

Unleashing the talent and potential of next generation migrant leaders

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the multifaceted problems of adversity, exclusion, and stigma that migrants and refugees face around the world. Their already vulnerable position in host countries has deteriorated, leaving most of them in unsustainable situations or alarming circumstances. Regional and country-level policies and responses to the current crisis need to include the voice of these communities to adequately address major problems, and to ensure that sustainable actions are taken that allow us to (re)build more just and equitable societies. Next generation migrant leaders are stepping up to the difficult task at hand and are an important part of the solution. It's crucial that we acknowledge their talent and potential, and support their efforts to create meaningful impact: going beyond a crisis response and towards more resilient societies.

Societies under a magnifying glass

Crises magnify the strengths and weaknesses in our societies' systems and institutions. From research and practice we know that migration can become an opportunity rather than a threat to host countries. This depends on our societies' ability to truly include people and build on their potential.

¹Naimi, A., Hehenberger, L., Clewett, K. (2020) Humans at the center: How social entrepreneurs with a migrant background are making a difference (forthcoming).

²<https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/refugees-refugees-refugee-leadership-during-COVID-19-and-beyond>

³See reference 1

However, up until now, there has been a gap between the realities on a grassroots level, and the discussions and solutions developed at a policy and decision-making level which often do not fully account for the complexity of the situation.¹ Most of the solutions that are implemented to deal with the current pandemic are no exception and therefore do not adequately protect these vulnerable communities.²

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From research and practice, we also know that there are changemakers from these communities, who are already doing invaluable work to tackle the adversity, exclusion, and stigma that impede the full participation of migrants and refugees in host countries. Their solutions are often more effective and human, because of their experience with and knowledge about migration. Changemakers with a migrant background - migrants themselves and their descendants - have an interconnected view that makes them particularly well equipped to deal with grand challenges that span borders. In addition, they have proven their ability to access resources in difficult circumstances through perseverance and adaptability.³ Their solutions to deal with the current pandemic are also no exception.

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Necessity is the mother of invention

Despite difficult circumstances, next generation migrant leaders are emerging and providing solutions to deal with the ramifications of the current crisis in underserved communities. For example, refugee-led initiatives around

the world have stepped up to produce face-masks for their communities and to provide information about the virus in various languages. In a matter of weeks, changemakers with a migrant background adapted and distributed their online educational tools for children negatively affected by the pandemic. Former refugees, who have a deep understanding of the meaning of a crisis to people's personal lives, successfully mobilized volunteers to support a broader group of vulnerable people in their host countries (e.g. elderly, homeless) to provide medicine, groceries, and daily conversations to tackle loneliness. In these responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the civic engagement of young people with a migrant background has especially stood out and they have become important allies to large humanitarian organisations.⁴ These examples are only the tip of the iceberg of next generation migrant leaders who are creating social impact in host and home countries around the world.⁵

Opportunity for change

Amidst this unprecedented global crisis, there is an opportunity for meaningful change. On one hand, creative and rapid solutions that are emerging at a grassroots level need to be supported and scaled. Large institutional actors, such as governments, businesses, and NGOs, can provide access to resources, networks, and visibility to make this happen. On the other hand, changemakers from migrant and refugee communities need to get a seat at the table at a policy and decision-making level.

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Large institutional actors can include the voice of these vulnerable communities by pushing for diversity within their own organisation as well as through their external collaborations. Finally, we need to adopt solutions that empower and unleash the untapped potential of young

people with a migrant background, because they will make the difference we need to move forward. Only together, we can ensure that sustainable actions are taken that allow us to (re)build more just and equitable societies.

It's time for solidarity, now and beyond this crisis.

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⁴ <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/COVID-19-support-refugee-migrant-children-italy/>

⁵ <https://www.hello-europe.eu/changemakers-for-migration>