



Work first: Refugee Gap in Labour Market

Finding a suitable job in the host country is one of the main challenges facing efforts of integrating refugees. Sweden has identified this issue and is investing into making labour market inclusion the driver of refugee integration.

“Work is important for me. I have always worked. Work is my baby!” says Misrak (36). Eleven months ago she moved from Ethiopia to Sweden to reunite with her husband, also from Ethiopia, who had to leave the country before. Both have refugee status and live now in Stockholm.

Misrak’s straightforward attitude to work is a perfect predisposition to be integrated into any labour market, one would think. Unfortunately, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are struggling to find jobs, when they arrive in the country of destination, especially in the European Union.

Refugee Gap

Over 80% of all non-EU nationals between 15 and 64 years of age residing in countries of the European Union are working or profiled as low skilled or unskilled. In countries with high barriers to the recognition of foreign skills like Finland or the Czech Republic, migrant workers in general end up being considered less well-educated than native workers. They often have to accept worse working conditions. The origin of migrants further aggravates the differences. 21% of Russian migrants to Finland, for instance, have their tertiary education recognized, while less than 10% of Somali migrants, mostly refugees, managed to do so.

Refugees are considered the least skilled among migrants, a group that anyway struggles with an adequate skill’s recognition. Analyses in multiple countries have pointed at the fact that refugees always perform worse in labour market integration than migrants, even if their skills levels are not necessarily lower. This additional “refugee gap” appears across age groups and language competences of the host language.

When it comes to labour market support measures, such as unemployment benefits, refugees would normally get a limited access. If they are new arrivals, they do not get anything at all, thereby cutting them from any access direction to employment.



Good integration practice

Sweden, one of the top countries in Europe when it comes to accepting refugees has opted for a probably unique approach in putting work first when welcoming refugees. New arrivals to Sweden, mainly proceeding from Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Iraq are not left waiting in camps or parked in social systems, but enrolled in a work integration program. After the residence status is taken care of, it is the public employment service of the country, not the migration board or city council that helps the refugee to gain foothold in the new environment. Finding a job is at the core of this.

When Misrak arrived to Sweden she was immediately put into the work integration program for refugees run by Arbetsförmedlingen, the Swedish public employment service. Different from countries, where family members joining a yet residing refugee are expected to be looked after by the more settled partner, this program invests into the employability of each refugee from the beginning. This sense for empowerment has proved successful also in Canada, where the comparatively positive attitude towards migration stems from the country's policy to attract and train skills that can be actually used on the domestic labour market.

The skills assessment in the Swedish integration program does not only look at formal qualifications, but also at the job history, soft skills, and other job relevant experiences. Johan Nylander, analyst at Arbetsförmedlingen states: "Skills levels among new arrivals are not always low, they are very varied." The refugee is part of the assessment, also by expressing the personal expectations towards the program and towards the work of the job advisor at the public employment service. The resulting integration plan empowers the refugee as a job-seeker to take his share of responsibility in finding a suitable job. Arbetsförmedlingen supports and guides where necessary with preparatory training courses to explain the Swedish employment reality: Both, an eye opener and a door opener according to Misrak. The assessment got her into a university program for high skills, where her background in administration and management would be rightly matched with job vacancies.

The support does not stop there, the Swedish program has additional success factors.



First, it includes many partners in the process of integrating a refugee into the labour market and manages the partner's expectations. While the philosophy of 'know before you go' targeted at those who leave a country is valid and crucial, there is also a need to manage expectations on the receiving end. Immigration countries like Germany or Brazil have significant social struggles with refugees, also because the receiving communities are not well-informed and lack cross-cultural communication skills. A recent study on the two-sided nature of managing expectations in migration to the USA showed that even generic concepts like "welcome" mentioned in leaflets for new arrivals contain varying implications, at risk to be understood in different ways from different cultures. Also, the meaning of "refugee" in many languages equals to "fugitive" or "outlaw" and is for that reason very distant from employment or any form of integrating to the receiving society. Partnering with migrant self-organizations that know both sides is a good asset to the overall result of refugee integration.

Talking to employers

The public employment service in Sweden reaches out to another important partner, the employer. They do so at an early stage, identifying those who are willing to hire refugees and negotiating with those that show a lower readiness to invest into skills development of foreign workers. Subsidies for work practices and preparatory training courses help pave the way to a mutual positive kick-start into a new recruitment. Continued assistance after the refugee starts working facilitates a sustainable employment. Countries that have tried employment mentoring programs –long-term traineeships for skilled refugees to fully enter a company or start their own business- have experienced a viable route to drop unemployment, increase earnings and financially empower refugees.

In addition, the Swedish approach of integration is holistic. It focuses, in the end, not only on finding a job. "A strength of the program is that it starts parallel paths to train and integrate the refugee, for example not spending a long time sitting in a course learning the language and then looking for a job, but doing both at the same time," says Nylander.



The program also helps to look for appropriate housing. A good labour market usually brings about a bad household market, integration programs need to consider that. Since the beginning of the program in 2010, roughly 25.000 refugees have asked the public employment service for help in finding a place, over 30% could be offered a satisfying match with the workplace. A lot of refugees could find places to live on their own.

Result orientation

Measurable results develop slowly in pioneering projects. That's why for this integration program, the Swedish government decided to concentrate on individual successes, not on generic figures. Between 2012 and 2013, 24% of the participants that attended the program in Sweden were placed into jobs or studies. This number could seem low, but it is an impressive start into improving the labour market integration of almost 1000 refugees, also taking into account that the number of participants in the courses are raising each month and that each refugee will after participation have the possibility to receive continued support of the public employment service. The fact that the program is not ruled by monitoring deadlines or budgetary constraints helps to establish migration policy as a long-term approach, rather than a quick fix to a temporary phenomenon.

Misrak had low expectations when she came to Sweden. Today she works for the procurement department of a Swedish cosmetics company based in Stockholm. Thanks to the work integration program, she feels that her skills are recognized. She takes pride in being a good example of integrating in Sweden. Ethiopia is still her home, she mentions, that is perfectly understandable. If she decided to stay for longer however, the civic orientation that Arbetsförmedlingen provides together with municipalities came with different modules starting with *Coming to Sweden*, moving on to *Having influence in Sweden* and ending with *Growing old in Sweden*. She has a choice now. Lots of refugees don't.

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