Against the backdrop of the ‘crisis of trust’ in the Child Welfare Services in Norway among sections of the migrant population, the ‘Trust across Borders’ project set out to bring Norwegian and Polish professionals from governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations together to contribute to increased mutual understanding, system-knowledge, and reflection. Through participatory group-based activities, we identified a range of ‘best practices’ for trust-building based on work already being implemented in Norway and in Poland. In this paper, we share some conclusions from this experience and offer recommendations for trust-building efforts.

Marta Bivand Erdal
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Lubomiła Korzeniewska
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka
University of Gdańsk

Magdalena Żadkowska
University of Gdańsk
The ‘Trust across Borders’ project was funded by the EEA bilateral fund Poland-Norway and was solicited on the backdrop of what can be described as a longstanding crisis of trust in the Child Welfare Services in Norway among sections of the Polish migrant populations living in Norway. The challenges related to migration and trust have severe implications, for the work of the Child Welfare Services, for migrant children and families, but also at the level of international cooperation. Given the shared commitment to the same international legal instruments from both the Polish and Norwegian sides, not least the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the potential for enhancing trust – through dialogue – has been the scope of action for the ‘Trust across Borders’ project.

Our point of departure is that trust is a key condition for well-functioning human relationships at societal, interpersonal, and cross-border levels. The project as a whole started from the premise that trust is possible and desirable across borders, as well as between public institutions and residents, with or without migrant backgrounds in a given context.

Our understanding of trust builds on psychological and social scientific knowledge, where trust means we assume that other members of a given community are characterised by honest and cooperative behaviour. This is why trust is often called the foundation of society. However, we also know that there are distinct differences in trust levels, and in whom one trusts and to what extent, across contexts globally. Thus, trust is also culturally determined, and may be affected by socio-economic and political conditions.

Beyond Polish migrants in Norway

The crisis of trust between Polish migrants and the Norwegian Child Welfare Services is well known. Yet, balanced knowledge on this topic – informed by perspectives from a wide range of actors about what contributes to produce this crisis of trust, and what sustains it – is fragmented or lacking. The ‘Trust across Borders’ project has therefore sought to produce an overview of existing knowledge, and the research gaps that remain, on the topic of migrants’ trust in the child welfare service, especially based on Polish-Norwegian experiences.

The ‘Trust across Borders’ project was funded by the EEA bilateral fund Poland-Norway and was solicited on the backdrop of what can be described as a longstanding crisis of trust in the Child Welfare Services in Norway among sections of the Polish migrant populations living in Norway. The challenges related to migration and trust have severe implications, for the work of the Child Welfare Services, for migrant children and families, but also at the level of international cooperation. Given the shared commitment to the same international legal instruments from both the Polish and Norwegian sides, not least the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the potential for enhancing trust – through dialogue – has been the scope of action for the ‘Trust across Borders’ project.

Our point of departure is that trust is a key condition for well-functioning human relationships at societal, interpersonal, and cross-border levels. The project as a whole started from the premise that trust is possible and desirable across borders, as well as between public institutions and residents, with or without migrant backgrounds in a given context.

Our understanding of trust builds on psychological and social scientific knowledge, where trust means we assume that other members of a given community are characterised by honest and cooperative behaviour. This is why trust is often called the foundation of society. However, we also know that there are distinct differences in trust levels, and in whom one trusts and to what extent, across contexts globally. Thus, trust is also culturally determined, and may be affected by socio-economic and political conditions.

Beyond Polish migrants in Norway

The crisis of trust between Polish migrants and the Norwegian Child Welfare Services is well known. Yet, balanced knowledge on this topic – informed by perspectives from a wide range of actors about what contributes to produce this crisis of trust, and what sustains it – is fragmented or lacking. The ‘Trust across Borders’ project has therefore sought to produce an overview of existing knowledge, and the research gaps that remain, on the topic of migrants’ trust in the child welfare service, especially based on Polish-Norwegian experiences.

Information may be found in the review report resulting from the project.

Migrants may be more willing to interact with public institutions when: 1) they are familiar with an institution; 2) they can understand and interpret an institution; and 3) they can predict an institution’s actions with reasonable certainty.

While our starting point has been a focus on Polish migrants in Norway, our perspective goes well beyond this case, not least including the experiences of various migrant communities in Norway, migrant communities in Poland, and organisations working closely with them, of relevance beyond these two countries. Both Poland and Norway are countries experiencing increasing societal diversification, which poses opportunities and challenges at individual and societal levels – and places new demands on public institutions. Therefore, identifying the basic success criteria for creating trust in public institutions among migrants is of relevance both to the specific challenges of trust in child welfare services, and more generally for integration processes.

Migrants may be more willing to interact with public institutions when: 1) they are familiar with an institution; 2) they can understand and interpret an institution; and 3) they can predict an institution’s actions with reasonable certainty.

By contrast, if knowledge, understanding, and trust are not present, migrants will likely avoid contact or interaction with an institution. Such a situation is not conducive to building social harmony and institutional order. Therefore, a level of trust is necessary to create safe space for social dialogue.

**Co-Creating Trust through Dialogue**

The aim of the two closed workshops organised as part of this project was to foster dialogue on challenges related to migrants’ trust in state institutions, in both Norway and Poland. The overarching objective was to exchange experiences about concrete practices on how to enhance trust in the child and social welfare services among migrants, in both countries.

The workshops provided a meeting space for professionals working in and with child welfare services and inclusion of migrants in Poland and in Norway, across different institutions and organisations.

