

Editorial:

Integration, integration, integration: The key policy challenge for domestic migration policy and beyond

The peak of the humanitarian refugee crisis is behind us: the unprecedented high inflows of the second-half of 2015 and early 2016 have receded over the past year. In the first six months of 2017, the total number of landings on European shores reached 72 000, slightly below the flows in 2014 and more than 12 times less than the flows in second-half 2015. Many of those who arrived in Europe from conflict countries are likely to stay for some time, at least until their home countries are safe again. It is now time to focus on how to help people settle in their new host countries and integrate into their labour markets. This demands rethinking both domestic policies and international co-operation.

The very large and sudden inflow of asylum seekers at the time when most European countries were still grappling with the impact of the Great Recession has fuelled public concerns as to whether governments can manage such large flows and whether they can effectively integrate those migrants who will stay. Public opinion often calls for more selective and restrictive admission of future migrants, if not for the closing of borders. Past integration outcomes have indeed often left something to be desired. The OECD-EU report, *Indicators of Immigrants Integration: Settling In* (2015), showed very clearly that all too often life chances of people are determined by their country of origin rather than their abilities and ambitions. The unemployment gap between native-born people and immigrants has widened in many countries since 2007 and is now almost 5 percentage points in Europe. Immigrant children also, on average, have significantly less chances of being among the top 25% of performers in school compared with peers who also come from a relatively economically disadvantaged background but who have native-born parents. Furthermore, it has taken 5 to 10 years for most previous generations of family migrants and refugees to be employed in Europe and as much as 15 to 20 years for them to reach a similar level of employment as natives – if ever.

Improving the integration outcomes of immigrants and their children, including refugees, is vital to delivering a more prosperous, inclusive future for all. In many OECD countries, increased awareness about the need to ease the settlement of recently arrived refugees came with greater mobilisation of different stakeholders: central to local authorities, public employment services and other relevant public agencies, the education system, NGOs, employers and trade unions, and civil society at large. The recent initiative of the European commission, “Employers Together for Integration”, is building on this positive dynamic. There are also countless examples of individual or collective actions at local level to welcome refugees; in the vein of the “refugees welcome” initiative and private sponsorship programmes. They tend to be oversubscribed in most countries. More generally, in many cases, additional funds have been made available to improve integration outcomes and to cope with increasing needs.

As this *Outlook* shows, important changes are being implemented in order to more effectively and efficiently integrate refugees. Innovative service delivery methods have been tested, building notably on new technologies. The fast-track integration programme in Sweden and the adoption of the first ever law on integration in Germany are good examples of these changes. In some countries, public policies are still lagging behind, but calls for action are mounting. There is clearly positive momentum for further reforms at national level regarding migrant integration, focussing on all migrants, not just refugees.

Integration is not only a domestic question. There is a strong case for international co-operation in this area:

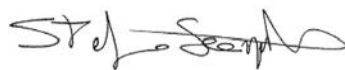
- The economic, political and social costs associated with the lack of integration in one country may have negative spill-overs for others.
- In a context of increasing diversity, the development of inclusive, cohesive and harmonious societies will have a positive impact on international relations.
- Better integration outcomes are essential for the migration-development nexus – unless migrants’ skills are well used in their host countries, they will not be able to contribute to the development of their origin countries.

Given their global implications, it is striking that integration issues have been largely absent from the international agenda. In the UN context, policy debates focussed until recently on migrants’ rights but not necessarily on their outcomes. Even at the EU level, integration remains in essence a national competency. This is finally changing. For example, the labour market integration of regular migrants and recognised refugees was brought into the agenda of the G20 countries this year. G20 employment Ministers noted that “employment plays a key role in promoting the sustainable integration of over 130 million regular migrants, approximately 5 million refugees and significant number of returning migrants in the G20” and identified policies for fair and effective integration of regular migrants and recognised refugees. This is a first step, and an important one, but this effort must next become an ambitious international agenda on integration – and one with measurable outcomes.

The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and in particular their promises to leave no one behind, provides a major opportunity to develop a global monitoring system of integration outcomes of immigrants and their children across all destination countries for all key dimensions of integration.

We also need to take advantage of the unique opportunity constituted by the development of the UN Global Compacts on Refugees and on Migrants to bring the critical question of integration more into the international policy arena. The clock is ticking, notably for the Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Building on content already outlined in the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, details must now be defined in negotiations, in order create a Compact that is viable and that will have real impact.

At this critical juncture, it is not only time for concrete actions on supporting the integration of migrants and their children into our labour markets and societies. Now is the time to think about integration policy as a priority not just within countries, but also at global level.



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