



European Competence Centre for Social Innovation:  
ESF+ Community of Practice on Migrant Integration

# **From Service Provision to Empowerment: ESF+ Supported Pathways to Migrant Leadership**

21 April 2026, online

**Summary Report**

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## 1. Background information

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The first event of the 2026 Work Programme of the ESF+ Community of Practice on Migrant Integration (CoP MI) was held online on 21 April 2026. The webinar brought together policymakers, practitioners and experts to examine the full migrant integration pathway: from initial service provision to long-term empowerment and leadership.

The event combined keynote presentations, breakout discussions and a panel session to explore how integration systems can move beyond service delivery towards more inclusive, participatory and empowerment-based approaches.

Eight representatives from seven organisations presented and/or moderated breakout rooms, making this one of the CoP MI events led by a wide range of expertise. These included Aurélien Mornon Afonso (European Commission), Başak Yavçan and Alexander Wolffhardt (Migration Policy Group), Cova Bachiller (Red Cross EU), Alexandra Weerts (Eurocities), Ourania Sakellarki (General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons, Greece), Regine Nguini (African Media Association Malta) and Julie Breton (Moniheli), alongside the CoP MI team, composed of Rasa Micevičienė, Erika Borg and Amira Bieber.

The opening presentations set the scene by outlining the overall approach of the CoP MI to the integration pathway, including its distinct stages and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders at each phase. This was followed by a presentation of the latest MIPEX 2025 report, which provided an overview of the current state of integration policies across Member States.

The core of the event centred on four expert-led breakout sessions covering:

1. Building effective integration strategies;
2. Service provision models, including one-stop-shops and specialised services;
3. Migrant-led initiatives, including their opportunities and challenges; and
4. Migrant empowerment at all levels.

The sessions fed into a plenary panel discussion, during which moderators shared key insights and participants engaged directly through questions and reflections.

The webinar concluded with the official launch of the 2026 Work Programme, alongside an overview of upcoming activities and priorities.

### 1.1 Objectives

The event aimed to:

- Explore the full migrant integration journey, from policy design to empowerment outcomes, while clarifying the roles of the state, migrants and host communities in integration processes.
- Promote holistic and coordinated use of EU funding instruments, particularly ESF+ and AMIF.
- Support CoP MI members in the development of long-term integration strategies that ensure effective initial service provision while progressively enabling migrant leadership and active participation within communities, in line with ESF+ and future funding objectives.
- Launch the CoP MI output, the background note entitled *Rethinking Migrant Integration: A Stage-Based and Three-Way Approach to Cohesive Societies*.
- Launch the 2026 Work Programme.
- Address two Work Programme Priorities: (1) Promoting the well-being and social inclusion of migrants through holistic support and civic participation; and (2) Providing effective integrated support systems for migrants.

### 1.2 Target group

- Managing Authorities responsible for ESF+ Calls;
- Public authorities at local, regional and national levels;
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations working in the field of migration and integration, including grassroots groups and migrant-led associations;
- Policymakers and practitioners involved in social inclusion and diversity;
- Potential project partners seeking opportunities for collaboration.

### 1.3 Number of participants

The event was attended by 48 participants.

## 1.4. Geographical and typology spread

Participants registered from the following 14 Member States: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Portugal.

In terms of affiliation, participants included representatives from various organisations, such as European Commission (2), implementing organisations (3) intermediate bodies (6), line ministries (3), ESF +National Managing Authorities (7), non-governmental organisations (10), non-profit organisations (7), other organisations (8) and regional managing authorities (2).

## 2. Main findings

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### 2.1 Key outcomes

#### Keynote presentations

**Aurélien Mornon Afonso** (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission) opened the event, emphasising the need for stronger synergies between EU funding instruments, particularly ESF+ and AMIF, to address the integration journey in a comprehensive manner. He highlighted that the discussions were timely in view of shaping the National and Regional Partnership Plans under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with a view to promoting more integrated programming that supports migrant empowerment through a holistic approach.

**Erika Borg** (Lead thematic expert, CoP MI) presented the CoP MI output 2026, the background note entitled 'Rethinking Migrant Integration: A Stage-Based and Three-Way Approach to Cohesive Societies'. The proposal includes:

- a more detailed understanding of the integration stages, ranging from pre-departure integration to empowerment;
- a shift from a two-way to a three-way approach, recognising the host community alongside the state and migrants as key actors; and
- the role of EU funding, particularly ESF+ and AMIF, in supporting these stages.

