



Fostering Social Inclusion of People in Situations of Vulnerability: Experiences from the Italian and Portuguese Contexts

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Abstract

This chapter builds upon the findings of two multiplier events carried out in Italy and Portugal. They involved education professionals such as teachers, educators and other experts working with adults in situations of vulnerability (migrants, refugees and people at risk of poverty or social exclusion). The goal of the chapter is to analyse challenges and obstacles for professionals in promoting social inclusion for the selected target groups and to present best practices with a focus on digital technologies. The last section explores teachers' and professionals' training needs and the supporting actions for their continuing professional development at a local and national level.

Keywords

Social inclusion · People in situations of vulnerability · Italy · Portugal · Immigrants · Digital inclusion · Educational inclusion · LIDA

According to UN DESA [1] training toolkit, there are many challenges concerning the definition of vulnerability. It is not a universal, static, or even homogenous concept. Identifying people in situations of vulnerability is of prime importance when the goal is to avoid their further marginalization and exclusion. An important way to do this is through the mediation of the professionals who work with them. They are in a privileged position to listen and to answer their voices, needs, and demands. In this way, the professionals play a key role in promoting at least three of the sustainable development goals: to end poverty in all its forms, to combat inequalities or work to reduce them and to build peace, justice and strong institutions.

People in situations of vulnerability are those within our societies who are exposed to a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population. They are more likely to experience unemployment and low education which, subsequently, contributes to their further exclusion from society. Poverty seems to be a fertile ground not only for the accumulation, but

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also for the intergenerational transmission of adverse circumstances [2]. The economic income of the family is the most powerful indicator of socio-economic status. Scarcity of resources, malnutrition, health problems, and lack of access to medical care are some of the indicators of poverty that are systematically associated with inadequate family planning, unemployment, precarious employment, and/or low income [3–5].

Material deprivation may be what defines poverty, but poverty has repercussions on the human being as a whole, namely on their sociability (e.g. neighbourhood, friends), the symbolic system (e.g., memories and most important life events), and on personal development and fulfilment [6]. People in situations of vulnerability or marginalisation include but are not limited to lower social classes, older and younger people, people with disabilities, or migrants and ethnic minorities.

International migration, and the subsequent social inclusion of migrants, have become one of the major issues for Europe and the world over the last decades. In the European Union, people with a migrant background are more likely to face discrimination and barriers in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and housing, compared to European citizens, who were born and reside in the EU. Statistics show, for instance, that among the adults aged 25–64 with a low level of educational attainment, 38.5% were born outside the EU (compared to the 19.6% of their European-born counterparts). Similarly, the same percentages are recorded at risk of poverty and social exclusion among the two groups (Eurostat 2019).

Despite the different guidelines or actions carried out in the last years, the European path for inclusion still has to tackle several challenges in order to foster social cohesion and build inclusive societies and cultures within the EU.

In November 2020, the European Union (EU) presented the new *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion* for the period 2021–2027. The plan builds upon the 2016 document (*Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals*), which was aimed to support member States in strengthening their integration policies. The Action Plan for 2021–2027 broadened its target of action

which is now related to third-country nationals and to EU citizens with migrant background and expanded measures of supporting adopted by the Commission in the previous document [7].

The Action Plan for the period 2021–2027 acknowledges the key role that social inclusion plays in the well-being of the society and in the economic growth of the European Union and highlights how the integration and inclusion of immigrants is a two-way process, requiring the efforts of both migrants and EU citizens with migrant backgrounds and the host society. This is in line with other three major international documents: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [8], the Global compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) [9], and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) [10], which recognize the potential of migration to promote development in both sending and receiving societies.

The actions implemented by the EU follow a “multi-stakeholder” approach that involves all relevant stakeholders, namely national authorities but also local and regional authorities. It is therefore a “whole society approach” towards social inclusion, including migrants, local communities, civil society, and all levels of government [7].

The main actions envisaged in the Action Plan 2021–2027 are related to the support of inclusive education and training from early childhood to higher education; to the improvement of employment opportunities and entrepreneurship, with specific attention to the access of women in the labour market; promotion of the access to health services and the awareness of health rights (especially for women), and also access to adequate and affordable housing.

The LIDA project—*Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age* (Ref. 2021–1-NO01-KA204–076518)—is aligned with the guidelines and actions promoted by the European Union on social inclusion; especially with respect to the synergy between local authorities, schools, and people in situations of vulnerability and most notably migrants. One of the focus points in this project has been is the development of formal and informal educational paths to foster social inclusion in the consortium’s countries, in particular through

the use of digital technologies, which became even more important with the covid19 pandemic.

This chapter presents the findings of Multiplier Events (MEs) carried out in two consortium partner countries (Italy and Portugal) involving professionals of education and of enterprise sectors such as teachers, educators, and other experts working with adults in situations of vulnerability (migrants, refugees and people at risk of poverty or social exclusion) i.e. leve l2 in the triangle introduced in the opening chapters. The chapter is therefore focused on the professionals' perspective concerning the challenges regarding working to foster the social inclusion of people in situations of vulnerability in two Southern European countries. Professionals were invited to participate in two focus groups, one in each country, where they shared positive practices, obstacles, and overall personal experiences that guided their learning processes.

We begin with a brief background introduction regarding information and policies on social inclusion in both countries. This is followed by an overview of the organisation and structure of the MEs and a presentation and analysis of the most relevant findings. The final section highlights the main conclusions of both MEs, and identifies some implications for social inclusion in Italy and Portugal.

