9 Box-ticking exercise or real inclusion?

Challenges of including refugees' perspectives in EU policy

Robert Larruina and Halleh Ghorashi

Introduction

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen significant movements of individuals from their countries of birth due to natural disasters, economic inequality, war, and political conflicts. This era has been called 'the era of mobility' (Urry 2007) or 'the age of the refugee' (Said 2001:173). Since 2000, migrant reception and integration has been one of the most significant topics in contemporary political and public debates in Western society, especially in Europe and the United States. And once migrants and refugees have overcome all the legal and formal obstacles to settling in their host societies, their journey is far from over. As Priya Kisson (2010: 4) states, 'Arriving to safety often entails a dramatic devaluation of refugees' human capital and social status: a flight from persecution to destitution.' Refugees face challenges of equal participation and inclusion in their new societies (Ghorashi 2015). These challenges are related to the (often subtle but sometimes blatant) exclusionary mechanisms ingrained in practices and categories of thought that limit equal participation and recognition of migrants' contributions. Including migrant voices in ways that make a difference is a fundamental part of the core values of democratic societies (Ghorashi 2010a). In line with this, Iris Young (2006) connects two principles of social justice to the very fundamentals of democracy: the right to self-determination and the right to self-development. The first principle is related to individuals' opportunities for equal access to societal resources, and the second is connected to their freedom to pursue life in their own ways. However, to ensure these opportunities and freedoms do not bring harm to others, they have to remain within pertinent legal and moral frameworks (Ghorashi 2010a).

Since 2015, refugees' struggles to cross European borders have shown a different side of the era of mobility, one that accentuates the interface of mobility with inequality and shows the paradoxes in governing mobility and border. The reception and integration of migrants and refugees has therefore become a much-debated issue among academic researchers and policy-makers (Feischmidt, Pries, & Cantat 2019; Larruina, Boersma, & Ponzoni 2019). Despite different policy approaches (from target group to mainstream,

generic policies) (Jacobs & Rea 2007; Scholten et al. 2017), most countries adopt a ‘top-down’ approach to integration (Korac, 2003) on the national level (Scholten 2018). Nonetheless, the top-down, state-centric approach is currently shifting towards a multi-level governance approach in which increasing prominence is given to local governance (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, & Scholten 2017).

Regardless of the approach taken, existing integration policies consider the experiences and needs of migrants and refugees. An example of multi-level governance that tries to consider the central role of migrants and refugees is the European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB, also called the ‘Board’ in this chapter). This pilot is an initiative of the Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees (from now on, ‘the Partnership’) and is financially supported by the Open Society Foundations (European Commission n.d.; Open Society Foundations 2019). The EMAB’s aim is to include former migrants’ and refugees’ voices in European policymaking and thereby contribute to their advocacy activities (Larruina & Berg 2018). Though the EMAB advises the Partnership, it is not part of that collective. Its ultimate goal is to propose and implement ways for better managing the integration of migrants and refugees, considering cities’ needs and challenges in particular. The Partnership, on the other hand, includes cities and countries as well as European associations.

This chapter discusses our study of the EMAB’s initial work, focusing on the possibilities and constraints the members encountered in their efforts to contribute and bring their perspectives and experiences to the Partnership. Despite the EMAB’s name, eight of the nine initial members had refugee backgrounds, and its activities were strongly focused on refugee integration policies; therefore, we see this case as an example of refugee inclusion. Our study was guided by the following question: What are the challenges and opportunities of including refugees’ perspectives in EU policy? By answering this question, we contribute to understanding of the complexities of including lesser-heard voices in policymaking.

After a theoretical discussion, we present methodological reflections and then elaborate on the EMAB’s experiences. The final section discusses the implications of our data.

Power, participation, and co-creation

A major debate about the challenges and opportunities in the creation of spaces for inclusion, spaces that create chances for refugees’ experiences and expert perspectives to tackle the blind spots of policy, is to what extent these spaces are real in their inclusionary promise and do not remain a mere symbolic practice. In the following, we present theoretical approaches of visible and invisible forms of power and discuss various concepts (such as deep democracy and co-creation) related to the conditions of inclusion.

