Migrants and COVID-19
Media representations, self-representations, institutional communication

POLICY BRIEF

This Policy Brief intends to provide answers and recommendations concerning 3 main questions:

During the COVID-19 pandemic:
- **How did media represent migrants?**
- **How did migrants represent themselves?**
- **How did health institutions communicate with migrants?**

Introduction

From January to May 2022, the EU funded H2020 ITHACA project organized a series of **Policy Council Events** (PCEs). The PCEs were set up to allow scholars, policy makers, representatives from institutions, NGOs and grassroots associations to meet at the local, national and international levels.

Where: 8 countries, 12 towns and more than 180 participants were involved.

Who participated: researchers in migration studies, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, migrant associations, policy makers, health agency representatives, politicians, journalists, intergovernmental organization representatives and lawyers, all convened by the ITHACA partners.

How: the local and national meetings – which were either held in person or online according to the pandemic conditions – were divided into two parts; during the first part, participants shared views, perceptions, and personal memories since the outbreak of the COVID 19 in 2020; and discussed media representations of the pandemic, especially those addressing migrants, by focusing in particular on social media. During the second part, participants shared views on the ways institutions communicated with migrants, and suggested recommendations for policy makers.

This action is part of the ITHACA project that aims to analyse migrations from the Middle Ages to the present day, within a rigorous historical framework, and to make its results available through a web-platform.
This will allow migrants, researchers, practitioners and policy makers to work with a digital database of narratives, documents and archival sources.
The Consortium devotes special attention to providing impact at the political and social level in order to transform narratives and policies on migration.
The topics, practices and discourses unfolded in the ITHACA PCEs were related to different geographical, social and economic contexts; however, the feedback by the stakeholders showed some important points of uniformity in terms of problems, opportunities and recommendations.

This policy brief represents the views of the ITHACA project partners. The support from the Horizon 2020 program that the project receives for its publications does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

KEY FINDINGS 1

Media representations of migrants in COVID-19 times

From an overrepresentation of migration to silence
This mediatic turn started at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Replacing migration as a major subject of media attention, the spread of the virus
and its consequences became the new (often politicized) emergency.
Media spaces that had been laboriously constructed to focus on migrant
communities became marginal, albeit briefly.
After the initial shock, and as migration gradually resurfaced in media discourse,
coverage generally tended towards sensationalism, adopted a "what people
want to hear" approach; media were rarely sensitive in their approach
of presenting that COVID-19 might affect migrant communities unequally.

Evolution of media representations
At the outbreak of the pandemic (February-March 2020), the media contributed
to the process of "ethnicization" of the virus, initially targeting specific communities
(e.g. the "Chinese" virus, but also "Europeans") but also migrants in general, who
were portrayed as **more vulnerable to the disease and therefore as potential
virus spreaders**. After this first phase, there was a general indifference towards
the conditions of migrants in relation to the health emergency. However, following
the spread of the disease all around the world, this lack of interest **did not change
the stereotypical framework** in which the media discourse on migration is usually
embedded. Even when mainstream media made efforts to represent the reality
of migrants, they often offered a one-dimensional understanding of their issues,
with no or very limited attention to the reality and daily experiences of migrants.
Nevertheless, a handful of constructive stories were reported at the local
and regional level, such as how healthcare personnel with migrant background
disproportionately contributed to COVID-19 relief.

From uncertainty to disinformation
Disinformation actors, above all on social media, adapted their existing narratives
to the new circumstances and developed new ones. Preconceived ideas wrongfully
relayed by mainstream and social media exacerbate existing stereotypes towards
migrants and specific communities or contribute to the spreading of rumours.
This tendency was reinforced by great **global uncertainty**: COVID-19 'surprised'
scientists, as well as institutions, migrant and residents. While history is marked
by epidemics, even in recent centuries and decades, this unpreparedness provided
a fertile ground for **disinformation actors to create a powerful and dangerous
link between health concerns and anti-migration attitudes.**

Across the ITHACA countries, media outlets connected migrants to COVID-19's
continued spread:

- In **Italy**, images of the so-called 'quarantine boats' became recurrent. After the first wave, during which Italians were the most affected population in Western countries, stereotypical and prejudiced representations portrayed migrants as 'infectors', 'plague spreaders', and 'carriers of disease'. Media mainly communicated uncontextualized and therefore difficult to read data, while the situation improved during the evolution of the disease, together with a better preparedness of all the actors.