1 Background: National Contexts for Social Inclusion

This section briefly presents the background contexts of the two countries where the MEs took place, and highlights the main features of the core topics addressed in the focus groups at the national level. First the issue of Portuguese and Italian emigration and immigration will be addressed. Second, some data regarding social, educational, and digital inclusion in both countries will be presented, with a specific focus on the consequences of the Covid-19 disruption. Finally, the main results of both ME's are presented and discussed. While the ME in Portugal addressed primarily the issue of social inclusion via poverty eradication, the one in Italy was mainly focused on the inclusion of migrants into

formal and non-formal learning contexts, such as schools and organisations that deal with extra-curricular activities for teenagers.

2 Immigration and Emigration

2.1 Portugal

Portugal is, traditionally, a country of emigration of people with low levels of education or skills who seek an opportunity to escape poverty and unemployment. This portrait of the emigrants has been changing over the last decade. In 2019, Portugal was listed in the top 20 countries of emigration with a rate of 20%. In many cases, though, the profile of these migrants was quite different: young educated, and skilled workers who seek to have better career conditions and wages, mostly in France, and Switzerland. Immigration trends have also changed over time. In the 1970s, after the democratic revolution, Portugal began to receive high inflows of migrants from the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, mostly former colonies, Cape Verde, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Mozambique. From the 1990s onwards, influxes of labour migrants came from Brazil and the Eastern European countries, namely Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, and Romania. Asylum seekers represent only 1% of total migrants and they are generally escaping from civil wars and humanitarian crises. These forced migrants face high application rejection rates and overcrowded reception facilities.

Most recent data from the Observatory for Migration in Portugal, showed that in 2019 Portugal exceeded half a million foreigners residing in the country, specifically 590,348 people, rising to 662,095 foreigners in 2020 when residence permits in the country are included. These represent unprecedented figures in Portugal. Regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of this population, they are mainly concentrated in the urban areas along the country coast. In 2019, women represented 49.8% of the foreign population, and 49.2% in 2020, reversing the trend of feminization of immigration seen since the beginning of the decade. The structure of ten most representa-

tive foreign nationalities in Portugal also underwent some changes, namely associated with the increase in nationals from European countries (such as Italy, France, and the United Kingdom - pre-Brexit), and from Asia (e.g. India), and the decrease in some nationalities from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries) and from Eastern Europe. The age distribution of the last decades is stable with the foreign resident population tending to be younger than the Portuguese population [11].

2.2 Italy

Italy is the main Mediterranean country where migrants try to reach Europe: from 1 January to 10 November 2021, 57,000 people landed in Italy, 86% more than in the same period in 2020. In addition, 4723 Afghan asylum seekers arrived in Italy in 2021. The Mediterranean represents the core not only of the Italian but also of European migration. It represents one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. According to IOM data (International Organisation of Migration, 2020), between 1 January and 15 November 2021, out of the 1567 people found dead or missing in the Mediterranean, 1226 died along this central Mediterranean route.¹ In addition to the issue of landings and deaths at sea, the debate on migration in Italy has also focused on international agreements, in particular with Turkey and Libya, that are considered quite controversial, particularly due to the in sustainability of the Libyan situation characterized by the trafficking and exploitation of migrants. On first January 2022, foreigners living permanently in Italy was estimated by ISMU (Iniziativa e Studi sulla Multiethnicità—Multiethnicity Initiatives and Studies) to be 5,576,000; 519,000 of them are irregular immigrants [12].

¹ IOM, Missing migrants project, database available at https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?region_incident=All&route=3861&year%5B%5D=2500&month=All (last accessed May 18, 2022).

The analysis of the origins of the foreign population on first January 2021 shows that—besides the Romanian Community, which represents the most substantial foreign community in Italy—third-country nationals mostly come from Albania and Morocco (with, respectively, 11.6% and 11.5% of the total number of non-EU residents), followed by immigrants from Ukraine, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh.

3 Integration of Migrants in Portugal and Italy

MIPEX (Migrant Integration Policy Index) measures policies aimed at fostering the integration of migrants in several countries across continents, including all EU Members, such as Portugal and Italy. MIPEX identifies and measures the impact of integration policies across eight major domains: labour market mobility, family reunion, education, health, political participation, permanent residence, access to nationality, and anti-discrimination.

According to the latest edition of MIPEX [13], Portuguese integration policies have been consistently improving over the last years on all dimensions of equal rights, opportunities, and security for both, immigrants, and for Portuguese-born descendants. Portugal is also improving in its weakest domains such as access to health and education. School curriculum on cultural diversity and healthcare access for asylum-seekers are some of the indicators underlined by MIPEX. However, there is still a place for improvements as is highlighted by recommendations drawn from these results. This includes intercultural competencies of professionals and in the access and quality to both, early years and adult education and training. Compared to all other developed countries, Portugal's integration policies in 2019 were above average in almost all areas (except for health). A two-way process seems to be the key to success: national citizens and newcomers generally enjoy equal rights, opportunities, and security, and there is a willingness to accept and interact with each other. In fact, Portugal is ranked in

the MIPEx ‘Top Ten’ integration policies, along with leading Nordics and other traditional migration destination countries, scoring 81 on the MIPEx on the 100-point scale. Portugal specifically leads among the ‘newer’ destination countries, far ahead of other countries including Italy.

In fact, immigrant integration policies in Italy [14] have not improved in recent years. On the contrary, they are declining due to restrictive changes to naturalisation and health policies.

