



Towards recognition and employment of refugees

*I have two hands, I have one mind, I can work, I can live my life.
(Dritjon, stylist)*

*I have a degree, but I kind of lost it.
(Muna, social worker)*

*In the future I can maybe work for a company or have my own company. That's
my big dream.
(Rena, economist)*

*I would like to be successful and do what I like doing.
(Mohamed, teacher)*

*I invested into my job. And I will fight for it!
(Argjent, journalist)*

Labour market integration of refugees in Europe can be the key to helping and profiting from new arrivals. Public employment services together with other labour market and civil society actors have an important role to play in improving today's situation.

Europe is facing the most challenging refugee situation since World War II. In 2015 1.3 million asylum applications were filed, more than double the number of the years before. The current influx of refugees coming through the Mediterranean alone is rising above 200.000 people in 2016. This "crisis", as the media has labelled it, however seems to be rather one of leadership and solidarity than of capacity. The fact that the two million refugees, who came to the EU in search of shelter from regions torn by war, violence and economic misery, cannot be properly distributed among all 28 European Union member countries, seems indeed critical. Opposite to the current global scaremongering, claiming that people are against migration, a recent IOM-Gallup survey revealed that the vast majority of the world population is actually pro-migration, the only exception being Europe (with 52% opposing it). Europe, at the same time, has one of the lowest incoming rates. In the top five hosting countries for refugees led by Turkey, none of the EU countries appears.



The fears that avoid lifting the burden from a few main European receivers of refugees and asylum seekers like Sweden and Germany -and with a more immediate impact Turkey or Greece- are driven by many perception flaws in the civil society. Those range from xenophobia to worries about social segregation scarring the well being of the receiving country. One crosscutting issue is the potential performance of refugees on the labour market. Their integration into employment is key to their own independence and the role they will play in the destination environment. Public employment services are therefore in a crucial position to help match migrant skills with decent work and shape the public opinion on labour migration.

Entering the labour market?

Generally, migrant workers, unless highly skilled or in an expatriate work-setting, are at the low end of the employment chain. They are usually the last to be hired and the first to be fired. State help for the integration of migrant workers, if it exists at all, is being lowered or cut quickly in times of austerity. This is all the more true for migrants in search of refuge.

Even in the current aggravated situation of a simultaneous skills supply from refugees and a skills shortage on the demographically strained EU labour market, there seems to be little political will to open up to third country workforce. Refugees are stigmatized as low skilled through assessment systems that hardly capture more than nationally coded competencies, educations are not recognized by protective academic systems, and employers appear unready to hire or test refugee skills other than through subsidized temp models with little sustainability. Entrepreneurial talent of migrants, proven in various studies like a recent one from the United Nations University, to be above the average of European destination countries, is largely ignored.

The administrative slog of determining the residence permit (in cases lasting for years) hampers any kind of integration. The concept of temporary protection that had been adopted in the EU in the past as a provisional response to situations of mass influx when individual refugee status determination becomes impracticable, has not been activated for the thousands of refugees that are arriving now.



Three areas of action could be taken to improve the situation, also with the collaboration of public employment services.

Tackling a global issue jointly

First, while there are many good practices of how to help integrating refugees into the labour market already in place, there seems to be a lack in coordinating them and capitalizing on their outcomes. This governance gap, according to a soon-to-be-published study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung titled “From Refugees to Workers”, causes excellent initiatives of integration like the Virtual Refugee University that offers webinars as *massive online open courses* (MOOC) slip past the attention of decision makers in education and employment. In better cases, single practices are copied and pasted into different environments, where they then do not work out.

The study concludes that four elements seem to drive the current package of EU refugee integration practices that remain a conventional wisdom without critical reflection. Those elements are: early skills assessment, introduction programs including cultural orientation, intensive language courses and access to generalized job intermediation services. This is a reasonable start, but evidence shows that in particular public employment services struggle with a proper skills assessment, let alone a matching backed by interested employers. A few targeted early intervention initiatives, eager to approach refugees quicker to the labour market, entirely lacked the participation of employers.

Few integration projects are multinational or include a continuous mutual learning mechanism like the Di & Di Employment Integration Program against discrimination, targeting low-skilled women and skilled youth, which involves different labour market actors on both sides of the skills match in Bulgaria, Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland. Public Employment Services are not a partner in this program yet.

In the field of testing and coordinating initiatives more leadership and governance is required.

Secondly, and linked to the first issue, outcomes of good integration practices are not being evaluated.



Success factors that drive local integration projects like a refugee integration program for the hotel and catering industry in Germany or another one addressing the common integration obstacle of psychological conditions of refugees by utilizing a network of psychologists, social workers and employment professionals in the United Kingdom, do not provide a systematic follow-up of the impact, even if they have been underway for a while. As a recent briefing by the European Parliament implies, the funding structure of pre- and co-financing such initiatives by the often limited resources of the tendering non-for-profit sector might be the cause for cutting costs on evaluating, but it might also be a lack of planning and governance when setting up the project that drops the follow-up. In any case, comparability and navigation of project delivery, in this case the integration of refugees, can only be guaranteed by some sort of impact evaluation.

Lastly, refugees do not seem to have a voice in the whole process of labour market integration. The migration trauma, the usual lack of language skills and the intimidating asylum procedure surely silences them. But there is more: The support measures and labour market programs directed towards them have been designed without asking them beforehand. Fair enough, this is also true for other vulnerable groups and it is precisely this top-down labelling principle that does not meet the homogeneity of the vast group of refugees aka migrants. If Syrian refugees, for instance, are generally clustered as “mainly low-skilled” the integration chances of the entire community will be low too, no matter how diverse their (unrecognized) skill’s backgrounds may be.

The large amount of initiatives where refugees do get a voice, for example to recount their human story, could include a more decided presentation of what they would like to work in and what they are good at.

One thing is sure when talking to most refugees: They did not leave their country of origin searching for liberation to enter a situation of dependence. They want to be self-sufficient and thus work.

Public employment services would be well-advised to reach out to refugees and facilitate their own skills narrative in order to get to know, develop and profit from



the professional capacity that is coming to Europe.

Conclusion

The European Union needs strategies and governance to move beyond the top-down model of regulatory and victimizing refugee assistance on the one hand and a set of unmonitored local practices on the other, towards more coordinated support measures that empower the refugees and allow them to contribute to the society of destination (and ideally to the one of origin too).

Employment partnerships should be created that focus on the skills of the refugee not on their status only. The earlier a migrant can start working according to competencies, knowledge or talent, the sooner aid dependency, host state fatigue and the downward spiral of passivity and xenophobia will cease.

Public employment services and WAPES as players between labour market policy and local employment implementation are in a good spot to give a voice to job-seekers, employers and other labour market actors in how to better integrate refugees. They can also help to give a voice to the migrants themselves.

On a greater scale, Europe would not send the message to other world regions that refusing to support displaced populations is a valid option, but stand for a good example that solidarity, leadership and economic prosperity go hand in hand.

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