The concepts were presented through a set of visuals, summarised in the image below.

**Başak Yavçan** (Migration Policy Group) presented the main findings from the 2025 MIPEX report. MIPEX is comparative tool assessing integration policies across eight policy areas (access to nationality, anti-discrimination, education, family reunion, health, labour market mobility, permanent residence and political participation), covering up to 52 countries. The findings highlighted significant variations between Member States, pointing to the need for greater alignment and harmonisation. She stressed that effective policies should foster openness, participation and local engagement, and emphasised that integration continues beyond citizenship, given the evolving roles and responsibilities of individuals within society, such as the legal right to vote.

#### Breakout session discussions

**Başak Yavçan** and **Alexander Wolffhardt** (Migration Policy Group), together with **Covadonga Bachiller** (Red Cross EU), led the first breakout session, *Building Successful Integration Strategies*. The Migration Policy Group (MPG) highlighted the importance of evidence-based action plans, clear objectives and monitoring mechanisms in the development of integration policies. Multi-level governance and multi-stakeholder collaboration were identified as essential components.

The Red Cross approach underscored four pillars: socio-economic inclusion, socio-cultural integration, well-being and protection, and accountability through meaningful participation. Housing emerged as a key gap requiring further policy attention. MPG noted that it is exploring ways to include housing as one of the policy areas in future MIPEX reports. The discussion also highlighted the importance of streamlined funding and showcased Spain's long-term partnership model with civil society as an effective practice.

**Alexandra Weerts** (Eurocities) and **Ourlia Sakellarki** (General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons, Greece) led the second breakout session, *Service Provision: One-stop-shops or Specialised Services*. Alexandra Weerts opened the session by introducing one-stop-shops as effective access points, while noting that specialised services remain necessary to address complex needs. Practical insights from Greece (HELIOS, HELIOS+ and KEMs) illustrated how AMIF and ESF+ can be used in a complementary manner, as well as the challenges related to determining appropriate funding allocations

The discussion quickly shifted to practical matters, such as how and why transitions occur from AMIF to ESF+ funding in different countries, and how to identify which measures should be financed under the respective funding instruments. Ireland and Italy explained their working methods, while a representative from Milan shared their experience at regional level.

**Regine Nguini** (African Media Association Malta) led the third breakout session, *Migrant-Led Initiatives: The Advantages and the Challenges*, opening the discussion with a reflection on what migrant leadership looks like in practice. She highlighted the importance of migrant leadership in shaping policies and narratives, rather than being treated as a subject within a policy topic. She illustrated this through two projects: *Turning the Tables* and *Empower to Integrate*.

This discussion also underlined the importance of representation, as migrants need to be present in conversations to challenge the stereotypes. Participants highlighted persistent barriers to accessing funding, including restrictive eligibility criteria and administrative burdens. It was noted that limited migrant involvement in programme design leads to missed opportunities and weakens overall impact.

**Julie Breton** (Moniheli, Finland) led the fourth breakout session, *Migrant Empowerment at all levels: What does it take?* The session explored empowerment as a multidimensional concept extending beyond access to services to include agency, decision-making and structural influence. She noted that empowerment should focus on who holds the power to decide, act and shape their own lives.

The discussion highlighted the interplay between resources, agency and outcomes, as well as the individual, community and structural factors, noting that progress in one area does not guarantee empowerment at all levels. Examples from Moniheli illustrated how collective representation and participation can strengthen empowerment. It was also noted that the concept of 'empowerment' is often used without sufficient clarity or operationalisation.

### Group Panel Discussion

The group panel discussion, moderated by **Erika Borg**, brought together insights from all breakout sessions. A central theme was the need for a more integrated and participatory approach to funding and policy design. Participants emphasised the importance of combining funding instruments to deliver holistic support, the need to address fragmentation and administrative complexity, and the value of participatory approaches in developing integration strategies.

A recurring point was the under-recognition of migrants' lived experience, which continues to be undervalued compared to formal qualifications. This, coupled with limited representation, restricts meaningful participation. The discussion also raised critical questions around power-sharing, particularly who is willing to relinquish control to enable inclusive decision-making.

**Erika Borg** moderated the group panel discussion, starting with introductory questions to the moderators about the main takeaways from the discussions held in their respective breakout rooms. **Ourania Sakellaraki** highlighted the need for stakeholders working in the field to better understand the interconnectivity between funding instruments and how they can be combined to support a holistic approach. **Covadonga Bachiller** echoed this point, while noting the challenges associated with managing different funds and silos, and stressed the importance of participatory approaches in the development of integration strategies.

