



# Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups

Research Paper 7

Lessons from a City  
Working Group Model of  
Learning Exchange

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This paper sets out lessons from an eighteen month learning exchange project involving working groups of city officials coordinated by university based researchers. It is intended as a contribution to knowledge on the efficacy of differing models of learning exchange, to inform future exercises of this kind. *Action for Inclusion in Europe* was a learning exchange project run by the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity, part of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The aim of this paper is to assess the value of the particular working-group model used in the project as a means of facilitating reforms in policies or practices at city level. It is based on focused discussions with working group members and research coordinators at the second and final meetings of the projects' three city working groups; and on their on-line, anonymous responses to a series of questions relating to different aspects of the model. The author was overall responsible for the project and attended all of the meetings of each working group.

## The project

The project, which ran for an 18 month period from 1 January 2015 to 30 June 2016, aimed:

*'to secure tangible reforms in city practices in Europe to foster inclusion, equality of opportunity, civic participation and a mutual sense of local belonging across diverse communities of newcomers and existing residents, by drawing on research evidence on barriers to inclusion and shared learning on proven effective approaches in overcoming them.'*

The rationale was that exclusion is perpetuated in part by the lack of opportunity for policy makers, service providers and civil society actors at the local level to access, discuss and act upon evidence from research and from other cities, on practices and initiatives that have helped to foster inclusion. COMPAS's work with local municipalities in Europe in earlier projects<sup>1</sup> had revealed a significant interest among them in such opportunities to engage.

The funding included provision for 15 (in the event, 16) municipal authorities<sup>2</sup> to work on one of three inclusion issues on which evidence shows that municipalities per se can have significant traction; that address marginalisation of existing residents as well as newcomers; where evidence on good practice is strong; where COMPAS has expertise; and on which progress could be made over an 18 month period. These were:

- **Identity and belonging:** in particular, developing practice which fosters an inclusive, local city or neighbourhood identity;
- **Education:** addressing underachievement through provision of information, guidance and engagement with parents across marginalised communities to support their children's learning;
- **Homelessness:** in particular, seeking solutions to homelessness among citizens and non-citizens lacking entitlements to public housing and welfare benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance AMICALL [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/attitudes-to-migrants-communication-and-local-leadership-amicall/](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/attitudes-to-migrants-communication-and-local-leadership-amicall/) and EUMIA [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/european-migrant-integration-academy-eu-mia/](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/european-migrant-integration-academy-eu-mia/).

<sup>2</sup> Aarhus, Antwerp, Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Dublin, Ghent, Gijón, Glasgow, Hamburg, Helsinki, London Borough of Islington, Rotterdam, Tampere, Turin, Utrecht and Vienna.

Within the overarching theme of each working group, five cities would meet on three occasions over 10 months to develop individual city action plans; supported and facilitated by a COMPAS researcher who would provide a background paper highlighting relevant research evidence to inform their discussions. At each meeting, hosted by one of the participating cities, participants would discuss relevant research evidence, exchange experience and get feedback on their action plans and challenges faced. The development of each plan would, as a requirement of participating in the project, include dialogue with civil society. Dialogue within the project would continue between meetings with the research coordinator and electronically through means such as a webinar. All city participants would have access to a private, web-based information exchange facility, Ning, serviced by COMPAS, providing access to all materials and to their own postings of materials to share.

The model of change was that cities, faced with major challenges in relation to inclusion and open to learning from evidence of successful approaches and to critique by their peers, would be willing to engage in an exercise that assisted them to develop new approaches. Regular reporting to their peers and feedback on their progress would help to maintain the necessary momentum. A requirement to engage with civil society, including non-traditional actors, would introduce ideas to the city that enhanced the impact of their actions while contributing to building a broader constituency of support for inclusion policies and practices.

The goal was three-fold: to deliver a tangible shift in practice in each of the participating cities, including their practices in relation to engaging civil society, benefitting individuals at risk of exclusion; and for each group to monitor outcomes and capture learning in a collective output on the topic which can be used to facilitate change elsewhere. A further objective was to use the learning as leverage to secure funding from new sources to take forward one or more of the work streams. The output would be a report by each city on action taken during the project and how it would be taken forward; and an overview report by the research coordinator of each group on shared learning.

Criteria for selection of cities was that a) they had experience to offer as well as something to learn on the topic and on civic participation; b) that they shared the objective of addressing issues relating to both new and established marginal communities and of engaging with civil society in the process; c) that the city representative was highly motivated to participate, share, introduce changes in their city practices as a long term transformation, and to contribute to collective output for wider dissemination, d) that the city representative had authorization at a senior level for their participation with an indication of motivation to act on learning from the project; and e) were willing in principle to host one of the three project meetings.

