

Tapping into ‘the New We’

Migrant civic and political participation in Norway

Research into active citizenship and the contributions of diaspora reveals multiple patterns of civic and political participation by migrants. Societies experiencing immigration can benefit substantially from these engagements. This policy brief explores how stakeholders may tap into such forms of participation. What can we learn from newcomers about our own society? Can the transnational ties and multi-lingual and multi-cultural competence of migrants benefit others? And could those who have experienced violent conflict and repression play important roles in political action in Europe today?

Brief Points

- In order to tap into all available human resources in culturally and religiously diverse societies like Norway, it is necessary to explore the civic and political participation of migrants in new ways.
- First, migrants can bring original perspectives to taken-for-granted societal practices, allowing us to see them in a new light.
- Second, migrants have access to transnational networks and are important lobby groups that can benefit Norway’s foreign policy work.
- Third, those who have fled violent conflict and war can feel a strong sense of social responsibility that drives political action in times of uncertainty.

Cindy Horst *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Introduction

In 2006, Norway's then Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre introduced the notion of 'a new and larger "we"' to reflect the new realities that had come about as a consequence of half a century of immigration to Norway. The uptake of this new narrative may be described as relatively limited to date. Recognizing the need for public discourse to better reflect present national realities in Norway, this policy brief takes the concept of 'the new we' as its starting point and asks what new civic and political resources may become available with this 'new Norwegian we'. This brief is based on a decade of research on migrant transnationalism, active citizenship and refugee political agency, in Norway and beyond.

From this research, I identify three important resources that Norwegian society can benefit from. First, newcomers – especially those who have not yet become used to the way things are done in their new country of residence – can provide fresh perspectives to taken-for-granted societal practices. Second, those who come to Norway as individuals with existing social networks and cultural skills have socio-cultural resources that can be valuable for the country of settlement in a range of ways. Third, research with individuals who have fled conditions of violent conflict and repression has shown that they are actively committed to a range of social justice issues. Individuals with refugee backgrounds in Norway can have a strong sense of responsibility to act or speak up for the sake of maintaining a community or to protect a fair and just democracy.

1. A Fresh Perspective

The concept of 'the new Norwegian we' implies a more open and inclusive approach to the nation than alternative approaches that treat the nation as small, bounded, and homogenous – these narrower approaches have had negative impacts for indigenous Sami populations and national minorities in Norway. 'A new and larger we' allows us to explore what difference and diversity can contribute to the national collective.

Migrants can bring original perspectives to taken-for-granted societal practices, allowing us to see them in a new light. I would like to suggest that curiosity about such fresh perspectives can

be a starting point for a truly enlarged 'we'. In the following section, I will illustrate this using a concrete example that explores community service in Norway. While the practice is a variant of community service not dissimilar to what is practiced in many other countries, public discourse presents it as something typically and uniquely Norwegian.

A fresh perspective on 'dugnad'

Norway is identified as having a strong culture of volunteering, and the concept of *dugnad* is often brought up as the quintessential example of this. *Dugnad* refers to communal work that is usually unpaid and voluntary, but at the same time is sustained through a rather strong normative pressure on individuals to participate. It is commonly carried out within the neighbourhood or local community in order to support the collective or individuals within it.

As part of a research project on active citizenship amongst residents of Oslo, we interviewed Imran Khan, who had moved to Norway a few years before. Imran explored some of the contradictions within the civic practice of *dugnad* – in particular, the contrast between its nature as something both voluntary and highly institutionalized. Imran contrasts community service in Norway and Pakistan in the following way:

There is a very big difference in cultures [...] for example, the system of dugnad is very good in Norway. That neighbours who live in a housing cooperative can get to know each other – that is a very good thing and that does not exist in Pakistan. But in Pakistan, we know each other without being part of a dugnad.

And here in Norway there is a very good system for organizing all things in the housing cooperative: there is a board and a system that does everything. But in Pakistan where I lived, people did this voluntarily. There is no board, no system, no organization that does things. So that in a way gives people motivation to be active to take responsibility and sort things [...].

If one is used to being very active in society and being in contact with

others in a good way, and one comes to a country where one cannot practice that, that is in a way a bit strange – a bit of a pity, one might say.¹

The suggestion is indeed that community service is not uniquely Norwegian, but what is typical of how it is practiced in Norway is the way it is formalized and institutionalized to such a high degree. Where and how to engage in 'volunteering' is determined by particular norms that are presented as fixed, even though they have changed over the years and there are differences between for example urban and rural areas. How Imran describes realities in Pakistan where he lived is not that dissimilar to how older research participants in Oslo describe realities in the past, or individuals who moved from rural areas in Norway to Oslo describe their realities growing up.

