UNESCO RILA: The Sounds of Integration

Episode 101: Looking for Loopholes: Using the Strengths Approach in Local Government Refugee Support in Germany

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri
وسَهْلاً أهْلاً benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society, and Identity.

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Speaker 2:

[Jingle]

Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri
أشكر, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri

We are going to hear now from two other wonderful humans who are going to tell us about another form of resistance. I love the title of 'Looking for Loopholes.' We're going to hear from Kathrin and Avril about a particular approach, which is called the strengths approach. Avril Bellinger co-wrote with Deirdre Ford, *The Strengths Approach in Practice: How it Changes Lives*, which is a wonderful book and I absolutely, highly,

shamelessly recommend. It changed my life when I read it. I can say that with truth. This session is going to be talking about the strengths approach in Germany, so using the strengths approach in local government refugee support in Germany.

Our speakers are Kathrin Warth — Kathrin has been working as a social worker for 20 years, currently as a coordinator in the so-called 'integration management', and she has recently completed a part-time Master's degree as a young mother. We salute you.

Avril Bellinger is also a social worker. She is many, many things. She's an academic activist, a grandmother, and she is an honorary elder of the UNESCO RILA… team? Chair? Sofa? She's also an international volunteer and has an honorary fellowship from the University of Plymouth.

So after that introduction, which could be so much longer, I'm going to stop talking and let them talk, and thank you so much for what you're about to share.

Speaker 2: Kathrin Warth

Good morning from Germany. First of all, I have to say I am not an artist, I'm just a social worker. Like many other social workers, for most of my career I work within rigid structures. So, most of my career, I worked within these rigid state structures whose funding depends on political trends, so loopholes. Finding loopholes has always been my working concept, liberating resources for real, restorative integration.

A few words about the German asylum system in the beginning. It provides the initial accommodation. Until people submit their application, temporary accommodation during the asylum system procedure in the districts and follow-up accommodation. So, my work has been in the last two stages, but during all the time, people may be forced to live in their assigned location and therefore have their freedom restricted. According to Ghaderi and Eppenstein, the social space is constructed and can have constrictive meaning for people with a history of flight, who might like opportunities to decide for oneself when/how one wants to settle. So, for refugees — and I really don't like that word — place is of central importance in terms of appropriating social space.

This presentation will use a chronological structure, sharing examples of my practice during Germany's open borders in 2015, briefly describing the changes over the past 10 years, my research motivation, and the analysis of some thoughts about how the strengths approach can realise further potential.

But first, Avril will tell you about START and the strengths approach.

Speaker 3: Avril Bellinger

So, Students And Refugees Together (START) is a small, micro-activist NGO in southwest England which I founded 24 years ago, when Plymouth became a dispersal area for refugees. It has the combined objectives of supporting people to access their rights when they're granted leave to remain, and also to provide high=quality, practical placements for students on professional qualifying courses like social work and occupational therapy. Both groups, often seen as burdens on society, are recognised as potentially high contributors in transition, learning together how to negotiate the labyrinthine systems to access their rights. A small staff team, equivalent to 6.9 full-time posts and up to 8 students at any one time, provide case work, group work and community activities in response to constantly changing needs. Since it began, more than 360 professionals and more than 4,500 refugees have helped to make START the amazing organisation that it is, proving the power of the strengths approach on which it is based.

So briefly, the strengths approach is a way of thinking and acting to make the most of the potential that exists in any situation. Traceable in social work a century ago, it has not achieved traction, possibly because it defies commodification. Whilst fully acknowledging the seriousness of our global crisis, as articulated by Will Tuladhar-Douglas in RILA's wonderful integration handbook, we can use the following beliefs to prompt us to action: all situations are rich with resources; people, communities and environments have capacity for change; everyone's contribution is needed; difficulties, however severe can also be a source of resilience and creativity; and we cannot know the potential of others and must not ever place limits on their aspirations. So, the strengths approach is not idle optimism. It is a commitment to work collectively, to find possibility in every situation. It is an honour for me to be able to share Kathrin's work with you today and we welcome your feedback about our social work practice.

Speaker 2: Kathrin Warth

So with Open Borders, Open Minds, empowerment is central to social work, and to establish social justice has always been the core task of social work. This means that only strengthening the individual's capacity for action but also collectively addressing structural inequality. Albert Lenz describes empowerment as abandoning the traditional superior and paternalistic level of professional work and engaging in processes of negotiation and bargaining of joint searching and discovery. The central task of professionals is to provide people with the space in which life can unfold. In the end of August 2015 when the then-Chancellor, Angela Merkel, decided to keep Germany's borders open. At this time, I was a social worker in the shelter with nearly 100 asylum seekers in the southwest of Germany, and over the next few years until COVID, between 20 and 50 new arrivals, people, came to the city every month. Due to this overload within the system, people were forced to act and think outside the box, and without

creative work and an equal footing, cooperation and the belief that we could do it, it would not have worked. Nash describes that focusing on strength is both a theoretically consideration and a practical necessity.