The issue of the suitability of the Italian system for the acquisition of citizenship by immigrants, especially by their descendants, cyclically re-emerges in public discussions. The current system requires that one of the two parents becomes a citizen, or, but only in the case of those born in Italy, that the person has reached the age of adulthood. Otherwise, the ordinary rules for adults are implemented, which set economic requirements, and there are some discretionary powers in the management of the process by the administrative bureaucracy. It is widely acknowledged that this system is now inadequate for a country where immigration plays an increasingly important role because it penalises in particular second-generation immigrants, who will nevertheless to become a significant role in the future of Italy. According to the most recent estimates of the ISMU Foundation, second-generation immigrants in Italy between the ages of 0 and 35 years old now number approximately three million [12].

The law of 1 December 2018, which change the Law Decree n.113, reformed the system of international protection, replacing humanitarian protection with special residence permits or a “temporary integration”. This change also occurred in France or Germany. This approach encourages national citizens to see immigrants as equals but still foreigners, and not as neighbours or potential citizens. It makes a big difference since results suggest that integration policies emerge as one of the strongest factors shaping not only the public’s willingness to accept and interact with immigrants, preventing racial/ethnic and religious discriminati but also immigrants’ own attitudes, sense of belonging,

sense of trust, participation and even health in the host country.

Italy scores 58/100, which is higher than the average MIPEx country (49) and slightly above-average among EU and Western European (EU15)/OECD countries. It is fair to say that immigrants in Italy enjoy more opportunities than obstacles regarding integration, although major obstacles tend to emerge in political participation and access to nationality, impairing long-term security to settle permanently or invest in their own integration. It is important to provide further supporting to immigrants’ labour market integration, both those who still need training and those who have high skills and expertise and struggle to find jobs matching their skills and expectations. Also, early school leaving has to be prevented, supporting students and their families and enhancing intercultural competence of teachers, trainers, and other professionals [14].

4 Social, Educational, and Digital Inclusion: Some Challenges and the Impact of Covid 19 Pandemics in Portugal

As stated by European Anti-Poverty Network ([15], p. 5), “it is not possible to talk about poverty without talking about social exclusion. (...) the concept of exclusion is essential to the recognition that people are pushed out, or to the margins, they do not fall by themselves, and that the kind of relationships society establishes is central to the risks of poverty and exclusion.”

According to Eurostat (2021), in 2020, an estimated number of 96.5 million people in the EU (21.9% of the total population) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, corresponding to the sum of persons who are at risk of poverty and/or face severe material and social deprivation and/or live in a household with very low work intensity. Women, young adults, people with a low level of educational attainment, and unemployed persons were, on average, more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020 than other groups within the EU population.

Despite being slightly below the EU average in terms of poverty and social exclusion, Portugal is one of the most unequal countries in Europe, where the wealthy citizens earn an income that is five times higher than other people who are living in poverty. Unemployment is one of the main causes of poverty in Portugal. Nevertheless, to work sometimes is not enough to escape poverty, since 40.6% of poor individuals live in households where people work full time. Portugal is one of the European countries that work the most, although, the hourly wage for workers is extremely low compared to other countries in Europe. Elderly citizens, the most dominant demographic group, and children are more likely to be living in poverty in Portugal [15–17].

Immigrants play a fundamental role in the efficiency and sustainability of the Portuguese labour markets. However, this does not reflect their qualifications. In fact, they tend to continue earning even lower salaries than Portuguese workers and have higher job precariousness and unemployment rates [11]. As in other European countries, resident foreigners in Portugal are at greater risk of poverty and live with greater material deprivation. However, they do not lead to their greater dependence on the country's social protection. Foreigners show greater contributory capacity than nationals to the social security system and they continue to have fewer beneficiaries of social benefits per total contributor number of foreigners, compared to the total number of residents in Portugal [11].

After the 2008 recession, Portugal did not progress well economically compared to the other countries around the world and faced austerity measures that impacted mostly those who were already struggling. The outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated this situation. It led to 400,000 additional impoverished citizens in Portugal and a 9% increase in inequality. The Pandemic increased the risk of poverty from 16.2% to 18.4%, according to the National Statistics Institute (INE), reaching almost two million people and with increases among women, the elderly, and families, especially with children and single parents.

In Portugal, like in most societies, schooling is still a vehicle of social reproduction: disadvantaged children and youth tend to attain lower lev-

els of school achievement and educational levels. In spite of Portugal being considered the country which has most improved in the school performance of immigrant pupils in the last decade (2006–2015), migrant children and youth tend to have poorer academic performances, even when they share a similar socioeconomic background to their national-born counterparts [18]. The pandemic did not find, thus, an educational system free of inequalities. Covid-19 uncovered these inequalities in the families but also in the schools themselves, particularly regarding access and success in the use of digital and information technologies. The use of emergency remote education and the imposition of long periods of confinement changed the conditions and spaces for learning, forcing teachers, learners, and their families to, suddenly, teach and learn online. Nonetheless, to be successful would have required prior knowledge of digital literacy and availability of appropriate resources [19, 20].

