

Approaches to the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers

Introduction

Providing swift access to the labour markets of host countries is part of the solution to Europe's refugee crisis. This report takes forward existing research on the labour market integration of refugees (those with the officially recognised status of international protection) and asylum seekers (those who have applied for international protection and are awaiting a decision).

The objectives of the study are to:

- update information on legislation and practical arrangements in the first half of 2016;
- examine labour market integration in the context of receiving and supporting asylum seekers and refugees;
- explore the role of the social partners in this area.

The study is based to a large extent on evidence collected via a questionnaire to Eurofound's network of European correspondents in the EU28 Member States and Norway. The responses reflect a snapshot of current developments.

Policy context

The sudden and massive influx of asylum seekers in 2015 initially posed a humanitarian challenge primarily for the frontline countries, Greece and Italy, where those seeking protection first arrived. However, the longer-term issues around the successful integration of the new arrivals quickly came to the fore, prompting an increased interest in social inclusion measures. As social inclusion is closely linked to successful labour market integration, the question of how to ensure swift access to and integration in the labour market has become a prominent issue on the policy agendas of many EU Member States. This is not surprising as, in addition to facilitating social inclusion, labour market integration is an economically rational response, especially if it is done in an efficient way.

Key findings

In many countries, the average duration of the asylum procedure has increased (in some cases quite substantially). Nevertheless, various measures have been introduced to ease the effects of delays in obtaining a decision; in some cases, the procedure has been accelerated for specific groups of asylum seekers.

Delays in obtaining asylum can have far-reaching consequences, as legal access to the labour market is usually linked to the status of international protection, meaning that it is open just to refugees. Due to the sudden and high inflow of asylum seekers, however, access to the labour market for this other group has had to be eased.

This is generally the approach adopted by the Member States most affected by the refugee crisis. Nevertheless, they face a number of challenges, linked to the crisis.

- Living conditions in reception centres are often inadequate to prepare people for joining the labour market. Overcrowding and poor conditions are reported, as well as a lack of accommodation. There are problems with the availability of externally provided services, and coordination with these services can be difficult.
- Although the geographical distribution of asylum seekers and refugees is planned, in most cases proximity of jobs cannot be taken into account due to housing shortages.
- Funding for employment services for asylum seekers is often less well established than that for refugees. Access and the rules for participation are also not as straightforward.
- Social security entitlements for working asylum seekers vary across countries, and sometimes the rules are less favourable than for other migrant groups, including refugees.
- For asylum seekers, opportunities for self-employment are very limited, mainly due to the uncertainty of their status.

- Employers are only sporadically given incentives to employ asylum seekers; the use of wage subsidies as a tool is entirely lacking.
- Although the school-age children of asylum seekers are entitled to attend compulsory education in all Member States, special arrangements for these children are not always guaranteed. Some countries reported that schools are ill-prepared to receive these children.

In many countries, the granting of asylum has become temporary in the wake of the crisis. Provision of temporary asylum can weaken refugees' position in the labour market since it may deter employers from hiring them, offering them longer-term contracts or investing in training.

Several countries have recently reduced some non-employment-related social services and allowances for refugees or asylum seekers or both. While this could increase their motivation to work, it could also further impede labour market integration since it affects their living conditions. Restrictions on family reunification may have a similar impact, further postponing social (and labour market) inclusion.

In several countries, measures that aim to facilitate self-employment of refugees are either mainstream initiatives or are targeted at immigrants in general and thus do not take the specific needs of refugees into account. Private agencies (intermediary agencies and temporary work agencies) have little involvement in delivering employment services for refugees and asylum seekers.

The social partners play an active role in most of the key destination countries, where they focus on important topics such as education and apprenticeships, accelerating labour market access, and recruitment of refugees.

Joint statements by the social partners often stress the desirability of sustainable and fast integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the labour market. While trade unions tend to emphasise sustainable integration, to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers can live and work within a country over the long term, employers focus on fast integration, to boost their competitiveness by using the new labour resources efficiently.

Policy pointers

- Employment considerations are important when deciding the geographical distribution of refugees and asylum seekers within a country. But where there is a shortage of housing, it is often not possible to pay sufficient attention to labour market integration. Therefore, when new housing opportunities are explored, the availability of jobs should be taken into account.
- More attention should be paid to providing access to social services (for example, specific education for asylum seekers' children, other family support, adequate healthcare), and if services are externally delivered, better coordination with the providers is needed in reception centres.
- Employment services during the asylum procedure should be extended in order to provide better preparation for the labour market integration of asylum seekers.
- Mainstream active labour market policy measures are generally insufficient. Specific measures targeting refugees and asylum seekers (for example, language training, on-the-job training and mentoring by earlier migrants) are needed. These should also focus on the untapped potential for self-employment.
- There is a need to find the right balance between fast and sustainable integration. Integration plans should be realistic: low-skilled jobs may come first (for initial work experience), but career paths should be offered for more sustainable integration.
- The potential to involve private labour market intermediaries or temporary work agencies in offering employment services (possibly in cooperation with public employment services) should be explored.
- In several countries, the importance of the social partners' role in labour market integration is not sufficiently recognised. Not only could their experience on the ground be useful, but better coordination with them as actors (together with other relevant players) could also lead to a more efficient implementation of the integration process.
- The EU-level platforms could prove useful tools not only for exchange of experience of promising measures, but also for monitoring and evaluating the existing initiatives (as suggested in the Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals, adopted in 2016).

Further information

The report *Approaches to the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers* is available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications

For more information, contact Klára Fóti, Research Manager, at kfo@eurofound.europa.eu