Visible and invisible power

How should scholars understand the challenges of including refugees' perspectives within the complex structures where EU policy is made? Inclusion always involves power relations; however, there are many approaches to power in the academic literature (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998). Lukes's (1974) three-dimensional power is useful for exploring several ways that power is at play. The first dimension of power emphasizes decision-making on matters involving a visible conflict of interests (Lukes 1974: 15). Consequently, the most influential actors in society are those who win the majority of conflicts (Dahl in Lukes 1974: 12–13). The second dimension, which is based on Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) work, recognizes the way in which decisions are prevented from being taken on issues involving a clear conflict of interest (Wilson & Thompson 2001). According to Bachrach and Baratz (1962), problems that do not arise on the political agenda can be just as important as those that do. The third dimension takes the process of non-decision-making further and is about hegemonic power, in which the status quo is not questioned but taken for granted. A framework that considers all three dimensions of power is relevant for understanding power struggles in the decision-making process. It allows the incorporation of tensions that emerge in the policymaking arena (first dimension), actions and omissions that give shape to the establishment of priorities (second dimension), and actions and omissions that form the perceptions, understandings, and preferences of the relevant actors (third dimension).

To these, we add a fourth dimension of power – discursive power. Hegemonic power (Lukes's third dimension) is seen as domination by certain groups, assuming that there are powerful and subordinated groups. A discursive approach to power argues that all individuals are normalized in their actions by the power of dominant discourses regardless of their hierarchical position (see also Ghorashi & Sabelis 2013). In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) elaborates the concept of normalization through his description of disciplinary power. Normalization, according to Foucault, involves the construction of idealized norms of conduct that gradually become taken for granted. In other words, individuals refer to a norm that could become an ideal they strive towards. In that sense, disciplinary power normalizes individuals so that they eventually speak, think, and act in similar ways (Lilja & Vinthagen 2014). Disciplinary power can be seen as a system of knowledge that understands the individual as an 'object to be known in relation to others who can be known' (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014: 109). For Foucault, disciplinary power has not only inhibiting and restraining characteristics but also productive characteristics that make things happen. This idea is intrinsically related to the notions of biopower and governmentality. Bio-power has the capacity to gradually turn people into subjects and is exercised by state organizations and institutions (i.e. police, church, army) and the like. Therefore, normative power is a form of power present in everyday practices through which

individuals are categorized and form their identities. To study power, then, we must study how 'subjects are gradually, progressively, really, and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.' (Foucault 1994: 35).

We also added Gaventa's (2016) definition of participatory spaces to investigate the visible and invisible ways the four dimensions of power manifest themselves in the amount of space that is created to include less privileged perspectives (from no access to creating their own spaces). Gaventa elaborates on three types of participatory spaces for citizen initiatives: closed spaces, invited spaces, and created spaces. Closed spaces are where decisions are taken by policymakers without input from other stakeholders. This is the space where elected representatives or governments act without any broader consultation. Invited spaces constitute a shift from closed to open spaces. Here, stakeholders/actors are invited to participate. Finally, created spaces are shaped by stakeholders with less power or influence over a particular issue. The interplay between closed, invited, and created spaces brings challenges for citizen and minority group engagement with governmental organizations because merely participating in these spaces does not guarantee that marginalized groups will be allowed to have meaningful contributions. Thus, despite the proliferation of new opportunities for citizen and migrant engagement in different policy processes (Gaventa, 2016), their participation has not necessarily led to better refugee inclusion. However, those invited by 'dominant groups' could try to increase their power by demanding transparency and accountability and more democratic structures (Gaventa 2016).

Quality of participation: from tokenism to co-creation

To examine the quality of participation in various spaces, we used Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which distinguishes three notions: tokenism, co-creation, and co-option. Arnstein's ladder consists of eight different levels, divided into three groups, and the power citizens have increases as one moves up the ladder. The bottom steps of the ladder, manipulation, and therapy, make up the non-participation group. The middle steps – informing, consultation, and placation – represent a higher group of participation: tokenism. Here, participants get the opportunity to make their voices heard, but their involvement often has no impact (Arnstein 1969).

Zimmer (1988) and Laws (1975) elaborate how the term 'token' refers to a mere symbolic presence without genuine impact. Simmel (1950) and Hughes (1945) speak of 'stranger' and 'outsider,' respectively. They refer to an individual who matches the relevant profile to enter an organization or group but does not have 'auxiliary characteristics' that are common to the individuals in those groups (e.g. race, sex, ethnicity). Those seen as strangers or outsiders are never permitted by 'insiders' to be full members of the group,

and they risk being rejected if they move too far from the special 'niche' assigned to them (Hughes, 1945; Simmel, 1950). The term 'token' has also been used to refer to individuals who are admitted to a group because of their difference from others in the group. In many situations, the token person is used as proof that the group does not discriminate against such people (Zimmer 1988).

