

Autumn Academy 2018

Opportunities and challenges in cooperation between government and civil society in the management of migration in Europe and North America

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What did we learn? Take-away themes, reflections and forward agendas

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In the final session, Sarah Spencer presented on her shared reflections on the symposium debates with Nicola Delvino, co-directors of the Autumn Academy, drawing together eight key themes that had emerged from the discussions, and the concrete ideas that had been put forward to strengthen relationships between government (at all levels) and NGOs.

Key themes

1. Context is all

- **Public attitudes towards migrants: polarized toxic debate or space for inclusive narrative**
 - whether migrants are perceived as future citizens (Canada), legitimising investment in integration and creating expectations that other citizens and employers will play a part in facilitating it – most likely where there is no far right party (as also in Ireland).
 - alternatively, seen as a threat: we saw in some countries that hostility to migrants (and NGOs that help them), and scapegoating, has reached a new intensity, alongside hostility to multilateralism (both threats to national sovereignty), fueled by far the right, narrowing the political space for humanitarian action and government action on integration. Even children, we heard, are not sacrosanct. As we were told in the opening session ‘the more toxic the narrative the narrower the space for cooperation’.
 - politicization can sideline officials; policy is led by politicians, making officials vulnerable, creating uncertainty, so that working with NGOs poses a risk to them.
 - a situation in which media coverage does not always reflect the facts (a constant theme), and emotion can be more powerful than evidence – though not, we learnt, at the operational level, away from the spotlight, where officials still want to get things done and evidence based arguments still carry weight. Politicisation can indeed create opportunities – civil servants needing NGOs as allies, ‘saviours’ in dark times.

- **Differing political cultures:** from perceptions on the role of the state (contrast the distrust in the US to expectations in Scandinavia) and with it contrasting perceptions of the role of NGOs in a democracy; attitudes to state relationship with religion (and hence faith organisations); to whether there is a culture of dialogue and cooperation (as in Sweden) versus one of exclusion of NGOs from the policy making process (as at the national level in Greece, Hungary); and attitudes to international criticism which makes a government more sensitive to NGO concerns.
- **Scale of migrant/refugee numbers** that government has to manage, and the speed of change, putting pressures on the reception/integration system and increasing reliance on NGOs, but also changing the politics – as we saw in how attitudes changed to rescues at sea as numbers grew.
- **Design of the programme** into which government brings NGOs as partners – whether it works well, there is agreement on aims and means, or, as in the Greek reception system, very negative conditions which do not protect human rights so that NGOs can only be confrontational, there is no room for collaboration; or the challenge where it is an untested space for cooperation, there is no clarity on who is responsible, or unclear goals.
- **Central or devolved governance system:** whether decisions are all taken at the national level (a pitfall we heard in the US Resettlement system; of the Dutch asylum reception system when cities such as Utrecht want to innovate; and of the rigidity of the Greek regulatory environment); or whether it is devolved to the provincial level (and so less vulnerable to a polarized immigration debate) or to the local level – where municipalities can work with NGOs and build capacity, credibility and solidarity at that level.
- **Whether there is political leadership,** motivation, to deliver and to do so with NGOs – a question related, in part, to public attitudes: at the local level, we are seeing more courage to lead, to try to shift the narrative, than at the national level.
- **Ideas and capacity:** whether government feels it already has the ideas and capacity to deliver, or is looking for fresh ideas on how to proceed and cannot act alone.
- **Rules on non-profits/charities** that constrain relationships of advocacy more than they need.

2. Diversity and complexity of civil society and its stage of development

- Whether the sector is young (as in Greece), relatively new to immigration as in Ireland, or there is a long tradition of NGO service provision role in the migration field (as in Canada, France and USA) so that NGOs already had capacity and experience when the state wanted to provide services; were already authoritative to inform policy; but also potentially negatively impacted by the state investing selectively in the sector – as in France – creating competition within the sector to keep out state sponsored new players.

- Differing types of organisation – differing views, priorities, capacity, approaches, contributions; the extent to which values or commerce is their motivation; extent to which they have private funds and a board with influence so that they can afford to risk their relationship with the government. That is, the diversity in the sector in turn means a diversity of relationships with government.
- Fluidity of the sector over time: different actors, driving different agendas, forging different relationships – described by one participant as ‘complexity and chaos’ but that it can nevertheless coalesce.

3. Many countries’ migration systems would collapse without NGO contribution

- Governments can lack capacity to deliver on many fronts, while NGOs can (but do not always) have flexibility, capacity to innovate, to respond to needs, to do what government cannot do, to expand and contract with demand (albeit at a cost to their staff and sustainability), to engage local networks which national governments do not necessarily have and to pilot services that could not be provided through the mainstream system.
- Beyond any service role, we learnt that NGOs are ideally placed to build bridges, mediate with, inform and mobilise migrants; to test messages; and to provide evidence/understanding on what is happening in source countries

4. But the ‘unsung heroes’ narrative is also flawed

- There are issues on performance, standards and accountability; of NGOs pursuing own agendas (including those related to faith); and the downside that NGOs can replace government responsibility rather than complement it.

