



Mutual Learning Conference on “Innovative approaches to integration and inclusion of migrants”

Online event, 26 November 2020

Executive Summary

This Conference provided an opportunity to exchange innovative practices in the area of labour market integration and social inclusion of migrants and people with a migrant background.

The Conference brought together 116 participants from national administrations across Member States as well as representatives of social partners, academia and of civil society and the European Commission.

The Plenary session offered an overview of the positions and aspirations of the European Commission for the next programming period (2021-2027) and provided a state-of-play of innovation and fast-tracking integration following the pandemic from the perspective of different stakeholders. The discussion continued in four parallel workshops focussing on new approaches to migrants’ skills assessment and skills development with a focus on medium and highly skilled migrants (in the light of a new Skills agenda); good practice in overcoming barriers to employment and social inclusion of migrant women; innovative approaches to migrants’ fast track labour market integration and social inclusion, and matching low-skilled migrants with work opportunities in the post-COVID-19 situation.

Supporting more inclusive and resilient societies

In his speech, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit noted that integration and inclusion initiatives are our best chance to ensure migrants are no longer considered migrants and that they live not next to us but with us and among us. He stressed that in the past years, progress had been made regarding the integration of migrants in the labour market. Between 2013 and 2019, the employment rate of non-EU migrants increased by more than seven percentage points, up to 64.2 % and the European Social Fund (ESF) has contributed to the integration of around 3.9 million people with a migrant background or from minorities between 2014 and 2018. However, migrants still face many challenges: the employment rate of third-country migrants remains lower than that of native residents, migrants tend to have lower qualifications, they do not have equal access to decent housing and often face prejudices and discrimination.

In her remarks, Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson underlined that *“integration of migrants is a long-term investment in a strong and more resilient society”*. Hence, innovative integration and social inclusion solutions are needed, either through mainstreaming or targeted policies as highlighted by the new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for the period 2021-2027, which was adopted by the European Commission on 24 November 2020¹. The Action Plan lays the foundation for strategic guidance and puts forward concrete actions to foster the inclusion of migrants, building upon four cornerstones: access to employment, education, healthcare and housing.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/inclusion-all-commission-presents-action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027_en

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director of Social Affairs at Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion underlined that the Conference was very timely, as it took place two days after the European Commission adopted the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, which showed that *"the European Commission took this challenge very seriously and was committed to act"*.

As reiterated by Michael Shotter, Director for Migration and Protection at DG HOME, *"the Action Plan is the first deliverable prepared in the context of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which presents a comprehensive approach that addresses all the dimensions of migration policies"*. While the implementation of the Action Plan will be carried out primarily by the European Commission, cooperation with other stakeholders is essential. These include national, regional and local authorities, economic and social partners, as well as civil society organisations.

Yonous Muhammedi, Director of the Greek Forum of Refugees underlined that the participation of migrant representatives in the preparation of the Action Plan was a positive step forwards towards migrants' involvement in local and national policymaking. Daniel Kerber, Founder and CEO, MORE THAN SHELTERS (Germany) pointed out that neighbourhoods and local communities are particularly important drivers of integration for migrants and investing in spaces where migrants can meet and in community-building practices can compensate migrants' lack of informal networks. Creating 'communities of practice' can also contribute to identify talents as resources, incubate and support them.

The recent COVID-19 outbreak imposed additional challenges for many migrants in vulnerable situations. As presented by Prof. Petra Bendel, migrants are at a higher risk of infection than native-born, with potential consequences on health, employment and education. Migrants are more likely to work in temporary jobs, which account for 80% of job losses due to the pandemic. Moreover, as explained by Petra Draxl, Managing Director of the Public Employment Service Vienna (AMS), migrants are overrepresented in sectors that were hit the hardest by the crisis, such as the hospitality industry, as well as services sector. Lockdowns and social distancing measures led to further segregation of migrants, who often did not have the necessary digital equipment to keep contacts and continue with their integration pathways. Jean-Christophe Dumont, Head of the International Migration Division, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also stressed that children of migrants faced more difficulties with distant learning due also to their housing conditions, parents' low skills or lack of digital tools.

The European Commission will seek to improve the situation of migrants also in the context of other initiatives, such as the upcoming wide-ranging Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The EU can provide a significant contribution through funding, including through the Asylum and Migration Fund, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and the European Regional Development Fund. Close cooperation, genuine partnerships and early engagement of stakeholders with Member States' Managing authorities will help to respond efficiently to the calls for proposals and calls for projects.

The video presentations of speakers and panellists together with the thematic reports and highlights of innovative projects are available online at this [link](#).