- In **France** the PCE confirmed that the perception of migrants as the main virus-spreaders was common. After the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved anti-covid vaccines in December 2020, reference to migrants was then linked to the question of their access to vaccination, focusing only on the hesitancy by certain foreign individuals, groups and communities, rather than the inequality in the access to vaccination for migrant people.

- In **Jordan**, where the percentage of refugees is highly significant, mainstream media narratives reinforced the hostility towards refugees, especially Syrian, who were perceived and depicted as the main recipients of humanitarian aid to the detriment of the Jordanian population.

- In **Azerbaijan**, the PCE participants stressed that media never covered migrant needs and rights, even before the pandemic.

- In the **Netherlands**, participants attested to a vast media environment in which particular outlets attract specific readers/viewers with matching political views. Participants tended to follow progressive outlets, but knew that conservative outlets pointed to immigrants as not complying with COVID-19 measures. On social media, however, migrant creators challenged stereotypical representations from mainstream media with their own content.

- In **Tunisia**, the widespread images of healthcare workers facing unbearable conditions of work led to a strong mobilisation in support of refugee communities. These media representations led to a great movement of volunteers to provide refugees, immigrants and emigrants with moral and financial support, despite the societal and governmental flaws that came to the surface.

- In **Morocco**, essentialisation and stereotypical discourses about migrants emerged. Media proved generally indifferent towards the fate of migrants, with the issue of migration being only raised in certain occasions, such as Migration Day. As a consequence, the public's ignorance about the disease led to the scapegoating of migrants as spreaders of the virus.

- In **Greece**, at the beginning of the pandemic, official statements expressed fear that the virus would spread through migrants from Iran and Afghanistan. The images of the quarantines in refugee camps, coupled with employees of National Public Health Organization (NPHO) visiting the facilities wearing special uniforms, further increased the isolation of some migrants while also demonizing them.

Social media

Social media platforms had an increased role for all the stakeholders and across all ITHACA countries in the period 2020-2022. Since the beginning of the pandemic, spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have been **main platforms to launch (emergency) messages, to debate regulations and vaccines**, about to **self-represent** and **connect** with people sharing local, national, or international contexts.

Social media have played a pivotal role, **facilitating both communication and access to information in multiple languages and in a more immediate way**. Moreover, **migrants and associations** often used social media to **strengthen information and awareness-raising campaigns** about isolation or the difficult conditions faced by undocumented migrants (and) within refugee camps and reception centres. In countries like Azerbaijan, social media proved to be the main source of information about social life in otherwise isolated villages. Digital tools and social media have become a channel for activities previously carried out differently, sometimes even by **forcing the rules**: an example shared by a lawyer is their use for sending official documents by isolated people with difficult access to public offices or to institutions, public offices, and reception centres. Digital tools and social media have been for many people the main tool through which they managed to **carry on with their work.**

Facilitating the link between migrant associations and NGOs, social media also helped with **overcoming isolation.** Many participating practitioners in the field of migration reported that **social media had become the most effective tool to reach the authorities.**
On the other hand, refugees and undocumented migrants tended to avoid social media in order to avoid exposition to the authorities, and therefore **found themselves even more isolated.** Social media contributed to the circulation of stereotypes and fake news about migrants, especially related to supposed scientific information, leading to **failure to treat scientific findings in a nuanced way.**
That being said, platforms like TikTok could also be a tool for migrants to **respond to problematic tropes** in the mainstream media.

"People were typically reliant on social media for their impressions concerning the virus and migrants, which resulted in confused, unclear and irresponsible views." (Local PCE, Azerbaijan)

"A survey was carried out among exiled students and provides quantitative and qualitative information on the effects of the pandemic among them. Among the students, there was a massive investment in social media, which made it possible to set up mutual aid groups; social networks were invested in a differentiated manner according to age or cultural and political interests." (Local PCE, France)

"The actors themselves adopted a strategy of seeking invisibility in public spaces due to the increased presence of authorities monitoring the movements of individuals in the context of the pandemic. It is therefore to social networks that these minority refugees have turned to rely on self-help groups, to keep themselves informed or to stay in touch with their relatives/friends in their countries of origin." (online contribution from Amman during the Local PCE in France)

"Grassroots association IoVaccino and its Facebook page proved an invaluable tool in reaching millions of Italians on the subject of the vaccine campaign who had not been effectively reached by official sources of information." (National PCE, Italy)

"Despite all efforts, social media started out as a chaotic source of information, whether true or false, and is now slowly becoming a more organized and reliable channel of communication. The beginning of the pandemic was marked by intra-community solidarity and self-organization by using social media - WhatsApp mainly - to help each other during the pandemic. On the other hand, hatred was thriving on social media." (National PCE, Tunisia)

