that were already further ahead in the digital transition also struggled initially. In Canada, for example, integration policymakers and practitioners had to pivot to new digital tools to carry out remote work. During the first days of the pandemic, work was affected because there were not enough lines for teleconferencing, and officials had to gain access to the appropriate platforms. This shift later proved beneficial because they could participate in more conferences, and collaboration across the country became easier, with 'geography getting a lot smaller'. Author interview with Eleni Siopi; author interview with Giovanni di Dio, Labour Migration and Integration Specialist, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of Italy, 20 October 2021; author interview with David Cashaback, Senior Director, Settlement and Integration Policy at Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, Government of Canada, 19 November 2021.

23   Author interview with Sonia Pereira.

24   Author interview with Tom de Bruyn; author interview with Gemma Pinyol, Head of Migration and Mobility Policies at Instrategies and Associate Researcher at GRITIM-Pompeu Fabra University, 26 October 2021; author interview with Sonia Pereira.

to have the kinds of in-depth exchanges that typically happen in person and excluding those with limited access to digital communications.[25] These sudden shifts changed the kind and degree of involvement of different stakeholders in immigrant integration, and the nature of partnerships amongst them. These trends have had several notable and sometimes unexpected effects, elevating the role of certain actors while constraining others, and empowering certain groups while leaving others behind—all while intensifying existing partnerships and igniting new ones. In this changing landscape, the pandemic generally reinforced existing dominant political strategies for migrant integration,[26] while putting new target groups and issues on policymakers' radar and requiring more flexible use and management of resources. These shifts may durably change the stakeholders, partnerships, and priorities in immigrant integration systems for years to come.

A.   *Shifting stakeholders*

Local actors and multilevel partnerships on the front lines

By thrusting local governments onto the front lines in the response to COVID-19 and shifting work online, the pandemic sparked or accelerated a trend towards decentralising and devolving responsibility for migrant integration in many places. The sudden shift to online work increased opportunities for geographically dispersed actors to get a seat at the table. The Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia, for example, reported a sudden increase in the number of regional and local government officials and local CSOs at national workshops that had moved online.[27] National actors also began to see greater value in such participation. The pandemic ignited pioneering initiatives, such as the Directorate-General for Foreign Nationals in France actively reaching out to local government (prefectures) for the first time to coordinate and collaborate on immigrant integration efforts in the COVID-19 context.[28] Not all new collaborations will be lasting, however, and 71 per cent of EU subnational government respondents in a 2020 survey by the Committee of the Regions and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development highlighted that the lack of coordination with other levels of government is amongst the biggest challenges they have faced in managing the health crisis.[29]

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25   Author interview with Tom de Bruyn.

26   Perhaps unexpectedly, the pandemic did not dramatically alter countries' political course or approaches to migrant integration but instead intensified or helped justify existing approaches. Portugal, a country with more inclusive existing policies, focused its COVID-19 response on equality and inclusivity by offering regularisation to all migrants and asylum seekers with pending applications to ensure full access to health and other social services. In countries with more restrictive migration and integration policies, such as Denmark, authorities did not expand health-care service eligibility for foreigners, and health communication was outsourced to volunteers associated with civil-society organisations (CSOs). In Hungary, with its more restrictive migration policies, the government cited COVID-19 as a reason to close its borders and stopped admitting migrants and asylum seekers in 'transit zones'. See Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), 'Regularising Undocumented People in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', PICUM blog, 1 July 2020; Slootjes, *Healing the Gap*; Rádio Renascença, 'Coronavírus. MAI confirma que 130 mil imigrantes ficaram provisoriamente com situação regularizada', updated 5 May 2020; Vera Lúcia Raposo and Teresa Violante, 'Access to Health Care by Migrants with Precarious Status during a Health Crisis: Some Insights from Portugal', *Human Rights Review* 22 (2021): 1–24; Martha Sif Karrebæk and Solvej Helleshøj Sørensen, 'COVID-19 Exposes Language and Migration Tensions in Denmark', Language on the Move, 9 September 2020; Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, 'Coronavirus: Hungary Suspends Admission of Asylum Seekers', InfoMigrants, 4 March 2020.

27   Author interview with Karoline Fernández de la Hoz Zeitler. Another example comes from Portugal, where participation rates of local officials unexpectedly increased when Portugal's High Commission for Migration moved its trainings on issues such as nationality law, migrant rights, and intercultural sensitivity online. Author interview with Sonia Pereira.

28   Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet, Project Manager for European and International Affairs and Communication, Directorate-General for Foreign Nationals in France, Ministry of the Interior of France, 3 December 2021.

29   OECD, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Regional and Local Governments 2020* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 65.

Increased distance between policymakers and voices on the ground, especially migrants

In Spain, many of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration's site visits to local integration programs and initiatives were suspended, making it difficult for policymakers to stay in touch with local developments. Rich information about the nuts and bolts of why programmes are successful may get lost in online communication, or on-the-ground practitioners may not think to share unique best practices because they consider them self-evident. In interviews, policymakers cited how crucial it is to be able to visit programmes in person and take the time to engage in-depth with local service providers to properly identify best practices.[30] When conversations moved online, the combination of unreliable internet connections, limited digital literacy, and lack of access to digital tools described in Box 1 became a major barrier to this type of information exchange, especially with immigrant communities, obstructing migrant representation in essential consultations during this period.[31]

A boom in cross-sectoral collaboration

The pandemic forced integration policymakers to contend with new areas that had not been traditionally a focus within integration policy, such as health, but this created new opportunities for cross-governmental cooperation. For example, in Canada, Finland, Flanders, and France, governments were forced to reach out to colleagues working in other policy areas to address newly arising issues or deepening structural inequalities.[32] Immigrant students, for example, were disproportionately affected by the shift from in-person to online education, in part because of the digital divide but also because of crowded living conditions and fewer opportunities for parental supervision. Migrants were also hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic's labour market fallout because they are more likely to work on temporary contracts and in heavily affected sectors. Policymakers from different policy areas started to coordinate their approaches, often for the first time, through new task forces and increased interdepartmental communication.