The pre-existing inequalities imposed added challenges on children and young people from more disadvantaged family contexts, confined to often-overcrowded accommodation without a quiet space to study, without proper technological equipment or internet connection. Their parents also struggled with the demands of working from home, being laid off and/or putting their health at risk going to their jobs as essential workers, while they were also forced to take over the guidance of the learning process of their children. In the case of immigrant families, the poor knowledge of the Portuguese language, compounded this making it even more difficult [19, 20]. The pandemic deepened the inequalities in education, mostly because of the differences in access to digital resources and adequate support for learning opportunities. Thus, if at the end of the 1990s, in Portugal, the discourse was mostly focused on access to internet: 'info-inclusion'/'info-exclusion' and 'info-alphabetisation', during the first decade of the 2000s, with the integration of ICT in more sectors of public life, from education to health and governance, the active population and students were the target groups. In 2010, digital competences, skills and literary became more and more important. The different paces concerning digital inclusion were made even more obvious with

the pandemics. It made clear the importance of, on the one hand, giving better support to families and to children and young people outside the school, and, on the other, to combat social inequalities [20, 21].

5 Social, Educational, and Digital Inclusion: Some Challenges and the Impact of Covid 19 Pandemics in Italy

The education system has been widely affected by the health emergency caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In addition to the problems arisen in the emergency, the pandemic has revealed chronic weaknesses that characterized the Italian school system for a long time, namely the learning difficulties and inequalities suffered by the most disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs. As it happened in Portugal, in many cases, school closures and distance learning activities in Italy have exacerbated dynamics related to school inequality: the physical and relational distancing and the technological issues (mostly due to the absence of adequate devices and Internet connections) have resulted in a progressive emotional and educational disengagement of many students, causing disadvantages in their learning experience [22]. In this scenario, students with an immigrant background lacked specific training in the activities they needed the most. The practice of the Italian language and the additional training activities on Italian L2 have been reduced or interrupted, the spaces for interaction between Italian speakers and non-Italian speakers, which are crucial for motivating the learning of a second language, have been widely limited.

If we consider that the share of pupils with a migrant background account for 10.3% of the total number of pupils enrolled in Italian schools, from pre-school to upper secondary schools, it is likely that most of them have experienced some form of suspension of their learning for almost 2 years. This is in addition to the difficulties that often characterize the school trajectory of students with a migrant background, i.e.,

lower results than Italians in Italian language and mathematics tests carried out at the national level (especially for first-generation students); the lagging behind in studies (this phenomenon concerns 9% of Italian students and 30% of non-Italian students); the early school dropout and the difficult transition between school, training and work. The data on Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET) and Neither in Employment nor in Education and Training (NEET) showed that the percentages of foreign-born young people in these conditions remain quite high in 2020 and Italy holds the European record with respect to these indicators [12].

To tackle these issues, research at the national level has been focusing on the development of educational methodologies, mostly pertaining to the field of Intercultural Education, specifically devoted to disadvantaged students with a migrant background. In particular, the intercultural strategies envisaged in Italian schools are related to:

- The revision of school curricula, with the introduction of intercultural issues in disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching, and the promotion and comparison of cultures;
- The provision of extra-curricular activities carried out with out of school organisations that work with migrants and deal with intercultural issues;
- The attention to open school and classroom climate and dialogue;
- The involvement of migrant students and especially of their parents in school activities;
- The reflection on the teaching style (decentralisation of points of views, possible cultural and ethnic bias, teaching to prevent stereotypes and prejudice) and contents;
- The adoption of specific strategies and activities for foreign students, including the provision of Italian as a second language courses [23].

However, in spite of a massive body of research and a general interest in this area at the political level, these strategies did not call into question the Italian education system as a whole and intercultural education seems to be just one of a plethora of issues on which schools are left alone,

in finding resources and allocating efforts for its implementation. In the last 20 years, educational institutions, schools for adults and voluntary organisations have developed a host of effective initiatives, which were however limited to the interest and the willingness of the people promoting them. The educational system at the national level still lacks nationwide initiatives and funding to effectively implement intercultural strategies to foster the inclusion of students in situations of vulnerability and their families [24].

6 The Multiplier Events (ME) in Italy and Portugal for Level 2

As detailed in the previous chapter (see Gabriella, Joao and Andrea's chapter), the Multiplier Events were carried out with focus groups, structured according a common set of questions for all the participants to consider. The set of questions were related to the three levels identified in LIDA: (1) governments and intergovernmental organisations; (2) the education sector and public/private enterprises; (3) educators and students belonging to the adults in situations of vulnerability group.

The table below briefly reports the set of questions that were asked during the MEs for Level 2 (Table 1):

The Italian project partner represented by LUMSA University research group conducted three Multiplier Events, one for each level. Given the pandemic emergency, the meetings took place online, via Google meet. The duration of each meeting was approximately 2 h.

The focus group for level 2 as an example of the methodology was carried out on June 9, 2021 and involved five participants (all women):

- P1—the head of the Education Department in Comunità di Sant'Egidio run school in the Trastevere neighbourhood, Rome (the main school of the organisation in the city centre). Approximately 1.800 students (migrants and refugees from 118 different countries) attend this school. The Comunità di Sant'Egidio is a religious international net-

Table 1 Focus group questions

Overall question: How can the education sector and public/private enterprises support learning inclusion and active citizenship?
1. Can you describe some good practices in the training of professionals / use of technology to promote inclusion?
2. What are the main issues/obstacles for teachers/educators in promoting active citizenship and inclusion through technologies?
3. How might educators and associated professionals be prepared for the digital world of work and study, including 1) the support to innovate collaboratively and sharing pedagogic designs to foster learning inclusion and active citizenship; 2) the promotion of accessible lifelong learning opportunities that can be applied equitably across cultures, languages, ages and abilities?
4. What do you think are important to support learning inclusion and citizenship?

work that operates in more than 70 countries to help people in poverty and experiencing situations of marginalization. It has also other schools in Rome and in Italy and they offer courses on Italian language (A1-C2 levels);

- P2—the head of the Intercultural Centre of CEMEA Mezzogiorno, an active communication and inclusion organisation in Rome for teenagers;
- P3—a School Principal of a pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school in Rome;
- P4—the Head of the Education Sector at Centro Astalli in Rome. Centro Astalli is the Italian branch of the Jesuit Refugee Service-JRS.
- P5—the person in charge of the Health Sector at Centro Astalli in Rome.