The public discourse on national realities in Norway underscores communalities and downplays differences. This discourse of 'imagined sameness' does not just relate to newcomers and their children becoming part of society. Such discourse affects many residents of Norway, in many different ways. Being open to the fresh perspectives that newcomers will have when they try to find their place in Norwegian society presents an interesting opportunity to question the taken-for-granted in new ways. Just as travel is often seen as enriching because it allows the individual an opportunity for self-reflection – through being confronted with the fact that what is taken for granted in one's country of residence may not be taken for granted elsewhere – similarly, societies can learn to benefit from newcomers within their borders by gaining different perspectives on societal practices.

2. Transnational Networks and Political Accountability

One area in which efforts have been made to recognize and utilize migrant civic and political resources is in the field of foreign aid and – less publicly – foreign policy. It is not by coincidence that the concept of 'the new we' was coined by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs rather than a minister responsible for the field of migrant integration. In the years following the coining of the concept, diasporas were recognized as promising contributors in the field of development cooperation. Remittances – the

money migrants send back to countries of origin – have been seen as a particularly attractive resource that required a rethinking of development aid priorities and stakeholders.

Our research on the role of the Somali diaspora in shaping Norwegian foreign policy towards Somalia shows that Norwegian politicians are aware of the potential benefits of the transnational resources these new citizens might have. The State Secretary at the time (2005–2009), Raymond Johansen, explained the benefits that his close ties to the Norwegian-Somali population had for his role as State Secretary:

I am invited for breakfast and get to meet the Minister of Energy and Minister of Foreign Affairs [. . .]. Someone who lives in Grønland [a neighbourhood in Oslo] in a two-room apartment is a friend of the President [. . .]. The diaspora and the political leadership are very close. That is certainly my impression.²

Besides highlighting the importance of a range of migrant resources, those who work with foreign policy expressed an understanding of ‘the new we’ in terms of a sense of accountability towards new citizens. They expressed an awareness of the fact that these individuals are citizens of – or at least residents in – Norway, which comes with particular demands and responsibilities. Johansen alluded to the connections between Norway’s foreign policy towards Somalia and the political pressure of the Norwegian-Somali population:

When Norway focuses on Somalia, it is not least because of the 36, 37, 38,000 Somalis, or Norwegian-Somalis, where most of them live in the central parts of Norway. [. . .] They are also an important pressure group and that is actually the reason for why there are more questions in parliament about Somalia. They put these issues on the agenda.²

Likewise, then Minister of International Development (2012–2013), Heiki Holmås, clearly expressed his responsibility towards particular migrant populations within the Norwegian electorate. He directly linked his national responsibility towards contributing to positive developments in Somalia to successful integration in Norway.

As an [elected] representative for a big population group, my view is that we have a special responsibility as a nation to engage in the positive development of that country because there are so many of our citizens who have family, friends, memories, [and] feelings attached to that country. So their focus, their satisfaction, their possibility for integration, [and] their possibility for having a good day is dependent on the development in another country. That is my point of departure as an elected representative.²

White Papers 13 on development policy and 15 on foreign policy from 2009 similarly mention the importance of including diasporas in foreign engagement politics. However, while the recognition of the economic, cultural and civil-political (transnational) resources of migrants was common in Norway in policy and practice between 2006 and 2013, in the years that followed this was mentioned much less. The issue of political accountability towards migrant voters has similarly not been mentioned to the same extent, which might be the consequence of a shift in government in 2013.

3. Political Participation

Individual experiences of loss, exclusion or degrading treatment can be drivers of civic and political participation. Life history research with over 100 individuals with refugee backgrounds has shown that experiences of violent conflict and human rights abuses can create a political awareness and a strong sense of duty to act in the face of injustice. Such political awareness is strongly inspired by visions of society based on justice and equality, while the concerned individuals were also occupied with their own role and responsibility in contributing to this vision.

The political engagement of these interviewees happened in a range of ways and arenas, in formal and informal settings. Often these individuals described such engagement in terms of a crucial responsibility or duty, where they did not really feel they had a choice but to act. Some reflected: ‘If I do not do this, and the others who think in the same way do not do this, who will do it then?’ Others referred to their country of origin, saying ‘I know what happens if people do not act, if they do not resist’. They also often referred to their privileged position as leaving

them no choice but to act. Here, a young man from Afghanistan reflects on why he tells the story of his journey to Europe:

I tell my story because people need to hear it. I tell my story because it is not just my own story, and because there are many like me who can no longer tell their stories.³

A sense of responsibility as citizens

While this shows a sense of political responsibility that relates to experiences elsewhere, there is also a very strong civic responsibility related to the Norwegian nation-state. This can be seen in a research participant’s justification of, for example, engagement in the Refugees Welcome initiatives in Oslo:

I know how I experience it. I understand very well what it means to travel from war and look for a new life, and the journey from your home country to another country. [. . .] They do not deserve to sleep outside so we just tried to do something for them. Because they deserve to be in a better situation here in Norway.³

The experience of particular life events or forms of marginalization and exclusion can be a very powerful driver for engaging in socially transformative political action. In times such as these, as the status quo becomes increasingly polarized and exclusionary, such transformative action is urgently needed. How can societies and communities benefit from this crucial experiential knowledge about what the consequences of inaction are? How can stable societies like Norway draw on the invaluable resources of refugees and others in ways that acknowledge the transformative potential of collective trauma?