The shift to online work also enabled an increase in collaboration between often-siloed government departments. The Greek government, for instance, established an online file-sharing system, allowing for easier real-time information sharing across different ministries.[33] In interviews, policymakers said they expect the increase in cross-sectoral collaboration and communication to be sustained, though maybe not at the same level of intensity, now that new connections have been made. By increasing cross-sectoral collaboration, more policy areas have been exposed to the specific needs of migrants and refugees, providing opportunities to achieve better integration outcomes in the future.

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30   Author interview with Gemma Pinyol.
31   Migrant representatives were often cutting in and out of meetings because of unreliable internet connections, limiting their ability to participate in online discussions. Others observed that sometimes a lack of familiarity with the communication platform's functions, such as the chat function, prevented those with limited digital literacy from full participation. Author interview with Maria Grazia Montella, Project Manager at IncluCities and Policy Officer, Migration and Integration, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 9 December 2021; author interview with Vincent Catot, Policy Officer, Migrants' Integration, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission, 8 December 2021.
32   Migrant integration departments in these countries were involved with informing migrant populations about health regulations and promoting vaccine uptake. Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet; author interview with Tom de Bruyn; author interview with Helena Torkko; author interview with David Cashaback.
33   Author interview with Eleni Siopi.

The further rise of civil-society organisations

The efforts of nongovernmental actors, and especially CSOs, played a crucial role in ensuring that migrant populations had access to essential information about COVID-19 and vaccination programmes in their own languages and in providing other forms of relief, often jumping into the void left by government inaction.[34] In Denmark, for example, the Danish Refugee Council launched a COVID-19 hotline in 25 languages in the absence of government efforts to communicate critical information in immigrant languages at the onset of the pandemic.[35] Canadian authorities, on the other hand, leveraged a pre-existing, well-established network of third-party service providers for translating information during the pandemic.[36] The increased role of CSOs presents an opportunity to capitalise on local forms of engagement and solidarity as a force for integration and inclusion.

CSOs' prominent role in the COVID-19 response fits within a broader trend of nongovernmental stakeholders being increasingly at the forefront in assisting migrant communities and delivering integration services. In the United States, for example, federal, state, and local governments have increasingly contracted out social and human

The increased role of CSOs presents an opportunity to capitalise on local forms of engagement and solidarity as a force for integration and inclusion.

services to not-for-profit, community-based organisations over the past four decades, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the 'delegated state'.[37] Similarly, in Canada, the settlement and integration sector uses a third-party service delivery model, relying on about 500 service providers ranging from not-for-profit organisations to public institutions.[38] The 2015–16 European refugee crisis gave further impetus to this trend in Europe, leading a proliferation of nongovernmental actors to become active in the field of migrant integration.[39] In Greece, for example, CSOs have played a crucial role in filling the gaps left by the government when facing increased numbers of refugee and migrant arrivals.[40]

The rise of CSO engagement comes with opportunities and challenges. These organisations are often flexible, speedy, and adaptable to changing needs and realities, which allowed an agile response early in the

34   See this survey of immigrant-serving organisations across 37 U.S. states: Hamutal Bernstein, Jorge González, Dulce Gonzalez, and Jahnavi Jagannath, 'Immigrant-Serving Organizations' Perspectives on the COVID-19 Crisis' (brief, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, August 2020).

35   Michala Clante Bendixen, 'Denmark—New Hotline in 25 Languages about Coronavirus', European Website on Integration, updated 6 April 2020.

36   Author interview with David Cashaback.

37   Kirsten A. Grønbjerg and Laurie Paarlberg, 'Community Variations in the Size and Scope of the Nonprofit Sector: Theory and Preliminary Findings', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2001): 684–706; Nicole P. Marwell, 'Privatizing the Welfare State: Nonprofit Community-Based Organizations as Political Actors', *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 2 (2004): 265–291; Lester M. Salamon, 'Of Market Failure, Voluntary Failure, and Third-Party Government: Toward a Theory of Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State', *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* 16, no. 1–2 (1987): 29–49; Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Margaret Weir and Jessica Schirmer, 'America's Two Worlds of Welfare: Subnational Institutions and Social Assistance in Metropolitan America', *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 2 (2018): 380–99.

38   Esses et al., 'Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery'.

39   Meghan Benton and Alexandra Embiricos, *Doing More with Less: A New Toolkit for Integration Policy* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019).

40   European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Study Group on Immigration and Integration, *The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Ensuring the Integration of Migrants and Refugees: Project Summary Report* (Brussels: EESC, 2020).

pandemic. Furthermore, they may have a better sense of the situation on the ground, working directly with migrants or sometimes even being co-created by them,[41] which may strengthen community cohesion.[42] Yet these CSOs have also faced increased challenges during the pandemic, including limited funding to support growing needs, technological barriers to reaching migrants, shifts in projects and strategies, heightened risk of exposure to the virus as they continued to provide in-person support, and concerns for the mental health and well-being of both staff and volunteers.[43] Additionally, having multiple actors working on the same issue sometimes results in duplication of services and reinventing the wheel.[44] Urgent pressures to address the COVID-19 crisis may have also meant longer-term migrant integration activities were shelved as civil society pivoted from long-term projects to emergency relief.[45] Even though emergency services are essential, the triple consequences of the coronavirus—deepening inequality, raising obstacles to migrant integration, and shifting civil society's efforts away from long-term integration—may set immigrant integration back significantly and be felt for a long time to come.