The three ME in Portugal were also implemented separately by the Portuguese project partner, represented by a research team from the University of Porto. Level 1 and level 2 multiplier events were implemented online, using the zoom platform, because of constraints associated with Covid 19 pandemic. Level 3 ME was implemented in person to avoid possible limitations regarding the participation of people in a more disadvantaged situation. As in LUMSA's MEs, all the events were recorded after informed consent of the participants.

Exemplifying the methodology, the ME for level 2 was implemented on June 18th 2021 and involved two moderators and seven participants, mostly education professionals who work with young and adult population in situations of vulnerability:

- P1—A female coordinator of the Eradicate Poverty Movement.
- P2—A female teacher at Raul Dória Vocational School.
- P3—A male coordinator of the Second Chance School in Valongo.
- P4—A female psychologist at the Integrated Development Association of Matosinhos (ADEIMA).
- P5—A female teacher at ADEIMA.
- P6—A female coordinator of the Qualifying Center of ADEIMA (F).
- P7—A female representative of the Qualifying Center of IEFP—Cerco/Porto (F).

The following paragraphs present the major findings from both MEs and follow the set of questions that were shared among the consortium partners.

7 Main Results of the Italian ME on Level 2

In describing the ways in which inclusion can be promoted through digital technologies, all participants stressed the crucial role that the pandemic of COVID-19 has played in speeding up their use by students and educators. Technology was a relevant means for inclusion during the COVID-19 disruption as it was deemed very useful for teachers to keep in contact and ensure relationships with migrants and refugees, although at a distance. However, students with low language proficiency levels had problems in using digital technologies. These students often opted for the use of WhatsApp instead of PCs for Italian language distance learning classes.

Before the pandemic, the ME participants reported that they had not made use of the technology during their classes—they often used Apps for translation or audio exercises for mobile phones to be activated together with a text book.

Only a very limited number of good practices emerged, since technology is not generally used in the daily practices of schools/organisations working with migrants and refugees. Moreover, people who took part in the ME posed some general doubts about the usefulness of technology for LIDA's target group, which would instead need close contact with people from the host country, within the daily-life contexts they were experiencing. Participants reported that immigrants and refugees should not be left alone in the use of the technology because their low level of ICT proficiency might increase their isolation. On the other hand, technology might be useful as a tool that enables them to meet other people and to communicate (*"I don't think that technology can be used by this target group in isolation. I believe that technology can be a bridge that can foster communication, in order to link together people from different cultures"*—Head of the Education sector, Centro Astalli).

Only the two persons from Centro Astalli provided an example of good practice and how it was carried out by their organisation: the online meetings with refugees and students from a secondary school in Rome. These meetings were aimed at promoting the use of the technology to foster communication and interpersonal relationships between immigrants/refugees and the people of the host country. During these online meetings via zoom, students were made aware of the needs of the refugees and learnt to consider them not only as people in situations of vulnerability. Refugees, on the other hand, had an opportunity to meet and talk with Italian people. The participants from Centro Astalli reported that these meetings had a strong impact on the ways Italian students considered the immigrants and refugees and their perceptions about immigration and inclusion. On the other hand, from the point of view of migrants/refugees, they managed through the meetings to talk and share experiences with Italian young people—and this opportunity made them feel welcomed as they were treated as peers by the Italian students (*"it is important to consider the others not as victims but as people like us, maybe with different experiences but with the same needs and desires"*—person in charge of the health sector, Centro Astalli).

The main obstacle for the promotion of active citizenship and inclusion through technologies, according to the ME participants, is related to low levels of ICT ability and to the lack of laptops and computers at home (and sometimes also in the schools). During the pandemic, participants reported that both immigrant students at school and migrants/refugees who attended Italian as a second language courses and who did not know how to use a PC were difficult to reach and could easily feel completely lost about their learning.

There has been wide debate in Italy about the “right to be connected”, for those people who could not be reached during the pandemic due to lack of PCs/laptops, Internet connection and digital skills. In relation to the lack of internet connection, participants reported a project (*the Linfa project*) carried out by the association *Liberi Nantes*, as best practice in overcoming this challenge. Linfa was an advocacy operation thanks to which, over 200 immigrants in Rome and its province could take advantage of a stable and open broadband internet connection and therefore had access to digital tools for training and remote interpersonal exchanges.²

Another issue for promoting active citizenship and inclusion was raised by two participants who took part in the ME: in schools it is often difficult when it comes to involving immigrant parents of students in school activities or even in just school/class parent meetings. Therefore, according to their opinion, families and parents can represent a strong barrier for inclusion, that prevent younger generations of students with immigrant background who seek to fully participate in society. The need to work both with students and their family was thus strongly recommended (“*it is easier for the young citizens of tomorrow to become adult citizens when the adult parent feels that s/he is welcomed and supported*”—*head and educator of CEMEA Mezzogiorno*).