The key policy messages from the Mutual Learning Conference can be summarised as follows:

Cross-cutting principles to be taken into consideration while developing policies and services for migrants

- When designing innovative measures and policies, a holistic approach focussing on migrants as individuals and adequately addressing their needs is crucial. Empowerment, participation, two-way communication and mainstreaming are equally important.

- Co-creation with migrants in developing, implementing and evaluating innovative integration measures is important to ensure that their needs are thoroughly addressed from the onset.
- An integrated, cross-sectoral and multistakeholder approach is crucial in designing and implementing effective integration policies that link the different dimensions of the integration process. In particular, employers' and social partners' engagement is crucial to design and implement integration measures, such as skills assessment and skills development activities as well as fast-track procedures for the integration of migrants in the labour market and society.
- A 'joined-up' approach to integration service provision (i.e one-stop-shops) can facilitate the provision of the holistic support required to address their often complex and specific needs. A coordinated approach between the different services will facilitate a more efficient and effective support and thus increase their opportunities for integration.
- Innovative actions designed and implemented to tackle the hardships of the COVID-19 crisis for migrants at local level should be supported through funding and disseminating information across layers of government and Member States. Initiatives that meet the good practice standards such as sustainability, empowerment and participation, two-way communication, mainstreaming, and easy access should be reached further and scaled up.

How best to develop migrants' skills assessment and skills development with a focus on medium and highly skilled migrants:

- Skills mapping and skills development are long-term processes that require an increase of migrants' self-awareness about their own skills and potential and reflections on their career development possibilities, rather than activities offering short-term solutions for integration. Also, the early involvement of migrants in designing skills mapping and skills development approaches has paid off.
- Non-formal/soft skills are relevant and should be appropriately taken into consideration in (formal) migrants' skills assessments. In particular, migrants might have developed unique soft skills, through their journey and through their personal experiences, that can bring an added value to the labour market.
- Migrants should not be considered as a homogenous group with similar skills and needs. Therefore, categories for skills mapping and skills development should allow for some individualised interventions in order to offer a menu of different support services to be selected on the basis of the specific needs of migrants.
- Recently arrived migrants should have better entrance to language learning and should be supported in having entrance to online courses and digital equipment (often lacking entrance to good Wi-Fi connections). Innovative digital tools that do not require the proficient use of the language of the host country can provide an effective solution for the identification of migrants' skills.

How to overcome barriers to employment and social inclusion of migrant women:

- Migrant women face additional barriers to labour market integration and long-term social inclusion which require comprehensive support. Thus, the provision of services for migrants should be designed taking into consideration a gender perspective (e.g. opening hours in parts of the day where women tend to be available) and specific measures for women with care responsibilities (e.g. programmes offering childcare).
- Initiatives to challenge gender stereotypes and encouraging migrant men to take more responsibilities in the domestic context can contribute to the participation of women in the community, hence, to improve integration in society and the labour market.

- Adequate outreach activities can contribute to the engagement of all migrants, including women, which are particularly difficult to reach. Innovative outreach activities targeting migrant women, such as buddy, mentor or mediators collaborations, can build networks and communities that encourage integration in the labour market and society.

How to develop innovative approaches to ensure fast-track labour market integration and social inclusion of migrants:

- Migrants should be integrated in the labour market as soon as possible in order to prevent a loss of motivation and skills. This disengagement might result in further difficulties for migrants to join the labour market.
- A holistic approach combining different measures (e.g. language learning, workplace learning) and individualised support yield the best possible results. Language and culture courses can be delivered in innovative ways, for instance, between other courses (e.g. vocational training courses) or during extra-curricular activities.
- In order to facilitate the integration of migrants into their host society, counselling activities should focus on giving migrants the knowledge to access and navigate the specific labour market, including by offering advice and information on existing regulations and opportunities. Target measures and training might be developed to support other skills such as entrepreneurship.
- Digitalised skills assessment tools used at the regional or national level need to be standardised to speed up the integration process and increase the effectiveness of the recognition process.

How to match low-skilled migrants with work opportunities in the post-COVID-19 situation:

- Vocational training can be an effective way to improve the employability of low-skilled migrants and facilitate their access to the labour market in the post-Covid-19 situation.
- Mentoring services can steer the migrants towards labour market needs in order to sustain their integration in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery phase.
- In the light of COVID-19 pandemic restriction, digital technologies and innovative tools for sharing information on labour market opportunities can play an important role to overcome information gaps for migrant communities, in particular regarding access to the labour market for low skilled migrants, access to housing and basic needs.
- Measures need to be taken to close the digital gap that often affects migrants, making sure that they are equipped and have the necessary skills to access online and digital services and tool (i.e. phones), which became particularly relevant since the outbreak of Covid-19, in order to overcome the barriers resulting from restrictions to movements.