



Final Report: EMF 2023

The 2023 European Migration Forum, ‘Migrants in Europe today - Specific needs, skills and communication for stronger inclusion’

The 8th European Migration Forum on 4 and 5 December brought together more than 250 participants, made up of mostly civil society organisations, as well as participants from local and regional authorities, EU Member States, as well as experts in the field of migration and integration. The discussions focused on three of the most pressing issues related to migration today: public attitudes and communication; the specific needs of migrants and refugees; and labour market integration.

Over two intense days, participants put forward recommendations, formulated key points, and shared best practices and challenges. They pointed out the value that migrants and refugees bring to the economy and to society at large, and that it was imperative to build an inclusive Europe through responsible reporting and communication campaigns.

Keynote speeches

EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, opened the conference by saying Europe should **“never underestimate the skills, passion, and energy that migrants have”** going on to speak about her continuing mission, together with civil society, social partners, local and national authorities and businesses, to change the toxic narrative surrounding migration and improve legal pathways for those coming to Europe, including to attract talent. **“Integration is not about assimilating into a country; it's about becoming part of a community. And that's where civil society plays a pivotal role.”** She spoke about the proposal to revise the EU Anti-trafficking Directive and stressed that the rules to fight human trafficking would be tightened. The Commissioner also underlined the importance of fighting smugglers' networks.

Speaking about the labour market, Commissioner Johansson said stopping migration would be a catastrophe for Europe: **“If migrant workers were to stop working tomorrow, Europe would be completely blocked”**. She highlighted her recent work on talent partnerships with Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tunisia, and others, as well as the creation of a talent pool for migrants and employers whereby migrant workers could respond to jobs through a portal, bypassing intermediaries.

The ultimate difference between migration being a success or a failure is how it's managed, she said. The message needs to be that migration is nothing to be afraid of, it's entirely normal. **“To change the narrative, we need to change the policy,”** and in that regard, the Commission is close to having an EU-level asylum and migration system with more focus on protection and rights and setting the standard for solidarity in law. It won't be without challenges, but **“I think we can get there,”** she said, adding that the proposed policy wasn't perfect, but would be much better than what's currently in place.

EESC president Olivier Röpke stressed the importance of the forum as a space where civil society could shine a spotlight on key issues, especially in these uncertain times. He pledged that the EESC would do everything in its power to implement the ideas raised during the Forum. He called for the right job matches for migrant jobseekers, for narratives around migration to be democratic at all levels and for social inclusion to be promoted as much as possible. He thanked participants for **"showing up every day to help migrants and refugees lead a decent and secure life."**

Seventy-six percent of EU citizens believe that the most vulnerable citizens should be supported by their government. **"Let's use these figures to fight the growing right narratives around migration, to put an end to xenophobia and racism that is fuelled by ignorance and misinformation"**, he said.

Highlights of a successful local refugee integration initiative

[Instroom](#) is a Belgian labour market integration project specifically designed for refugees by chef Seppe Nobels in 2021. It was in the spotlight this year for its success in training 110 local refugees to become sous chefs at its culinary academy. The Michelin-starred restaurant and vocational training program sees refugees bring multicultural cuisine – and the stories that go with them – to 60 Antwerp restaurants during a 6-8 month chef's apprenticeship. Seppe Nobels and his Iraqi sous-chef Faieq Al-Mamoori spoke to the forum about the collaboration to teach and learn local dishes from their respective cultures and, in the case of refugees, to also learn Dutch. Apprentice chefs serve dishes from their villages to diners, and share the heartwarming and heartbreaking tales of the kitchen tables and families they can no longer return to.

Roundtable discussions

On Day 1 of the forum, there were three parallel roundtables in which participants exchanged views and formulated key findings.

