



Mutual Learning Programme Peer Review on 'Labour market inclusion of international protection applicants and beneficiaries'

23-24 May 2016, Madrid (Spain)

Executive Summary

The current refugee crisis is stressing the mechanisms in European countries to deal with asylum requests and general migration on economic grounds. The Peer Review focused on the experiences of European countries regarding the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees¹. Amongst others, participants considered the role of social partners, charitable organisations and civil society in international protection; the recognition process for educational qualifications and previous work experience; fast track systems for asylum seekers and refugees to acquire basic language skills; social integration; and the monitoring and evaluation of programmes for social and labour market integration.

The event was hosted by the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security. It brought together Ministry officials and independent experts from Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, FYR Macedonia, Norway and Sweden, as well as representatives from the European Commission.

As the starting point for discussion, the Peer Review presented the specific Spanish situation when it comes to the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Spain has limited experience in this area, specifically, but the authorities give this issue high priority and the country has greater experience when it comes to the integration of migrants in general. The integration of asylum seekers has become a pressing issue, given that the number of international applications more than doubled in 2015, placing significant strain on the system and leading to the implementation of measures to improve the present system.

The Spanish system reflects a comprehensive concept of integration, with labour market integration at its heart. The system includes 'individualised itineraries' and is divided in three phases – Phase 1: living in a reception centre; Phase 2: living independently; and Phase 3: looking for autonomy. The use of these phases emphasises the idea that becoming autonomous is a gradual process. The duration and design of each phase thus depends on several factors affecting the individual, such as economic, labour, family and social factors. The involvement of the civil society NGOs is particularly noteworthy in the Spanish case. In the three-step integration process, NGOs are responsible for the development and delivery of the second step. The collaboration between the regional governments, municipalities and NGOs is key to Spain's approach to international protection. Further collaboration is promoted through several implemented networks (such as the ARIADNA² network in the field of labour integration) and through partnerships with companies with the aim to further strengthen the collaboration and coordination between the key actors.

The Spanish government is faced with several challenges in its aim to further develop and harmonise the system and to grant minimum common integration itineraries for all asylum seekers and refugees across the country. Adapting existing integration measures to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees is seen as one way to improve the situation, taking into account issues such as the psychological wellbeing of individuals; language skills; recognition of qualifications and previous work experience; access to training and the level of engagement of employers. The success of such measures has not yet been evaluated.

¹ The term refugee is used here to refer to all beneficiaries of international humanitarian protection, be they Geneva Convention refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The term asylum seeker applies to someone who has applied for humanitarian protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status. This distinction is important from a legal perspective.

² Ariadna is a collaborative network for NGOs and other providers of services to refugees, so that they can collaborate and share good practice.

Moving forward, the Spanish Government aims to increase the budget for international protection applicants by EUR 200 million. In 2016, the Government's employment policies also identify refugees as a priority group. Collaboration between different authorities responsible for international protection already in place will be strengthened. Although this is an exclusive competence of the central Government, the autonomous regions in Spain manage employment services, health, education and vocational training, meaning it is important to engage them from the outset.

Considering the state of play in Europe as a whole, Member States have introduced a number of measures to support the labour market inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees. Despite major differences across European countries as to the scale of asylum applications, some common challenges include trouble developing and delivering coherent training and education policies for asylum seekers and refugees, issues in the effective recognition of (formal and informal) skills and previous work experience, barriers to the activation of those that have never been part of the labour market, and insufficient collaboration between the stakeholders involved (especially measures to activate employers).

While integration of third-country nationals is a Member State's competence, the European Union plays a role in facilitating discussion and cooperation between Member States with regard to labour market integration policies. The Commission also makes available specific funding packages that can support refugees and asylum seekers in Member States. The common EU asylum rules do already contain the obligation for Member States to provide rights relevant for the integration in the labour market of refugees and asylum seekers but significant differences exist in practice in the implementation across Member States. Developing common legal approaches further could lead to greater consistency across Member States when it comes to the conditions of labour market access for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection.

The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows.

Rights and opportunities within national labour markets

- In all countries at the Peer Review, recognised refugees have the legal right to participate in the labour market on equal terms as native-born residents, and the barriers they face may be of a practical nature. In practice, refugees are also accessing mainstream measures for foreigners in general / national minorities.
- EU legislation states that asylum-seekers should have access to the labour market no later than 9 months after filing their application for international protection, however it gives Member States the flexibility to decide the conditions for granting access to the labour market for the applicant. As a result, the timing and conditions of effective access to the labour market vary widely. Furthermore, in some countries, some applicants for international protection occupy in practice an ambiguous legal status, such as those whose applications are rejected.
- The concept of 'successful integration' into the labour market differs between Member States.

