Extended abstract

**Migrant Work Inclusion: A tale of three inclusion projects**

Over recent decades, the world has witnessed multiple crisis that has driven migration globally. In fact, the inclusion of migrants and refugees into society and the labour market is considered a key focus and challenge, often referred to as a grand challenge of the 21st century (Karakulak and Faul, 2023; Knappert, Ortlieb, Kornau, de Garcia & van Dijk, 2023). Nevertheless, despite good will, intentions and numerous initiatives, inclusion efforts often fall short. The unemployment rates among migrants, particularly refugees and migrants from specific regions or countries, are higher than for others. This trend is prevalent in most countries, including Norway.

Recent studies (e.g. Knappert et al. 2023) point to refugee employment and inclusion as a multi-actor effort. Knappert et al (2023) highlight the important role of what they call “refugee employment ecosystem” whereby refugee employment is managed as a collective effort whereby complementarity is seen as a key mechanism. They point to how a variety of actors engage in complementary activities, yet how the actors’ motives, responsiveness, and perseverance, while being important for achievements, are under-researched. Werhle et al. (2024: 60-66) suggests that employment, which is critical for refugees’ integration, requires cross-sector collaborations (e.g. refugees, various stakeholders such as authorities, official and unofficial supporters, employers). Nevertheless, they also acknowledge how there are challenges in regard to cross-sector collaborations in terms of factors such as goals and priorities of the different stakeholders, hence they suggest that trust among stakeholders is important for success yet challenging to develop (Wehrle et al 2024). There are recent calls for more research in the field of migration management taking a broader lens, including micro, meso and macro levels of society and the interplay between the levels involving investigations of both opportunities and challenges as well as new ways of working regarding migration management within and beyond the workplace (Groutsis et al. 2023).

In this study, our focus is on Norway where we have recently witnessed a new approach to strategically working with the integration of migrants into the labour market (with a particular focus on refugees and migrants from specific countries/areas), which in many ways resembles the proposed multi-actor effort/refugee employment ecosystem as found in Knappert et al’s (2023) study. This includes various projects in different cities that are initiated by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Association (NAV) and local municipalities, who have traditionally led the work with migrant inclusion locally. These new projects are organized as (partly) independent projects (funded by NAV and/or local municipalities) and build on ideas of creating new arenas (e.g. ecosystems/cross-sector collaboration), initiate alternative activities and ways of working, including fora’s where different actors (including NAV, employers, municipalities, the volunteering sector, migrants etc.) meet. Hence, in a new and innovative way enhancing cooperation regarding migrant inclusion and employment.

In exploring the migration ecosystems/cross-sector collaborations, we utilize ideas from equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) literature on change agency and social movement literature and ideas around frames.

The importance of actors, “change agents”, is well established within the EDI scholarship. There is and can be a wide range of actors involved in working with issues around EDI at the organizational level as well as beyond the organizational level. While some actors are driving the EDI agenda, others might be more actively involved in the implementation of specific strategies and initiatives, while others again are more indirectly involved and/or act as external champions for change. In terms of looking at diversity work in organizations, an important contribution which has influenced a wide range of later studies is that of Meyerson and Scully (1995) who coined the term “tempered radicals”, often women, which they define as “individuals who identify with and are committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of the organizations”, hence an internal micro change agent (1995:586). Another type of change agent, more similar with what Kirton and Green (2009) refer to as “champions” and macro change agents are top leaders providing “heroic leadership” (Kelan and Wratil, 2017). Migrant inclusion projects are based around ideas of cooperation in initiating change; hence, the role of (key) actors is pertinent. Key actors can be both internal driving the projects and external, providing legitimacy and fronting the projects.

We also build on literature on framing. It is argued that framing is essential in creating social change regarding contentious social issues. The inclusion of migrants can be understood as a contentious social issue. A key argument is that how issues are framed matters when it comes to creating change. Snow and Benford, 1992 (cited in Creed et al., 2002) suggests that frames serve three main functions. First, they help develop a common understanding of the problem that needs to be addressed; Second, they attribute responsibility about who or what is to blame, and suggest solutions; and third, they motivate others to act in order to address the issue by suggesting corrective measures. Recently, several studies within the migration/refugee field have utilized frames as a theoretical lens. Karakulak and Faul (2023) highlights that there are multiple studies within the field of refugee framing that have focused on political and media representation. Klein and Amis (2021) study explore the presentation of the migration crisis in the media and how “the framing of an issue can change quickly and fundamentally» (1325), hence framing can be seen as a dynamic process. Karakulak and Faul (2023) on the other hand focus on value creation for refugees by social partnerships and posit that frames of refugees, in particular how refugees are both perceived and labelled, will affect how and what type of value that might be created for beneficiaries of social partnerships.