With regard to the third question of the focus group (the training of educators and other professionals for the digital world to foster learning inclusion and active citizenship), participants provided some useful input:

First of all, they highlighted the need to revise school curricula from a multicultural perspective—for example, revising the way History is taught and learnt, that often includes only a “Western” point of view on historical developments; analysing the proverbs or fairy-tales/stories of different countries in a comparative way in order to not only discover the different cultures, but also to identify the common traits that unify us all as human beings (“*we are all humans and have tried to overcome obstacles in the same way, although in different parts of the globe. This should be the heart of a pedagogy that is aimed at the inclusion*”—*Pre-primary and Primary School Principal*).

According to this perspective, teachers should be trained to recognize cultural biases, to consider the other cultures without the lens of their culture of origin, to create spaces for intercultural education, to understand the needs of migrants and refugees (“*teachers and educators should learn to look at the others’ culture without the filter of one’s own culture...and this is very difficult*”—*Head of the Education Section of Comunità di Sant’Egidio*). On these aspects, participants strongly recommended the planning of training activities that involve both educators and refugees/migrants, in order to make it possible for them to share ideas and requests.

According to participants, intercultural education should be an integral part of school culture as a whole all the time, overcoming the tendency to implement 1-day episodic intercultural activity and instead working to include the intercultural dimension across the curriculum (“*we should avoid activities that are thought to be related to inclusion but instead are telling immigrants “Showcase yourself only today and then remember that you are in Italy and you need to be aligned to our culture”*—*pre-primary and primary School Head*).

The schools and the organisations should be “open communities”; a place where students and their families can meet and share their experiences, and where they can find support and help—and therefore it is crucial to envisage activities that can foster these opportunities. With this in mind, the promotion of the cooperation between schools/teachers and the organizations that work

²<https://www.liberinantes.org/progetto-linfa-azioni-di-solidarieta-digitale-ai-tempi-del-covid-19/>

with migrants/refugees at the local level can contribute the generation of positive synergies inside and outside school. Unfortunately, due to the COVID disruption, it was more or less impossible for schools and organisations to even start working on this aspect.

Finally, in the last part of the focus group, participants suggested several actions that could be undertaken in order to support learning inclusion and citizenship, starting with the knowledge of the host country's language as the most important means for inclusion and citizenship and the key role of education and the school for the development of interpersonal relationships (especially during the pandemic where immigrants faced isolation). These aspects are in line with the need to promote activities that are aimed not only at developing the knowledge of the host country and the skills to find a job but also to provide opportunities to meet and to exchange points of views between migrants/refugees and Italians—because immigrants and refugees are often isolated in reception centres where they live. These activities can take place in the form of online meetings, cultural visits in the city with people from the host country providing information about the life/culture of the city, double interviews (with one refugee and one Italian) where both participants decide which questions to ask each other.

Another important activity to promote inclusion concerns feasts and traditional celebrations. Migrants/refugees usually feel alone during feasts and they miss their families—and participants highlighted that these are moments when migrants/refugees strongly need interpersonal relations/communications. On the other hand, they are also willing to know the traditions of the host country. These are also occasions to share the values of the host culture (democracy, gender equality etc.) in an open and friendly atmosphere and, more simply, to eat together and taste food from different cultures. Participants stressed that it is crucial for migrants and refugees to take part in the cultural life of the city in which they live in (for instance, in Rome there are organizations promote common activities to mark the memory of the deportation of Roman Jews during World War II).

8 Main Results of the Portuguese ME on Level 2

According to Portuguese participants, besides the foundation offered by their initial academic training, it is important that professionals who work to foster social inclusion of people in situations of vulnerability are open, willing, and sensitized to lifelong learning, and this improve their political awareness of active citizenship. Participatory educational approaches that value the sharing of personal experiences and knowledge and inter-generational solidarity are cited as privileged opportunities of reciprocal learning/learning together (*What we are doing today, it was important that this issue was formalized, that we really had knowledge sharing teams*—Professional at a Qualifying Center of IEFP/National Institute for Employment and Professional Training—Cerclo/Porto).

However, in order to do this, it is necessary to guarantee that educators/professionals' possess cultural sensitivity, stability and resilience (*I was not prepared for these populations. Therefore, I had to adapt and I think this is the great characteristic that these people must have, the ability to adapt (...)* *The trainer has to be resilient. Very flexible, being open, and maybe it makes sense to think not only about a project to work with these people, but also projects to work with people who work with these people*—Coordinator of a Qualifying Center/lifelong learning at the Integrated Development Association of Matosinhos ADEIMA). Some specific knowledge and skills were also identified as important such as the proficiency in the use of new digital technologies. Thus, participants highlighted the need for training professionals, creating knowledge sharing actions and partnerships, as well as guaranteeing effective access to technologies for both people in situations of vulnerability and the professionals who work with them (*In a time when we talk so much about the importance of technologies, of updating knowledge in technologies, we are dealing, weekly, with people who do not have technologies at all*—Psychologist at the Integrated Development Association of Matosinhos ADEIMA).