Organising and delivering labour market integration programmes

- Early assessment of personal needs and skills is important, looking at the psychological needs and other necessary forms of support to improve the employability of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection. However, participants emphasised the need to consider the sequencing of support and to increase the support on a gradual basis, as individuals move their asylum application process and potentially become refugees.
- The management and delivery of integration programmes depends on the level of inflow of asylum seekers and refugees in a country. In some countries with large inflows, integrating asylum seekers and refugees into the existing institutional system can be important to avoid duplication, to ensure consistency of support, and to ease the pressure on overstrained resources. This approach builds upon pre-existing processes, structures and/or expertise to provide tailored support to the specific groups.
- The economic situation in the host country affects the opportunities available to asylum seekers and refugees and the design of the integration process.

- The participants highlighted the importance of coordination and **cooperation** between different types of organisations to cover the complex needs in the integration of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection into the countries' labour markets.
 - The discussions highlighted the differences in stakeholder collaboration, for example it became evident that the lead organisation varies by country. In some cases it is the Public Employment Service, in others municipalities, and in others even non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (in collaboration with central government).
 - The participants highlighted that the involvement of NGOs can be very important for offering more understanding of the needs of particular groups, as they are often the ones working directly with asylum seekers and refugees. However, the level of professionalization in NGOs varies by country. In some cases, they may require additional capacity-building support.
 - The involvement of employers is essential, not only to facilitate the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees, but also to educate employers themselves – on, for example, the legal status and access of asylum seekers and refugees.
 - Supporting entrepreneurship and self-employment is important, but a lack of family links and start-up funds may mean that additional support is needed for refugees to make the business sustainable.
- The implementation of individualised integration plans – taking into account the needs and existing skills of refugees and asylum seekers – is deemed as crucial for their successful integration into the labour market and society.

Offering education and training services to asylum seekers and refugees

- Recent research and the Member State discussions at the review confirmed that knowledge of the host country language is essential, and that language courses need to be offered as early as possible (potentially at reception centres).
- Participants emphasised the need to motivate people to take up training. In some cases, this might be challenging, specifically with regard to vocational training, as participants may see greater value in entering low-skilled work sooner.
- Women asylum seekers and refugees may face specific challenges in terms of participation in training, due to higher levels of illiteracy, gendered expectations within the household, and a need for childcare support.
- In some countries, sanctions and testing are used to ensure that individuals participate in training. However, such measures should be used with care, taking into account the starting point of the participants and the level of commitment they have demonstrated (for example, if a person attended the training), rather than their exact test results. This is extremely important so as not to disadvantage particular groups (for example, illiterate persons).
- Teachers and trainers may need specific support on how to meet needs of these groups. The participants emphasised that it might be beneficial to explore alternative learning methodologies and tools for reaching adults with limited skills and formal education. Exploring dual training (for example, connecting workplace training and language training) can be beneficial.
- Considering how to integrate children in the educational system as early as possible is important for encouraging social integration and avoiding future disadvantage in the labour market.

Recognition of existing qualifications and work experience

- The recognition of skills and qualifications can be challenging, due to a lack of documentation on the part of asylum seekers and refugees, lengthy and bureaucratic processes in the host country, and a lack of government resources to engage in processes to recognise non-formal and informal skills.

- In this regard, low and medium skilled (especially those with informal education and experience) may be in the most precarious situation. For this group, it is especially important to consider alternative ways of assessing non-formal and informal learning experience.
- Employers can play an active role in assessing these skills in a workplace situation.
- Underemployment is also an issue, whereby refugees are employed in roles that do not make full use of their skills and qualifications. However, European governments appear to have made limited efforts thus far to reach out to these individuals already in work.
- It is important to develop and harmonise systems to recognise tertiary qualifications acquired at foreign universities, although many asylum seekers and refugees will not have university education.
- Encouraging the entry of refugees into more regulated professions can be a particular challenge. Some countries are resorting to self-certification methods accompanied by training and testing.
- There is room for cooperation among European national administrations in order to share solutions for recognition of qualifications and skills assessment.

Monitoring and evaluation

- The available country level data specifically on labour market situation, poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees specifically is limited, meaning it is not possible to measure countries' success in fulfilling the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy – which encourages greater inclusivity within the labour market and lower levels of poverty and social exclusion by 2020.
- In terms of monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of existing measures, countries face challenges in identifying successful policies and measures that might contribute to a better integration of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection in labour markets, due partly to the pressure created through large inflows of applicants and beneficiaries of international protections. This may make scaling-up of pilot or small-scale measures highly challenging.

Further information

Full report, presentations and background papers will be available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1047&newsId=2475&furtherNews=yes>