To work towards the aim of co-creation of trust through dialogue, the workshops – the first held in Oslo (December 2018) and the second held in Gdańsk (March 2019) – consisted of interactive exercises: case study discussions with allocation of roles, exchanges on practical examples in small groups, elements of design thinking, development of a three-language glossary of key
terms, and reflection sessions in pairs. Plenary sessions also allowed for the sharing of diverging views and frustrations related to challenges of trust – and lack of trust – in the child welfare services among migrants. The group of participants quickly established good working relations, thus enabling valuable and respectful exchanges on sometimes challenging issues.

Who participated and why?
The participants were drawn from relevant governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations in Norway and in Poland (the full list of participants and their affiliations may be found at the end of this paper). The participants from Poland and Norway mirrored each other, in the sense that there were ministerial staff represented from both countries, there were public sector employees working full-time on child welfare services, and on related matters of social support and migrant inclusion, and there were non-governmental organisation staff. From both Poland and Norway, among the above-mentioned, there were also individuals with their own personal migration history.

The selection of participants was based on direct contact at institutional and organisational levels, as well as on contacts which were subsequently identified. Each participant wrote a brief statement about the relevance of the workshop series to their work and engagement. Prior to the first workshop, each participant was also interviewed by one of the facilitators, in order to learn about – and be able to manage – expectations, as well as possible concerns, related to participation in the workshop series.

Agreement, disagreement and dialogue
As part of our work together in the two workshops, some ground-rules were laid down in order to create a safe space for exchanges. Evidently, while there was agreement about most issues in principle, there was also a fair amount of disagreement about particular points and specific questions, and not least at the level of interpretation.

The purpose of dialogue is neither to ignore nor to resolve disagreement, but rather to find ways in which to exchange views and to participate in two-way communication – both listening and being listened to. Such two-way communication exercises foster understanding and pave the way for finding common ground.

Communication and language

Communication and language lie at the heart of the crisis of trust between sections of Polish migrant communities in Norway and the child welfare services. Our workshops employed English as the working language. The benefit of this choice was that neither Norwegian nor Polish participants were able to use their main working language, thus creating a more level playing field. While the participants were all able to function well in English, during the process of discussing issues of migration, diversity and inclusion (especially the systems of public support for integration and, more specifically, for child welfare services) it became apparent that using English perhaps created an equally unequal playing field – one in which getting lost in translation was a real risk.

The way systems of care, welfare and protection are organised is deeply anchored within the socio-cultural and institutional landscapes of a given geographic and nation-state context. Thus, particular practices, modes of work, and associated vocabulary are often system-related and unique to a given country. Issues of language and communication shape perceptions and misperceptions in fundamental ways and are thus central to trust. Language and communication were therefore substantive areas of focus in our workshops.

Participatory Co-Creation of Trust

The two workshops were organised as closed events, with an interactive programme of participatory activities, mixing professionals working in Poland and in Norway, and across governmental levels, and within non-governmental organisations. The rationale for this was the adoption of participatory methods aimed at co-creating trust, premised on shared understanding, and real two-way communication. To this end, a series of group-based activities were employed, which we discuss in brief below.

Case-work with role play

Based on a short narrative description of the circumstances of a migrant family with children of pre-school and school ages in a new country
of residence, where concerns over child welfare were reported, workshop participants engaged in case-work with role play. A five-step exercise described the work with the case, where participants analysed the story in relation to the socio-cultural context they were familiar with (Norway or Poland), and were tasked to take on the perspectives of e.g. the mother, father, older child, case worker, or teacher, in order to tease out details and possible outcomes and to discuss the scope of action.

**Tracing ideal and average case-processes**

Another group-based exercise was dedicated to the design of a ‘road map’ or ‘consumer journey’ that described, step by step, the ideal – and average – case-process experience for a family in contact with child welfare institutions in Norway and in Poland. Part of the task was to reflect on the similarities and differences between ideal and average assumed case-process, and the similarities and differences between Poland and Norway in how child welfare systems can be anticipated to act and engage with families, parents and children, on the basis of similar concerns, e.g. risk to a child’s health.

**Obstacles to trust building**

Participants were asked to individually name obstacles to building trust and to reflect in groups about the different kinds of obstacles faced. Another exercise offered experiences of best practices in building trust. All participants were invited to share examples of ‘best practices’ from their organisations or institutions, specifically related to building trust between migrants and public institutions.

**Reflecting on the role of facilitation**

The group of four facilitators in the ‘Trust across Borders’ project could capitalise on fluency in Polish and English, with two also fluent in Norwegian. This linguistic competence, paired with contextual competence, was a crucial factor in executing the facilitator role. Mobilising the group, making use of all participants’ experience and skills, and thus the group’s diversity, was a key task in facilitation, contributing to shared ownership of both specific activities and the overall outcomes. Here, the mix of the four facilitators’ expertise as researchers combined as an integrated interdisciplinary team, along with their individual professional experiences as coaches, trainers and mediators, was an important success factor, preparing them for the necessary flexibility and dynamism throughout the project.

**Recommendations**

- Facilitated meetings for professionals in different countries to exchange experiences and perspectives are a necessary component of building trust across borders, such as in the case of migrants’ trust in public institutions in countries of settlement.

- Including stakeholders of all kinds – from migrant communities, through case-workers, to policy makers, diplomats, communication advisers, and NGO staff, and on to top-level bureaucrats – within the same discussions can foster innovation in both policy solutions and ideas for their implementation.

**Further Reading**