

A photograph of a blue metal cup filled with various colored pencils, positioned in the bottom left corner of the cover. The background features several overlapping circles in shades of pink, orange, grey, blue, green, and yellow.

# INTERNATIONAL MIGRATIONS AND (IM)MOBILITIES: IDENTITIES, AGENCY AND VOICE OF REFUGEE BACKGROUND YOUNG ADULTS

PILOT ACTION ACTIVITY HANDBOOK

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# INTRODUCTION

## The NEW ABC project in a nutshell

NEW ABC is a project funded by the European Union's Horizon2020 research and innovation programme. It draws together 13 partners from nine European countries with the aim of developing and implementing nine pilot actions. All NEW ABC pilot actions (activity-based interventions) include children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, but also teachers, families, communities and other stakeholders in education, as co-creators of innovation to empower them and make their voice heard.

If you want to learn more about NEW ABC **this is** the link to the project website where you can find information on the other pilot actions too:

[newabc.eu](http://newabc.eu)

## What is co-creation?

Before we introduce the activities co-created with young people for the *International migrations and (im)mobilities: identities, agency and voice of refugee background young adults* pilot action, we would like to explain in just a few words the basic features of co-creation.

Co-creation is a participatory method used to develop democratic partnerships between researchers and local/community stakeholders. Associated with this pilot, the idea of co-creation is the active participation of young adult asylum seekers in designing and implementing pilot activities.

Co-creation is not simply an academic or intellectual research method but rather an ethical and relational practice based on mutual trust, respect, engagement, participation, responsibility and care as well as oriented to personal and collective transformation and change. The core aim of co-creation is to establish a dialogue between researchers, young adult migrants and stakeholders to advance knowledge of processes of inclusion and integration 'together' in a concrete and noticeable way.



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## What does the pilot action activity manual consist of?

This handbook is a training resource that emerged from the pilot action *International migrations and (im)mobilities: identities, agency and voice of refugee background young adults*. This pilot is about life and migratory trajectories of young adult asylum seekers and refugees across highly complex spatio-temporal configurations, paying particular attention to processes of inclusion and integration through formal (e.g. education, school, work) and informal learning (e.g. social relations and encounters). This pilot action also focuses on the (re)construction of subjectivities ('a person's sense of self') and identities ('who one is' and 'who one is not' in relation to 'others') in interview talk and digital narratives and storytelling.

This pilot is addressed to different social actors—organizations, volunteers, citizen groups, policy makers—actively engaged in the reception and direct assistance of asylum seekers and refugees in the form of health, psychological, legal protection and educational and learning support.

## What does the handbook include?

This handbook is divided into three main parts as follows: Part I provides a general discussion of research pilot design. Part II discusses some of the methodological tools that may be used to carry out research. Part III explores processes of identity repositioning and learning practices through and in asylum seekers' and refugees' digital video narratives and storytelling.



# PART I: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

## Migratory trajectories and mobility and immobility processes

Asylum seekers' and refugees' migratory trajectories are dynamic, changing process-like phenomena; they involve a sequence of decisions taken during the crossing of different spatial, temporal and social contexts. Migratory trajectories are characterized by multiple plans, unexpected events, encounters with specific people, opportunities and constraints (e.g. cultural and social norms, values, institutions).

The main point we want to make in this pilot is that young adult migrants' trajectories are characterized by a continuous and complex dynamic between mobility and immobility.

Migrants moving from one place to another and or/transit through different places cannot be understood without considering immobility or processes of suspension, transit, indeterminacy as well as precarious and vulnerable living conditions. Migrants are subject to obstacles such as the closure of safe passage areas, the lack of money to continue their trips, incarcerations and illness and bureaucratic procedures that stop them in their tracks for short or very extended period.



It is during experiences of immobility, suspension and waiting, however, that migrants might adjust their migratory decisions and aspirations.

Asylum seekers and refugees are subject to structural or institutional forces. When we talk about structural forces we commonly refer to politics, law, economy, education, class differences associated to dominant political (e.g. policies, party programs, speech of politicians), legal (e.g. bills/laws; international agreements; treaties) and media (e.g. news, reports, interviews) discourses or ideas, concepts, ways of thinking and categorizing migrations.



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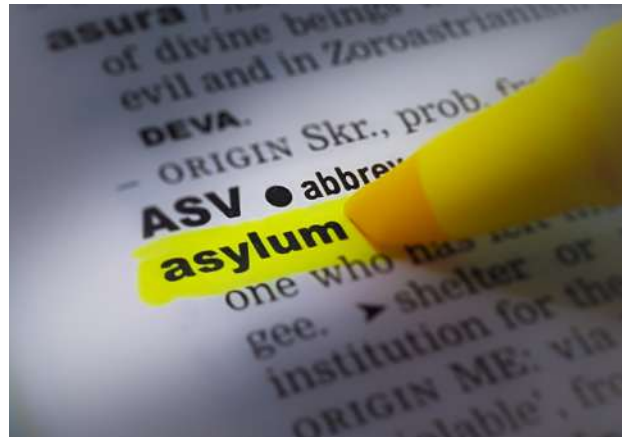


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## Researching asylum seekers and refugees

Carrying out research with asylum seekers and refugees involves sensitive issues such as trauma, physical violence, social isolation, displacement and immobilization.