B.   *Shifting partnerships*

Leveraging existing partnerships to hit the ground running

Digital tools have fuelled collaboration across policy areas and with different levels of government, as well as with nongovernmental actors. Countries with strong existing structures in place to facilitate multistakeholder collaboration were better able to capitalise on this because those ready-made processes, networks, and trust allowed stakeholders to hit the ground running. Such collaborations grew across the board, often intensifying the frequency of contact or expanding their areas of work.

In Canada, policymakers could leverage the existing Canadian National Settlement and Integration Council, which brings together federal, provincial, and territorial governments as well as settlement and integration service providers, civil society, nongovernmental organisations, and international organisations to tackle the issues raised by the pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 crisis broadened the range of issues on which they work and intensified the use of the platform, changing from biannual meetings to weekly teleconferences.[46] In Portugal, the Council of Migrations broadened its work by starting to tackle issues such as high infection rates amongst specific groups of migrants.[47]

41   Benton and Embiricos, *Doing More with Less*.

42   For instance, the Berlin Senate Office and the portal 'Go Volunteer' started a joint campaign that is thought to have strengthened community cohesion by showcasing solidarity and willingness to help. Sawsan Chebli, co-initiator of the campaign, explained that 'experiences of solidarity strengthen cohesion' and that the campaign aimed to address the fact that the active contributions of migrants and refugees to civil society are often missing from political debates. See Nora Gottlieb, Maren Hintermeier, and Kayvan Bozorgmehr, 'Situational Brief: COVID-19 and Migration in Germany' (brief, Lancet Migration, University College London—Lancet Commission on Migration and Health, London, 28 May 2020).

43   Bernstein, González, Gonzalez, and Jagannath, 'Immigrant-Serving Organizations' Perspectives'.

44   Author interview with David Cashaback.

45   Parvati Nair et al., *Migration, Pandemic, and Responses from the Third Sector: Lessons from Brazil and India* (London: Queen Mary University of London Global Policy Institute, 2021).

46   These meetings provided a vehicle to discuss and develop concerted strategies to tackle the most pressing issues and needs (such as alternative service delivery options during COVID-19). The Local Immigration Partnerships in Canada were leveraged to disseminate vaccine information to migrant communities. Author interview with David Cashaback; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 'HUMA - Settlement Services', updated 6 January 2021; Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC, 'National and Regional Networks', accessed 5 January 2022.

47   For instance, the council brought together health authorities providing testing and medical care, civil society providing meals and social support, and local authorities providing housing, demonstrating how such networks can be activated in times of emergency for a joint, concerted, and quick response. Author interview with Sonia Pereira.

Especially during this challenging time, having existing international platforms that bring relevant stakeholders together to facilitate mutual learning, share best practices, and coordinate responses proved immensely beneficial. The digital shift ensured the continuation and sometimes intensification of collaborations that had started prior to the pandemic.[48] Leveraging existing partnerships made it easier to have more targeted discussions as the partners already had trusted relationships,[49] while online

Moving online removed geographical and financial barriers to attending international meetings but also created new obstacles, making it harder for those without access to digital technology and limited digital skills to be active voices at the table.

forms of engagement made it easier to meet members' changing needs.[50] Just as in the national context, moving online removed geographical and financial barriers to attending international meetings but also created new obstacles, making it harder for those without access to digital technology and limited digital skills to be active voices at the table.[51] Eurocities (a network of more than 200 cities) reported an increase in the number and variety of member cities that became active in its virtual meetings related to migrant integration,[52] whereas IncluCities (a network of eight middle-sized cities aiming to improve the integration of third-country nationals) stressed the difficulties that less-digitised municipalities and migrants faced in sustaining online communication.[53] Despite the digital divide, these platforms proved crucial for integration stakeholders to share experiences and learn from one another during the pandemic,[54] and they remain important avenues to foster and strengthen multilevel and multistakeholder collaboration.

Igniting new partnerships to meet new challenges

In some cases, no existing coordination structures existed, and new multistakeholder collaborations had to be built from scratch to address challenges created or aggravated by the pandemic.[55] In Finland, a new task force was launched with the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare to explore and develop new methods to reach migrant communities during the pandemic. The task force brought some actors together for the first time and spurred new cross-sectoral and multilevel collaboration in the country.[56] Similarly, in France, the pandemic sparked collaboration between the central government and the local level, including through regular calls between relevant Ministry of the Interior departments and local administrations (prefectures)

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48   Author interview with Katharina Bamberg, Migration and Integration Policy Advisor, Eurocities, 26 October 2021.

49   Author interview with Vincent Catot.

50   Author interview with Katharina Bamberg.

51   Author interview with Maria Grazia Montella.

52   New members from eastern European cities especially could be more active. Author interview with Katharina Bamberg.

53   Author interview with Maria Grazia Montella.

54   This is epitomised by the example of Eurocities, which created an online platform for members to share COVID-19-related news, questions, and challenges, enabling cities to discuss the most effective strategies for communication and outreach with migrant communities. Author interview with Katharina Bamberg.

55   The New American Integration Initiative in Colorado convened a New American Stakeholder Group subcommittee, which ensured information sharing amongst stakeholders and informed the governor's office and state agencies about concerns within refugee and migrant communities. Author interview with Kit Taintor, Senior Advisor for New American Integration, Office of the Governor, State of Colorado, 3 November 2021; Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, *New American Integration Annual Report 2020* (Denver: Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, 2020).

