

'Migration Matters' Summerschool

The CRCPD, in collaboration with Sustainable Society and colleagues from Social and Behavioural and Spatial Sciences, recently co-organised the 'Migration Matters' Summer School in Groningen. The summer school brought together students from diverse countries, cultures and disciplinary backgrounds for a series of challenging workshops and activities. What happens if students from different countries and universities come together for a week to explore the complexity of migration, its many facets, the problems around it, and alternatives to current practices in policy and society? At the end of the summer school 'Migration Matters' at the University of Groningen, the answer was clear: Creative ideas, concrete projects, and critical questions. This blog post gives a short overview of the various themes, ideas, and questions discussed during the week's program.

Friday morning, 8 July 2016, unusual scenes in the city hall of Groningen: What is normally a place for politics and the local government, now hosted five groups of international students presenting their projects on various issues around migration. The presentation of the results of the week to a panel of experts from policy and civil society was both the grand finale of the week as well as a starting point to put ideas into action.

The initiatives and ideas developed during the week covered the diverse spectrum of themes discussed as part of the summer school: humanitarian aid, the role of the media, integration policies, women's empowerment, and neighborhood initiatives. And while the summer school addressed migration as such, the urgency that the current crisis within Europe presents was of course the dominant topic throughout the week.

Working on the role of the media, one of the projects introduced the idea to deal with stereotypes about migrants among young students at school. Departing from the problem analysis that the negative display of (Muslim) refugees in the media leads to a polarization within society, the focus on one's own stereotypes offers a new perspective, that is, not to talk so much about 'them' who are coming, but to ask ourselves where our thoughts about refugees come from and how we can gain a more nuanced picture of the situation.

Another project took issue with the very fact that refugees, once arrived in the Netherlands, are struggling with the distance between refugee camp and society, the cold proceduralism of asylum policies, and the lack of a welcoming atmosphere. Bringing together artists, students, and refugees to create neighborhoods of shared spaces and a common living together is one of the examples of how bottom-up initiatives can contribute to making a change in the atmosphere of living together. The project directly resulted from conversations with a young refugee from Syria who shared his impressions from the last eight months in the Netherlands.

But migration, of course, includes many phases, places, and stakeholders. A third project, based on discussions on the role of humanitarian aid in migration, looked at cases of increased violence between the police and asylum seekers in the 'Maria Camp' on Lesbos. Developing a dialogic approach towards conflict transformation, the project presents the idea of the Theatre of the Oppressed as an alternative way to include both police and asylum seekers into the process in order to create a peaceful, respectful, and safe environment. By focusing on the most vulnerable persons in the process of forced migration, humanitarian aid is thought of as an inclusive practice that necessarily needs to take into account the actual needs on the ground.

Looking at the situation of women within migration processes, a fourth project aims at bringing together young talented migrant women with migrant university students to create space for conversations between newly arriving migrants and those who have already found a place within the host-society. From there on, various aspects that matter in integration can be approached together, resulting in new synergies with regard to issues such as rights, boundaries, self-efficacy, and social cohesion.

And finally, starting from the problem that the success of integration policies and practices is difficult to measure, one group presented the idea of a task force that introduces quantitative and qualitative research methods to develop means of a more nuanced evaluation of integration with the goal to make it available to municipalities in the Netherlands. This work begins with a definition of integration that includes both migrants as well as the host-society to overcome one-directional and one-dimensional understandings of integration processes.

The various projects developed during the week draw their inspiration from the different experiences of the participants as well as the set up of the summer school that included numerous lectures by academics, policymakers, and practitioners, workshops within the small groups, and various teaching formats including a simulation of a 'refugee experience', based on the model developed by Oxfam Australia, the direct encounter with refugees who live in Groningen, and the concrete task to develop problem analyses, policy interventions, and specific projects. While academic input was primarily focused on the global situation of migration, highlighting that we are living in times where migration takes place on unprecedented levels and will continue to do so, policymakers shared their insight from within Dutch politics, and practitioners from the field could shed light on the local conditions within refugee camps and organizations in refugee help.

Such an interdisciplinary approach is not only necessary with regard to the many aspects of migration, it also results from the joined forces within the team of organizers at the University of Groningen, namely Sustainable Society, Social Psychology, Spatial Sciences, and the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The projects developed during the week including the feedback by the expert panel in the final session have

the potential to be developed further in the coming weeks and maybe even to be realized in one way or the other.

Despite the diversity of the projects and the varying conditions that different phases and types of migration present, there is a common theme that became clear throughout the summer school, namely that migration not only affects those who (are forced to) migrate, but poses new challenges to societies and politics at large. The urgent need to rethink current approaches to migration and integration has to be addressed on multiple levels between grassroots and policymaking. The polarization around migration and the institutional crisis within the EU indicate that the time for new questions and new answers is now.