So, my job included a lot of day-to-day work, from appeals in court, drawing up cleaning rotas in the accommodations, organising language courses, cycling courses, health campaigns, etc. All these situations are full of resources and it has never been about changing people but about shaping circumstances, and this way of thinking is fundamental. At its core it's about shaking up the system within the system. In order to implement things that are not supposed to be part of everyday work, and for which there is therefore no funding available, it is invaluable to forge alliances and identify key people who can facilitate access. Such individuals include politicians, mayors, members of local parliament, doctors and people from the communities. These individuals and collaborations can be used wonderfully as springboards and existing networks can be exploited. All of these are resources that area available in social spaces and simply need to be used.

Let me share some examples of successful cooperation and how social space can be appropriated. You may have heard of Banksy's work, originally called 'Girl with Balloon' and later 'Love is in the Bin.' On the right of the little girl, Bansky wrote, "There is always hope," a sentiment central to the topic of flight and the strengths approach. The picture was exhibited in the city where I worked and could be viewed in return for a donation to a good cause, so we convinced the museum to use the donation to enable us to finance a project in which young trainees were supported to move out of large accommodation facilities so that they could concentrate on their education in peace and quiet. They also received annual tickets from the museum which were actively used and shared with others.

The second example is from our Lebenswert project. We were shortlisted in a competition organised by the Ministry of the Interior for our published report of the needs, wishes and aspirations of 106 people from 14 different countries who were living in other accommodation in the city. It was structured to inform political decision-makers. Our report stated, "It is becoming increasingly important to strengthen the lives of people in the immediate neighbourhood, resolve conflicts within the neighbourhood and build on reliable structures in the microcosm. Recognising that a shared future and peaceful coexistence among all residents and their environment requires a high degree of tolerance and mutual understanding, we want to create a place where this is promoted." Ultimately, our work resulted in the formation of accommodation councils made up of residents, volunteers, social workers and caretakers to implement real changes in the immediate living environment. We then applied for a nationally funded project on process support entitles 'Integration through civic engagement and civil

society' and used this framework to promote our ideas, which were born within the accommodation councils, to administration staff, key people and local politicians.

In this example too, the strengths approach was and is a precise guide. We firmly believed that people (in this case, long-established politicians and administrative staff) and communities (in this case, administrative structures) have the opportunity to change, or more precisely, to break down structures and respond to the demand for participation. During the moderated process, which included workshops, town hall meetings and presentations over a two-year period, people whose lives would not previously have intersected came together to talk: mayors with refugees, artists with administrative staff. The essence was trust in the process, in which creativity and never giving up enabled difficulties to be overcome. At the end of this process, the local council decided to establish a municipal participation committee for migrants. This committee has political legitimacy and advises local politicians and the city administration on all issues relating to coexistence in a diverse society. The members contribute their perspectives from an international background and provide impetus for municipal integration work. This process came very close to my understanding of restorative integration.

Having moved to another part of Germany I worked in child protection services for 3 years, continuing to volunteer with refugees whilst undertaking a part-time Master's programme. Now, I am employed again in state provision for refugee integration in an increasingly conservative and populist environment. Nonetheless, there is still substantial state funding in parts of Germany for the work with refugees. In Baden-Württemberg — that's the dark green bit in the southwest of Germany — the state government provides 40 million euros annually to cover the personnel costs of so-called integration managers in the municipalities. While the integration process is to be designed individually over a period of three years, language, education and employment are defined as 'minimum content'. Participation in the programme requires an integration plan to be drawn up with each refugee, setting out goals and steps to be taken, to document progress and clarify responsibilities. Changes in the new regulations affect reporting requirements, and result in more time being spent on documentation which in turn determines the flow of funding to the service itself. A former block grant funding model has been replaced by flexible budgeting. This means that if the number of people requiring support decreases, it can put pressure on integration managers to maintain case numbers and retain clients, rather than working in a process-oriented manner towards independence. It also limits the state mandate to organise projects and activities alongside the actual case work. These regulations, which count output, fail to provide any conceptual framework for *how* the work should be done.