Kanter (1977: 210–12) incorporated the concept of token in her theory of organizational behavior, reporting three interactional perceptual tendencies that lead to negative token dynamics: visibility, contrast, and assimilation. Visibility happens when the token gets attention and becomes more present than the dominant group alone. This leads to what Kanter calls a 'larger awareness share' because tokens, and the group they belong to, make the dominant group they have joined more visible. Contrast or polarization occurs when individuals from the dominant group exaggerate their differences with tokens (Kanter 1977). This mainly happens when the dominant group is hesitant about how to deal with the token, and it may eventually lead to the token's isolation. Lastly, assimilation is the process by which tokens are encapsulated into stereotypes or common generalizations about the token's group. 'So tokens are, ironically, both highly visible as people who are different and yet not permitted the individuality of their unique, non-stereotypical characteristics' (Kanter 1977: 211–12).

Token-related behaviors may lead to co-option, assimilation, taking, or winning over into a larger or established group (Coy 2013). Widely used in social and policy studies, co-option refers to the diverting in into a role different from the original one. It refers to the actions by which cooperation and collaboration with official organizations and inclusion (in the polity) turn into situations where the individuals or organizations invited to participate lose their original purpose and innovative essence. In this we see a clear example of the willingness to include, which ultimately turns into exclusion through co-option, or assimilation, of potentially different perspectives. This is partly due to the paradox of survival. For less privileged groups, it is essential to show that their perspective is valuable because it is different, but they often need to be fully incorporated into the system to survive. It is therefore important that scholars address the issues of power, space, and quality of participation together (see Table 9.1) to understand the possibilities and constraints disadvantaged groups face when invited to participate in mainstream spaces.

The final group in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation is 'citizen control,' which comprises the three top steps of the ladder. This group represents the highest degree of citizen participation in and influence on decision-making. There is indeed a noticeable redistribution of power between citizens and those in power. With this model, Arnstein calls for a redistribution of power that enables the 'have-not citizens,' presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future (Arnstein 1969: 216).

Table 9.1 Correlation between participation, tokenism, co-creation, and participatory spaces

Arnstein		Kanter		Gaventa
Participation		Tokenism	Co-creation	Participatory spaces
Citizen control	Citizen control		Citizen as initiator	Created space
	Delegation			
	Partnership	Assimilation/ Co-option	Citizen as co-designer	Invited space
Tokenism	Placation	Contrast		
	Consultation	Visibility	Citizen as co-implementer	Closed space
	Informing			
Non-participation	Therapy			
	Manipulation			

Source: Arnstein (1969), Kanter (1977), Gaventa (2016)

Co-creation, deep democracy, and reflective capacity

Co-option as a concept is especially relevant for studying policy advice and advocacy, since it is a possible outcome of well-intentioned inclusion practices. Concepts such as co-creation and co-production (which relate to Arnstein's citizen control and Gaventa's invited spaces) are alternatives to co-option that respect the agency of marginalized groups and their capacity to adjust and to compromise. Co-creation involves processes of mutual adjustment among different stakeholders and the inclusion of different types of knowledge and perspectives in the policymaking process, but most importantly, it is about the active involvement of end-users (e.g., customers, clients, citizens) in various stages of the creation process (Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers 2013). In the domain of collaborative governance and community involvement, Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers (2013) distinguish three types of co-creation that differ in their degree of citizen involvement. The first type involves the citizen as co-implementer of public services (citizens responsible for some execution tasks). The second type describes the citizen as co-designer. Here, the initiative remains within the public organization, and citizens decide how the service delivery is designed. The third type characterizes the citizen as an initiator and the government as an actor that follows the citizen's recommendations. These variations in public participation and the space for citizen's voices and perspectives are based on discussions of democracy and inclusion.

In her seminal work, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Young (2006) discusses the idea of democratic practices as a means to promote justice, and she calls for a widening and deepening of the idea of the democracy.

Deep democracy goes further than the traditional notion of democracy, which is characterized by the rule of law, promotion of liberties, and fair elections of governments, and suggests some steps to enact this democratic deepening through inclusion. Young states that ‘the normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes’ (Young 2006: 5). This means the chances that democratic decision-making practices will stimulate justice and the inclusion of collective problem-solving are improved by the presence of diverse groups, opinions, and perspectives (Young 2006: 6–7). Inclusive democratic practices stimulate fairer outcomes because they allow individuals the opportunity to influence others about the virtues of their claims and to negotiate their interests, which might change during the negotiating process.