56   Regular meetings every two weeks brought together health-care units, nongovernmental organisations, and migrant organisations. Author interview with Helena Torkko.

and CSOs.[57] Governments have generally embraced the pivotal role that CSOs have played in the pandemic response, often resulting in formalising their work and igniting new public-nonprofit partnerships. In Portugal, for example, the High Commission for Migration launched a new partnership with Doctors of the World Portugal to develop a guide on COVID-19 in more than 20 languages.[58]

The sudden need for technology also led the private sector to get involved with new partnerships. The private sector, for example, plays a pivotal role in the Dutch public-private initiative #allemaaldigitaal, which brought together NLdigital (a network representing more than 650 tech companies in the Netherlands), Alliantie Digitaal Samenleven (an alliance of 30 public and private partners working towards a more inclusive digital society), and Recover-E (a programme that aims to recycle and reuse old technology and to ensure inclusive access to technology).[59] Now that these relationships have been built, many policymakers think and hope that such collaborations are likely to last, though ongoing contact is expected to become less frequent as the pandemic subsides.

C.   *Shifting policies and priorities*

New target groups: Irregular migrants and women

The COVID-19 pandemic brought visibility to specific groups of migrants and the vulnerabilities they face,[60] putting new groups on governments' radar, triggering more target group approaches, and (partially) breaking with the ongoing trend of 'mainstreaming'—that is, addressing migrant integration as part of more generic social policies.[61] In some countries, groups of irregular migrants who usually remain under the radar (because they sustain themselves with informal work and without government support) suddenly appeared on the doorsteps of food banks and other emergency services during the pandemic. The City of Amsterdam was surprised to learn about the presence of a community of irregular migrants from Brazil in this way, and in Spain, policymakers became acutely aware of irregular migrant women working in the domestic sector.[62] Irregular migrants, without the protection of formal work contracts, have experienced some of the hardest socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic while also facing the toughest barriers to accessing basic services and health care—if they have access at all.[63] For that reason, irregular migrants increasingly became the focus of targeted attention and support. Governments in Italy and Portugal adopted regularisation

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57   Monthly calls between the central government and local administrations are ongoing and focus on various topics linked to migrant integration. The pandemic also fuelled cross-sectoral collaboration in the areas of health, education, and employment with, for example, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Health collaborating on translating COVID-19 information and information relating to violence against women. Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.

58   OECD, *How Best to Communicate on Migration and Integration in the Context of COVID-19* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

59   For more information, see Allemaaldigitaal, '#allemaaldigitaal', accessed 27 January 2022.

60   Lorenzo Guadagno, *Migrants and the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Initial Analysis* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020); John Twigg, Reshma Mathews, and Lorenzo Guadagno, *Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees in Preparedness and Response to Biological Disasters: Case Study of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2021).

61   Peter Scholten, Elizabeth Collett, and Milica Petrovic, 'Mainstreaming Migrant Integration? A Critical Analysis of a New Trend in Integration Governance', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83, no. 2 (2016): 283–302.

62   Author interview with Gemma Pinyol.

63   Vicki Mau and Nicole Hoagland, 'Barriers to Accessing Services and Assistance during COVID-19: Learning from Those Directly Affected', *Forced Migration Review* 67 (2021): 33–35; Marie L. Mallet-Garcia and Nicola Delvino, 'Rethinking Exclusionary Policies: The Case of Irregular Migrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Europe', *Social Policy Review* (2021): 2–18; Guadagno, *Migrants and the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

schemes, and the City of Amsterdam partnered with CSOs to reach out to and support its irregular migrant residents.[64] This new awareness is likely to shape future policy responses.

COVID-19 also had a particularly pronounced effect on migrant women because many were frontline workers and because of an increase in levels of domestic violence,[65] leading to a boom in new targeted initiatives.[66] The Canadian government, for example, mobilised additional resources for services that support victims of gender-based violence and extended employment supports for racialised minority women.[67] Similarly, Spain approved an emergency measure designed to help domestic workers—mostly migrants from Latin America—affected by the pandemic's economic fallout, granting them the right to unemployment benefits for the first time.[68] In Malta, the Migrant Women Association Malta launched an emergency call to gather knowledge about the main needs of migrant women during the pandemic. This call led to the launch of the COVID-19 Emergency Response Project offering support to women at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation during the lockdowns.[69] Although awareness of the intersections of gender and migration had been growing before, COVID-19 pushed this trend ahead, placing migrant women's needs firmly on the policy agenda.

Innovative communication and outreach strategies

The pandemic provided fertile ground for experimentation and innovation with communication and outreach to migrant communities. The practical imperative to limit the spread of COVID-19 caused a marked shift to embrace multilingual communication, even in a country such as France with a previously purist approach to conducting government communication solely in French. The embrace of multilingual communication about COVID-19 there spilled over into other policy areas, including translating an information booklet summarising civic integration classes in France into ten languages.[70] The pandemic has exposed governments to a menu of cost-effective strategies to provide multilingual information, such as machine translation (which uses artificial intelligence),[71] computer-aided translation (which uses databases of professional translations and source text for later reuse),[72] and relying on volunteers and CSOs. Yet quality and accuracy are key, especially in a public-health crisis and other emergencies. Machine translations and those done by

The practical imperative to limit the spread of COVID-19 caused a marked shift to embrace multilingual communication.