For this reason, we decided to embrace a research approach which minimizes the distance between researcher and researched. In order to do so, we constructed an open and relational space based on equal coordination of different subjectivities, identities and knowledge(s) opening up the possibility for asylum seekers and refugees' voices to be heard. By the term voice, we refer to possibilities to express one's thoughts, ideas, beliefs as well as capacity to do or say something on a particular issue.



### Pause for thought

Bell Hook's work on *Talk Back*, raises some issues of voice. As you read the text, reflect on how allowing asylum seekers and refugees' 'voice' is strictly linked to ideas of empowerment, agency and self-determination or conscious and intentional capacity to act and make decisions.

**"Moving from silence into speech** is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and **struggle side by side** a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes **new life and new growth possible**. It is that act of speech, of **"talking back"**, that is **no mere gesture of empty words**, that is the expression of **our movement from object to subject-the liberated voice**" (Bell Hook, 1989: 9 [Bold mine]).



**You can write your thoughts here!**



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## Rethinking the dynamics between researcher and researched

Researcher's positionality and reflexivity is one of the key aspects of research design. By the term positionality and reflexivity, we commonly refer to researcher's capacity to critically reflect on his/her thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and values as well as decision and motivation for carrying out research.



### Pause for thought

A good way to start thinking about researcher's positionality and reflexivity is to take a moment to answer the following questions:

- o Why do I do research?
- o What kind(s) of interest motivate(s) me?
- o How can I design my study in such a way so as to carve out a more dialogic space for the researcher and the research participants?
- o Apart from my own voice(s), whose voice(s) are also reflected in the knowledge produced?
- o What are the tensions between these voices (if any) and how have they been included in the knowledge produced?
- o What kind(s) of knowledge will I produce? Is it descriptive? Is it also reflexive and potentially transformative?
- o What is the possible impact of my research (or the knowledge that I shall produce), and for whom? (Lin, 2015).

**Take a moment to write down your own thoughts about your research positionality!**





# PART II: STAGES OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH

In the next section we will consider the stages of conducting research from research questions to sampling and data collection.

## Formulating research questions

Research questions are strictly linked to researcher's personal and professional interests. In this pilot, research questions were oriented to the understanding of global/international migrations, particularly how processes of (im)mobility impact migrants' subjectivities, identities and learning practices and activities.

We developed the following 'basic' research questions:

- o How do asylum seekers and refugees experience and (re)negotiate linguistic, socio-cultural, racial and social class barriers and inequalities in everyday social practices—ways of doing things—and activities? And how do the latter impact on processes of sense of belonging, self-determination, autonomy and human agency?
- o What kind of learning activities, skills and competencies help asylum seekers and refugees to adjust to the new social reality?



### Pause for thought

To reflect on research questions further, read the following text in which Monica Heller and colleagues consider research questions as open-ended, flexible and generative tools allowing researchers to advance knowledge as well as question what is already known about a specific topic.

"In sum, **research questions are actually not closed and specific things.** [...] [O]ne thing doesn't lead to another and then to the obvious next research question to pose. [...] [I]t is always possible that our **initial formulations were based on assumptions that turn out to be wrong, or in any case overly simple.** Then we revise, and check again. **The more we discover, the more we find out what we do not know.** [...] **Research questions need to be shaped and crafted throughout the whole research process**" (Monica Heller et al, 1998: 29-30 [Bold mine]).



Take a moment to write down one or two research Questions relevant to your project!

## Where to start?

The next research step concerns 'situation' and 'sampling' or where to carry out research and with whom.

## Challenges in recruitment process

In our pilot action, the original plan was to recruit young adult migrants, namely asylum seekers and refugees, residing within temporary reception centres for undocumented migrants.

However, sampling process turned out to be a lot more difficult than expected. The main challenges related to recent legislative acts regulating the reception system in Italy and Covid19 pandemic, restricting possibility to enter reception structures. For these reasons, we decided to use personal relations and connections within and beyond temporary reception centres to contact potential research participants personally.

Another relevant challenge concerning the recruitment process was age. It was difficult to construct, as originally planned, a sample of individuals aged between 18-20. The main reason was that most of the young adult migrants we met were afraid 'to show' themselves *openly* and *publicly*; they stated that *this might have put them at life risk*.

## And with whom?

Our sample was made up of 3 male and 1 female young adult migrants respectively coming from different countries—Cameroon, Mali, Yemen, and Afghanistan—aged between 18 and 26 years, who reached Italy via Libya and Turkey obtaining a residence permit for humanitarian reasons. At the time of research, 2 of the young people resided within temporary reception centres, whereas 1 was able to move to a private accommodation.



