



Participatory approaches to integration policy-making: Making the case for co-design

COMMENTARY

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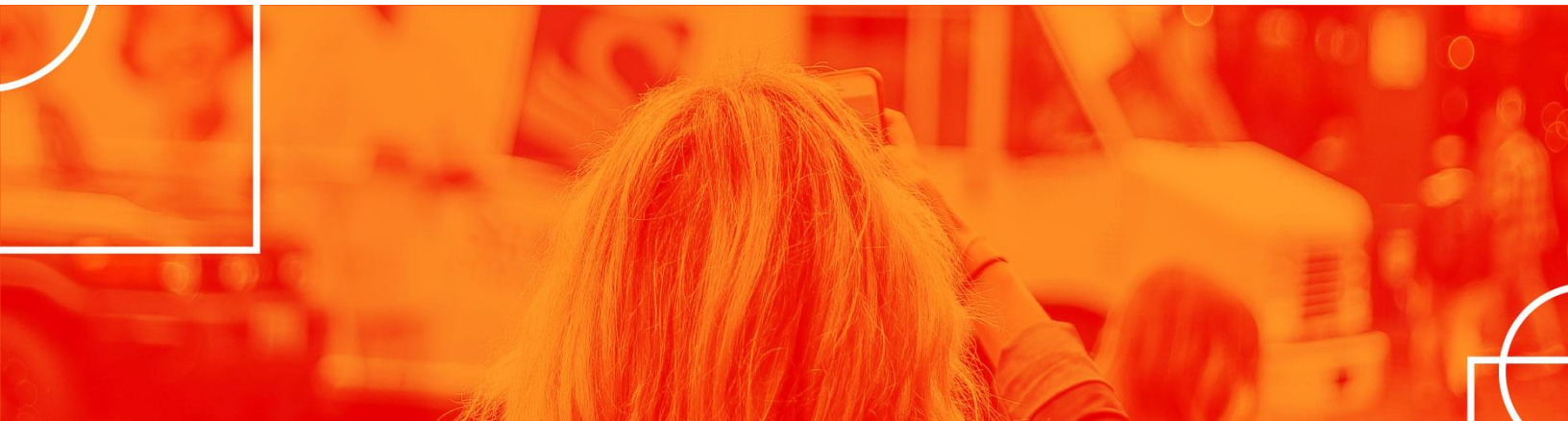


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SPRING is a EU-funded project focusing on the integration of recently arrived migrants in the context of the large-scale arrivals of refugees and other migrants since 2014. It aims to develop a toolbox to improve the innovation, effectiveness and sustainability of the work done by Europe’s integration stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The project mobilises significant research, networks and communications capacity and gathers, summarises and shares the best available research and evidence on the effectiveness, innovation, transferability, sustainability and evaluation methods for integration policies and practice.

The SPRING Platform integrationpractices.eu is the main hub to make the project results available to practitioners as well as to the general public.



Since the large-scale inflows of migrants and refugees in 2015/16, integration has remained high on the European policy agenda, with existing initiatives scaled up and new initiatives put in place, alongside further mainstreaming of integration into standard social services. Designing effective and efficient integration policy necessitates several key types of knowledge – on the needs on the ground, obstacles to implementing integration policies, and possible solutions.

In this context, integration practitioners are well positioned to provide valuable insight based on their experiences – particularly in quickly evolving situations. Yet, although integration stakeholders are best aware of the local needs in a highly dynamic situation, they are rarely systematically involved in integration policy-making processes. Participatory approaches can contribute to closing this gap and lead to improved integration outcomes.

Participatory approaches can bring together the experiences of a highly diverse stakeholder base in the integration sphere – including practitioners, migrants and host communities, while harnessing the knowledge of these stakeholder groups, enhancing their ownership in the process and feeding into the policy cycle or research project design. This commentary focuses on **the co-design methodology** and shares insights from the co-design trajectories undertaken as part of the [SPRING project](#) on sustainable practices of integration.

Who are the stakeholders in the European integration landscape?

A wide [range of stakeholders](#) are involved in the integration landscape as “migrant integration cuts across policy areas, ranging from housing to the labour market, and involves multiple levels of governance, from local to international”. This already **highly diverse integration stakeholder base** has further diversified in the wake of large-scale arrival to the EU of migrants and refugees: In response to the 2015/16 large-scale inflows of migrants and refugees, for example, a [range of actors](#) entered the integration landscape – or fostered existing roles, including voluntary initiatives,

employers, chambers of commerce, trade unions and universities. More recently, a **plethora of new integration stakeholders** has emerged, particularly in Eastern European countries, which despite limited integration experience are hosting high numbers of people from Ukraine.

One specific group of stakeholders are migrant- or refugee-led organisations, which bring together both the lived experiences of migrants and first-hand knowledge based on their daily integration work. A [mapping carried out by EWSI in 2021](#) showed that the **representation of migrant-led organisations at EU or international level is relatively low**, as only one quarter of the most active migrant-led organisations is a member of an umbrella organisation.¹ And, indeed, the perspectives of migrants and migrant-led organisations represent a relatively untapped source of guidance and insights based on experiences lived by members of these groups.

The [EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#) acknowledges that “[i]ncluding migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background as well as promoting their active participation in consultative and decision-making processes can help empower them and ensure that integration and inclusion policies are more effective and reflect real needs.” An [Expert Group on the views of migrants](#) has been set up and EU Member States are encouraged to involve migrant-led organisations in all stages of the integration policy cycle in pursuit of the stated policy aim.

What is co-design and why do we need it?

Co-design is a participatory approach that [refers](#) to “a design-led process, involving creative and participatory principles and tools to engage different kinds of people and knowledge in public problem-solving”. This means that co-design is **based on principles of design**, which includes, for example, iteration, creativity and a focus on innovation. The concept of co-design is [rooted in the democratic idea](#) that the people affected by design decisions should be involved in making those decisions, and acknowledges the importance of *lived* experiences as a form of expertise.

A co-design trajectory should **bring together different forms of expertise** to find solutions to the problems identified. Co-design as a process contains several steps, strategies, and a variety of tools to support them. The choice for a particular tool is based on the objective that the tool must accomplish. In the case of the SPRING project, the objective was to first identify the issues surrounding integration, before co-designing solutions in collaboration with practitioners engaged directly in this landscape.

How was the methodology used in the SPRING co-design trajectories?

The SPRING co-design trajectories **brought together 24 practitioners from across Europe**, sorted into four groups. The online sessions were hosted on the video platform ‘BUTTER’, while the interactive whiteboard ‘MIRO’ was used to support the workshops. The co-design trajectory consisted of two distinct phases. The first phase identified barriers to integration, while the second phase aimed at formulating solutions to the identified problems.

However, due to the complexity and interconnectedness of the barriers to integration, it proved impossible to identify *the* main problem encountered by integration practitioners. Therefore, based on these insights, rather than looking for *a* solution to *the* problem, *ideal situations* were identified, along with *pathways of interventions* that lead to achieving them.

What do SPRING co-design trajectories identify as the main barriers to integration?

The first co-design-trajectory showed that **integration challenges are highly interconnected and often rooted in societal problems**, including discrimination and non-inclusive sentiment. Communicated through the media, such sentiment impacts both policy decisions and the level of organisational capacity made available to implement these policy decisions. Practitioners from different parts of Europe (and beyond) recognise similar dynamics in addressing integration challenges. Ultimately, **the three main barriers to integration identified** by the practitioners were: Discrimination, Policy and Organisational (In)Capacity.

What can we learn from the ideal situations identified and the pathways?

The second part of the SPRING co-design process showed that there are no simple answers, and that complex problems require complex solutions. This reality is best captured in **the concept of “pathway”**, which provides a better understanding of the long-term process and steps needed to address a given situation. As part of this process, **it is essential to involve practitioners in the design of funding schemes**, taking their needs into account and empowering them to work *actively* instead of passively. Furthermore, all co-design trajectories highlighted **the importance of de-problematising migration** by looking at migrants as “citizens to come”.

These insights are based on the **detailed pathways drawn up** to induce the ideal situations identified by participating practitioners. The [SPRING platform](#) features visualisations of the

pathways to ideal integration situations, as well as in-depth descriptions of these pathways and the process of their identification, available in the full research report “*Working together towards solutions to commonly identified barriers to integration*”.

Will co-design improve integration outcomes?

Co-design trajectories are a valuable methodology helping to underpin important – and highly necessary – discussion on integration issues. They thus hold **particular value in the current, fragmented integration sphere**. While the co-design trajectories carried out in the framework of the SPRING project focused on integration practitioners, a strong argument can be made for also including other actors in the co-design of integration policies, such as migrants and host communities. Expanding the co-design reach in terms of scope, but also time, could yield incredibly strong results.

This commentary is based on the SPRING Research report “Working together towards solutions to commonly identified barriers to integration”.