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64   Author interview with Giovanni di Dio; author interview with Sonia Pereira; author interview with Niels Tubbing.
65   Laura Foley and Nicola Piper, *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impacts and Implications* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020).
66   During the pandemic, Eurocities organised an online city dialogue focusing on migrant women. In France, the Directorate-General for Foreign Nationals translated information relating to violence against women. Author interview with Katharina Bamberg; author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.
67   Author interview with David Cashaback; author interview with Senator Ratna Omidvar, Senate of Canada, 29 November 2021.
68   Author interview with Gemma Pinyol; Sophie Davis, 'Spain Starts Subsidy for Domestic Workers Hit by Coronavirus', Reuters, 31 March 2020.
69   PfC Malta, 'COVID-19 Emergency Response Project—Migrant Women Association Malta (MWAM)', European Website on Integration, 1 April 2020.
70   Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.
71   Dorothy Kenny, 'Machine Translation', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 3rd edition, eds. Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2020).
72   Alan K. Melby and Sue Ellen Wright, 'Translation Memory', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Technology*, ed. Chan Sin-wai (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2015).

untrained volunteers may come at a low cost but may also be inaccurate.[73] If anything, the pandemic has shown that slightly different versions of similar information and minor inaccuracies can create confusion or even an 'infodemic'—that is, too much and often incorrect information—and can hurt rather than help.

Simply providing multilingual information is also not enough. The outreach method and sender of information are crucial to reaching migrant and refugee communities effectively. In the U.S. state of Colorado, for example, migrants were found to be making only limited use of multilingual information pages on government websites, while in Estonia, migrants seemed to access information primarily through local embassies.[74] To reach migrant communities effectively, governments have collaborated with community members and CSOs and proactively experimented with different outreach methods. These have ranged from door-to-door awareness-raising campaigns and providing health-literacy training in community groups in Portugal,[75] to involving religious institutions and imams in the dissemination of information about COVID-19 vaccinations to migrants and setting up appointments after prayer in Finland.[76] Many stakeholders have experimented with using social media to reach migrant communities for the first time. The City of Amsterdam started using WhatsApp to reach migrant communities, even for formal communications,[77] and the City of Helsinki disseminated multilingual information not only via the InfoFinland.fi website but also Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter.[78] But migrants often distrust official government resources, even when they are communicated via social media.[79] Some governments have recognised that who is sending the information on social media is important. In Colorado, for example, the state government started to actively involve social media influencers in migrant outreach, and Paris involved health mediation and social support professionals with a migrant background.[80] However, with funding drying up as the pandemic subsides, some experts worry about whether these lessons will stick and fear institutional knowledge will be lost.[81]

These innovations in communication and outreach did not emerge spontaneously and often required lobbying by specific units or individuals advocating for targeted communication and outreach to migrant communities.[82] In Finland, it took considerable lobbying effort on the part of the Communications Unit at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment to switch to multilingual communication.[83] Staff changes have also been cited as playing an important role in providing a 'fresh perspective' on traditional ways of doing things and embracing multilingual communication.[84]

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73   Laura Godfrey, 'Lost in Translation', Digital.gov, U.S. General Services Administration, 1 October 2012.

74   Colorado used Google Analytics to study the number of website visitors to multilingual government webpages. Estonia conducted survey research amongst migrant groups to map how these communities access information on COVID-19. Author interview with Kit Taintor.

75   Slootjes, *Healing the Gap*.

76   Author interview with Helena Torkko.

77   Author interview with Niels Tubbing.

78   OECD, *How Best to Communicate on Migration and Integration*; InfoFinland, 'Coronavirus COVID-19', updated 24 January 2022.

79   Meghan Benton, 'Digital Litter: The Downside of Using Technology to Help Refugees', *Migration Information Source,* 20 June 2019.

80   Ville de Paris, 'COVID-19: Paris et la Seine-Saint-Denise lancent une campagne d'info multilingue et inclusive', updated 27 April 2020; author interview with Kit Taintor.

81   Author interview with Kit Taintor.

82   Author interview with Kit Taintor; author interview with Helena Torkko.

83   Author interview with Helena Torkko.

84   Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.

Investments in digitalisation and increased funding flexibility

The pandemic triggered two key shifts in resource management. First, even though overall budgets generally remained the same,[85] policymakers highlighted in interviews how immigrant integration funds were increasingly redirected towards digital service delivery. In France, for example, funds were reallocated to acquire digital tools and bridge the digital divide.[86] In most countries, though, general government funding and especially the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility provided additional funding for digitalisation of (general) government services.[87] In Portugal, the High Commission for Migration accessed general funding that was already available to support the digital transition within public administration and used it to shift and improve online integration service delivery.[88]

The second key shift triggered by the pandemic is increased flexibility in the use, timelines, and reporting requirements of funds. At the EU level, the European Commission made timelines and budget spending on projects funded by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund more flexible.[89] Canada's Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada introduced some flexibility in how service providers could use project and programme funding during the pandemic. Specifically, the line between programme delivery expenses and administrative costs became less fixed, giving service providers the ability to meet changing needs and acquire necessary digital tools.[90] There is great enthusiasm to retain some level of funding flexibility beyond the pandemic to ensure that programmes continue to adjust to constantly changing needs and realities.

Increased attention to discrimination

The pandemic also shifted public perceptions of migrants in many societies, sometimes negatively and other times positively. It triggered both increased discrimination and hate speech and increased awareness and appreciation of migrants' contributions to the well-being of all members of a society as essential workers. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, countless episodes of xenophobia and hate speech against migrants have been recorded in countries all over the world, particularly against those of Chinese and other Asian origins.[91] At the same time, the pandemic raised the issue of discrimination higher on the policy agenda, catalysing initiatives and campaigns to counter misinformation and prejudice against migrants and support victims of discrimination. The Spanish government, for example, launched the digital campaign 'We stop this virus together', publishing stories of migrants' integration into Spanish society and highlighting their contributions to COVID-19 crisis response efforts.[92] The International Organization for Migration also launched several national initiatives to counter xenophobia and promote migrant integration, such as the 'COVID-19 does not discriminate, why do you?' social media campaign to fight misinformation and hate speech.[93] The increased attention to ethnic and racial discrimination was triggered not only by COVID-19-

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85   In Canada, for example, there has been a consistent funding strategy for integration over the past years, and in France, the department working on integration received additional funds in 2018 but not since then. Author interview with David Cashaback; author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.