The term 'integration management' gives the impression that integration can be managed, which is nonsense. As described in the earlier examples, it is about creating opportunities, identifying undesirable developments, namely the move towards assimilation, and utilising existing resources. Beate Blank asserts that social work

should not “uncritically develop from the logic of state welfare to the logic of activating and individualising self-care.” As I now work within this system, I have access to a certain degree of power and to opportunities for cooperation that would otherwise not be possible. This is where we need to proceed both cautiously and radically at the same time. Creativity is needed to find new loopholes and exploit them while broadly meeting the requirements of the funders. My Master's research has been fundamental in this.

Speaker 3: Avril Belinger

Kathrin is in full agreement with Stewart who urges us not to wait for the day when governments act to remove social injustice, and instead are committed to working alongside people to organise on their own behalf. The aim of Kathrin’s research was to offer a conceptual idea, informed by the strengths approach for the work of professionals in integration management. Alongside documentary data collection, she interviewed integration managers in Germany currently working with refugees and asked them what technical and conceptual requirements they are confronted with in their everyday work. She asked what is possible when they are explicitly restricted in their scope of action by rules and prohibitions; what is important to them in their work; from whom they accepted assignments; and what else is needed. She also spent time in England — which is what I described earlier — at START, to find out what it means to work holistically and practically using the strengths approach. It enabled her to use a theory practice transfer in a new situation — and for us to have a very good time collaborating. Recommendations for action were derived from these two strands of research in order to close the theoretical and practical gap resulting from the lack of a conceptual framework for so-called integration management in Baden-Württemberg.

Her research has shown that almost half of integration managers stated they had no concept for the process. The work, according to the prescribed case management approach, was interpreted differently by everyone. Less than 40% of respondents saw refugees as their primary clients, while others named employers and society. In contrast, in an Annual report, START describes their mandate as follows: “The strengths approach and a ‘journey walked together’ ensure that the refugee is firmly at the centre of the support.” The lack of clear, conceptual anchoring of a social work approach in Germany has led to uncertainty among professionals with unclear job profiles and limited resources in a rigid structure with predefined tasks.

Speaker 2: Kathrin Warth

The question now is, how to introduce the strengths approach to integration management. If specialised integration services are needed, then we should take advantage of the opportunity to offer things that regular services do not provide. Specialism creates the possibility of forging coalitions that would not otherwise be possible. This should be seen as an enrichment, emphasising collaboration and not competition. For a better system I believe it would be beneficial to reallocate the funding and use it to create positions for locality-based work. This would take up the

idea of geographical reference and, above all, include more people in a process of mutual learning. Each situation is unique and provision needs to grow out of local resources and needs. With colleagues, I set up a reading cafe, arts and music classes for children, which are still running 15 years later. These examples could be used to promote such a shift.

However, reallocation of funding requires political will and collaboration at state level which will take time. Transformation within institutions rarely come easily. It requires intention, critical reflection, and the willingness of each individual to act, even when change feels difficult and slow. In the meantime, in my role as a co-manager, there are strategies I can use to support a change of culture: We could seek to offer internships to students and give young professionals a chance to work alongside them. As learners, they are also disruptors, questioners, and potential change agents. We can support and position them as trojan horses within our systems as they are able to challenge entrenched norms and bring new energy to places where transformation is overdue. Having less experience within the system and not knowing what might be impossible, they can help to scratch away old structures, with everyone involved benefiting from such free thinking. Deviating from the norm can be refreshing from time to time, allowing us to see what is possible when we are brave. For example, if a random regulation states that I may not accompany someone to an appointment at the immigration office, why not set up a mobile office there? Sometimes, small actions outside formal responsibilities can help build trust and demonstrate a commitment to shared values. For example, consultations can move to a deeper level when we have already walked with a person, or cooked together, or played football. The gaps within the rigid system must be identified and gradually expanded. In physics, we know that friction generates energy. So why not simply act, and if in doubt, apologise rather than always asking whether something is allowed? Systems are reinforced through compliance. So, subverting the expectation for everything to be in German or whatever language, and adopt a multiligual approach. It is not hard — we only need to listen to what people want.

Rather than waiting for structures to evolve, we must create the spaces where new practices and ideas can take root like the joint reporting with refugees in local councils. We must become bridge-builders, linking people, communities, and disciplines, and creating cooperation where there was previously competition or silence. By drawing on the resources embedded in the social space, strong, strategic relationships with key persons can be built. From this openness and persistence, relationships arise with people that can, in turn, open other doors for us. The strengths approach presented here as Avril and Deirdre have written “… is a long-term, whole systems intervention in which outcomes are neither quick nor possible to predict.” It does, however, create a space for dynamic expansion of whatever loopholes we can find. Combining theory and practice, it offers a critically emancipatory orientation that brings together empowerment and social justice.

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