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## Refugee Protection and Service Delivery project

### Cultural Mediation and volunteering to assist refugee arrivals

*Discussion paper for a 2.5-day European Exchange Visit  
Milan, 23-25 November 2016*

#### Background

The current refugee situation requires authorities, NGOs and other service providers to reflect and to strategize on how to address gaps in refugee reception and integration, and how best to meet refugees' and migrants' diverse needs. Against a backdrop of limited funds available for refugee assistance, host communities are looking at new and different ways of responding to mixed migration flows. Creative solutions are being developed **to boost reception and integration capacity at local level**, one example being the use of **Cultural Mediators**.

Cultural Mediation consists *in a third party mediating between newly arrived migrants and authorities, helping to facilitate translation and understanding of the host country's culture* (culture being understood here as **"the set of practices and beliefs that is with members of a particular group that distinguishes one group from others."**)<sup>1</sup>

Cultural Mediators can help to:

- increase the *quality of services for migrants in the fields of reception* (including identification and registration) *and integration*, by helping migrants to obtain housing and healthcare and providing feedback to service deliverers to help make their *facilities and programmes more accessible* to newly arrived migrants
- act as a "bridge" between people from two different cultures, providing translation and helping to *interpret cultural norms and concepts* to newly arrived migrants

Cultural mediators can play an important role in addressing mixed migration. The Third EU-Turkey Civil Society Dialogue meeting in Milan, co-organised by ICMC and Caritas Milan; will therefore discuss, with participants from Italy, Turkey and others, on the potential for Cultural Mediators to be used by NGOs and service providers.

We will examine how to address the needs of refugees in accessing mainstream health and education, and how to ensure integration in host communities, particularly in the areas of language, employment and housing. Italy has an established tradition of Cultural Mediation and frontline actors rely on Cultural Mediators to welcome and assist newly-arrived migrants from the moment they step off the boat.

<sup>1</sup> *The Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning: Professional Learning that Promotes Success for All*, by Amy Colton, Georgeta Langer and Loretta Goff





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Although Cultural Meditation can be exercised as a specific profession subject to training and certification, attention will also be paid to the extent to which **mediators can be volunteers, recruited from refugee communities or migrant Diasporas**. In Italy, for example, the role of Cultural Mediator is traditionally filled by *“an immigrant who has lived in the host country for long enough to acquire a good knowledge of the language and cultural codes and to have worked through his/her own experience of migration...”*<sup>2</sup>

We will look, in particular, at how Turkish organisations such as our Civil Society Dialogue partner Human Resource Development Foundation (HRDF) might make use of volunteer Cultural Mediators. Since several years HRDF provides legal counselling, psychosocial and in-kind support to Syrians, other refugees and vulnerable groups in Turkey, and seeks to improve the quality of legal, social and educational services they are offered. As such, HRDF relies on those who can communicate with both service-providers (in Turkish) and service-users (in Arabic). However, faced with a shortage of interpreters with the relevant skills, HRDF has begun to reflect on where to access the necessary skills, and to reach out to universities teaching Arabic. Together we will build upon this reflection.

### Objectives of the Third Civil Society Dialogue

Despite the wide use of Cultural Mediators throughout Europe, there is still a lack of clarity among stakeholders about the term, and the scope of the role varies across organisations and countries

This background paper aims to stimulate reflection, questions and discussion on Cultural Mediation. It is hoped that over the course of the Third EU-Turkey Civil Society Dialogue meeting, through the exchange of lessons learnt, best practices and knowledge, that Turkish and EU actors will arrive together at a common understanding of Cultural Mediation and the potential use of volunteers as Cultural Mediators. We are pleased that recognised scholars and experts from the University of Milan and Council of Europe, will add to the reflection on the concept of cultural mediation.

We will highlight the work of Italian civil society and draw upon grass-roots experience from actors in:

- Belgium (City of Antwerp).
- Bulgaria (Bulgarian Red Cross),
- Croatia (Croatian Red Cross),
- Netherlands (Dutch Council for Refugees)
- United Kingdom (Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre),
- Turkey (HRDF, Dervis Baba and TOG),

<sup>2</sup>Intercultural Mediation as a strategy to facilitate relations between the School and immigrant Families, Catarci, M (2016)





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## 1. Introducing Cultural Mediation: definitions and rationale

Intercultural Mediation has been defined as “a profession whose main objective is to facilitate the relations between natives and foreign people, in order to promote knowledge and reciprocal understanding, to enhance positive relations between people with different backgrounds”<sup>3</sup>.

“Mediation” traditionally refers to the process of bringing about agreement between parties in a conflict, but Cultural Mediation has a related meaning, namely to assist people to communicate when they speak different languages, do not understand certain terms or are dealing with new situations.

