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# Segregation Kills

Topics: Displacement, Migration, Integration | Integration Policy | Integration | Created by Joakim Medin

Fokus North: #tellcorona - How COVID-19 spread in migrant communities in Sweden is prevented by Civil Society efforts.

## The Swedish Experiment

When the coronavirus pandemic struck Europe with full and deadly force in March 2020, practically all EU member states introduced very strict measures to limit social contact and keep people indoors, in the hope of hindering the spread of the virus.

But Sweden decided to follow a different path. Public gatherings within certain limits were still allowed. Primary schools, public institutions, bars and cafés remain open. The government typically issues recommendations, not orders, urging people to maintain social distance and to self-isolate at home if they experience coronavirus symptoms.

Behind this strategy lies the idea that people can act responsibly and according to what is best for all of society without the implementation of draconic rules. But such a strategy requires that everyone is able to understand and follow the recommendations.

## Reaching out to everyone?

This triggered a public debate about segregation in Sweden as a challenge during the pandemic. But it has also highlighted initiatives and created new ones to deal with these challenges.

Early on, Nuri Kino, an investigative journalist and well-known human rights advocate living in Stockholm, identified issues that could contribute to the coronavirus quickly spreading in segregated suburbs. He has long cultivated social networks in such suburbs with migrant groups.

“People there socialize differently. They live differently, often several generations under one roof. And they often also live in crowded households, especially hidden refugees and people belonging to the shadow society,” says Nuri Kino.

Such features are first and foremost related to economic conditions as people in these areas are often poor or lack better options. This is especially common among people living below the radar, whether they are labour migrants without work permits or asylum-seekers whose applications have been rejected. This situation made it easier for the coronavirus to spread. Nuri Kino got in touch with state agencies to discuss these risks, but was surprised by the replies he got.

“I thought these things would be just as obvious to them as they are to me, but they were not. It fascinates me that state agencies can be that unaware of what a part of Sweden looks like,” he says.



Image: [Translate to English:] of [tellcorona.com](https://www.tellcorona.com)

[Translate to English:]

## Language - a Vital Tool in Fighting COVID-19

Yet another issue that could have accelerated spread of the coronavirus in segregated communities is the fact that the state has failed to reach out with information to all those who lack a high level of Swedish. Nuri Kino says that neither labour migrants nor refugees he has spoken to have been following the Swedish state agencies' press announcements about the pandemic. Neither have they followed the coverage in the public service media.

"They have been unable to understand the Swedish terms used in the announcements," he says.

Such a problem has also been recognised by Amil Sarsour, chairman of SIU, an umbrella organisation for migrant associations in Uppsala, Sweden's fourth largest city. The main problem he sees is that many people in the segregated areas do not receive adequate or daily information.

"They do not know where to find information published by the Public Health Agency. And even if they have learned Swedish, they seldom know enough to understand difficult health-related issues. They follow the news about their own homelands but are not getting enough information about whether or not they can go outside in Sweden, if their children can attend school, etc. There is too little communication between them and the state," says Amil Sarsour.

Such questions are instead asked to Amil Sarsour, when, almost every day, people turn to SIU's office in Uppsala to receive assistance and information. These encounters have made Amil Sarsour discover the amount of confusion, worry, and disinformation in segregated communities.

"People do not understand why Sweden has not taken the same measures as neighbouring countries against the coronavirus. Some are worried and angry, some seek out advice from so-called experts online. Some claim that eating lemon peel offers protection against the virus."

## **#tellcorona – Civil Society facilitates communication to save lives**

Several civic actors and organisations agree that people in segregated areas need to get adequate information about the coronavirus in their own languages. Nuri Kino started contacting celebrities from different ethnic groups and asked them to record short video messages in their own languages about cleanliness, social distancing, and the importance of avoiding large gatherings, in order to fight the coronavirus. These video messages and more have been added to the newly created webpage [tellcorona.com](https://www.tellcorona.com). Nuri Kino has been assisted by the Swedish social media bureau Bright Mind Agency, which created the tellcorona site, showing the important role that communication bureaus can also play when reaching out to segregated communities.

"The response has been enormous and positive. Pharmacies, municipalities and religious congregations have been sharing links, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency also got in touch with me to cooperate," says Nuri Kino.

The realisation that not everyone has been able to understand public health recommendations has seemingly given birth to renewed cooperation between the state and civil society actors engaged in segregated areas. In late March, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) asked popular music artists with fans in segregated areas to share the word on how to prevent spreading the coronavirus.

The MSB claimed in a press conference on 30 March that they have been able to reach at least half of Sweden's population with information about the state's coronavirus strategy via social media. But from early April, there will be an even broader information campaign in cooperation with organisations, religious congregations, and several news and information outlets specifically reaching out to migrants. The goal, said the agency, is to reach "everyone", including communities that previously have been difficult to influence.

At the end of March, Amil Sarsour and representatives of a dozen other civil organisations participated in an online meeting with Åsa Lindhagen, the Swedish Minister for Gender Equality who is also responsible for anti-segregation efforts. The purpose was to get a picture of civil organisations' work in segregated areas and the needs they identify.

“Not shaking hands, washing your hands – these are things that most people already know about. People are mainly concerned about entirely different things today so I see a need to send out simple, correct information to them every day through social media,” says Amil Sarsour.

### Informations on a daily basis

SIU also shares adequate information related to the coronavirus crisis in people's own languages, but has taken it one step further by attempting to do so on a daily basis. The information arrives from Uppsala Municipality, since Amil Sarsour requested that they send him a short daily e-mail with coronavirus-related news. Volunteers at SIU translate the information into 15 different languages and the content is shared via different social media groups, but the goal is to expand and add more languages.

“SIU consists of 45 member associations. We decided to pause many of our social activities now, but we still share information about the coronavirus through our channels and via our radio station where we broadcast in 10 languages. My hope is that the government listens to our experience and takes advantage of our resources in civil society,” says Amil Sarsour.

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