

INTEGRATING REFUGEES INTO HOST COUNTRY LABOUR MARKETS:

Policy Tradeoffs and Recommendations

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I. Explaining refugee employment disadvantage

- Refugees find themselves at a particular employment disadvantage upon arrival:

Newcomers' difficulties stemming from limited host-country-specific human capital

- Language barriers
 - Foreign-acquired qualifications and work experience
 - Lack of familiarity with local labour markets
 - Lack of local networks
- are more acute for refugees, who had less opportunities to plan their journey ahead

The specificities of refugee journeys, settlement, and status

- Interrupted employment or education trajectories
 - Trauma and other health problems
 - Constrained settlement opportunities
 - Delayed access to integration services
 - Delayed/restricted labour market access
 - Precarious status
- translate into additional barriers

- ❖ Refugees are *not* a homogeneous group, and challenges vary depending on: education, age, journey, networks, assets etc.

II. Tackling challenges through integration policies

- The opportunities for overcoming challenges depend largely on labour market integration policies
- EU MS receiving large inflows of asylum seekers have stepped up efforts to support refugee labour market integration:
 - Granting early access to labour market integration programmes/measures to asylum seekers or even prior to departure
 - Offering tailored opportunities for the recognition of foreign qualifications and experience
 - Accelerating employment transition for skilled refugees through customized bridging offers
 - Promoting alternative paths into activity for the less skilled/educated
 - Reducing waiting time and conditions restricting labour market access for asylum seekers
 - Supporting employers willing to hire and/or train refugees
- Investments are not geared only to employment objectives: their (long-term) returns are expected to span to social cohesion and fiscal balance

III. Policy tradeoffs in supporting early refugee labour market integration

- How to justify investments in integration and labour market activities for asylum seekers, when resources to support resident immigrants – and, in some countries, unemployed natives – are tight?
- How to promote upskilling opportunities and adequate employment matching for refugees, while acknowledging the possible tradeoff between *swift* and *optimal* labour market insertion?
- How to ensure that skilled refugees are *swiftly* bridged into employment, without compromising professional standards?
- How to make sure that refugees with the greatest labour market potential are fast-tracked into employment without sidelining the more vulnerable?
- How to make productive investments along the migration continuum, when many refugees follow non-linear trajectories and services are in emergency mode?
- How to create incentives for employers to hire and train refugees, without distorting the market or undermining the integrity of the migration system?

IV. Early access to labour market integration programmes

- Some countries have opened up integration programmes to *asylum seekers*
Different approaches have been adopted to strike a balance between investments and returns:
 - Opening up introduction programmes only to asylum seekers with the greatest chances of getting protected status (e.g. Germany, Norway)
 - Offering services on an incremental basis along the protection continuum (e.g. Finland)
- In most countries the offer of labour market integration activities (e.g. early skills profiling, orientation, vocational training) available to asylum seekers in reception centers has expanded, often provided by civil society actors
- The provision of *pre-departure* integration support to refugees/asylum seekers bound to resettlement/relocation is also under consideration
- To bear concrete and durable results, early labour market integration activities need to refer newcomers to more structured/in-depth programmes along the settlement continuum

V. Tailored procedures for the recognition of foreign-acquired qualifications and experience

- Alternative recognition procedures for migrants lacking verifiable documentation based on:

- individual interviews
- work samples/supervised work
- competency tests

(e.g. Norway: NOKUT UVD procedure; Germany: Prototyping Transfer; Netherlands)

Involving employers in the alternative recognition procedure may improve its trustworthiness (e.g. Germany; Sweden)

- Disentangling language testing from qualifications recognition
(e.g. Finland; Netherlands; Sweden)

- Few countries have piloted recognition procedures for asylum seekers, though numbers are small
(e.g. Finland; Germany; Norway)

- ❖ *Early skills assessment and recognition may help feeding employment matching considerations into settlement decisions, yet in practice housing shortages and lack of coordination have constrained this opportunity*

VI. Customized bridging offers

- Bridging programmes are the gold standard to accelerate employment transition for *mid- to high-skilled* migrants:
 - they provide a combination of measures aimed at plugging specific gaps in host-country human capital
(e.g. complementary vocational training, vocational-specific language training, supervised work experience to complete recognition procedure)
 - they allow to spare time otherwise needed for migrants to restart their education/qualification programme at destination
 - they improve migrants' employment matching and self-sufficiency
 - Comprehensive bridging packages are resource-intensive
(funding, managing, and human resources)
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- They are most often offered to migrants/refugees who have skills and qualifications in *shortage occupations*
(Sweden: Fast-tracks; Norway; United Kingdom: Building Bridges)

VII. Alternative paths into activity for the less skilled/educated

- For those refugees who are *less skilled or less educated* (incl. minors and young adults) enrollment in *mainstream* education and workforce training is a key path into activity, provided that:
 - **introductory/complementary training** is available to catch up with natives (e.g. basic literacy, numeracy, language, familiarization with the local education system)
 - **mainstream systems are accessible to “unconventional learners”** (incl. for “non-beginners”)
- **For some of them, however, a long (re)training path may not be an option** (e.g. older refugees and those who need to support a family/pay back debts)
Alternative paths for them include:
 - **Entrepreneurship support**
 - **Unconventional jobs** (e.g. mediators)
 - **Volunteering opportunities**

VIII. Encouraging Employers (SMEs) to hire and train refugees

- While legal restrictions to employment access for asylum seekers have been reduced in most EU MS, for the bulk of employers hiring asylum seekers is still not an option because of:
 - difficulties navigating administrative requirements
 - risks involved in recruiting vulnerable candidates with limited labour market credentials, and unstable status
 - resource constraints on workforce recruiting and training
 - limited returns in terms of visibility of diversity initiatives
- Governments may support and encourage employers by:
 - cutting red tape and offering administrative guidance
 - facilitating access to secure residence status for asylum seekers with employment potential
(e.g. allowing status change or suspending negative decisions)
 - providing support for profiling and employment matching
(e.g. through databases)
 - subsidizing refugee employment

IX. Looking ahead: how to sustain and scale up recent innovations?

Government commitment and civil society enthusiasm have sparked a host of innovative policies and initiatives to improve the labour market integration of refugees

For these efforts to achieve *durable* and *substantial results* the following recommendations may be considered:

- Craft a *coherent strategy* across the protection and integration continuum, through *effective multidimensional and multistakeholder coordination*
- Allow for concrete measures to be *tailored* to the *diverse needs* of *refugees* and *receiving localities*
- Involve and *support* employers and civil society actors
- Routinely *monitor* and *evaluate* programmes to inform policy changes
- *Communicate effectively* on immediate results and expected returns on investments to win public confidence

Thank you for your attention!

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For further reading:

