

Crossing Borders: Migration and Citizenship Education

Based on my contribution to the NECE meeting in Zagreb 10-12 November 2016

by Noha El-Mikawy, Ph.D., Regional Representative/Regional Director Middle East and North Africa in the Ford Foundation

An estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011. The majority have sought refuge in neighboring countries including around 4.8 million in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, while hundreds of thousands have requested asylum in Europe. Germany with more than 300,000 applications and Sweden with 100,000, are EU's top receiving countries.

How should we understand the challenges of migration today? Sixty million refugees and labor migrants worldwide are voting with their feet to shame local, national, regional and global policies of economic, social, cultural and political inequality and also to offer innovative solutions that should inspire inclusion. In the last two years, migration has been the sub-story of several populist campaigns in Europe and the USA after it became in 2015 the main concern of Europeans, replacing the economic situation and unemployment, according to the Migration Policy Centre (Italy).

Migration is a global phenomenon, not new, but newly challenging as much as it can be inspiring humanity. The following thoughts summarize how it could be both a challenge and an inspiration and how it is all about our perspective and the narratives we build.

Geographic and Economic Border Crossing

Migration is most known as the crossing of borders. But it is also the transformation of assets. When we move, we leave behind both our home location but some of our assets. We don't leave behind our past; it is packed with us in one of our bags. And we don't leave behind our dreams for a better future, though often a displaced person finds it hard to dream.

Families leave their home, their shop or agricultural plot behind and with it physical assets that define their stature in society. The young lose the comfort of the known neighborhood and may also leave school and hence their only asset, their passage way to decent adulthood.

People cross the border and are immediately considered “refugees”. They look themselves in the mirror and they no longer see the educator, engineer, doctor, etc., that they used to be; they see a refugee. What does this really mean and is it an easy thing to get used to? As an educator, engineer, doctor, etc. they may be able to map out a future. But how would one do that by looking in the mirror and seeing a refugee?

It is hard to talk about skills and assets in the absence of citizenship rights. It is not possible to engage in economic and civic life when one is at threat of arrest and criminalization. The issue here is lack of residency permits due to high fees and arduous requirements and procedures and then the criminalization of refugees who do not have residency permits in the host country. Non-registration of newly born babies leads to further exclusion from public life and marginalization of a whole new generation, putting them at further risk of militarization and/or deportation. Without them choosing, refugees experience crossing borders as negative asset transformation and at the core here are arduous permit procedures and the looming threat of marginalization, criminalization and radicalization. There are currently efforts by UNHCR and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to waive the residency fees and to reduce the requirements and procedures for Syrian refugees.

Crossing the Borders of Identity and Values

Furthermore, when we move, we cross a virtual social and cultural border. This crossing has made us cognizant of the divide between liberal values of inclusion and nationalist populist sentiments, a divide that has been leading in many societies to polarization between the “us” and “them”, to a vicious contest between stability/security driven by fear and an open future based on a belief that all human beings are equal.

The responsibility here is ours, civic educators, to sort out this divide between nationalism and universal values. We recognize that massive migration is threatening to service provision, especially in countries with weak economies, and that that is in many instances

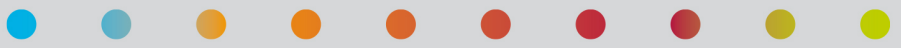
used to provoke national sentiments. It is the responsibility of civic educators to define universal values that revolve around the right of every human being to dignity while respecting national values in host communities. It is our responsibility as civic educators to reach out without over-reaching, arrogance or insensitivity to context. Messaging the value of dignity for all, we are tasked with the responsibility of explaining how nationalist populism is driven by deep structural economic and political inequalities, be that in Europe, the USA or elsewhere in the world. Civic education should work hard to uncover and dispel false narratives that shove inequality under the rug and use migration to ignite nationalist sentiments.

How to get over the machinery of misconception, if not outright lies? As Philippe Fargues, director of the migration policy centre, has said “Migration is a reality of all times and all places. It represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While well-managed migration may foster progress and welfare at origin and destination, its mismanagement may put social cohesion, security and sovereignty at risk.” Well managed migration is a matter of sound policy-making and balanced societal mindset about migration. Both require knowledge based, as opposed to emotional or lie-based, discourse.

Migration is a Chance for Celebrating Constructive Creativity, Not Lies

Dispelling falsehood is a prerequisite. One prevalent falsehood is that refugees and migrants take jobs away from host community citizens. How true is that? According to research from the American University in Beirut and from FAO Lebanon, Syrian men in Lebanon in the working age range of 15-64 amount to 220,000, which is half the number that used to exist in Lebanon before the Lebanese civil war. More than 70% of Syrians in Lebanon today are women and children who are not competing for jobs with Lebanese. We need to get the facts right and out for the public in order to challenge the myths against refugees.

Dispelling myths is also the task of creative and artistic expression. Civic educators may have to strengthen that aspect in their work. According to Oussama Rifaei, former director of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (based in Beirut, Lebanon), “through Arts and Culture we have to force a critical re-examination of individuals and societies’ disposition to empathy,



solidarity, hospitality, generosity and tolerance. Through the universal language of culture, radicalization, intolerance and fear can be addressed in a profound and concerted effort to allow us to rally global citizens to responsible and constructive action.”

Art education is a means of fostering in migrants skills that enable them to regain a sense of individual dignity, a sense of wanting to re-engage in a community, and feel empowered to imagine solutions for their realities. The work of *Action for Hope* with Syrian refugees in Lebanon is exploring ways by which civic education efforts engage with the arts not just as a tool, but as a mind set: the idea being that you can convey the essence of civic education without even using the words through the nuanced subtlety of artistic creation. When a young man who has escaped bombing and military recruitment in Syria ends up being a community leader in a refugee camp in Lebanon because he experienced theater through an art education program in that camp and sensed the power of the arts in releasing his individuality and creativity—that’s a civic education process, through an art education one.

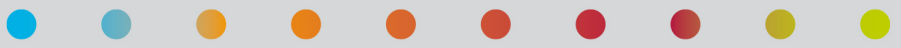
The current approach to civic engagement for refugees in Europe is so focused on “integration” and “assimilation” – and is measured by the refugees “success” in entering “the system” - the complicated, well established, “sophisticated”, “unquestionable” European system. Artistic creativity is a space where the refugee can dare question the system, express his/her feelings towards it, bring in his past experience to inform the future of this system. It’s a space where “assimilation” is a mutual process, on the side of the refugee as well as on the side of the host community.

Physical Art spaces that are engaging in showcasing work about or by refugee communities are potentially safe meeting spaces for debating polarized views on migration. They are spaces where the “refugee” can for once take off the “refugee” hat and regain his/her dignity as an artist, and by doing so remind that the refugee, whether an artist, a doctor, or a construction worker, is an individual human being, with a past, a present and a future.

Crossing Borders of Governance & Rights

When we move, we cross administrative borders, and as the numbers increase, people and their needs challenge social service provision in strained local and national institutions. To quote a Lebanese urbanist, Mona Fawaz: “The neighborhood can’t be the solution alone. We





need to learn from the resilience of these communities and apply it to other neighborhoods. And we have to be ready to say at some point that the capacity of a neighborhood has been reached.”

Tensions that arise due to the mobility of people should make us pay more attention to governance at the municipal level. Good city councils can play a critical role in connecting migrants and refugees to services, creating safer, more inclusive communities. But those city councils need to have better capacity, powers, and accountability. Bad city councils that are not held accountable can actively violate rights by imposing ad hoc fees, curfews and other restrictions on mobility, housing and livelihoods. A neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon provides example: Increase in the numbers of Syrian refugees was very sudden and large, in the range of 30-40%, and created a burden on services (garbage increased from 120,000 to 170,000 tons per day) and rents rose from \$200/month to \$300-400/month, leading multiple families to reside in the same room, gender based violence against Syrian women and children, and security challenges as victims sometimes found themselves living on the same street or the same building as their victimizers, while police would not intervene. However, under Lebanese law the city isn't authorized to buy more trucks to pick up the additional garbage, it has no arrest powers to deal with security, no powers to regulate the number of people living in a housing unit or the quality of the housing, and the newcomers don't contribute to the tax base so the city isn't recouping any of the new costs. An emphasis on interventions that are needs-based to avoid privileging certain populations in situations where everyone is suffering was named as the only way to go.

There is a need to learn from people's coping mechanisms. There are, for example, two solidarity networks for refugees in Lebanon. One is an ad hoc transnational network for raising funds for health care for Syrian refugees (which is not covered by hospitals or UNHCR) that circulates via Whatsapp photos of the medical report, the needed intervention, and the paid bill after the treatment takes place. Civic educators should address these tangible issues, present innovative solutions and use classroom and other settings for discussions to encourage empathy and problem solving creativity.

Another is advocating joint livelihood opportunities as good models for civic engagement.



The women cooperatives in Lebanon and Jordan are an interesting model for Syrian/Lebanese and Syrian/Jordanian interaction and joint learning. Talking to both the Lebanese and Syrian women in Akkar, they all confirmed that this interaction has been very enriching and helped break the barrier and misconceptions about each other. For young Syrian girls, who do not have access to education in the informal settlements where they live, this engagement in cooperatives and life skills programs was not only important for their livelihoods but is seen as 'breathing space' for self-esteem.

Conclusion

Migration is part and parcel of human history, not a temporary crisis of the present age. It can be a challenge and it can be an opportunity. Civic educators should not be blind to what others see in it as a challenge; they should address those challenges, dispelling myths in the process. Civic educators should also transform their space, classroom or otherwise, into spaces for creativity, problem solving and inclusion with dignity for all as the overarching motto.

Never before has the responsibility of civic educators been greater than now.