Critical diversity scholars argue that the development of inclusive space requires reflective capacity to counteract normalized forms of exclusion (e.g. Rast & Ghorashi 2018; Ghorashi & Ponzoni 2014; Zanoni & Janssens 2007). Space for reflectivity can be created in personal encounters and at group, organizational, and societal levels (Ghorashi & Sabelis 2013; Ghorashi 2014; Ghorashi 2017). In these spaces, participants are willing to question and disrupt historically rooted images about the self and the other that are informed by the dominant discourses, and they are willing to engage meaningfully with others whose lifeworlds – that is, their experiences, activities, and social contacts – are quite different than their own. Only then can invited spaces become inclusionary and stimulate possibilities for creating spaces, in which both normative and hierarchical power are challenged and new forms of connectedness based on equality between all participants are stimulated.

Research approach and methods

Access to the Board and the Partnership was possible thanks to the municipality of Amsterdam, the Partnership coordinator, which commissioned a research report (Larruina & Berg 2018) about constraining and enabling elements for the Board’s existence. This research was conducted in the context of the Refugee Academy, an expertise laboratory at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The data collected for the report was complemented with other documents produced after our fieldwork ended. For this qualitative case study (Baxter & Jack 2008; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2015), we conducted semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The interviews, conducted between May and June 2018, allowed us to get participants’ (Board and Partnership members) insider views on their experiences with the Board’s activities. The interviews were mostly conducted through Skype and were held in English or Dutch. Most respondents were invited through an introductory email with a tentative topic list, which was

developed in cooperation with the Partnership's coordinator. We accessed other respondents through a secondary source: interviews conducted in January 2018 by a European Studies student from the University of Amsterdam, who researched the Board's potential influence on the European arena and its policymaking process. Use of these transcripts, approved by the student and the Partnership coordinator, was done to avoid overlapping respondents. We conducted nine interviews, four with Board members, and five with members of Partnership organizations. An additional two Partnership members were included through the secondary source. Respondents requested absolute anonymity; therefore, all references to age, gender, ethnic or religious background, and place of birth, residence, and work have been omitted or altered.

Observations were made during Board and Partnership activities, including two Board meetings (in Brussels and Amsterdam) and the Partnership's annual meeting (in Brussels), which included the Board. These observations (approximately 80 hours) provided data for understanding the 'totality' of the context where the Board operated (Moeran 2009). We also analyzed public and internal documents (Bryman 2012) produced by different parties involved in establishing the Board. While the public documents were available on the Partnership's website, the internal documents were distributed on a research platform managed by the municipality of Amsterdam (Open Research Amsterdam), which was only accessible to the researchers and the Partnership.

By triangulating the data from the interviews, observations, and document analysis, we were able to better understand and interpret the research situation. Our aim was to identify recurring topics and develop an overview of the different views, perceptions, and opinions of the Board and the Partnership. To systematize and analyze the data gathered, we used the grounded theory approach (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton 2013). The following empirical findings are based on selected quotes from the interviews, observations, and documents that show common patterns and topics pertinent to our research question.

Empirical findings

This section presents the EMAB's challenges and opportunities 'to better manage the involvement of immigrants and refugees in policy-making processes' (European Commission 2019). We show how tokenization – and co-option-related mechanisms – have made it difficult for the Board to provide genuine policy advice despite the potential opportunities that the Board and the Partnership have.

Logistical-organizational challenges

The first phase was marked by delays in the Board's formation and the beginning of its activities. During the first week, the members were asked to

get to know each other, to be trained by different NGOs and instructors, and to be introduced to the rest of the Partnership during different official activities. However, some activities were rescheduled or postponed.

During our first field observation and from interviews and some unplanned conversations, we observed elements concerning sustainability (funding) and bureaucratization. The need to secure funding to guarantee the Board's continuation after the initial funding by Open Society Foundations was a significant concern for the Board's initial work and its long-term vision.

The challenge is, what happens if they don't get the funding? What happens if they are not secured? How can they be? I think that we have to think within the Partnership, to find a way to really make this mechanism self-sustainable. If it's not through EU funding, we have to find another way. [...] Because people now are very enthusiastic, they want to do a lot, and this enthusiasm is good, but it can be really dampened, very easily. Whenever they get stuck in the bureaucracy of the European machine.