86   Author interview with Mathilde Mandonnet.

87   European Commission, 'Recovery and Resilience Facility', accessed 12 January 2022.

88   Author interview with Sonia Pereira.

89   Author interview with Vincent Catot.

90   Author interview with David Cashaback.

91   Twigg, Mathews, and Guadagno, *Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees*.

92   OECD, *How Best to Communicate on Migration and Integration*.

93   OECD, *How Best to Communicate on Migration and Integration*; International Organization for Migration, 'IOM Launches Social Media Campaign in Mexico to Prevent Discrimination during the COVID-19 Pandemic' (news release, 14 April 2020).

sparked discrimination but also by the Black Lives Matter movement that started in the United States and gained wide publicity across Europe in the summer of 2020.

A renewed appreciation of low-skilled migrant workers in essential roles

COVID-19 also unexpectedly sparked a renewed appreciation of low-skilled migrant workers, who often hold essential and frontline jobs in health care and the agri-food industry, and who played a crucial role in the pandemic response.[94] In Canada, this attitude shift resulted in the government providing access to permanent residence for temporary foreign workers and refugee claimants who worked in the health sector during the pandemic.[95] In May 2020, the Canadian government launched the Agri-Food Pilot, creating pathways to permanent residence for those working in the industry, not including seasonal workers.[96] Although these are exceptional measures,[97] the increased focus on essential low-skilled workers marks an interesting shift within Canada's Comprehensive Ranking System, which has traditionally favoured high-skilled migrant workers, and it may pave the way for future changes in low-skilled migration.

Similarly, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, underscored that without migrants, Europe would not have been able to cope with the pandemic.[98] Migrants account for 14 per cent of key workers across European countries and are over-represented in key sectors ranging from food production and distribution to hospitality and health care.[99] Like in Canada, this prompted a shift within the European migration debate that has traditionally focused on attracting high-skilled migrants.[100] At the EU level, the pandemic spurred reflection on lower-skilled jobs and helped to put legal migration higher on the policy agenda.[101] At the national level, countries facing labour shortages went to great lengths to admit essential migrant workers. Germany, Spain, and other European countries organised chartered flights and implemented exemptions from travel restrictions for seasonal agricultural workers,[102] while Italy regularised irregular migrants working in agriculture, health care, and domestic work, and France announced that migrants working on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19 would be granted a fast-track to the naturalisation process.[103]

> *At the national level, countries facing labour shortages went to great lengths to admit essential migrant workers.*

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94 Author interview with Kit Taintor; author interview with Senator Ratna Omidvar.

95 Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 'Pathway to Permanent Residency Recognizes Exceptional Service of Asylum Claimants on Front Lines of COVID-19 Pandemic' (news release, 14 August 2020); Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 'New Pathway to Permanent Residency for over 90,000 Essential Temporary Workers and International Graduates' (news release, 14 April 2021).

96 Government of Canada, 'Agri-Food Pilot: About the Pilot', updated 21 June 2021.

97 Esses et al., 'Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery'.

98 European Commission, 'Commissioner Johansson's Speech at the European Migration Forum' (speech, 27 October 2021).

99 OECD, *COVID-19 and Key Workers: What Role Do Migrants Play in Your Region?* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

100 Francesco Fasani and Jacopo Mazza, 'Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response' (policy paper no. 155, Institute of Labor Economics, April 2020); author interview with Vincent Catot.

101 Author interview with Vincent Catot.

102 Kate Hooper, 'Labor Shortages during the Pandemic and Beyond: What Role Can Immigration Policy Play?' (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, October 2021).

103 OECD, *COVID-19 and Key Workers*.

4   Distilling Lessons from a Crisis for Future Policy Innovation

The pandemic and its fallout have triggered the perfect storm in migrant integration, posing disproportionate risks to migrants' and refugees' lives and livelihoods while upending policymakers' and practitioners' usual policy toolbox for supporting immigrant communities. Without rapid and decisive government action, the pandemic risks jeopardising immigrant integration in many European and North American settlement countries and deepening existing inequalities. COVID-19 has acted like a plough, turning the usual integration playing field upside down, exposing existing cracks in the system and creating new ones. But the cracks of crisis may prove fertile ground for sowing innovation, from capitalising on increased collaboration and digitalisation to leveraging adaptations in communication and funding. Effectively building on innovations triggered by the pandemic may contribute to more effective coordination between different stakeholders (multilevel, cross-sectoral, and public-private), balancing the benefits of digital and in-person models and broadening policymakers' perspectives on policy issues and target groups.