The aim of requiring authorization from a senior level (CEO or Mayor), as evidence of high level buy-in to participation, was to ensure a genuine intention to act on the basis of the learning from the project, and to avoid the risk of participants finding that there were political or other obstacles to their continued participation or progress in securing reform after the project had begun. Procedurally, the funder granted access to the funds for the working group phase of the project only after that evidence had been provided.

The aim was to have five cities from at least three different countries, in each group. It was anticipated that the incentive for cities to participate would include the opportunity that it would provide to learn from their peers working in cities facing similar challenges, and access to relevant

research evidence in an accessible form, with the support of the researcher in preparation and dissemination of the collective output from the group.

The following sections report on lessons learnt on the model from each stage of the project.

## 1. Application process

Participants were asked to comment on the application process including the (relatively modest) level of detail they were asked to provide on the city and challenges faced and the requirement to get their CEO or Mayor's approval.

Without exception responses endorsed the level of information required and the process of application positively (*'fine', 'sound' 'easy'*). Securing high level endorsement for participation had not generally been onerous, was *'a good idea'*, and (for CEO approval at least) normal for such applications. Significantly, it had in some cases (five) proved important for the participant in securing continued support for the time given to the project where senior staff or departmental priorities had shifted: *'Getting CEO approval was useful as a lever later on.'* Careful selection of cities to ensure genuine motivation, and the seniority and experience of each city representative, was valuable for other participants: *'Having a good match makes it much more interesting to exchange ideas'*. The opportunity to apply had been circulated through a range of city networks and by snowballing through professional contacts but ideally greater time could have been devoted to making it more widely known to ensure a larger range of strong applications.

## 2. The working group

Participants were asked what they thought of the working group that was formed, for instance the seniority of participants; the number of cities (five, in one case six); the range of countries (in the three groups, four, four and five countries respectively); and that in two groups there were two cities from one country.

Participants were in most cases staff with direct responsibility for policy and or practice on the issue addressed in the working group or on the specific topic of their action plan. In a few cases, participants had more senior management positions with less direct control over implementation. Comments on the level of seniority noted the variation but valued it, commenting that all *'present a high level and adequate experience for the project'*; *'were very professional and experts in their field'*; *'we speak more of less on the same level and that makes it interesting'*; and *'it was interesting that the participants had quite different job roles and this added to the depth of the discussions'*. Seniority did not equate with contribution to discussions in terms of insights or ideas, but sufficient seniority to be able to deliver change in policy or practice, within their differing local governance structures, was a pre-requisite of success of the working group model.

There were differing views on the optimal number of cities, recognising a trade- off between a number small enough to be manageable, particularly with only three meetings, and the greater input of ideas and experience had the group been larger. Most thought the size right (*'Good size to share enough detail, build relationships and learn from others without being too many to really make the links'*). Some thought it could have been slightly larger, but not more than ten.

In relation to countries there was little comment other than the observation that interaction with cities in countries with similar national legislative structure was perhaps most helpful: *'if the operating environment is very different from your own city it is harder to think about implementing*

*lessons learned by others*'. Of the six who commented directly on there being two cities from one country in their group, two participants thought it should be avoided as not adding much value, four that it was not a problem as the cities and their contexts differed nevertheless.

### **3. The topic**

The breadth of the topic set for each group, and within that the breadth of issues addressed in the action plans of the participating cities, differed significantly: from a clearly defined area of practice in the education group, that of parental engagement; through approaches to addressing homelessness (a common challenge but cities finding solutions to homelessness among migrants with differing levels of entitlement and on different scales, and which were at different stages in developing their approaches); and finally, within the cohesion group, each city addressing very different aspects of that broad issue.

The survey asked participants about the breadth of the topic covered by the group, and to comment on the fact that they had been able to choose the specific focus of their action plan rather than all being asked to work on the same topic. Some responses made reference to the topic of their working group but otherwise, as responses were anonymous, it was not possible to know to which working group they were referring.