*The four participants in the pilot action*

Research within contexts of asylum requires a continuous process of (re)negotiation of positions, knowledge and understandings of the world as well as power asymmetries. Thus, we decided to conduct my research by constructing open-ended interviews, which limited my intervention, prioritizing listening and trying to establish social relationships with research participants beyond data collection, for example, by sharing personal information about myself and my family or, when authorized, organizing social activities like cooking to have lunch or dinner together. Within these situated and momentary encounters, I was able to continue my conversation with research participants, while they were able to act in a more relaxed and reflective way.

## Generating data: Interview(s)

Semi-structured and narrative interviews in conversation with digital video narratives and storytelling were adopted to investigate research participants' life and migratory trajectories, subjectivity and identity and learning activities and practices.

We distinguish between different types of interview:

- o structured interviews:* in structured interviews questions are written down in advance.
- o semi-structured interviews:* or open interviews in which respondents are allowed to introduce and discuss their own topics.
- o narrative interviews:* or unstructured and open-ended interviews 'letting the story be told'.



A key aspect of research interviews concerns the formulation of grounded research questions to encourage reflection and improve knowledge about a specific subject. We formulated research questions to understand why young adult migrants decided to move from their countries, and how personal living social and economic conditions, climate change, but also personal perceptions, imaginaries and meaning ascribed to places impacted on their decisions to move and, most importantly, how mobility changed their self-categorization or who they are.

The following explorative questions were used to start the dialogue and stimulate a narrative and storytelling of their migratory trajectories.

- o When did you leave your country?
- o What difficulties did you have to face along your journey to Europe?
- o Can you tell me about your experience in the temporary reception center(s) in which you were hosted?
- o Were you able to establish any social relations outside temporary reception centers? And if yes, what were the major difficulties you encountered?
- o Did you get to interact with the locals?
- o Have you ever had to face or witness episodes of racism or rejection?
- o How did your life change after the migration?
- o How did your migrating affect your identity, or who you are?

[...]

**What further research questions would you suggest for data collection in asylum and refugeehood contexts?**



# PART III: DIGITAL VIDEO NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING

## The co-production of digital video narratives and storytelling

Digital narrative interviews were at the heart of video production. At the beginning of each recorded narrative interview, asylum seekers and refugees were asked to tell the story of their migratory journey without any constraints imposed by pre-determined questions.

The main point made in this pilot is that young adult migrants were co-designers in narrating their autobiographical experiences of migration. The co-production of digital narratives and storytelling had both the potential to empower asylum seekers and refugees by enabling them to decide what to say and why to say it and to gather and spread important ideas, views, social issues on how they remember, re-imagine and narrate personal stories of migration by drawing on and assembling rich multisensory resources such as music, paintings, poetry, voice over, and so on.

Furthermore, digital *videos* were filmed at different locations—temporary reception centres, social cooperatives, private accommodations and neighbourhoods—on different days and at different times of day by a professional film maker. The average duration of videos was between 1 hour and 1 hour and a half.



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## Narratives and stories of change

In this section, we aim to guide you to critical, reflective and practical thinking on research participants' digital narratives and storytelling as sites of personal change and transformation.

In what follows, we present 2 short extracts (click on the pictures to watch them) from the digital video "Voices of Migrants: remembering the past, living the present and imaging the future" introducing Sahar, an 18-year-old girl from Afghanistan, who reached Italy with her family (her parents, her sister and brother) through human corridors from Turkey, and who now resides in a temporary reception centre with her family and attends secondary school.

### Video 1: Sahar's positionality and reflexivity



#### Pause for thoughts

Watch video 1 and reflect on how Sahar's social position, integration and inclusion in a new socio-cultural reality is mainly determined by her capacity to (re)consider her 'past' life *critically and reflectively*.

Write down your reflections here



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## Video 2: Sahar's life and migratory trajectories as transformative



### Pause for thoughts

Watch video 2 and reflect on how Sahar's migratory and educational trajectories ('the possibility to attend school') allowed her to reconsider and, in some way, resist social, cultural and gender roles and relations ascribed to Afghani women and (re)position herself as a confident young woman with a clear idea of who she wants to be in the future.

Write down your reflections here



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# COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION

The final stage of research was designed to disseminate, maximise and provide visibility to the pilot activities (co)produced by researcher(s) and young asylum seekers by considering:

- 👑 **'to whom':** policy makers, local administrators, reception and integration operators, local community and political activists and academics,
- 👑 **'how':** organizing workshops and meetings with people who might have an interest in your research issues, ensuring that research participants and migrant activists are included in the process of dissemination, sharing your results with the scientific community at academic conferences and workshops and
- 👑 **'why'** it is important to share research activities and communicate knowledge produced. The main lesson we learned from our research is that the integration and inclusion of young adult migrants is possible only if we recognize them as active and reflexive social actors who are able to (re)shape one's life, subjectivities and identities through a great variety of (in)formal learning activities and practices.

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**Thank you very much for your attention!**

**We hope it has inspired you to create your own co-production of digital video narratives and storytelling with asylum seekers' and refugees'**



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