



Mutual Learning Programme Thematic Event on 'Measures to support the integration of asylum seekers and refugees'

22 June 2016, Brussels (Belgium)

Executive Summary

In light of the current refugee movements in Europe, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission hosted a Thematic Event on measures to support the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe¹. The socio-economic integration of such large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees poses an important challenge to the EU and its Member States as well as in other parts of Europe and beyond. The Event looked at different integration measures in the context of good practice examples across Europe. Amongst others, participants considered different elements of integration policies and challenges that Member States face in developing and implementing integration policies.

The Thematic Event held in Brussels, brought together representatives from public administrations/ agencies (regional/ national), social partners, civil society organisations/ NGOs from several European countries, as well as representatives from the European Commission, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Eurofound.

The Event was opened by Mr Michel Servoz, Director-General of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, and followed by a keynote speech by Ms Elizabeth Collett, Director at the Migration Policy Institute. The keynote speech outlined the current context and the main challenges to labour market and social integration, whilst also considering some of the key policy trade-offs and main areas for investment. In particular, Ms Collett stressed the need for innovation in designing and implementing policy interventions.

Ms Manuela Geleng, Head of the Refugee Task Force, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion explained several targeted and mainstreamed integration and funding measures introduced by the European Commission, ¹ such as the Action Plan on the integration Third-Country Nationals adopted on 7 June 2016² setting out a common framework to support designing policies at national level and presenting a set of EU-level actions planned for the next two years. She also presented the New Skills Agenda for Europe which includes provisions to support Member States in identifying, documenting and recognise skills and qualifications of refugees and other third-country nationals.

Whilst recognising that integration measures are a Member State responsibility, it was stressed that the European Union plays an important role in facilitating discussion and cooperation between Member States. For example, the European Commission recently launched the 'Knowledge Centre for Migration and Demography' providing information and data on migration related issues³. The Commission also makes available specific funding

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 European Commission's Communication, Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals, COM(2016) 377 final, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_action_plan_integration_third-country_nationals_en.pdf

³ For more information see: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/migration-and-demography>

packages that can support refugees and asylum seekers in Member States. In terms of EU funding, a desire for greater flexibility when it comes to core funds (ESF, AMIF, FEAD, etc.) and ability to target these to individual groups (not just 'migrants' in general) was expressed. The EU may need to do more to promote better take-up of available funding.

The Thematic Event was further divided into four working groups:

- Working group A: Labour market integration
- Working group B: Building on civil society to integrate asylum seekers and refugees into society
- Working group C: Facilitating skills assessment, recognition and upskilling
- Working group D: The role of the private sector in developing new integration approaches

In the *first* working group the examples of labour market integration in Germany and Norway were presented. During the presentations and discussions the main issues emerging in terms of labour market integration related to areas such as skills recognition and skills development; the sustainability of funding for policy responses including introduction programmes, but also the implementation of pilot projects. -Language training is important; however, a combined option of language courses and additional language training in a work environment was regarded as more effective. The *second* working group discussed the role of civil society in facilitating the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. The working group focussed on the examples of the protection of unaccompanied migrant children in Italy and the services for traumatised refugees in Denmark. The discussion uncovered the challenges of integration of traumatised refugees, but also the opportunity to offer quick and effective integration of children. Children are often more susceptible to learning the host country language and integrating into the education system and society. The working group concluded that early and systematic assessment of social and health needs of asylum seekers and refugees is necessary to develop measures to enable a sustainable integration. In the *third* working group the focus was on skills assessment, recognition and upskilling discussing the examples of Finland and Austria in terms of measures for skills assessment and recognition of existing skills. Finland and Austria have both piloted surveys with asylum seekers and refugees to assess their work experience, language skills, education and skills. The main outcomes focus on early skills assessment and training to enable early and effective integration. The *last* working group addressed the role of the private sector in integration approaches with examples from Sweden and the European organisation UNITEE, the New European Business Confederation. The discussions focussed on activating employers in the integration process and how entrepreneurship and exposure to a workplace can prove to be beneficial for refugees in terms of integrating in the labour market and society.

The existing EU legal acquis provides for employment and social rights for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection. Several countries have introduced or updated a number of measures to support the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, however, several barriers remain in practice, such as labour market tests, restrictions to certain sectors and occupation, as well as discrimination. From the working groups it emerged that, despite major differences across European countries as to the scale of asylum applications, there are many common challenges including the development and implementation of coherent integration policies for asylum seekers and refugees, effective recognition of skills and previous work experience, sustainability of funding (e.g. for scaling-up existing pilot projects), a lack of focus on alternative integration measures (such as fostering entrepreneurship) and insufficient collaboration between the public and private stakeholders involved.