(Partnership 8)

This organizational respondent is aware of the crucial importance of funding to guarantee the Board's existence, something echoed by Board members as well. It indicates not only a concern for practical matters but also an engagement with the new group being formed: they were concerned about the immediate implications as well as the initiative's continuity after the current Board members are gone. Though we could not learn about the financial arrangements for the Board, we know that Open Society Foundations provided funding for only the first phase of the Board. Similarly, the Board and the Partnership showed concern about the excessive administrative procedures, in which policy advice is contextualized, and both were hesitant about the potentially excessive formalization of the Board's work. This fear had already materialized during the Board's first week, when excessive demands had a negative impact on the Partnership's planned introductory activities. Concerns about funding and being part of the administrative structures were clearly relevant for establishing the Board, but also for creating the right environment for building cooperative structures and for the Board's capacity to become a self-led group. However, after the researchers gave feedback to the Partnership coordinator, these concerns were clarified and resolved.

Opportunities for co-operation

Narratives provided by both Board and Partnership members make it clear that both sides are determined to take actions and work together towards their common objectives. One respondent from a Partnership organization explains that they support having refugees work with them, instead of designing policies for refugees.

I am always in favor of sitting around the table with the people that we are talking about, and to not just make all kinds of beautiful, heavenly-looking texts behind a computer that nobody reads anyway. It is really about being with the people for who you are designing papers, to sit around the table with them and hear from them, 'Does it make sense?' or to ask them, 'What do you want?'

(Partnership 7)

Similarly, a Board member elaborates on the possibilities that the collaboration with the Partnership presents. They discuss how earlier approaches to making policies for rather than with refugees had failed, and therefore collaboration between policymakers and the targets of those policies is imperative to make substantial contributions.

I mean, they [the Partnership] invited us because they want us. And we want them too. [...] I want some powerful people to be in the same boat with me, you know. And at the same time, to bring a better Europe. If they want to work on more European policies towards integration, they want that because we are the best ones who can tell them what is really the problem. I mean, now the European politicians are aware that without us, they cannot fix the problems. [...] So, it's an opportunity for both sides.

(EMAB 4)

The following respondent goes further by highlighting that the main objective is to collaborate within the Board but also with the Partnership.

I think the main objective is that we are a group of migrants and refugees that work about [sic] different lines or different topics about migrants and refugees. [...] The idea is to work together, to defend very clear ideas in general for migrants and refugees obviously.

(EMAB 1)

All respondents emphasize the importance of having spaces for dialogue and of hearing from the policy-affected group directly. However, it is unclear whether the timeframes provided by the Partnership, and by EU institutions at large, match the Board's ability to deliver what is asked from them.

A respondent from the Partnership goes further in the opportunities for cooperation, explaining how the Board also advises civil society organizations that already have a role in policy advice within the European commission but lack the first-hand recommendations.

It might be an option to have some of those people of the Board work with the cities that are within XXXX working on migrants and refugees. That would be very interesting. But at the moment, we don't have that. [...]

The Board hasn't worked directly with XXXX, but the Board could do that, and would be highly appreciated.

(Partnership 6)

Here, we see the Board's potential, not only in advising official EU organizations, but also in guiding civil society organizations already interacting with EU bodies. This brings another dimension for possibilities of cooperation and mutual learning between the Board and the network of organizations around it.

Besides acknowledging the Board's need and willingness to work with other stakeholders, our research reveals that the Board and the Partnership agree about their challenges: the negative discourse about refugees and the risk of being tokenized. A respondent from a Partnership organization, a person with extensive experience in policy advice on migration and integration, details what they understand are the main concerns that refugees face:

[Having previously enumerated negative discourse against migrants]. So that's really some stigmatization, I don't know if the term is correct, but you know what I mean, no? [...] So, diversity, pluralism, that's another big challenge, how to make sure that diversity is reflected. Diversity cannot just be non-discrimination, but it should be something more. Proactive inclusion [...]. What I see as pluralism is that all different voices are reflected in society.

(Partnership 7)

This respondent refers to the normalized ideas and perceptions currently surrounding refugees in Europe and how these are intertwined with what diversity and inclusion are. He refers to proactive inclusion as being a form of presence that considers all views and experiences. This is reinforced by a secondary source and by a Board member, both of whom indicate that the Board should also contribute to challenging the prevailing discourse on refugees and migrants.

Something else the Board can do to help is to create a positive narrative. Right now, migration is connected to negative thinking, waves, huge numbers, while in reality, it's not that big. And we need migration because of the greying [aging] population. We could use success stories, role models, etc.

(Partnership 9).

