

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE: A RESEARCH JOURNEY TO EASTERN EUROPEAN MIGRATION

by Ulla Siirto

Introduction

I was invited to be the theme coordinator for the interdiac thematic research 'People on the Move'. In the background of this invitation was my involvement in the Lutheran World Federation "Seeking Conviviality" process (see Addy 2013). The latest stage of this process addressed the issue of the uprooted people and boundaries preventing convivial living together. I have also worked both as a grassroots worker with immigrants and refugees in Finnish context and as a researcher. However, I was unfamiliar with the Eastern European context and with writing research in English. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation because it was an interesting opportunity to learn something new.



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The research process lasted 18 months. The time schedule frames were given externally by the research steering group. This created some time pressures because, after all, this work was outside my own everyday job. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic which began during the second data collection phase affected the plans.

At the heart of the research process, the aim was to find out how churches and religious organisations meet and support "people on the move" in Eastern Europe. There is not much collected data and little actual research on this issue except the study reports produced by specific organisations and churches in their local contexts. This research and the related report fills this gap by examining church and faith based organisation across several countries and confessions.

Participatory research method spreads responsibility

The research method followed the guidelines of the participatory study (in order to learn more about participatory research see: Participate i.a). The idea of participatory research is to get the people who are the subject of the research actively into the research process.

Each country in the research theme group had a practitioner-researcher who was responsible for collecting data from their own networks. The

common language of the study was English, the practitioner-researcher already had a lot of work with translations alone. However, in the first stage of the research came the country reports, which laid the basis of the research and which was specified further through the all the interviews, which was the main task for a whole research process. Indeed, local researchers had a lot to do in terms of research and without them research would not have been possible. The country reports which each local researcher provided described the picture of the immigration situation of the country-participant. On the basis of this stage, I was able to prepare research questions for the following interviews planned in the next stages of the research.

Participatory research also implies that the results of each phase are returned to the local level for feedback and comment. In this case, the results were returned, after analysis, to the practice-researcher in each country. The first data collected was from people on the move who had contact with the professionals and the second data collection was from the professionals to the practitioner-researchers. The main idea was to enrich the data by reflecting on it. In the last reflective workshop, which was organised online, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole research was reviewed by the practitioner-researchers, and further refined. If anything in the research process causes regret, then it is the fact that similar online meetings were not held earlier. The experience of the on-line Thematic Workshop meeting of the practitioner-researchers proved that personal meeting is far more fruitful and rewarding than bilateral working!

One of the challenges presented by the participatory research is that it takes a long time for participants to commit themselves to the process and to reach a common understanding of what the research aims to achieve. Within this research, this stage was more easily reached because the research lines with the related stages of the research process and due dates had already been prepared in advance. However, the difficulty was that during the process, work and life situations changed, which affected opportunities of the practitioner-researchers to participate in the study. Nevertheless, participatory research method was tested and found to be a professional tool, which it

is possible to use in normal work in future.

In total, six countries joined the study: Armenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine. A practitioner-researcher from each country gathered interviewees from their own country whether in focus groups or individually. The first data was collected from the 'people on the move'. Those were people, who had left their own country for various reasons. The purpose was to listen to the stories of 'the people on the move' and of their experience of involvement in the activities of the churches and the Faith Based Organisations (FBOs).

Then the data was collected from professional workers who worked in churches or FBOs. They first got to read a short text that was a summary of the results of the previous stage and then given the opportunity to reflect on the result in the group discussions. The discussion was steered by the moderator with the aid of various questions related to their professional performance with people on the move.

It should be noted that without a participatory research method, it would not have been possible to obtain such extensive data from different countries. On the other hand, the data was collected from the contacts of a researcher-practitioner. Would different answers have been obtained if the interviewer had been a complete outsider? For sure, participatory data collection is thought to be an advantage when the interviewer knows the context and does not need to take the time to become familiar with it.

The risk in the data collection was the rush of the researchers, as this research process was carried out alongside normal daily work. The COVID-19 pandemic also transformed face-to-face interviews to online and focus group interviews into planned individual interviews.

Research Findings: Voices of People on the move

People move from their own country for many reasons. When migration takes place of one's own volition, it is an easier event than it is for those fleeing war and instability. Everyone faces a new kind of culture and language and of social structure in a new country, which takes time to learn.