On breadth of topic, a number of responses suggested it would have been preferable to focus on 'the same specific topic', that the variety in the group had been too large and that the breadth, initially without knowledge of the circumstances of each city, could make it difficult to focus and give appropriate feedback. It also made it difficult to compare initiatives or progress made. On the other hand some of those with reservations on the breadth of topics that inevitably arose from individual city choices (albeit within the topic of their working group) said that, nevertheless, they appreciated being able to work on an issue that was most relevant to their own city at this moment in time, and that *'it was good that no 'one size fits all' model was the goal of the project'*. Greater specificity would have limited the pool of interested cities and could lead to narrow, procedural and less exploratory discussions. In the case of homelessness, as the statutory environment and profile of service users varied greatly, it would not have been possible to address the same specific topic. In the more focused education group there was nevertheless a variety of topics and approaches taken in the action plans. There was some regret that the project model did not offer the opportunity, other than within the Ning web platform, for learning about the themes taken up by the other working groups.

### **4. Project expectations**

Participants were asked about the tasks that the project required: devising and delivering a specific action plan; securing any resources needed and political or management support; the timescale of the action plan relative to that of the project; and prospects for continued delivery after the last meeting. A second question focused on the timescale in particular.

It was widely felt that the timescale of the project was too short: not enough time to develop and implement a plan and to garner lessons learnt. One and a half years for the cities working together was suggested, rather than the ten months that the project funding in effect allowed. While the tasks were appropriate as well as manageable with other workloads, the timescale was not.

*'The challenges are appropriate – however the expectation that all aspects of developing a specific action plan and then having it properly resourced, underway and producing results is unrealistic in the timescale of the project.'*

*'I think the challenge of the task was at the right level, for me it has enabled me to trial out new approaches whilst not being too onerous in the context of the day-to-day workload. In trialling ideas, however, it is also the case that not all of them go to plan – in a way each city was instigating their own projects, some of which will succeed better than others.'*

*'Good pace, right amount of challenge to ensure things change without overloading, although demands of local contexts do impact on how fast we can deliver. Probably unrealistic to expect delivery within a year but setting the bar high has also meant we have achieved more in a short time than we would have done without the drive of the project.'*

The timescale had appeared appropriate at the beginning of the project but now felt inadequate. While eight months of preparation prior to the first meeting (selection and approval process for cities and preparation of background papers) was not too long, ten months was too short for learning and delivery. Cities had, nevertheless, achieved a great deal during the project period. The short time frame meant that they had to push reforms through quickly, as many did successfully. There is always a tendency to want longer. As one participant put it 'I have never worked on a project where I didn't think I needed more time!' Four meetings over 12-15 months could, however, have worked better or over two years.

Unless political support had already been secured for the plan, or (as in one case) the plan effectively continued on a path set by an earlier EU funded project, it was challenging to deliver in the timescale, depending on the scale of ambition of the plan. Most plans were still in the process of implementation at the time of the last meeting. With that in mind, participants were asked to divide their objectives into short and long term goals, recognising that the latter would be after the project's end date. Progress could, however, still be reported and reports updated over the following year. In one case, it proved difficult to identify and develop a project within the timeline, an early ambition proving unfeasible within the city's policy agenda, but the participant from that city felt the group '*helped set the ball rolling in a useful direction and also added a further incentive for colleagues to get involved.*' The timescale of a project relative to the academic year was an issue in education: '*we were too late to get the start of the year and thus won't see many results until after at least July 2017. That seems a shame, as I don't know how much capacity there will be for follow up at that time*'.

Some cities were thought to be better placed to deliver than others. Availability for meetings meant that for one group there was only six months between the first and the third meeting. Some cities were able to attract funds from their authority, had more autonomy to act or authority to secure implementation, than others. There were some staff changes so that the person involved was not the person who had committed at the outset; on the other hand some cities managed to draw colleagues into the process, providing an additional resource. Where participants had a stakeholder group to which to report on progress, not required in this project, it was helpful both for testing out ideas and for maintaining momentum in the face of competing pressures on time.

A key feature of the project was that it was resourced to enable learning exchange to contribute to the development of action plans, not to fund the activities set out in the plans themselves. That was seen as a limitation, but also a strength:

*'The fact that it's not related to a specific funded action in the city is both a strength and a weakness. It gives freedom and flexibility, and makes it more generative; but it devalues it locally within the administration in that it is harder to justify to colleagues the time that it takes.'*

*There is nevertheless a lesson here in managing expectations, in being clear that the project is intended to facilitate new thinking and innovation, not to resource its delivery.*

## **5. Academic resource and facilitation**

Participants were asked to comment on the value of the academic input, through the background paper and during and between meetings.