My expectation? A lot. But the thing is that we can't do much, but I really want the Board to act as a true representative of migrants and refugees, and to show the talent and the positive side of refugees. And I really want [sic] we could do something to change the narratives around migration. I really want – we need to change it

(EMAB 1)

Consequently, this extends the Board's aim beyond policy advice and towards an active contribution to changing negative perceptions and challenging normalized views and ideas. The strategies suggested by these respondents are intended to construct a positive narrative, yet they put the Board at risk of putting too much emphasis on appearances and media presence. This approach could result in the Board's developing a symbolic presence (peril of tokenism) rather than investing in a more significant contribution. However, the importance of creating counter-narratives is also stressed by other Partner organizations, as one Board member clearly describes.

I am so happy, and I would like if [*sic*] we could bring even a little change. It will be a [*sic*] really great achievement. Because it is not easy when you are talking with policymakers in Europe, and they [*are*] mostly forced by political will and so on. If you change something, it is really great.

(EMAB 2)

This Board member focuses on what can be done between symbolic presence versus significant contribution; they speak about the gratification of small actions within the complexity of policymaking at the EU level. This fragment also shows that the respondent is aware of how daunting the challenges and intricacies of the mechanism around his contributions are, yet he remains determined to bring a different perspective.

The challenges of co-operation: ticking the box and being taken seriously

The main aim of our research was to investigate whether the EMAB members' perspectives have been truly included or solely displayed publicly as a showcase. Interviews with some of the Partner organizations reveal doubts about the Board's influence on policy and concern that those voices are not being taken seriously. A respondent from a Partnership organization even compares the Board with a box-ticking exercise, an activity performed to serve a practicality rather than to accomplish something. 'The Board is now only being used as a box-ticking exercise for the Partnership' (Partnership 11).

In line with this, when asked how the Board's presence and advice could be treated with importance and with the attention and respect it deserves, a Board member responds:

We will keep following them [the organizations they advise]. [...] Because if we give the recommendations regarding to do something, and we don't see them responding, I mean, we will need to put more pressure [*sic*]. And this is going to be important with the relation we will make on a political level. [...] Having some politicians supporting us will be something important because sometimes we need to be

invited you know. We cannot just open the door and say we want to sit on [sic] the table with you.

(EMAB 4)

A respondent from the Partnership elaborates further, discussing the Board's promotion and media presence, but concludes that the final answer regarding advice by the Board still remains in the political will of the EU commission.

It depends really on the commission that decides as a whole. So, to take this Board inside the already complex EU decision-making process. [...] I think it's quite difficult. I support the fact the DG HOME can use this body, but it really depends on the willingness to do so. Because otherwise, if they only do that because they want to show that they are working with the target group, we're not going anywhere.

(Partnership 7)

The following respondent expresses similar sentiments while describing their reservations about the Board's success in a more graphic way.

So, I am a bit sceptical about it [EMAB]. [...] It depends of course on how ambitious the proposals are, the more ambitious a proposal is, the more it is likely to be watered down or perish. Mmm, so I might be prepared for that, but they [the Board members] know that too. They know how such a bureaucratic order as the EU works.

(Partnership 5)

Apparently, this perception of the Board being a symbolic effort to do a particular thing also prevailed in some of the cities where the Board members now live. Some cities have already suggested one advisory task: namely, determining how to ensure that people with refugee or migrant backgrounds are not being tokenized when asked to participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, this will be one of the Board's focus points (communication with Partnership, May 2018), and it remains a concern for Board and Partnership members alike. It also has implications for the Board's work and the application of their advice.

Challenges in understanding representativeness: the inclusion of different perspectives

Respondents from the Board shared their doubts about how genuine the representativeness of the Board could be considering the context, in which they operate. In this context, the notion of representativeness has two connotations: 1) speaking on behalf of a group or 2) being a sample or an example from that group.

I think we are, as a Board, well represented, but we need to prove that for others too, who are not in the Board. That this Board is representing well. I don't want to say representing, because it is again about who is in the right place to represent us, but let's say, be a voice for many voices of immigrants in Europe.

(EMAB 4)

But the thing is that we can't do much, but I really want the Board to act as a true representative of migrants and refugees and to show the talent and the positive side of refugees. And I really want [sic] we could do something to change the narratives around migration.

(EMAB 2)

The second respondent links representativeness with the capacity – as well as the inability – to challenge dominant discourses. While the emphasis on representation shows understanding and commitment to the Board's role, it is not clear what the second respondent means by 'true' representativeness. Similar sentiments were expressed by other Board members, who expanded on the capacity to represent as being the ability to speak on behalf of a group.