Following the parallel working groups, Commissioner Ms Marianne Thyssen addressed the audience particularly stressing that facilitating the economic and social integration of asylum seekers and refugees in our society is both morally and economically sound. She also added that in the long run the cost of non-integration will be much higher than the cost of successful integration and that investing in the modernisation of our integration systems will ultimately benefit all.

The Thematic Event concluded with a panel discussion chaired by DG HOME Director Belinda Pyke and featuring: MEP Mr Brando Benifei – rapporteur of the EP report on "Refugees: social inclusion and integration into the labour market"; Ms Christiane Kuptsch, Senior Specialist in Migration Policy, ILO; Ms Anaïs Faure Atger, Head of Migration, Red Cross; and Mr Martin Lauterbach, Head of Integration Policy, German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). During the panel discussion the need for early integration measures, a focus on early language training (e.g. in an employment situation), better cooperation between the private and public sector actors and better division of existing funding as well as provision of further funding across Member States for the development and implementation of integration measures (for example, the allocation of ESF was determined before the large influx of asylum seekers and refugees). Participants agreed that more mutual learning and work is needed especially on the integration of *young asylum seekers* into education systems (with less of a direct labour market focus). The wish for another mutual learning Event focusing specifically on this was expressed.

The **key policy messages** from the Thematic Event can be summarised as follows.

Integration: approaches and challenges

- In recent months, there has been a "sea-change in thinking" and integration is now a mainstream endeavour across a range of institutions, for example into schools, hospitals, services etc. There is more and more a tendency to talk about "mainstreaming" integration into other policies, but this often still coexists with the view that it is necessary to take into consideration the specificities of third-country nationals and refugees in particular.
- Over 1.3 million people requested asylum in EU in 2015. This is primarily a *humanitarian challenge*, but also a *socio-economic challenge*, which – if properly addressed – creates an opportunity for Europe (the chance to address demographic ageing and fill gaps in labour market)
- There is a broad diversity of experience and knowledge in Europe. There is an urgency to this endeavour that has not really existed before, for example innovative methods of bringing in NGOs, employers, voluntary groups. In some countries, programmes need to be urgently redesigned.
- A core challenge for national governments is to consider the multiple facets of integration at the same time. Whilst the main focus so far has been on labour market integration, there are 'softer' social aspects of integration that are often equally critical: limited social network, lack of knowledge about how to access the labour market, discrimination, obligations to family, and others. Public housing is also a critical issue across many countries, creating bottlenecks over time unless addressed.
- The integration of asylum seekers and refugees also raises a range of policy trade-offs:
 - **When and how to invest in integration?** Normally earlier is better, but how do we manage this trade-off in the case of asylum seekers? Countries are faced with difficult choices: do you invest heavily in reception centres? Do you focus resources on those with a good chance to stay? Or do you wait until their status is confirmed?
 - **Constraints on public services can go hand in hand with economic opportunity.** There is not enough focus on the type of area where people are housed; in declining areas labour market opportunities might not be close by.
 - **Conditionality in public benefits:** will this work and is this ethical for vulnerable groups? There is a need to balance the idea of making someone as productive as possible and meeting their complex needs.
- Investment: EU funding is becoming more flexible and is able to cater for more diverse populations. This commitment needs to be matched by national actions. The cost of non-integration is greater than the cost of effective integration policies.
- Adjustment of policies for different groups: In some cases, integration measures have been extended for women, if it appears that they would benefit from additional

measures to support their empowerment (for example, if women did not work in their country of origin). Many asylum seekers and refugees are minors and a focus on their early integration in the education system is crucial to avoid negative integration effects – in terms of labour market integration, but also integration in the society – for these generations in future.

- Lessons learned from previous experiences: In some Member States such as Sweden or Germany structures for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees are already in place based on their previous experiences (notably during the refugee flows from former Yugoslavia in the 1990s). These are under pressure by the current speed and numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, but provide a good starting point for further development⁴.
- A change in the mind-set of societies: integration of asylum seekers and refugees must not be seen only as a 'burden' for the societies, but it offers a chance for European countries to benefit from a 'win-win' situation. This is not just a question of corporate social responsibility but also a "hard-headed economic issue": refugees (and potentially asylum seekers) can cancel gaps in all types of skills. Hence, the implementation and development of policies and measures would benefit from a change of mind-set and focus on respect and dignified treatment of these individuals.