KEY FINDINGS 2

Self-representations of migrants in COVID-19 times

While **social media** could be mobilized as a tool to interact with local communities, to disseminate health-related information, and keep contact with distant and closer (diasporic) communities, **they did not substantially change public perceptions of immigrants.**
Migrants sometimes managed to influence public opinion through **acts of solidarity** aimed at society (rather than through social media): for example, the Italian Chinese community donated thousands of masks to the public, improving their image in a period of remarkable antagonism against foreigners.
The mainstream media's representation of asylum seekers and refugees, however, did not change substantially.
In some cases, the pandemic led to a **reshaping of migrants' identity** in relation to their origin countries. In Italy especially, in the first phase, they were often considered as witnesses of the tragic developments of COVID-19 when the country was among the first to be overwhelmed by the virus.
In a second phase, as COVID hit these countries as well, they were asked for advice. In a way, COVID made it so that some migrants, for the first time, felt themselves Italians by their own relatives abroad. At the same time, in most cases they were still seen as foreigners by Italians.

Most of the partners reported that the use of social media caused a further structural change: being the main medium to stay in contact, migrants and vulnerable persons usually unfamiliar with technology were obliged to **learn the "lingua franca" of smartphones and platforms.**
At the same time, in countries such as Italy and Morocco, refugees and undocumented migrants still tended to avoid this communication tool to tell their own personal stories because of **fear of the authorities.**
Migrants reported how their greatest fear was to be prosecuted by the police for having no legal documents.

Beyond any media representation and self-representation, for the same reason migrants whose legal position was not completely settled had bureaucratic difficulties in accessing vaccinations and healthcare.

KEY FINDINGS 3

How institutions and migrants communicated

An unprecedented challenge in terms of institutional and scientific communication occurred worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemics. In regard to communicating to and with migrants, this challenge has posed further obstacles, while offering new opportunities to learn remediation measures even when outside of emergency times.

As very often in emergency situations, during the pandemic the information travelled also through **bottom-up** channels rather than *top-down*, especially at the local level, confronting local authorities and institutions with a double barrier, but also with the opportunity to reveal successful experiences and establish new alliances.

Barriers

The **high level of uncertainty** and the complexity of the health-related **content** have been a huge barrier in conveying the right information on protection measures, safe behaviours and access to healthcare for local, national and international institutions.

Things were complicated by linguistic issues: very often, institutional communication **did not envision multilingual and multicultural information**, thus creating language barriers for migrants and further feeding the sense of distrust towards institutions, as well as the spread of mis- and dis-information.

More generally, given the crucial role of the internet and social media in informing the whole population, a further structural barrier emerged: the deepening of the **digital divide**. Those did not have access to digital tools and did not have digital skills, could not access information in real time and services, and was pushed even further to the margins of society. On the other side, the forced use of online tools improved the level of literacy of non-digital-savvy individuals. Finally, a relevant structural obstacle to an effective two-way exchange between migrants and institutions is legal: the **lack of protection for migrants' confidentiality**, which restrained their willingness to share their testimony or even dare ask for help or counsel from local institutions, especially in the case of refugees and asylum seekers.

"When the first measures related to the pandemic/lockdown were announced – i.e. to stay at home, keep distance, wash hands - migrants did not always receive the information in the same way as natives. Consequently, some measures were not implemented as well in migrant communities, as communication in their language did not explain the local protocols."
(National PCE Greece)

"How to communicate that one is sick but asymptomatic in case of profound cultural barriers? How to communicate the need of a green pass?"
(Local PCE Italy)

"Oral, face-to-face information is more effective. Other tools were used: the organizations used posters that addressed different population groups and online discussions.
The Municipality of Athens gathered migrants' questions and then organized an online discussion with the Ministry of Health to answer them.
However, access to information is not a luxury but a right. Therefore, a national strategy that would include migrant populations is needed."
(Greece)

Mediators

Two main factors facilitated the exchange of information during the pandemic: media channels – especially social media; and practitioners working and volunteering in NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in direct contact with the migrants on the field.

As for **media channels**, besides the powerful social media and "Stay at home" websites, other effective information vehicles were TV programs/news, radio, podcasts, hotlines, posters and, in some cases, megaphones along the areas of major migrant settlement. Besides the social media, audio-video messages proved particularly effective.
To overcome the language obstacles faced by institutions in the first phase of the pandemic, a great effort was made in a second phase by intergovernmental organizations as well as states and local organizations. Social media proved to be an important tool through which to communicate vaccination campaigns to migrants.