Another respondent discussed how he does not like to define himself as a refugee, but he does not have another option within the context he operates. This Board member also feels he is a representative in the sense that he speaks on behalf of the diversity of migrants, rather than being a sample of the refugee population.

Okay, I don't like to describe myself as a refugee, but I have to. I feel like I have to because I am working for refugees, and I'm like, kind of, you know, representing them, or I voice, I'm a voice for refugees. And that's why I have to say that I'm a refugee. [...] I thought that I used to understand them, but it is totally different. No one can understand, you know, others unless you're in the same situation.

(EMAB 3)

This respondent clearly states that they do not like to frame themselves as a refugee, but they are directly and indirectly forced to do so in order to have a valid space to speak on behalf of other refugees. The documents and interviews reveal that the Board and the Partnership are searching for representatives. However, the question is how the notion of representation relates to the inclusion of perspectives from groups who are targets of policy. Are refugees' perspectives, which are influenced by their lived experiences and their varying networks, enough to make the present policies more inclusive?

Actions and absence of reflexivity

In December 2018, at the time of our last observation, during the annual Partnership conference in Brussels, the Board presented the initial findings of a report based on an online survey (for the final report, see EMAB 2019). During the conference, the Board and its work were mentioned several times by the EU commissioner and other authorities. This produced immediate reactions on Twitter and other social media channels. Following the morning presentations from members of the Partnership, the Board presented its work in one of the many afternoon workshops. Civil society organizations and junior members of the Partnership were the main attendees. No commissioners or recognizable decision makers attended the workshop.

While the effect of the Board's report within EU institutions is outside the timeframe of this article, its introduction section shows that after half a year of EMAB's work, emphasis on representation (as being a sample of) is still present.

Since its establishment in March 2018, the EMAB has sought to represent and defend the interests of migrants and refugees in Europe.

(EMAB 2019: 3)

The consultation demonstrates that a vast reservoir of expertise exists among migrant and refugee representatives. Currently, experts with migrant and minority backgrounds are severely underrepresented in EU institutions and decision-making.

(EMAB 2019: 8)

The report does not mention concerns about tokenism and the need to be taken seriously nor does it indicate training or strategies to deal with these issues. The introduction elaborates on the Board's strengths, yet it fails to go beyond topics already widely discussed at research and policy levels.

The Board aims to amplify the perspectives of refugees and migrants in policy debate and contributes to improving integration policy by providing recommendations from local and grassroots organizations to policymakers on all relevant levels. [...] The consultation focused on eight areas: integration, access to the labor market, housing, higher education, participation, the situation of unaccompanied minors, micro-credit, and the EU Action Plan on Return. Board members chose these topics as key issues based on the members' first-hand experience.

(EMAB 2019: 3)

This statement explains that the topics in the report were chosen based on the direct experiences of the Board members. However, it does not mention the danger of having a mere symbolic presence of migrant organizations at

local and EU levels. While there is an appeal for ‘structured participation’ (p. 8), the report’s conclusions do not add anything new to this matter.

From the EMAB’s experience, governments and organizations need to regard participation as a right rather than a gift. To be meaningful, these efforts must include resources for participation, including for self-led refugee and migrant groups, so that newcomers can contribute to effective and sustainable policymaking.

(EMAB 2019: 8)

This report is important because it is the first of its kind at the European Commission level. However, it risks making the Board visible yet unable to trigger mechanisms that unsettle normalizing practices. The production of this document therefore presents a paradox: it delivers something that could potentially be meaningful for the group the EMAB advocates for, but at the same time, it gives a relatively limited amount of time to achieving one of its objectives (and mandate from the Partnership). Although strategies to bring about changes in the prevailing negative discourse on migration and refugees were present in all of our data, they are not present in the report. The mere production and promotion of this document does not mean that the Board will be able to make meaningful contributions to the policy issues the report addresses, since they face many other challenges.

Discussion and conclusion

By studying the challenges and opportunities of the European Migrant Advisory Board, this chapter explored the conditions needed to create meaningful inclusion in policy-making advice. Though the EMAB initially aimed at deconstructing the negative discourses about migrants and refugees and at making its own political integration genuine by avoiding becoming a token, it did not have specific strategies for implementing either of these points. It did achieve a large social media presence, but that also put it at risk of becoming a token. Another achievement was the publishing of a report (EMAB 2019); however, this publication did not bring anything new to the debate on the inclusion of refugees and migrants. Nevertheless, the EMAB’s presence paves the way for possible changes in policy advice on refugees at the European Commission level, something that had been previously absent.