Some participants found the academic input to be an *'excellent resource'*, *'inspiring'*, *'helpful'*. One participant considered it *'the most valuable component'*:

*'Input and challenge on the action plans, presentations and meetings were helpful and of a high quality. The wealth of knowledge and expertise provided by COMPAS helps operational staff do battle in their own organisations – even if securing change has to be done in slow, small steps.'*

Another participant found the way that the discussions were linked throughout the process to relevant supporting evidence to be particularly welcome *'and enjoyed the rigours of the more academic discipline supporting and challenging our ways of working'*.

Participants stressed not only the instrumental value of the evidence presented but that the process itself had led them to think differently about what they were doing:

*'we have to make it clear that this kind of process is really useful – to make it a bit more academic than I'm used to, to think a bit more, to ask constantly "Why? Why am I doing this in this way?'*

Approaches that had seemed normal and common sense were now interrogated: *'doing it in this more academic way wouldn't have happened if we'd just done this within our administrations.'* Familiar ways of working were now seen through a new lens. 'Sending an email' to an external agency became *'engaging civil society'*, and that meant thinking differently about the how and the why. Thinking more reflectively, one participant said, means you try to make the work exemplary. It is better for migrants because it is being quality controlled. It is more transferable because you have thought it through and related it to a model. Another participant had found:

*'Compared to other peer-to-peer pieces of work I've been involved in, the fact that the facilitator is an academic is valuable; it takes you beyond just comparing experiences, which has value but is limited. The added value is more evident; the academics have put it in a framework; you understand why something is exceptional or typical, why it is effective or not.'*

A delay in one group receiving their background paper due to a change in staff circumstances, so that the group could not draw on the research evidence early in their planning, may account for some less favourable responses on the value of that input, including the response from one participant that *'more useful for us as practitioners has been the comments from colleagues'*. More specific evidence on good practice in cities would have been valued, or to have had more time to discuss the evidence presented. One participant had hoped that there would be opportunities for research to be conducted on the projects that the cities were undertaking, which the budget did not cover, and was therefore disappointed. For the research staff concerned there was a challenge in providing evidence across a broad topic, from literature in many countries, and which could not always provide the rigorous evidence on the outcomes of adopting different approaches which the city participants would have found most helpful.

## **6. Format for learning exchange**

Participants were asked for their views on the working group meetings as a means of learning exchange: such as the number of meetings (three); format (two half days spread over two days) and inclusion of sessions with local NGOs. They were asked to comment on using updates on progress as the vehicle for securing feedback, on whether they learnt from each other, and whether the facilitation by the research coordinators had contributed to that process.

Responses were very positive on the format of the meetings: that they were private rather than public events; their timing over two days; that they were well prepared and structured; that there was space to exchange ideas and sufficient time for a small group to do so; and the facilitation by the research coordinator was appreciated. While some would have preferred meetings over two full days, others suggested in practice that the length made it easier to participate.

*'Good timings, space and structure to support project development and delivery. Well-structured sessions with good chairing and good discipline kept us focused and accelerated progress. Group dynamics have been very positive and productive, in large part down to the way the tone and way of working has been set as well as simply being a lovely group of people!'*

The reporting on progress framework for meetings was generally welcomed. A *'more participative framework'* could nevertheless, one participant felt, have been more effective and inspiring than just listening to each city report and asking questions'. That raises the question whether a different approach, perhaps working in pairs or small groups, might have been more feasible had all cities been working on the same action plan.

Sessions to which NGOs had been asked to contribute and visits to NGO services had been valuable, if raising the question how much time should be allocated to that relative to focused discussion on city plans, given the tight timetable of each meeting: *'it is a difficult balance as a group identity is in formation but participants still want inputs and observations from externals with relevant expertise and experience'*. One participant had gained most from the site visits. Invited speakers could have been an additional source of expertise, but would have required additional funds.

There was strong affirmation that cities did *'learn from each other and got new ideas to take forward'*.



*'I think people could underestimate just how useful it is to have some time in your work-life to think outside of the box, to refuel with ideas that can then lead to better outcomes in your own work – it was very helpful'.*

In some cases the learning was directly related to the action plan. One city in the education group, for instance, adopted an approach used by another city in the group. Some learning was less direct. One city was inspired by another to put writing a city history of migration on their agenda. The pictures on the wall of a neighbourhood community centre in which a group meeting was held inspired another to use the same idea in their own neighbourhood plan.