**Regine Nguini** noted that migrants do not recognise their own value, as their lived experience continues to be undervalued compared to professional qualifications, a situation exacerbated by limited representation. **Julie Breton** raised questions about how speaking time is shared and who is willing to relinquish some of their 'power' to ensure that everyone has a place and an equal voice. It was strongly recommended that future EU funding frameworks, including the MFF, should position migrants not only as beneficiaries but also as active participants in programme design and implementation.

### Closing remarks

The event concluded with the official launch of the 2026 Work Programme by Erika Borg, who outlined its objectives, priority areas and upcoming activities. Rasa Micevičienė (Coordinator, CoP MI) closed the session by thanking participants and providing further information on future engagements.

## 2.2 Participant feedback during the event

Discussions consistently highlighted the importance of involving migrants from the earliest stages of programme design and implementation. In parallel, participants acknowledged persistent structural barriers, including restrictive eligibility criteria, co-financing requirements and reimbursement mechanisms, which place a disproportionate burden on smaller and migrant-led organisations.

Participants noted that current funding frameworks remain largely focused on service provision (i.e. resources), with insufficient emphasis on fostering genuine empowerment in terms of agency and structural influence. This creates a disconnect between initial integration support and the development of cohesive and inclusive communities.

Co-design emerged as a recurring theme. Participants stressed that it should not be treated as an add-on principle, but rather as the foundation of programme and project development, while actively addressing the structural constraints that limit its effective implementation.

## 2.3 Impact

The event created an open and inclusive space for critical reflection on the use of funding instruments, integration policies across Member States and the desired outcomes of integration pathways.

It successfully brought together both long-standing and new participants from diverse professional backgrounds, enabling a richer exchange of perspectives, including policy-level insights and lived experiences.

Although participation numbers were lower than in previous events, the level of engagement remained consistently high, particularly within the breakout sessions, allowing for more in-depth and meaningful discussions.

## 3. Lessons learned

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### 3.1 What went well

Addressing the integration pathway in a holistic manner enabled a comprehensive discussion, highlighting both the interdependencies between different stages and the role of various funding instruments.

The breakout sessions proved effective in facilitating focused, in-depth exchanges, while also fostering a sense of community and identifying transferable practices across national contexts.

The careful selection and preparation of moderators ensured a high quality of discussion. Bilateral preparatory meetings helped align expectations and maximise their contribution.

Dedicated rehearsal sessions with moderators and facilitators strengthened coordination, clarified roles and enhanced the overall delivery of the sessions.

### 3.2 Areas for improvement

While the breadth of topics enriched the discussion, the overall scope proved too ambitious for a two-hour format. Additional time or narrower thematic focus would allow for deeper exploration of key issues.

Pre-event engagement from participants was limited, despite invitations to share inputs in advance. Strengthening early engagement could help to better tailor discussions to participants' needs and expectations.

### 3.3 Recommendations

In line with the partnership principle, further explore practical approaches to ensuring the meaningful involvement of migrants in programme design and implementation, not only as beneficiaries but as active agents, while addressing existing regulatory and structural barriers.

Introduce co-moderation as a standard practice to better facilitate interaction and encourage participation across different formats, including chat-based engagement.

## 4. Next steps

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### 4.1 Follow-up actions

- Organisation of a follow-up assessment meeting with moderators and the CoP MI team.
- Analysis of participant feedback collected through the evaluation form.
- Dissemination of the background note *Rethinking Migrant Integration: A Stage-Based and Three-Way Approach to Cohesive Societies*.
- Launch of the call for contributions to the *mapping of ESF+ interventions on labour market and social integration of migrants*.
- Sharing of a 'Save the Date' for the upcoming CoP MI study visit *Creating Opportunities for the Future: Labour Market Orientation and Support for Migrants*, to be held in Madrid on 23–24 June.

## 4.2 Future events

- CoP MI study visit *Creating Opportunities for the Future: Labour Market Orientation and Support for Migrants* will take place on 23–24 June 2026 in Madrid.
- CoP MI 2026 output focusing on promising ESF+ practices is currently under development, with the guidance document planned for publication by the end of 2026.
- Feedback gathered during and after the event will inform the design, topics and methodologies of future activities, including preparations for the 2027 Work Programme, in line with the CoP MI's 'building block' approach.

## Annex

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- A. Agenda of the event
- B. Presentations