We found that the Board is at risk of falling into ‘the danger of a single story,’ referring to the idea that accounts of success can never be a good alternative to the negative discourse on migrants since both are essentializing and homogenizing (Ghorashi 2016). Board members are caught between providing success stories and carrying the burden of representation, which prevents them from being considered important enough for who they are, for having perspectives and narratives that come from their specific lifeworlds

and their different networks, both of which are quite different than those of policymakers from the dominant group. This is in line with the slogan used in the Refugee Declaration for Effective and Sustainable Refugee Policy – ‘Nothing About Us Without Us!’ which refers to the idea that no policy about refugees should be conceived without their full participation.

In the Netherlands, past attempts to focus on representative bodies of migrants have failed because they assumed group homogeneity, which encouraged representative bodies. This led to competition between these bodies in their claims of speaking on behalf of ‘their community,’ but they also highlighted the impossibility of actually representing the whole community (Schrover 2010). We learn from Dutch history that all attempts to put refugees’ perspectives into a homogenous category of representation will fail, not only because of the heterogeneous reality of the group, but also because of the impossibility to represent such a group. This approach causes refugee participants to doubt their role while it minimizes their potential contributions based on their lived experiences and perspectives. These effects are mainly due to refugees’ positioning in a different network or different phase of life compared to people in decision-making positions. When marginalized groups are invited to a space and then co-opted by the dominant party, the quality of their participation (their specific experiences, perspectives, and networks) is ignored. However, safeguarding the quality and value of their participation can break the mindset in policies normalized by the dominant discourse, which is often disconnected from the lived experiences of the target groups for which such policies are made.

This coincides with Ghorashi (2010b: 89), who emphasizes that ‘the success of any societal participation depends on institutional trust and acceptance of participants’ qualities and inclusion of their perspectives.’ This means that for democratic practices to be inclusive in practice, *spaces*, *conditions*, and *practices* are needed that disturb normalized exclusionary structures. Inclusion in terms of co-creation or co-production of knowledge cannot be achieved solely by creating an inviting space (as a sign of decision-makers’ good will) and intending to be inclusive and to adapt a bottom-up approach. The space needs to include conditions that enable reflexivity towards invisible workings of power and that practice delayed (with patience) engagement with individuals from groups that are not used to being in a negotiating position. It is these kinds of inclusive spaces that allow counter-narratives to reveal themselves; these spaces enable a connectedness between the lifeworld of marginalized groups and the system world of the policymakers who want to include them. Such spaces enable the imaginations of people in power (Lukes 1974) to envision what it means to become a refugee, disconnected from the past, not fully connected to the present and uncertain about the future. This imaginary connectedness among different participants and stakeholders in an inclusionary space is the first step towards reflection on exclusionary structures and joint attempts to change those structures.

In our case study, the Board members are defined by their migration experience, their networks that they bring to the policymaking field, and their professional and educational knowledge. Yet these qualities are caught up in token-related mechanisms. Not acknowledging the tensions, the Board members face leaves no space to take their perspectives seriously, because they are always considered to be either not successful enough or not representative enough. What is left is to use them as a showcase of inclusion, a token (Kanter 1977), and to make them fit in the system (leave their difference to become the same) through co-option (Coy 2013).

We believe that while the EMAB provides a much-needed space at the European Commission level, something that is relevant in its own right, this, and other less visible initiatives (at meso and micro levels) need to go a step further to overcome being a mere presence and become entities that contribute meaningfully. Co-creation practices, where different stakeholders encounter and develop their reflexive capacity, generate ways to deconstruct exclusionary and inclusionary processes. The refugee experience does not have to be a journey 'from persecution to destitution', as Kissoon (2010) described it; providing opportunities for refugees to make genuine contributions to policymaking opens possibilities for them to take the lead in their journeys to inclusion. Self-led routes to inclusion are a fundamental necessity for democratic societies: through such routes, refugees have more opportunities for equal access to societal resources (i.e., self-determination) and more freedom to pursue their lives in their own ways (i.e. self-development) (Ghorashi 2010a; Young 2006) while also directly and meaningfully interacting with other relevant stakeholders in their new homes.

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Note

- 1 Respondents requested absolute anonymity; therefore, all references to place of residence or work have been omitted from this list.

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