All these channels have adapted to discussions of misinformation. After the gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, more on-field interventions are being carried out to reduce the overwhelming and exhausting flow of online information.
The presence of facilitators in the field was key: responding to deficiencies with institutional communication to migrants and migrant communities abou vaccination campaigns and government measures, **NGOs and CGOs** contributed to fill this vacuum, thus playing a crucial role in information exchange.
Officially translated information to migrants were therefore conveyed by people whom migrants trust, in a common effort that included local authorities.
This confirms the evidence collected by the main international organizations operating in the field of migration and health (Charania, 2020): **engagement with community members and organisations** is the most effective way to co-design interventions to address migrant and refugee needs.

Related, the importance of NGOs and other organizations operating in direct contact with migrants confirmed the relevance of these actors as **data collectors and keepers** regarding migrants, including personal information.

"These establishments are a solid link between migrants and governmental institutions; they convey the instructions of local authorities directly to migrants, which makes them the most available and credible sources of information.
The coordination between different social players and public institutions helped promote communication between the government and the migrants"
(Tunisia)

"Representatives of migrant associations are concerned about the official data provided by the institutions, and the data that they collect in the field.
This relates to the migrants' representation in the mainstream media as they tend to mostly use official, governmental data."
(Morocco)

During the PCEs held in **Italy** both at local and national levels, participants stressed that the lack of institutional communication addressed to migrants was evidenced as a problem even during the pre-pandemic. International and national organizations (UNHCR, ARCI) launched a website to provide information in 14 languages about the COVID-19 emergency to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, explaining hygiene and prevention measures (Lancet Situational Brief, 2020).

- In **Tunisia**, participants outlined the authorities' lack of credibility in relation to migration issues in the last years, even if they showed efforts by renewing migrants' residence cards automatically during quarantines.

- In **Morocco** and **Greece**, representatives of the authorities expressed concern on the matter of communication with migrants during pandemic. In **Morocco**, one PCE stakeholder (from the government) reported that, as part of the National Strategy of Immigration and Asylum (SNIA), governmental campaigns included communication strategies as pre-recorded capsules videos. However, feedback from the migrants' representatives and other stakeholders reports that this policy failed to reach a wide public. In **Greece**, the representatives of the body which coordinated the national strategy against COVID-19 stated that institutions were able to build a sense of trust with those migrants quartered in official refugee camps, unlike with those who were on the move. The Municipality collaborated with NPHO in order to vaccinate the migrants. The City of Athens also created a network of Municipalities in its urban hinterland, in order to exchange experiences and good practices.

- In the **Netherlands**, Public Health Amsterdam (GGD Amsterdam) worked with members of specific immigrant communities to brainstorm how their data should be released – as some of their data linked COVID-19 to specific immigrant communities – in an effort to increase health communication while avoiding ethnic stigma.

- In **France**, migrant students spoke of the impact of the pandemic on the health and working conditions of international students, some of whom did not have the technology (e.g. high-speed internet access) to attend classes or access educational resources. The closure of libraries, parks or train stations had a considerable impact on public internet access.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BETTER COMMUNICATE TO AND WITH MIGRANTS:
What should stakeholders do?

1. **Public communication must be linguistically and culturally accessible to all**

- Enhance the involvement of communities in organizational and decision-making processes and in the analysis of needs
- Target your audience based on their values and what they feel is important
- Take into consideration where your audience consumes information
- Translate the information into all the languages spoken in a territory
- Improve local linguistic-cultural mediation service network
- Communicate in a consistent, brief and unambiguous way
- Employ multiple and relevant dissemination methods: from popular social media (e.g. TikTok to target younger migrants, FaceBook to target older), to more traditional audio-video messages, call centres and advertising activities, participative events for information sharing
- Use existing validated information protocols.

2. **Disinformation and discrimination must be challenged actively**

- Contextualise, address and overcome stereotypical images of migrants
- Turn the narrative frame from "victim-villain-hero" to "people-principles-policies"
- Honor success stories involving healthcare workers, hospitals, and migrant-related organizations.

3. **Institutional and political communication is key**

- Promote and implement intercultural communication at institutional levels
- Deconstruct stereotypes, such as by affirming the right of free movement, or challenging the view that migrants are a drain on institutional resources
- Appreciate the role of mediators, from international NGOs to national and local associations
- Give value to stories of individual migrants as agents of information and policy exchange
- Address problems of "conflicts among rights", for example housing vs health rights
- Improve digitalization in the administrative sector
- Create an official digital database to share data between governments and NGOs and offering information available to the public.

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Contacts

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