Emergencies—including the 2015–16 European refugee and migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic—fuel governance innovation and encourage tackling both old and new issues in novel ways. Two questions arise from this flurry of innovation and experimentation. First, how can policymakers draw lessons from ad hoc, unplanned innovations triggered by emergencies and make them sustainable? Second, how can immigrant-receiving societies facilitate an innovative policymaking climate in migrant integration in the long term, without having to wait for the next emergency to trigger innovation? The following recommendations may lead the way to promoting sustainable innovation in migrant integration:

> *COVID-19 has acted like a plough, turning the usual integration playing field upside down, exposing existing cracks in the system and creating new ones. But the cracks of crisis may prove fertile ground for sowing innovation.*

▶ **Facilitating coordination in the increasingly complex migrant integration playing field.** The increased role of local and nongovernmental actors and the inherent cross-policy nature of migrant integration demand platforms to streamline and facilitate collaboration. Structured collaboration allows actors to leverage each other's strengths and competencies, promote mutual learning, and develop coordinated responses to shared challenges. Integration stakeholders should capitalise on the networks that were launched during the pandemic and make them sustainable to prevent scrambling to launch new collaborations when another emergency strikes. Key considerations include:

  → **Who should be involved?** These platforms should bring together actors across different levels of governance, across policy sectors, nongovernment actors, and most importantly, migrants. Migrants and migrant-led organisations launched many of the most promising innovations during the pandemic. They are acutely aware of the needs of their communities, yet migrants are consulted too rarely when developing policies that concern them.

→ **What should the format be?** Adopting hybrid convening formats, which invite both in-person and virtual participation, leverage the advantages of each convening method.

→ **What should the thematic focus be?** Platforms should rally around a specific policy issue that requires a joint approach by the actors involved. This can prevent the platform from becoming a venue for simply summarising each actor's activities on an issue.

→ **How flexible vs. fixed should operations be?** To respond to emerging issues and crises and ensure efficiency, these platforms should be relatively flexible in what topics are being discussed and who has a seat at the table. The platforms can reduce their burden on stakeholders' tight schedules by having a semi-flexible membership that brings together only those stakeholders relevant to the issue at hand.

▶ **Leveraging innovations in multilingual communication.** Policymakers should seek to build on the unprecedented awareness of and experimentation with multilingual communication in public outreach to reduce linguistic barriers that can keep immigrants from accessing essential government information. To prevent this information from getting lost in translation, stakeholders should invest in high-quality multilingual communication processes and leverage existing best practices, such as having qualified translators review machine translations, using a toggle function to easily switch between versions of a website in different languages, and developing fully translated versions of government websites.[104] Promoting mutual learning across government agencies and other stakeholders is key, and inspiration could be drawn from the Multilingual Community platform that was launched by the U.S. government to share ideas, challenges, and best practices for managing multilingual content and websites.[105] To make the most of investments in multilingual communication, governments should prioritise its use in key policy areas that are especially relevant for newcomers and other residents least likely to speak the language(s) usually used in official matters, such as health, migration, integration, and social welfare.

▶ **Improving community outreach campaigns by combining social media and in-person approaches.** The pandemic made it abundantly clear how the strategies commonly used to reach out to migrant communities have often failed; information is incredibly difficult to find and access, and even when it is accessible, migrants often distrust information coming from government sources.[106] To leverage the lessons learnt during the pandemic, stakeholders should work to:

→ **Map where and how migrants access information to develop effective outreach strategies.** Cost-effective or free tools such as Google Analytics could help assess whether translated webpages are actually being used.

→ **Broaden the range of outreach methods and build on successful initiatives developed during the pandemic.** Among other things, this could involve using the broad range of available social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube,

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104 Laura Godfrey, Fedora Braverman, Lina Younes, and Leilani Martinez, 'Top 10 Best Practices for Multilingual Websites', Digital.gov, U.S. General Services Administration, 14 July 2022.

105 This community was launched in response to Executive Order 13166, 'Improving Access to Services for People with Limited English Proficiency'. For more information, see U.S. General Services Administration, 'Multilingual Community', Digital.gov, 16 May 2022.

106 Author interview with Kit Taintor.

and WhatsApp, to reach migrants and especially those who are younger. Simultaneously, stakeholders should expand tried-and-tested in-person outreach efforts such as door-to-door campaigns and outreach in community centres and neighbourhoods, which can be particularly important for reaching groups who have more limited digital access and literacy.

→ **Governments should intensify and expand partnerships with nongovernmental actors and especially with migrant community leaders and organisations.** Given that people are more likely to accept and believe information that comes from trusted sources, working with community stakeholders can be the key to make sure that information reaches immigrants. But simply using nongovernmental actors and migrant organisations as megaphones or amplifiers for government information campaigns would be a lost opportunity. These stakeholders can serve as cultural mediators who interpret information in a culturally relevant way that will resonate with their communities. Migrant voices should be part of conversations about the creation of (government) strategies in the first place. In all of this, governments can leverage the many new partnerships they developed with civil-society actors during the pandemic.

▶ **Making migrant integration policies and funding mechanisms emergency-proof and sustainable.** Policymakers enthusiastically embraced increased budget flexibility, relaxed deadlines, and reduced grant reporting and other administrative requirements during the pandemic, and many have underscored how retaining elements of this flexibility may make funding more effective and emergency responsive in the future. Because policy and budget cycles vary dramatically across countries, the speed and ease with which each was able to shift to address the public-health crisis varied.[107] For some countries, the renewal of budgets and strategic plans occurred at the beginning of the pandemic, which allowed them to accommodate new needs, whereas others had to continue working with suddenly outdated strategies and budgets. Finding a balance between long-term stability and short-term adaptability is key, allowing grantees and practitioners to invest and count on funding while also ensuring emergency responsiveness. Optimising policy and funding timelines (for example, by following the Portuguese model of annual policy and budget plans that are embedded in longer, five-year strategies) allows organisations to develop long-term plans that are emergency-proof.

What will come next after this period of pandemic-inspired innovation? To prevent a boom-bust cycle like the one that occurred after the 2015–16 European refugee and migration crisis, evaluation of promising initiatives, scaling up and sharing best practices, and dedication of long-term funding are paramount to make these innovations sustainable. Crises—from the pandemic to the recent influx in many European countries of people displaced from Ukraine—contribute to a migrant integration playing field that is in constant flux. And that is to say nothing of the effects of frequent, and at times wide-reaching, changes in political strategy.