While the primary aim was learning exchange to support reforms in city practices, there was also learning for the researchers, benefitting from the knowledge and insights the project provided. However, the absence of a research element in the project to learn more from the work cities were doing felt like a missed opportunity, given the potential access the project provided. Developing research proposals that reflect the agendas that have emerged from the project remains a possibility to be explored.

## **7. Communication between meetings**

Participants were asked to comment on communication between meetings, with the research coordinators and between cities; on the level of information required of them between meetings and the conference-call method of sharing information and feedback. The latter had proved difficult, municipalities not having access to the software that would have allowed a webinar, a conference call without visual contact being less satisfactory and in some cases the sound quality poor. For non-native English speakers it could also be difficult to follow the conversation. If the cities had better conference call facilities regular catch ups would have helped to share ideas verbally and keep a focus on progress (raising the question whether use of home computers and soft-ware might have made it possible to overcome these IT limitations).

The Ning online forum had not been well used, *'Online forums doesn't work at all in this kind of project. A mailing list and a dropbox/drive are the best way to share information'*. Exchanging documents in Ning had been found to be more complicated than a simple attachment to an email in the normal way.

One-to-one skype and phone calls with the COMPAS coordinator had worked well, and the requirement to provide regular reports on progress, but lack of communication between cities was missed.

*'Probably the most challenging part has been attempts to get virtual communication between meetings; technology thwarted these and I found the conference calls difficult to manage and frustrating. Periodic updates on progress has been good to keep us on track!'*

It was widely felt as a result that neither the level nor quality of communication between meetings had been sufficient. While technology was responsible in part, more proactive encouragement by research coordinators and cities themselves could have led to more even communication and shared learning across the year.

## 8. Logistics

Participants were asked to comment on the venue, meals, organisation of meetings and on the obligations of the city when hosting a meeting. Responses were positive on all counts, the smooth organisation of the meetings and the scope for sharing ideas over an evening dinner, particularly appreciated. A host city organising each meeting was affirmed as a good idea and not too onerous in practice.

## 9. Outcomes

The outcomes of the work of each city and common themes running through their work are to be found in their separate [reports](#). Here we consider the narrower question of outcomes of the working group model itself. There was, first, an unexpected outcome: that participation in 'a European project' would in itself provide for some cities a degree of internal leverage within their administration that secured access to additional resources; political support for their initiative; access to, and the attention of, elected representatives and senior management colleagues to the initiative which would not otherwise have been secured; and capacity to bring around the table colleagues from other agencies or departments. This was particularly the case, but not exclusively, for those cities which hosted a meeting of their working group, providing an opportunity to invite a Mayor or council leader to participate in part of the meeting, or to arrange a visit to a facility where colleagues from other agencies or departments could be invited to engage. In one case, significant resources were secured from the city administration for a conference to share the learning from the group to practitioners nationwide.

Secondly, new or stronger relationships were forged between each city administration and civil society groups providing services to migrants or in other ways contributing to the agendas on which the working groups were engaged. In some cases those relationships were already forged and the project led to engagement with non-traditional allies less than had been hoped, but in other cases the project provided the catalyst to forge new links.

## 10. Conclusion

It is evident that there were some significant strengths and also limitations in the model, and in the way it was carried out. The size and composition of the groups facilitated considerable shared learning; the combination of learning from academic evidence and city practice, in an environment of analytical rigour, was of the greatest value. Going beyond sharing information and ideas, the project provided a structured framework for reform and facilitated that process. The leverage which participation in the project provided to secure resources and cooperation was an unanticipated bonus. Requiring sign-up at the most senior level to the city's participation ensured continuing support for the staff concerned. The importance of being able to work together as a group to support delivery over a longer timescale (two years rather than, in practice, ten months), with a more effective means to communicate collectively between meetings, are two key lessons learnt. Focusing on a specific issue on which all participants are working in some form, if not too narrow, is likely to facilitate greater shared learning than multiple topics under one broad heading. A local stakeholder group to which the participant reported back would, with hindsight, have been a valuable requirement of participants, ensuring momentum during and after the project, whether an established group or appointed for that purpose.

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating: the outcomes of the city's action plans. Those will be reported over the next twelve months. More difficult to capture are the incidental learnings, which may or may not shape future action; and the impact on the way participants think and feel

about their work. Asked for final comment on the value of the project, a common sentiment was motivation in the context of difficult policy debates and funding constraints. This initiative *'motivates me and my colleagues to go on'*, as one participant put it; another that the project had *'activated some issues in good time before it is too late.'* The significance of those outcomes is too ephemeral to capture in any assessment exercise but may prove to be no less real.