Influenced by the ideas from migration studies, EDI actors and framing, this paper explore various ways of working with migrant work inclusion based around ideas of the potential for migration eco-systems/cross-sectoral collaborations. We focus on three migrant inclusion projects (in three different cities) in Norway who are very much initiated from the same ideas and to a certain extend building on each other, yet what they focus on, the actors involved, the rationales they use to motivate and initiate change and how they work vary significantly. Our broad research questions are:

* How are the different integration projects aiming to improve inclusion of migrants into the labour market coordinated and working to create change?
* What frames are used in the migrant work inclusion projects to define, diagnose, and mobilize action towards enhanced inclusion?

Our study examines how context and various actors influence a current and critical issue. Empirically, we investigate the three projects over a two-year period. We compare how the projects are structured, how various actors collaboratively and/or complementarily work towards this objective and how different arguments are reflected in the rationales for enhancing migrant work inclusion. Our research employs a multi-source approach, utilizing both secondary and primary data. This includes interviews with key actors (such as project leaders and deputy leaders, NAV managers, migrants, employers, and the volunteer sector) and observations from events organized by the projects. Additionally, we analyze policy documents and media/social media coverage.

Our preliminary findings reveal both similarities and differences among the projects. As anticipated, all the projects organize events focusing on migrants, such as mentorship programs, job fairs, CV-writing workshops, arenas to meet the volunteering sector, and more. Perhaps unexpectedly, we observed a substantial emphasis and time in the projects spent on diversity work for organizations or potential employers. The projects engage closely with organizations or potential employers by facilitating diversity training workshops for managers or teams within these organizations. This training varies between the projects and ranges from cultural awareness to more traditional “diversity management” and events focusing on the benefits of diversity. Therefore, the projects undertake roles and initiatives usually associated with private diversity consultants, a sector that has experienced significant growth in Norway in recent years.

We found variations in terms of the prognostics, diagnostics, and motivational factors and the role of actors between the three projects. Regarding the diagnostic, or identification of the problem that needs addressing, all projects emphasized the issue of higher unemployment rates and lack of inclusion in the labour market for migrants. However, the reasons why this was viewed as problematic varied among projects. Some projects heavily featured the rationale that organizations are missing out on the resources and diversity that migrants bring. For others, the prognosis was more rooted in social justice lines of argument, highlighting the problem that migrants are not receiving fair opportunities. Consequently, differences emerged in the diagnostic discourses, ranging from social justice to business case rationales.

In terms of prognostics, or proposed solutions, we noticed similarities in initiatives aimed at assisting or enabling migrants. Yet, there was also a substantial focus on helping and adjusting organizations and employers. One of the projects implemented a certification system for organizations that sign up to the project, which is publicized on the project's webpage and in its communications. The project is also offering to help the membership organizations with their diversity work. This certification can also be leveraged by the organizations for branding purposes. Additionally, some of the projects places a considerable emphasis on changing attitudes within broader society, as evidenced by events at municipal, local, and national levels. All projects collaborate with different stakeholders at multiple levels to create change.

In terms of actors, we found, perhaps unsurprising, that the leaders were essential in all projects. We observed that the leaders go above and beyond the role to create change, hence, can be considered important change agents. Some share some resemblance with what Meyerson and Scully (1995) labelled “tempered radicals” and are working strategically to create change at various levels. We also observed other important actors among stakeholders, including “champions” in Kirton and Green’s terms.

In conclusion, our preliminary analysis reveals both similarities and variations among the projects. We posit that context plays a significant role in guiding the focus and the actions required to effect change. While context is typically understood at national or regional levels, we argue that the characteristics of cities, such as specific industries, size of companies and demographics, are crucial for migrant inclusion work. Consequently, a "one size fits all" approach to working with migrant inclusion at the city level would not be effective. We identified differences in prognostic, diagnostic, and motivational frames between the projects, as well as the evolution of these frames over time within the projects.

The aim of this study is not to pinpoint the success factors of the different projects, but rather to illustrate the myriad of new approaches observed in migrant inclusion work, based on ideas around cross-sectoral collaborations. In their study of diversity work in organizations, Risberg and Covellec (2022:1863) suggest that "it is futile to describe diversity work in terms of success or failure" and emphasize the importance of trying. We echo this sentiment in relation to migrant inclusion work.