Labour market integration

- Emerging consensus that there must be **early access** to the labour market and fast provision of public employment services for asylum seekers, rather than just recognised refugees. Early activation is crucial to minimise the issue of skills deterioration. The more time that asylum seekers spend in the process the more their skills will deteriorate, leading to further disadvantage in relation to labour market access at a later stage.
- In some countries, there has been a move away from sequential approaches to integration more towards **part-time and combination options** (for example, combining different training modules and/or combining job placement/training). Not only can this be more effective but also it supports the participation of those with other responsibilities (for example, those with childcare responsibilities).
- For many countries, most of those arriving are under 34 and of 'prime working age', if supported correctly. At the same time, there can be a mismatch between the skills in demand and the skills with which people arrive. The assumption that refugees can fill gaps and help countries to overcome the shortage of highly skilled workers is not false, but it is a long-term endeavour (3-5 years).
- The most recent cohort present a broad diversity of skills (from tertiary educated to those with low skills / illiterate). Investing in education is also very important, especially for those who face the most difficulties in integrating.
- Language training is important but, after a certain point, the returns can diminish. In Norway, it was found that more than 600 hours of language training does not provide positive transition to work.
- There is a need for close inter-institutional cooperation between the Public Employment Service (PES) and educational/vocational system as well as public authorities for asylum seekers. In many countries, the role of PES in integration is expanding. Investing in PES is crucial, so that they can function efficiently and staff have a manageable caseload.

⁴ In fact, the Swedish National Audit Office is in the process of carrying out a study on the reasons behind the successful labour market integration of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to gauge what can be learned for the present situation. For further information see Key policy messages from the Peer Review on 'Labour market inclusion of international protection applicants and beneficiaries' Madrid (Spain), 23-24 May 2016

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

- It is important to challenge the deterioration of working conditions for refugees e.g. employers offering compensation below the minimum wage.
- Given the many organisations working on the issue of integration, some countries are considering integrated data systems.

Building on civil society to integrate asylum seekers and refugees into society

- Vital to consider services for the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees e.g. unaccompanied minors and victims of torture, before focusing at all costs on labour market integration.
- Traumas and family violence can lead to **second generation problems**, if not tackled.
- Uncertainties and delays regarding family reunification can impede integration – also important to provide family support when reunified (e.g. encourage female participation in the labour market and/ or community activities).
- Systematic and early screening and providing mental health services are both important to support these groups.
- It may be cost effective to focus resources on children.
- Support from voluntary organisations and NGOs is generally a good thing, but it is important not to rely too heavily on such organisations, especially given issues over the sustainability of their funding.
- There is a strong consensus that integration activities cannot be done to the detriment of the local population. Everyone must act carefully to avoid this.

Skills recognition processes

- **Early assessment** of skills is very important. This rests in assessing and validating non-formal and informal acquired skills and competences for sustainable, long-term labour market placement.
- In skills recognition processes, there has been some testing of modular partial qualifications, accompanied by further training. Here, the curriculum is based on an individual's identified skills.
- It takes a long time to test and use someone's skills. For example, even if someone genuinely has a background in mechanics and engineering, they may initially have trouble in working with modern cars, due to having worked previously with older style cars. 'Upskilling' and flexible guidance are both needed for specific competences.
- There is a potential need to use skills screening to orientate residential settlement – for example, placing individuals in areas with appropriate and accessible job opportunities.
- The time that asylum seekers spend in reception centres should not be wasted – it is vital to ensure at least some engagement with them at this point, in order to avoid skills degradation and make it easier for successful applicants to enter quality work at a later stage.

The role of the private sector in developing new integration approaches

- Employers should be seen as facilitators of integration. Cooperation between PES and employers is fundamental.
- Asylum seekers and refugees should be enabled to live autonomously, the focus of measures should be mentoring and coaching, as well as enabling the access to necessary professional and social networks to enter the labour market. As an example for fostering entrepreneurship retired entrepreneurs could serve as mentors and role models for new arrivals.
- The case for employing refugees and should be presented as 'win-win'. This is not just a question of corporate social responsibility but also a "hard-headed economic

issue": refugees (and potentially asylum seekers) can fill several different types of skills gaps.

- Actions to support employer engagement include: guidance on the legal framework, supporting measures from the PES (e.g. facilitating meeting between the employer and the candidate) and involving them to offer individual job placements.
- The challenges ahead include the scaling-up and sustainability of implemented 'pilot' projects and the further activation of employers in the implementation of these projects.
- In the Swedish example of public-private partnerships between the PES and employers, 200 so called 'company advisors' will be employed by the PES to give guidance and support for companies (especially small and medium sized) to participate in the initiated measures.

Further information

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

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1072&newsId=2555&furtherNews=yes>