Cultural Mediators may take on, among others, the following tasks:

- **Helping migrants at the point of reception (border or transit points, arrivals by boats).** This is important for groups such as women and children who are particularly vulnerable upon arrival. Research from Turkey indicates that female newcomers are at increased risk of rape, violence exploitation<sup>4</sup>
- **Helping migrants to access quality health services.** This is vital as migrants may be ill after long and arduous journeys, or psychologically traumatised as a result of exposure to trafficking, gender-based violence or torture. Many suffer from psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and insomnia<sup>5</sup>. If health staff cannot communicate with patients then they are unable to provide an effective and professional service. Similarly, patients who are unable to communicate cannot explain their symptoms, provide medical histories, ask questions or give consent.
- **Improving migrants’ understanding of the school system and facilitating the participation and involvement of migrant parents in their children’s education.** This might entail translating general information about the school system or liaising between families and school staff to bridge differences between the school culture and the student’s family cultural.
- **Informing migrants** about their socio-economic and political rights and helping migrants to navigate the social security system, court system and legal processes
- **Supporting migrants to integrate the labour market** by providing them with practical advice on CVs, job applications and interviews. As such, Cultural Mediation has the potential to promote rapid integration, increasing migrants’ chances of obtaining gainful employment and reducing their dependence on assistance or the welfare system

<sup>3</sup> Institut de Recherche et d’Information sur le Volontariat (IRIV), October 2009. *T.I.P.S for intercultural dialogue-T-Learning to Improve Professional Skills for intercultural dialogue-Comparative research report.*

<sup>4</sup> [Refugee service provision & access to rights](#), Pinar Celik Arpacı - Eskisehir Bar Association Women’s Commission

<sup>5</sup> According to statistics in a 2015 [report commissioned by UNHCR](#), up to 4% of adults affected by emergencies may suffer from severe mental disorders, whilst up to 20% may suffer from mild mental disorder.





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## 2. Cultural Mediators and interpreters

The term “Cultural mediation” is sometimes used as a blanket term to cover both translation and interpreting and the terms interpreter and cultural mediator can appear synonymous. However, Cultural Mediation is about much more than just linguistics. For migrants, difficulty in communicating may not result solely from language barriers, but also from terminological differences, unfamiliarity with processes, lack of information, or even prejudicial behaviours of service providers in host country institutions. Indeed, the Council of Europe<sup>6</sup> distinguishes clearly between “linguistic” mediating which focuses on language, and “cultural” mediation – promoting understanding of cultural norms.

Whilst an interpreter may have general knowledge of the cultural background of both the host country and the migrant’s country of origin, s/he is not expected to be a cultural expert. Interpreters should, in theory, not go beyond facilitating communication although they may be required to explain cultural differences in order to do so. Mediators, however, require this cultural understanding and other skills.

## 3. Skills Required and Recruitment of Cultural Mediators

Migrants and refugees have a wide range of needs according to their background, age, gender, skills and other factors, and activities to support their reception and integration (and the corresponding skills required of Cultural Mediators to accompany this process) will therefore vary from one country to the next. For example, in Bulgaria, the majority of refugees do not wish to remain, and see Bulgaria as a country of transit: their needs contrast with those of refugees being permanently resettled and who wish to invest in their long-term integration in their new host country. **It is therefore difficult to have a one-size-fits all description of Cultural Mediators.**

There are, however, common **skills required**. Cultural Mediators must, for example:

- A good knowledge of the two languages and cultural codes between which the mediation is carried out, and adequate communication skills;
- be able to work with vulnerable people, display cultural sensitivity, respect and empathy;
- display patience, flexibility and tolerance, and adhere to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and professionalism. This involves setting aside political, religious or other opinions relating to fellow migrants or service providers in the host country, and providing assistance and support based solely on humanitarian needs;
- maintain confidentiality at all times, particularly given the sensitive nature of information relating to asylum claims or health needs of beneficiaries; and
- **be able to deal with emotional stress and to manage conflict.** Mediators are often migrants who have themselves fled violence, persecution and experienced psychological trauma.

<sup>6</sup> The Council of Europe, Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM) project. Available online at: <http://www.coe.int/sl/web/lang-migrants/linguistic-and-cultural-mediation>





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Acting as an intermediary between migrants and authorities can be stressful and Cultural Mediators require an understanding of the limitations of their role. They must recognise the signs of stress in themselves and be willing to seek help to cope with this.

### **Professionalization or Volunteering?**

In France and Italy, Cultural Mediator exists in law as a recognised profession. In Italy, it is possible to attend a course organised by the local authorities or regions, mostly free-of-charge, in order to qualify as a Cultural Mediator. Italian universities have started offering Master's degrees in this field, for example the University of Milan offers specialised degrees in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation. The role of Cultural Mediator has also been referred to as the “new boom aid job”<sup>7</sup> and NGOs such as Save the Children and Doctors without Borders, as well as actors such as the IOM and UNHCR, recruit regularly for the post. However, there is still no standard curriculum among teaching institutions and organisation, and training periods may vary from three-day to two-year programmes.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the prevailing trend towards professionalization, the realities of many civil society actors mean that they are operating in a context of **limited financial and human resources, rely on grass-roots support from local volunteers** and do not have the means to pay salaries of Cultural Mediators. As such, a pragmatic solution to consider would be to **train volunteers to carry out the combined role of interpreter and Cultural Mediator**. Volunteers who are themselves refugees have a unique understanding of the needs of newcomers. They may also carry positive messages about refugees and migrants, thereby helping to improve how they are perceived by receiving communities. In Turkey, where there is increased negative feeling towards Syrian refugees, such awareness-raising can have real potential with respect to improving social cohesion