5. NGO relationships vary between departments in government and between tiers of government

- Can be strong at municipal level while faltering at the national level.
- Strong with one government department when not with another – just as the Search and Rescue NGOs were supported by the Italian Transport department, responsible for the Coast Guard, while the Interior Ministry was giving them a hard time.
- Even long standing relationships can unexpectedly change.

6. Change of policy can threaten partnership, even be existential threat

- However, US experience on refugees suggests it can also be seen as an opportunity to rethink the basis of the partnership so that it works better – and is less vulnerable to threat.

7. Lack of transparency on mutual aims and priorities is a major weakness

- We heard of projects where partners find, mid project that they have differing ideas on what they are trying to achieve.

8. Weak communications strategies

- Where neither NGOs nor government partners anticipated the need to maintain public support and have neither individual nor a shared media strategy to maintain it.

Twelve steps to create an upward spiral in government – NGO relationships

1. **Civil society needs to be part of the new narrative on migration**, a narrative voiced by governments and by NGOs to change perceptions; to ensure that the vital role of NGOs is valued and not seen as a threat to security; that they are essential partners for government, adding value and doing things government cannot do. A narrative that thinks global as well as local is outward not inward looking; which separates reception issues from migration; and focuses on issues, like health, that the public can relate to, not groups of people they cannot.
2. **New narrative needs effective communication to the media**, by government and by NGOs, to forestall and answer negative coverage of NGOs and of governments working with them. A need to ensure that positive dimensions, like spontaneous volunteer support, get media coverage; while not shying away from issues that concern voters like impact on hospitals and schools.

NGOs cannot afford just to do good work – they need to engage with the media to ensure the public knows it and to maintain support; NGOs do have capacity to change narrative (as recently in the US on child separations); and governments need to be willing to talk up NGOs and defend their role. Going against public opinion is ‘political suicide’ a government participant said. Therefore, this must mean a shared responsibility to maintain public support. That needs to include local papers, on positive local stories like community sponsorship and SPRAH’s refugees teaching municipal officials English; but only national impact will ultimately save the day

3. **Strengthen solidarity across the NGO sector**, overcoming silo working between refugees and other categories of migrants and their separate narratives that weaken capacity to withstand attack, or to cope with policy change, developing strategies that anticipate political / policy change and how they will react. We live in very uncertain times. The sector needs stronger coalitions at all levels, from community development to national and international networks that can work together across current divides; where possible to speak with one voice, and to show solidarity when an NGO partner is under attack. Long term funding not short term project funding enables NGOs to plan effectively.
4. **Devolve responsibility where possible to local government tiers** to empower them to work more closely with migrants, building solidarity.

5. **Ensure communities feel they are benefiting from NGO work, not only migrants** – through the focus of activity (for the community as a whole) and a narrative that makes clear that is the goal. Even small local organisations need budgets for communication.
6. **Be clear on the goal of cooperation:** harmonious cooperation is good but challenge is also necessary for policy to develop. Pressure on government can be constructive to achieve an aim that (at least some of) government shares; and so funding conditions need to protect the right to be critical. Too much pressure, for unachievable outcomes, can damage relationships. There can be a need for compromise on both sides. The aim is to avoid a painful divorce – but not to avoid all disagreement and confrontation which can be necessary to bring about change
7. **Manage mutual expectations** through government and NGOs each understanding what the other needs if taking the risk of working together – recognised through dialogue, at the outset of the relationship (which could be facilitated by an honest broker, a neutral third party – like Welcoming America and philanthropy) to avoid risk of relationship breakdown. Individual NGO staff need to understand the risk that governments and individual officials take when they work with them – and maintain confidentiality if mutual trust is to grow.
8. **Improve channels of communication** within the partnership so that there is continual dialogue in the planning and implementation process, building mutual understanding and avoiding unforeseen conflicts, and planning together how to communicate the work and respond to media attacks.
9. **Build new partnerships** between NGOs and nontraditional allies: departments focusing on issues not migrants – like health and education: to match new framing on issues not migrants; and with municipalities which are increasingly willing to diverge from national government approaches; and develop new forms of partnership like the evidence gathering example we heard from Welcoming America, working together to get evidence to inform plans, so there is shared ownership of the evidence base.
10. **Capture the motivation of new volunteers** as a means to change public attitudes, rebuild solidarity (as Ireland is trying to do through its new Communities Integration Fund, sponsoring small organisations to get involved), as well as building a vital resource to support refugees; and draw in diaspora organisations so that migrant led organisations are part of the solution; and bring in others, like youth, who build the movement.
11. **Replicate schemes and relationships that are seen to work**, like Canada's sponsorship programme, including the co-planning and regular dialogue that accompany it, and Athens' SynAthina and ACCMR. There is a need to find a way to harness this learning, to ensure successful initiatives (and unsuccessful ones) are well known.

12. Encourage NGO staff to go for public office and administration jobs – so that they can promote the kind of partnerships they wanted when they worked for ‘the other side’.

To read the full report from the Autumn Academy 2019, please visit:

<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/event/autumn-academy-2018-opportunities-and-challenges-in-cooperation-between-government-and-civil-society-in-the-management-of-migration-in-europe-and-north-america>

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