1. How could we change the narrative on migration in the age of polarisation and disinformation?

European media should prioritise accurate, comprehensive, transparent and accountable reporting on migrants and migration issues. Language matters: people are not "illegal". Care must be taken to use proper language and provide context to fight harmful, polarising and populist narratives and, in so doing, tell stories that challenge stereotypes rather than reinforcing them. Above all, it is important to give migrants and those from migrant backgrounds a louder voice in media because **"who we don't see, does not shape the narrative"**. It is also key to take a multidimensional approach to storytelling and to focus not only on their "migration story", rather seek their opinions and expertise on science, culture, etc. It is important to acknowledge the role of social media in conveying positive and negative stories about migration and harness its power. Media literacy, communication campaigns and education (especially for young people) are needed to combat stereotypes. When addressing right-wing views on migration, to stop the spread of misinformation, when formulating messages, one should not seek to change fundamental ideology, but rather appeal to the audience as they are: address their anxieties, fears, and personal values.

2. What is needed for more sustainable labour market integration?

OECD research¹ shows that migrant employment in the EU is at record levels (2/3 of all migrants were in employment in 2022), but important gaps remain. Highly educated migrants, for example, are both more likely to be overqualified for the work they do and less likely to be employed than their native-born counterparts in all EU Member States. Indeed, if they had the same employment rates, the EU would have over one million more highly-educated people working. Analysing the lower employment rate of migrant women shows that family obligations are more often an obstacle to employment for them as for the native-born. This has been confirmed by the experiences of displaced people from Ukraine, investigated in different studies including by Eurofound, and underlines the need to take a whole-of-family perspective to integration.

More work needs to be done to create sustainable jobs for migrants as they are more likely to be long-term unemployed or in irregular work situations. There is a shortage of entrepreneurship, mentorship, and training available for migrants and refugees. Language barriers, cumbersome skills validation, recognition procedures and information gaps on the side of both migrants and employers – especially SMEs – are some of the many obstacles that stand in the way of matching vacancies with migrants' talents in a sustainable fashion. Effective cooperation between public and private labour market actors, especially at the regional and local levels, is essential to develop targeted solutions to the specific needs of different categories migrants, such as, for example, migrant mothers, unaccompanied minors in need of a professional perspective or highly qualified refugees.

Recommendations included: investing in strategies to use integration opportunities in rural areas and small agglomerations; building more on social economy actors to develop solutions for special needs; enable migrant organisations to access more funding opportunities; better utilise the skills and capabilities of highly skilled migrants to reduce overqualification rates; make migrants more aware of their rights to combat exploitation; educate employers on diversity issues that are specific to migration; mobilise the potential of migrant women, including by providing access to quality childcare; and create more humanitarian labour pathways.

3. How to identify and support migrants and refugees with specific needs

Many migrants reaching Europe belong to vulnerable categories who have specific needs that should be catered for, also in view of a more successful integration. This requires the early identification of the vulnerabilities and specific needs and the referral of these migrants to the relevant services in the Member States to ensure they receive relevant care and support.²

This topic was broken down into three subtopics: mental health; trafficking; and unaccompanied minors.

Mental Health: Participants' recommendations included acknowledging the prevalence of mental health issues in the migrant and refugee community and prioritising sustainable and long-term (including financial) support in this regard. It is important to create outreach and communication

¹ [Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In](#). This joint OECD-European Commission publication presents a comprehensive comparison of the integration outcomes of immigrants and their children in OECD, EU and selected other countries.

² In this regard, the Italian Ministry of Interior and UNHCR presented at the Forum as a best practice the recently approved handbook for the identification, referral and care of persons living with vulnerabilities in Italy, that promotes the communication and collaboration between all relevant public and private partners to this endeavour, and which could be a source of inspiration also for other EU Member States ([vademecum vulnerabilities 31-web-eng.pdf \(interno.gov.it\)](#)).

campaigns to break mental health taboos, i.e., through the provision of safe spaces within the migrant and refugee community. The participants strongly argued to provide mental health training for NGOs working with refugees and migrants, hire mental health specialists, and/or recognise the skills of professionals with migrant and refugee background to make them a mainstay in the health care system. Finally, they stressed a need for intercultural mediators who are specially trained to handle migrant mental health issues, as generic mental health 'best practices' might need to be adapted.

