

How organisations and individuals can manage migration and change

*Organisations and individuals involved in the management of migration face constant change. What can we learn from them? Drawing from her research in migration management across different countries in Europe and Africa, **Katerina Glyniadaki** explores how to manage transitions during turbulent times. She highlights four aspects: anticipation, sense-making, response and learning.*



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Katerina Glyniadaki will be speaking at the LSE Festival event [How to Manage Transition in Turbulent Times](#), Friday 16 June 2023 12.00pm to 1.00pm.

In recent years, we have witnessed a series of unprecedented and compounding crises: war in Ukraine, a global pandemic, global food crisis, energy crisis, climate crisis. Governments, organisations and individuals are expected to survive and thrive while

facing constant change, uncertainty and unpredictability. Is this feasible? Drawing insights from my research in migration management across different countries in Europe, as well as in Africa, I explore how transition can be managed during turbulent times. I highlight four key aspects: anticipation, sense-making, response and learning.

Anticipation

The first and perhaps the most important step in dealing with change is embracing it. Change has been an inherent element of human societies and evolution. It is the rate of change that has drastically risen in the recent decades. With today's level of technological advancement, local events or crises are more likely to become transnational, and faster so. Just as a local virus outbreak may turn into a global pandemic, a conflict or a natural disaster in one country may quickly affect those around it. With internet availability facilitating information access and transportation enabling mobility, people are more likely to cross borders seeking solutions. Such transboundary dynamics suggest that turbulent times are rarely geographically confined.

Embracing change, therefore, necessitates awareness of ongoing and upcoming changes globally, as well as their manifestations and potential consequences. The advancement of AI, for example, may be considered an *ambiguous* change, meaning it can potentially have positive or negative implications for people and organisations. The current conflict in Sudan, in comparison, would be a *hazard*, with potential adverse repercussions across borders and regions. Climate change, then, can be seen as a *creeping crisis*, given it is slowly unfolding, without immediately affecting most, but with dire potential consequences for all.

In addition to building a broader understanding, anticipation also requires self-awareness. My [PhD research](#) showed that, in times of high uncertainty, such as the so-called European Refugee Crisis of 2015-2017, identities play an important role in guiding individual action. [The recent example](#) of UK asylum workers who quit in large numbers because they feel pressured to work in ways that are not congruent with their values demonstrates this. Knowing where we stand on important controversial issues means we are more ready to face relevant challenges when the time comes. It is through greater awareness, therefore, both of ourselves and more broadly, that we can make informed *ad hoc* decisions, should unexpected changes arise.

Sense-making

In times of crisis, facing the facts is critical, especially in terms of the changes this brings to our daily lives. In the example of climate crisis, rising global temperatures are a fact that creates a higher likelihood for climate refugees (such as those from the Sahel). Yet, as interpretivists would argue, understanding reality requires not only the acknowledgement of objective facts but also of the subjective views and feelings people hold in relation to these facts.

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge our own perspectives as well as those of others. Differences in gender values and beliefs between Europeans and refugees became a [thorny issue](#) during 2015-2017, especially after the '[Cologne attacks](#)'. My [research in Berlin and Athens](#) at the time showed that the ways in which frontline workers perceived such differences shaped their behaviour towards refugees. Those who conceptualised refugees' perspective as equally valuable to their own, and as changeable over time, were more likely to engage with the 'Other' and more likely to reflect on their own views. In turn, they were also more likely to make discretionary decisions that would aid refugees' integration.

As it follows, embracing change comes with embracing complexity. Distinguishing facts from opinions is important, and so is questioning one's own views and biases. Ultimately, in sense-making, asking the right questions is key: Are these changes a result of human action? Who is being affected the most? Is there a way to address the consequences? Do those of the 'other side' have a point worth considering? Questions of this kind may prove useful in making sense of difficult or unprecedented events in today's complex reality.

Response strategies

When it comes to responding to change, there is no one-size-fits-all. Climate, society, economy, health, all affect our lives in different ways. Nonetheless, there are some principles that can be universally helpful in dealing with the unexpected: pragmatism, flexibility and resilience.

Being pragmatic, in this context, means making practical decisions in the face of limited available information or resources. This may include commonsensical decisions, like

cutting down on non-essential costs during an economic downturn, but it may also involve more creative responses, in the absence of ready-made solutions. My [research](#) on asylum determination in Greece showed that, under unprecedented pressure, asylum officers relied on teamwork and innovation: they created a new database for information-sharing and time-saving, while some also explored new legal pathways for assisting the asylum seekers deemed as 'deserving'.

This leads us to the next important principle, which is flexibility. Flexibility can be seen here as readiness for behaviour modification, according to the needs of the circumstances. In one more [migration management research](#) example, frontliners in both Athens and Berlin had to forge new collaborations and alliances with actors from other sectors, in order to meet the drastically increased needs for social services during 2015-2017. This was a difficult switch for many, but it was a critical move for 'getting the job done'.

Lastly, in times of transition, and especially when facing compounding crises, resilience is key. Research on [migrant returnees](#) in West Africa speaks to this. There are some returnees who, not only manage to overcome a traumatic journey and the stigma of returning empty-handed, but they also find ways to become community leaders and mentors. Even if 'making lemonade' when life gives us lemons might not always be attainable, remaining resilient can be.

Learning

Here is a truism to hang your hat on: we cannot foresee what the next crisis or big change in our lives will be, but we can learn from our mistakes – and avoid repeating them. Better yet, we can learn from the mistakes of others. Reflecting on what has already happened, engaging critically and being willing to learn would undeniably be beneficial in this direction.

The unprecedented inflow of newcomers in Europe seven years ago left us with some lessons to be learned, especially in terms of solidarity and burden-sharing within the EU. The degree to which these lessons were actually learned remains to be seen, but the recent Ukraine refugee crisis does offer a glimpse of hope, as it was met with more [coordinated efforts](#) from the EU. While other factors (such as identities or EU-Russia relations) may also play a role, EU member states, as well as migrant organisations and

their employees, now had more experience and know-how, and therefore greater readiness to process and integrate asylum seekers.

Seeking and achieving learning feeds back into the anticipation aspect. The implications are obvious: greater awareness of what could potentially go wrong is good not only for avoiding but also for managing difficult times and challenging changes. A learned toolset of sense-making approaches and responding strategies can be handy when transition in turbulent times next comes about.

Epilogue

Change is sometimes predictable but more often it is not. Had we always known what comes next, there would be no uncertainty to navigate (and life would probably be boring). In the face of unforeseen change, we can rarely be fully ready. We can, however, embrace change along with its complexities. Being aware of and open to potential possibilities constitutes the first step. Organising our thoughts and constantly challenging our views would be the second. Third, is adopting pragmatic, flexible and resilient responses. Finally, looking ahead requires reflection and learning.



Notes:

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