The participants shared some good practice that might promote inclusion and citizenship:

- (a) Training movements and networks for raising political awareness and active citizenship: Training and sensitization actions that create spaces for sharing experiences, denouncing and raising civic and political awareness and active citizenship of general population and particularly of organizations and professional groups (e.g. teachers) who work with people in situations of vulnerability (e.g. poverty, homelessness). It may encourage them to go beyond transitional measures of supportive social support, demanding the implementation of effective policies to eradicate poverty and to combat any other forms of human rights violation (... *it is very important that we can all raise our civic and political awareness, isn't it? Because everything is politics in life*—Coordinator of the Eradicate Poverty Movement).
- (b) Appreciation and sharing of personal knowledge: According to our participants, professional practices should be based on the philosophy of unconditional and genuine acceptance and appreciation of personal experiences, knowledge and individual interests of people in situations of vulnerability. This enriches the training process and leads to reciprocal learning opportunities. These kinds of knowledge and experience contribute to the construction of educational projects and motivate the development of participatory educational practices (e.g. community radio, photo-novel creation and rap) (*These second chance schools have the practice, it is part of their philosophy, to receive young people unconditionally, embracing them with all their experiences, and these experiences are the challenges of the training process here at the school.*—Coordinator of the Second Opportunity School in Valongo).
- (c) Learning from the experiences of relevant others (e.g. older and experienced people, experts). Through such initiatives, it is possible to share, recognize and acknowledge

the potential of all people of all ages to promote intergenerational solidarity (...*the interaction between different generations it's extremely important, because nobody loves what they don't know*—Coordinator of the Eradicate Poverty Movement).

- (d) (Digital) Literacy and citizenship training for people in situations of vulnerability (e.g. people in situation of poverty, homelessness, migrants) with themes and content adapted to their urgent daily needs and interests (e.g. access to social support platforms, invoice analysis, internet search) and which contributes to fight isolation, to value their knowledge, to empower and to promote inclusion (... *we always look for themes that meet the interests of our trainees, but also that we detect that it is something they need and that we need to work...* Teacher at the Integrated Development Association of Matosinhos ADEIMA).

Some obstacles to the former initiatives were also identified during Portuguese ME, namely the job instability and the lack of investment in digital. In fact, job instability prevails among professionals who work with people in situations of vulnerability, who always depend on precarious funding. This precariousness challenges professional motivation, training sustainability, professionalization and the development and success of their projects. The need to invest in digital is clear in education, and the pandemic made it even clearer. Since confinement stopped face-to-face training, a lot of people who already lack technological knowledge and do not have access to technological means to participate at a distance (e.g., computer, internet access) were significantly harmed. The only possible contact with these people was by phone and mail.

On the other hand, the pandemic fostered the evolution of digital knowledge, for trainees and professionals, enabling some proximity between them in times of confinement. Although, it is also true for teachers, who do not always keep up with new technologies; most of the time, they use more traditional software (e.g., PowerPoint) and both face-to-face and distance training remains

unappealing (e.g., reading manuals). It is necessary to invest in training professionals for the use of new technological tools. It is also important to distinguish the new from the old technologies, and to recognize the impact and formative power of the informal learning context of new technologies, through social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp, on the mobile phone or tablet:

...we continue to talk about the old ones and we don't talk about the new technologies, and the new ones are proof that learning in an informal context actually exists and is very efficient. (...) The people that we work with now, maybe they don't know how to turn on the computer, but they also don't need to, because they know how to turn on the Tablet, right? Maybe he doesn't have an email, but he knows how to receive and send emails through.

(Coordinator of a Qualifying Center/lifelong learning at the Integrated Development Association of Matosinhos ADEIMA).

It is also essential that effective access to technologies is guaranteed for all the people, in particular people in situations of vulnerability; the need for free or affordable access to technologies (hardware, software and internet) is the only way to prevent their digital exclusion that may impair even more their social inclusion.

Portuguese professionals identify two main priorities for preparing professionals in this field: to have clear government guidelines regarding the training needs and profile of professionals working in this field (e.g., to intervene with specific populations such as migrants), and to create and formalize a culture of sharing, implementing partnerships/networks between professionals working in different schools and institutions and, thus, promoting the exchange of experience.

The profile of these professionals has some common features according to Portuguese participants: cultural sensitivity, flexibility and resilience. It was highlighted the importance of training and experience of professionals in building a profile that goes beyond technique, towards a more humanized, empathetic, sensitive and ethical intervention, adapted to the needs and idiosyncrasies of the people they will work with (e.g. homeless, migrants, Roma) and to the context (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic). The in loco train-

ing must favor socialization, self-esteem, and motivation, sustained by advanced training and professional integration.

9 Discussion

The findings from the two MEs presented in this chapter highlight the different dimensions of the efforts of professionals who work with people in situations of vulnerability. Although the both the country MEs concerned the challenges for the social inclusion of these people, these dimensions had a dual focus: on the one hand, for the multiplier event which took place in Italy, they were specifically related to the social inclusion of migrants and refugees in formal and non-formal learning contexts. While, on the other hand, for the ME in Portugal, they were associated with the social inclusion of people in risk of poverty in general, also concerning the integration in formal and non-formal education contexts, and encompassing migrants and refugees.

In the Portuguese ME an important topic merged, namely the need of to have more opportunities to build and reinforce networks and synergies between professionals and organizations who work with people in situations of vulnerability. The initial training provided to professionals was far from being enough to deal with the challenges that arose during their daily work in struggling to do their best to foster the inclusion of those in need. Those networks were expected to provide both the needed support and the sharing of implicit or tacit knowledge that might improve their work, self-fulfillment and wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of the people with whom they worked, in particular in challenging times such as the Covid 19 pandemic. In order to be successful, professionals had to go beyond the traditional knowledge and skills provided by initial training: they had to show openness and flexibility and express cultural sensitivity, self-reflection and politically awareness and commitment [25].

