

Work and refugee integration in Sweden

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One of the main challenges facing refugees trying to integrate in their host country is finding a suitable job. Sweden recognises this issue and is investing in making inclusion in the labour market the driver of refugee integration.

“Work is important for me. I have always worked. Work is my baby!” says Misrak (aged 36). Eleven months ago she moved from Eritrea to Sweden to join her husband, also from Eritrea, who had had to leave the country before her. Both have refugee status and now live in Stockholm. Misrak’s straightforward attitude to work is perfect for being integrated into any labour market, one would think. Unfortunately, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are struggling to find jobs when they arrive in their country of destination, especially in the European Union (EU).

Over 80% of all non-EU nationals between 15 and 64 years of age residing in the EU are working as, or are profiled as, low-skilled or unskilled. In countries with high barriers to the recognition of foreign skills (such as Finland or the Czech Republic), immigrant workers in general are perceived as less well-educated than native workers and 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 recognised, while fewer than 10% of Somali migrants, mostly refugees, have managed to do so.¹

Migrants are often considered less skilled by default, refugees even more so. Analyses in multiple countries have shown that refugees always perform worse in labour market integration than other migrants, even if their skills levels are comparable. This ‘refugee gap’ occurs irrespective of age or competence in the host language. Refugees also have limited access to labour-market support measures, such as unemployment benefits, compared to migrants. The situation for newly arrived refugees is even worse in some EU countries; they might not get

anything at all, thereby cutting them off from help getting access to employment.

Countries that have tried employment mentoring programmes – long-term traineeships for skilled refugees to fully enter a company or start their own business – have discovered them to be a viable way of reducing unemployment, increasing earnings and financially empowering refugees. Sweden accepts the highest number of refugees of any European country, and has opted for what might be a unique approach in putting work first when welcoming refugees. Newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden are not left waiting in camps or parked in social support systems; instead, they are enrolled in a work integration programme. After their residence status is settled, it is the national public employment service, not the migration board or city council, that helps the refugee to gain a foothold in their new environment. Finding a job is at the core of this.

When Misrak arrived in Sweden she was immediately put into the work integration programme for refugees run by the Swedish public employment service (Arbetsförmedlingen). Unlike other countries, where family members joining an already resident refugee are expected to be looked after by the more settled person, this programme invests in the employability of each refugee.

Skills levels among new arrivals are very varied – and certainly not always low. The skills assessment component of the Swedish integration programme looks not only at formal qualifications but also at employment history, soft skills and other employment-relevant experiences. The refugee also expresses their personal expectations of the programme and of the assistance they would

November 2014

like to receive from the job advisor at the public employment service. The resulting integration plan respects the refugee as a job-seeker who will take his or her 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 programme for those with higher skills, where her background in administration and management would be suitably matched with job vacancies.

The public employment service also reaches out to employers, identifying those who are willing to hire refugees and negotiating with those who show less readiness to invest in skills development. Subsidies for work experience posts and preparatory training courses help pave the way to a mutually positive kick-start. Continued assistance after the refugee starts working helps ensure sustainability of employment.

Beyond a job

A strength of the Swedish programme is that it starts parallel paths to training and integrating the refugee; refugees do not, for example, spend a long time sitting in a language course and then start looking for a job but do both at the same time. As

its focus is not only on finding a job, the programme also helps refugees to look for appropriate housing, as a thriving labour market usually triggers a higher priced housing market. Since the beginning of the programme in 2012, 8,000 refugees have asked the public employment service for help in finding a place, half of whom were offered a satisfactory match with a workplace. One in four of the programme participants have found jobs or courses of study, an impressive start into improving the labour market integration of over 4,000 refugees in 2012 alone; the remaining three-quarters without placements remain in the integration programme for opportunities in the future.

Measurable results develop slowly in pioneering projects. That is why for this integration programme the Swedish government decided to evaluate every individual success, even if the overall numbers of integrated refugees might be humble in the beginning. The fact that the programme 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 programme, she feels that her skills are recognised and she takes pride in being a good example of integration in Sweden. She says that Eritrea is still her home, which is only natural. If she decided to stay for longer, however, the integration programme also 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. A lot of refugees do not.

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1. International Organization for Migration (2012), *Labour Market Inclusion of the Less Skilled Migrants in the European Union*. <http://tinyurl.com/IOM-LabourMarketInclusion>



UNHCR / Båvman

A Syrian refugee family begins a new life in the small town of Torsby, Sweden, January 2014.