In this research the majority of the people interviewed were refugees, who face not only a new language, culture, and society, but also a lack or limitation of opportunities as well as a hostile environment. In a new country they suffered often from poor, camp-like living conditions, lack of work, health care and supportive networks. Those in the most difficult situation are people who get a negative decision in the asylum process and are left in the country without a residence permit and other documents. It is possible for them to be misused, for example, by hiring them with a poverty salary for grey jobs.



On-line Thematic Workshop ,People on the Move‘

Other difficult situations were faced by with some Roma people, who “went to seek asylum” from non-EU country to the EU area and were sent back within three months, and also by internally displaced people, who belong to the same nation within which they have moved, but who have lost their own home area. They had a similar kind of problems to refugees in integrating to the new area. In those cases, when helping Christian refugees to get out from the war or conflict area, FBOs and churches met similar difficulties as supporting refugees from the same religious background. When the history, culture and language are different, it takes time to integrate although the religion may formally be the same.

Furthermore, the environment was often assessed as hostile, or at least prejudiced towards newcomers, and it is not easy for refugees to merge with the locals. One of the reasons is that many local people have misinformation about newcomers and build prejudices and a hostile attitude towards them. Overall, they are thought to

be a threat to society. Seeing them as potential terrorists instead of seeing them as distressed people prevents a human encounter. The far right political parties in particular use this ‘threatening’ thinking as a driving force for its support. However, suspicion creates a gap between people and prevents the construction of coexistence and thus, of building a sustainable and convivial society.

Research Findings. Reflections of Professional Workers

The status of churches and religious organisations is different from that of municipal and state institutions. They live in the midst of people and face people without the same power relationship that authorities have behind them. However, they need to build trust with the people on the move who have very often lost their trust in people during their bad and traumatic experiences. They need time and to be allowed space to gain people’s trust, although many people on the move have lost confidence in all those who help. Such loss of confidence and trust makes building collaboration challenging and trust must be built first. Many refugees carry very damaging and traumatic experiences, which makes it even more difficult.

Resources for the work come from their church for everyone in the study, and they may come through various project funding possibilities. The underlying funders will, of course, define the terms of action precisely based on the funding application. However, as the work progresses, it may turn out that new types of actions are needed which were not anticipated when the funding was applied for. In many cases, it can be difficult to use the funding received for new activities. Donors could therefore consider whether it is possible to facilitate the refocussing of funding as the project plan is refined during implementation.

The research showed that for many workers religion added a value as a motivating basis for working with migrants and refugees and contributed to creating security and trust in them as actors. Religious activities are a part of their work with immigrants. However, a clear distinction has to be made between organisations and churches whose primary purpose was missionary activity and then the provision of humanitarian aid and those religious organisations

which work in a religion-neutral manner. Religion was in fact, in no way raised in any context. I was left wondering if these organisations wasted the opportunity to use religion as a resource for integration. Instead, however, culture was taken into account. The ability to encounter people and a strong motivation are important resources for religious actors.

The challenge to be faced and highlighted more strongly is the advocacy for social and legal grievances and the changing of the narrative to be more positive about people on the move, by standing against hate speech and populism. There is a need to look at available resources and to use them not only for an advocacy of individual cases, but also for wider advocacy campaigns. Would there be people in the church who would have the calling and professional background to become more involved as advocates with and on behalf of migrants and refugees?

The final words

During a long research process, a wide variety of events happened, which were also intertwined with the research process itself. These events were not just personal, but national, even international. The COVID-19 pandemic changed many plans during the process. In the final stages, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan also set even more people on move and brought out in a harsh way how quickly things can change and how anyone can come into personal contact with the phenomenon called 'people on the move'.

However, at the heart of religious actors is seeing each person as an image of God and equally valuable. They may be promoting the vision of living together in their own activities. As time and experience now reveals it anew, in the long run isolation and sharp divisions do not protect anyone. It is only through working together from the beginning that mutual security may be created. Instead of dividing people into groups, building bridges, conviviality and reciprocity will help build a common future.

Through this research new needs for co-operation and learning from each other were discovered. Noticing that professionals in different countries were doing similar kind of work with very similar

challenges gave rise to idea of enhancing networking and co-operation in future. The participatory research method applied, in particular, allowed participants to look into their practices critically and evaluatively and brought up ideas how to improve their practices.

If you are interested in this research, it is soon going to be published by interdiac.

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Sources:

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