To answer these questions, we may look back and learn from Hannah Arendt’s essay ‘We Refugees’ from 1943. She argues that some refugees of her time can be the vanguard of their people, if they insist on telling the truth and keep their identity. She claims that the faith of these refugees and of Europe are tied up together, and argues that ‘the comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest members to be excluded and persecuted’ (Arendt 1943: 119). In her view,

those ‘weakest members’ are imperative for guaranteeing the maintenance of democracy in Europe through their civic and political participation. I contend that the same is true today and we need to learn to benefit from this type of participation in new ways.

Tapping into ‘the New We’

This policy brief argues for the value of tapping into ‘the new we’ in two ways. First, promoting the *concept* of ‘the new we’ in Norway is crucial for a recognition of the reality that currently 17.7% of the total population consists of immigrants and Norwegians born of immigrant parents.

Second, tapping into the *reality* of ‘the new we’ means exploring the unique contributions that the civic and political participation of newcomers, and at times their descendants, can offer. There are fresh perspectives to be gained, which can help us to question societal practices and how they are portrayed in order to learn what works and what doesn’t in Norway today. Foreign policy and foreign aid have a lot to gain from working with and assuming political accountability for migrant populations within the Norwegian electorate, as well as the transnational resources these populations bring with them. And those who know what is at stake when democracy is threatened can provide the political consciousness Europe so dearly needs through their sense of social justice and political responsibility.

New experiences of citizenship

Our research on active citizenship shows that the action-participation and the membership-belonging components of citizenship are closely interlinked. Participation creates belonging, while belonging also enables participation. However, our research has also shown how

feelings of not being allowed to belong can lead to participation as well: those who feel marginalized and excluded can claim belonging through participation. What comes out very clearly is that the experience of being an outsider, of being marginalized, is at times exactly what makes people willing to engage and take responsibility for the future society. While, ultimately, it is crucial to strive for a society that does not make its residents feel marginalized and excluded, in the meantime it is important to build on the lessons we can learn from the civic and political engagement of these individuals.

‘The new we’ adds another unique and important dimension, namely the transnational. We can go back to policy documents that are a decade old but more closely reflect the concept and reality of ‘the new we’ than present-day documents:

Double allegiances, multiple identities and experiences from war and conflict have so far not been identified as a resource, but rather as a social challenge. [...] We must recognize that the identities of the future will extend beyond the national ones and that many people will have strong ties to several countries and communities.⁴

Our research shows that indeed, residents of Oslo belong to and participate in a multiplicity of collectives within and beyond the nation-state. New experiences of citizenship generate new forms of civic and political participation that can contribute to society in important ways. The concept of ‘the new we’ allows us to recognize this participation, as well as the belonging that is connected with it, thus enabling these resources to be visible. ■

Notes

1. Horst, Cindy; Marta Bivand Erdal & Noor Jdid (2019) ‘The “good citizen”: asserting and contesting norms of participation and belonging in Oslo’. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1671599.
2. Tellander, Ebba & Cindy Horst (2019) ‘A foreign policy actor of importance? The role of the Somali diaspora in shaping Norwegian foreign policy’. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1(1): 136–154.
3. Horst, Cindy & Odin Lysaker (2019) ‘Miracles in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Refugees as “Vanguard”’. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fez057.
4. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009) *Interesser, ansvar og muligheter: Hovedlinjer i norsk utenrikspolitikk [Interests, responsibilities and possibilities: Main contours of Norwegian foreign policy]*. White Paper No. 15 to the Storting, 70. Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Available in Norwegian:

www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-15-2008-2009/id548673/sec1

Available in English:

www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/report-no.-15-to-the-storting-2008-2009/id548673/

Further Reading

Erdal, Marta Bivand & Rojan Ezzati (2013) ‘Når ute også er hjemme. Migrasjon og utenrikspolitikk’. In: Åsmund Weltzien & Odd Mølster (eds) *Norge Og Det Nye Verdenskartet*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 58–79.

Ezzati, Rojan & Cindy Horst (2014) ‘Norwegian collaboration with diasporas’. In L. Laakso and P. Hautaniemi (eds.) *Diasporas, Development and Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa*. London: Zed Books.

THE AUTHOR

Cindy Horst is Research Director and Research Professor at PRIO.
E-mail: cindy@prio.org

THE PROJECT

Both ‘Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies’ (ACT) and ‘Governing and Experiencing Citizenship in Multicultural Scandinavia’ (GOVCIT) explored relationships between citizenship policies and experiences of belonging in individuals’ everyday lives. Both projects are funded by the Research Council of Norway.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.