Intercultural education and the ways of deliver it across the school curriculum and beyond was the topic at the heart of the Italian ME. The educators involved in the focus group have constantly

reported the need to implement deep changes in the educational system that will allow a modification educational methodologies, in-service teacher training and the school organization as a whole, in order to foster the social inclusion of disadvantaged students with a migrant background. To this aim, different pedagogic designs should be developed, reviewing the school curricula from an intercultural perspective and questioning the implicit perspectives and assumptions included in syllabi, teaching activities and even within school textbooks. The schools and also the organizations devoted to the inclusion of disadvantaged people with a migrant background should become “open communities”. This can help and provide contexts for dialogue for the students and their families. The creation of links between formal and non-formal learning contexts, between teachers and families and among families themselves is crucial for breaking down cultural barriers and combating stereotypes. This leads to the promotion of integration [26, 27].

All the best practice examples provided by the educators and other professionals in both ME’s were characterized by a common aim: to foster the meeting and the mutual sharing of experiences and points of views through learning. In this scenario, according to the Italian ME, teachers and school-heads play a pivotal role, as agents of change. However, as shown in national reports and also in the voices of the educators involved in the ME, the provision of pre-service and in-service teachers training on cultural diversity and pro-social life skills is not enough in managing the complexity of the process of inclusion. It should be necessary to work simultaneously on different levels (educational policies, school organization, teacher training) in order to boost teachers’ and educators’ expertise and, at the same time, to provide them with appropriate contexts in which to act. The actions to be undertaken are clear to the teachers and the professionals working with migrants and refugees. Yet, Italian schools still have a long way to go to fully and systematically implement approaches and perspectives into the educational system [24].

Cultural sensitivity, but also some stability and resilience, are also key features identified

by professionals involved in Portuguese ME. For this to be the case, it is of utmost importance to create opportunities to lifelong training and sensitization actions, sharing good experiences and learning from the ones which may have not succeeded, learning and not just competing with each other, for resources and funding, but to seek solutions and act, collectively, to overcome felt and experienced difficulties. The civic and political awareness that may arise from it may also encourage going beyond traditional representations, approaches and measures of caring support for people in situations of vulnerability, evolving into the sensitization and accountability of all those who actually may eradicate poverty and combat all forms of human rights violation.

The effects of the pandemic on the social inclusion of people in situations of vulnerability was a core issue at the heart of both of the MEs in Italy and Portugal. Teachers and professionals have reported how the pandemic undoubtedly increased the use of digital technologies, with a twofold effect. On the one hand, digital technologies were deemed very useful in keeping contacts and relations with people in situations of vulnerability. In this respect, they were a relevant means for social inclusion during the COVID-19 disruption. On the other, only a limited number of people in situations of vulnerability were able to actually benefit from them, namely those who had access to ICT devices and a stable internet access, and had good levels of language proficiency and ICT skills. For the majority of migrants and refugees, for these reasons the COVID-19 pandemic implied isolation and a deterioration of their learning and participation in inclusionary processes.

The MEs participants in the two countries reported that in order to be an effective tool for social inclusion, digital technologies should be considered as a “bridge” to connect people, to communicate and share. However, technology is not generally used in the daily practices of schools/organizations working with people in situations of vulnerability—also because it is often the case that schools and education centers in Italy and Portugal lack essential digital equipment.

As in the case of intercultural education, actions to make improvements are intended at different

levels—in structural terms (more PCs and Internet access) and also in educational terms (greater focus on learning digital skills and on the use of devices for learning in the classroom or autonomously). Nevertheless, evidence from the MEs suggests that these actions are needed but are not enough in themselves. If the aim is to promote the social inclusion of people in situations of vulnerability, they must be combined with learning of the hosting country language and, most importantly, the provision of diverse experiences to actually meet other people and exchange different points of views.

Some social policies are being implemented to foster social inclusion of people in situations of vulnerability i.e. those who are migrants or national-born citizens. A good part of the immediate solutions found to the pandemic crisis involved digital tools, namely in health, socio-economic benefits and education. Most of the time, those tools were technically designed and socially delivered in such a way that it would worsen prior inequalities and create new ones. Professionals have to be literally and symbolically interpreters and translators, and mediators who provide a sense of security for these and other populations with whom they work. Digital and other resources have to be both technically designed and socially used for the reduction of social inequalities, respecting human rights and fostering the sense of belonging, social justice, and social inclusion [19].

Thus, the availability of social policies is not enough to make a difference. It is important to strengthen communication, information, and education channels to ensure that they are successfully implemented and actually reach all the people in need [16]. In this professionals play a decisive role. Psychology and other social sciences research have contributed not only to our understanding of the correlates and consequences of poverty and social exclusion, but also how to tackle and combat it. The detrimental short medium and long-term effects of poverty and social exclusion are well documented: it has negative effects on life opportunities and choices, mostly on the academic and work domains, health, and well-being across the life span. Research has also indicated that providing safe and affordable

housing, nutrition, health care, education, and financial security can make a difference in reducing inequalities and their generational reproduction. Furthermore, research provides insight into the way how not only objective conditions and behaviours, but also attitudes and beliefs make a difference in combating poverty and fostering social inclusion: stereotypes regarding people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are powerful predictors of change and make a huge difference [28]. Thus, it is important to be aware of its importance not only in the general population but primarily amongst professionals in the frontline working with people in situations of vulnerability, and people themselves.

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