However, volunteer capacity is not uniform across Europe, and whilst the volunteer sector is highly developed in some countries (procedures for recruitment, training and coordination, existence of volunteer codes of conduct and established working conditions), it may be less structured in others. Whilst this does not detract from the excellent work which volunteers can potentially achieve, the limited capacity of such organisations to provide support for volunteers should be kept in mind and sufficient training provided to bridge gaps in the knowledge and skills of volunteer Cultural Mediators.

In light of the capacities required of Cultural Mediators, and realities of the contexts in which many civil society actors are operating, it is necessary to reflect on ideas for recruitment of Cultural Mediators. Although this may vary across countries and contexts, universities and teaching institutions are a good source of potential skills. Using students as volunteers is not only resource-efficient but also offers students the opportunity to develop skills and expertise for future employment.

Ideas to consider:

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Phelan, Mary and Martín, Mayte (2010) Interpreters and cultural mediators – different but complementary roles. *Translocations*, 6 (1). ISSN 2009-0420





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- **Universities or language schools offering courses in languages which are likely to be spoken by migrants**
- **Universities or teaching institutions offering courses in teaching:** as Cultural Mediation often involves facilitating the relationship between parents, pupils and teachers, volunteers who are studying for the profession of teaching may possess relevant skills.
- **Universities or vocational institutions offering training in social work:** as Cultural Mediators are required to have a solid understanding of the social system, student Social Worker may have relevant skills.
- **Universities or teaching institutions offering courses in nursing or medicine:** a large part of the work of the Cultural Mediator revolves around the dialogue between health users and service providers in order to make health services more accessible to migrants and refugees. Students envisaging a career in the health sector might also have relevant skills and be attracted to the prospect of volunteering as Cultural Mediators.

#### 4. Cultural Mediation in Practice

##### **Italy: Cultural Mediators as the vital link between patients and doctors**

*“Cultural mediators are crucial...They are a vital link between patients and doctors. There are different approaches to medicine and health treatment in the West and in the East. What we consider the heart, other cultures believe is the stomach.”* Andrea Bellardinelli, Italy coordinator for the NGO Emergency

NGOs such as Emergency and Doctors Without Borders, who are responding to the migrant crisis in Italy, rely upon interpreters and Cultural Mediators to facilitate migrants’ access to healthcare as although the right to health is guaranteed by the Italian Constitution, it is hard to find hospital staff who speak migrants’ languages, or even English or French. They are lobbying the Italian government for more interpreters and more Cultural Mediators.

##### **Portugal: Cultural Mediators help prevent early dropouts in schools**

Portugal, traditionally a country of emigration rather than a host country, recently began to develop strategies and action plans to facilitate the integration of migrants. One tool which has proved successful in neighbourhoods of Lisbon with high migrant populations (coming from Brazil, Portuguese-speaking African countries and Asia), has been the use of Cultural Mediators in school.

A joint resolution in 2000 classified the use of socio-cultural mediators at schools as an extremely positive intervention for the reinforcement of the relationship between families and schools, intercultural dialogue, educational success and for the decrease of early dropout rates.





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### ***Sweden: better communication between migrant mothers and midwives***

The association Födelsehuset ran a project aimed at strengthening Somalian and Ethiopian migrant women's health to address claims that migrant women do not receive the same quality of healthcare as Swedish women. This was deemed to be due to structural discrimination in the health care system, a lack of communication with health staff and cultural differences. Women of migrant backgrounds with good knowledge of the Swedish language were therefore recruited to provide information and assist communication between newcomers and nursing staff. The project created better communication between midwives and mothers, and better interaction in the delivery room. It also led to a reduction in the use of painkillers during delivery, increased patient confidence in the Swedish healthcare system, and a better understanding by healthcare staff of migrant mothers' needs.

### **5. Questions for reflections sessions / breakaway groups to consider**

- Is it possible to define Cultural Mediation? In your specific context, how would you define Cultural Mediation?
- Do you already use Cultural Mediators, and if not, where might you make use of them? How would you identify people who could act as Cultural Mediators?
- Is it necessary to move towards specific, standardised training for Cultural Mediators? Are there any aspects of training which would need to be emphasised more in one context / country as compared to another?
- Is it appropriate to use volunteers and interpreters as Cultural Mediators? If so, what training needs might they have and which skills may they need to acquire?
- What ethical challenges may Cultural Mediators come across and is it necessary to develop codes of ethics for Cultural Mediators?
- How might Civil Society recruit and train Cultural Mediators in Turkey in particular? Would there be an interest to work with universities and/or other bodies to develop specific training/curriculum?