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107   Estonia, for example, adopts long-term (seven-to-ten-year) policy plans. Others such as Canada, Finland, and Spain adopt shorter-term (three-year) policy plans, whereas Portugal adopts annual budgets within a five-year policy framework. Author interview with Sonia Pereira; Sandra Silva, 'Portugal: Strategic Plan for Migrations 2015–2020 Approved', European Website on Integration, 23 March 2015.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put even more pressure on already stretched resources, with policymakers scrambling to respond to the new reality and leaving limited capacity to take stock of what works and how to learn from promising innovations. But limited resources should not cause innovations to go to waste. Investing in the evaluation of pandemic-era programmes and practices in the short term would allow governments to identify the most cost-effective strategies, optimise policy outcomes, strengthen accountability, and promote policy learning—and thus make more strategic resource decisions in the long term. Evidence of what works should be shared on central platforms that gather best practices, such as the European Website on Integration and the Sustainable Practices of Integration (SPRING) platform, to ensure that innovations at different levels of governance and across countries can benefit other stakeholders in their efforts to promote migrant integration. The most promising initiatives should receive sustainable resources to professionalise and scale up their activities. This last step—using evidence on what works to inform integration policies—is often missing. Migrant integration trails far behind other policy areas that have long embraced the importance of evaluation and evidence-based policymaking.[108] Governments should capitalise on the successive waves of innovation during the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis and the pandemic, make the most of this opportunity to evaluate what works, and use this evidence to create policies that make societies more inclusive.

Investing in the evaluation of pandemic-era programmes and practices in the short term would allow governments to identify the most cost-effective strategies, optimise policy outcomes, strengthen accountability, and promote policy learning.

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108 Meghan Benton and Paul Diegert, *A Needed Evidence Revolution: Using Cost-Benefit Analysis to Improve Refugee Integration Programming* (Washington DC, Migration Policy Institute, 2018); Slootjes, *Healing the Gap.*

Appendix. List of Interviewees

Belgium/Flanders: Tom de Bruyn, Deputy Director, Department of Equal Opportunities, Integration, and Civic Integration, Agency of Domestic Administration, the Flemish Government

Canada: David Cashaback, Senior Director, Settlement and Integration Policy at Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, Government of Canada

Senator Ratna Omidvar, Senate of Canada

Mireille Paquet, Associate Professor and Research Chair on the Politics of Immigration, Concordia University, Montréal, Quebec

Council of European Municipalities and Regions: Maria Grazia Montella, Project Manager at IncluCities and Policy Officer, Migration and Integration, Council of European Municipalities and Regions

Czechia: Jan Kepka, Head of Integration, Ministry of the Interior of Czechia

Estonia: Anna Mäkinen, Chief Specialist in the Cultural Diversity Department, Ministry of Culture of Estonia

Eurocities: Katharina Bamberg, Migration and Integration Policy Advisor, Eurocities

European Commission: Vincent Catot, Policy Officer, Migrants' Integration, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission

Finland: Helena Torkko, Senior Communications Specialist, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland

France: Mathilde Mandonnet, Project Manager for European and International Affairs and Communication, Directorate-General for Foreign Nationals in France, Ministry of the Interior of France

Germany: Honey Deihimi, Head of Division, Federal Chancellory of Germany

Greece: Eleni Siopi, Head of Policy and Programme Department, Directorate of Social Integration, Ministry of Migration Policy and Asylum of Greece

Italy: Giovanni di Dio, Labour Migration and Integration Specialist, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of Italy

The Netherlands: Peter Scholten, Professor of Migration and Diversity Policy, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Niels Tubbing, Senior Policy Advisor Civic Integration of Migrants and Refugees, Coordinator International Social Affairs, City of Amsterdam

Portugal: Sonia Pereira, High Commissioner for Migration of Portugal

Spain: Karoline Fernández de la Hoz Zeitler, Director of the Spanish Observatory for Racism and Xenophobia, Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration of Spain

Gemma Pinyol, Head of Migration and Mobility Policies at Instrategies and Associate Researcher at GRITIM-Pompeu Fabra University

Sweden: Ida Holmgren, Division of Integration, Ministry of Employment of Sweden

United States/Colorado: Kit Taintor, Senior Advisor for New American Integration, Office of the Governor, State of Colorado

About the Author

JASMIJN SLOOTJES   🐦 @JasmijnSlootjes

Jasmijn Slootjes is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe), primarily working on immigrant integration. Her research areas include migrant health, evidence-informed policymaking, migrants' access to services, integration policies, receiving-society responses to migration, and the use of innovative research methods to study migration.

Before joining MPI Europe, Dr. Slootjes was Executive Director of the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative at the University of California, Berkeley. Previously, she completed her PhD research on how migrants overcome health problems as obstacles to labour market integration. During her PhD, she was Coordinator of the Migration Diversity Centre and a Pat Cox Fellow at the Migration Policy Group. She also studied the impact of budget cuts on integration courses and migrant language attainment at the Municipality of Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Dr. Slootjes holds a PhD in sociology (migration studies) from VU University Amsterdam, a MSc in migration studies from Utrecht University, and a BA in political science and international relations from Utrecht University.

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Migration Policy Institute Europe is a nonprofit, independent research institute that aims to provide a better understanding of migration in Europe and thus promote effective policymaking. MPI Europe provides authoritative research and practical policy design to governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders who seek more effective management of immigration, immigrant integration, and asylum systems as well as successful outcomes for newcomers, families of immigrant background, and receiving communities throughout Europe.