Trafficking: It is key to create and implement a comprehensive and all-inclusive infrastructure that includes specialised professionals (frontline workers, law enforcement, social workers, health care and mental health workers) who can detect, identify, and refer trafficked individuals to the appropriate support and assistance services. Civil society organisations should be included in the process and the support should have a focus on long-term integration.

Participants recommended establishing more comprehensive labour inspections with common task forces, including the role of a linguistic mediator who can accompany labour inspectors during unannounced on-the-spot controls, ensuring that potential victims have a safe space to open up and trafficking offences can be detected.

Further suggestions included adequate funding for NGOs and frontline workers to be able to make early identifications and referrals of trafficking victims at the first point of entry into Europe, alongside sufficient training to detect all forms of trafficking and to identify and support all victims of trafficking (including minors, men, and transgender victims). Finally, trafficking victims should be allowed a reflection/recovery period to decide whether to bring forward their case to law enforcement authorities.

Unaccompanied minors: The discussion focused on the need to meet and uphold the international standards on the rights of the child. In particular, participants recommended that there should be no detention or protective custody upon arrival for children and that there needs to be the full implementation of EU legal safeguards for children, including unaccompanied minors. They also called for separation of the asylum and residency application procedures to give children full access to the social system upon arrival by issuing residence permits from the get-go. Finally, they emphasised the need for support for the transition to adulthood so that minors are not 'lost' in the system once they 'age-out' when they become legally adults at age 18.

Outcomes of the breakout discussions “The Floor is Yours”

Participants raised 10 crucial topics to discuss in small breakout groups:

1. Mental health initiatives
2. Women migrants and gender equality
3. Diversity in all sectors: how to share best practices
4. Talking with the Right and listening to their fears and concerns
5. Safe routes for asylum seekers (not economic migrants)
6. Participation and representation of migrants in decision-making
7. Migrants with disabilities
8. More migrants in NGOs to better understand needs
9. Assimilation vs. Integration vs. Inclusion
10. Basic workers' rights, including human rights.

In the **mental health** (1) working group, participants identified the need to create a sense of community and provide a forum for shared experiences to normalise mental health issues. Most are suffering from PTSD in some form, whether mild or acute, and migrants often have very little time or

resources to confront their mental health troubles. There is greater stigma around mental health in the migrant and refugee community than in the local population, and yet migrants are suffering from much bigger mental health issues than the native-born Europeans. On top of this, mental health is essential to their successful integration, and lack of treatment, acknowledgment, identification, or access to help are huge barriers to this.

In the '**Speaking to the Right**' (4) working group, the overarching question was two-fold: whether or not to speak to the anti-migration people typical on the extreme right, and if so, how to do so effectively. The consensus was that the best way to solve a problem is always through communication, however, some cautioned that it could provide a platform for people who don't deserve it, the so-called 'pushers' and 'populist mouthpieces' whose only aim is to add fuel to the fire and seek publicity. "**Even if you are winning the argument, to engage is to lose**". The participants posited whether it wasn't better to instead address 'the moveable middle' as this is where the most fruitful discussion would take place. Participants recognised that it was important not to conflate 'anti-migrant' with right-wing tendencies as many aren't voting for the anti-immigrant stance as the primary reason for voting for right-wing parties. It is equally important to address the primary fears of the extreme right head-on: are they cultural, religious, or economic? Engage in intelligent debates based on facts rather than emotional responses, and use the principles of non-violent communication.

Results of the Forum Bureau election

Participants elected two new members to the Forum Bureau for two-year mandates.

The **elected members** of the Forum Bureau were:

At the EU level, **Anna Coulibaly** called for bottom-up strategies, and using the knowledge and experience of people with lived experiences in decision-making. At the national level, **Yonous Muhammadi** from the Greek Forum of Refugees called for greater political integration, equality, and justice for migrants and refugees and for those affected most by policies to be at the decision-making table.

Networking Village

20 EU co-funded projects shared their experience and best practices at the Networking village. More information on the projects can be found [here](#).