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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

POST-EVENT BRIEF

ESPON Peer Learning Workshop

Good practices in the integration of migrants from European and local perspectives

19 October 2020

Summary



The ESPON virtual peer learning workshop focused on good practices in the integration of migrants and was held on the 19th of October 2020. The workshop addressed European national, subnational and local policymakers working in the field of refugee integration.

The workshop aimed at establishing a mutual peer-to-peer learning process between researchers from the European level (researchers from the ESPON MIGRARE project and researchers focusing on the situation in France) and Swedish local stakeholders from the public sector.

The discussions during the peer-learning workshop focused on 3 major challenges regarding integration of refugees and asylum-seekers: 1) integration into the labour market, 2) accessibility of the housing market to migrants and 3) education and skill supply of migrants. Each of these three presentations has been reflected on by a Swedish local stakeholder active in the field of integration (representative of a municipality).

In order to see migrant integration as an opportunity, especially in areas with demographic decline, the socio-economic conditions of the region as well as the opinions of the local society, government, and businesses cannot be ignored.

The peer-learning workshop illustrated that the attitudes of the local administration and community can influence the welcoming process from the beginning. In addition, the workshop highlighted the fact that socio-economic conditions of the hosting country and the skills of the migrants will influence their integration into the labour market.

The local administration can receive more support by involving the local population and the private sector in migrant integration. A close collaboration can help newcomers to integrate more easily and at the same time, the public administration receives support. Therefore, it is decisive how migration is viewed by the different actors.

Additionally, discussions highlighted a need for a European exchange and collaboration platform for the experiences of migrant integration on a local level (esp. in rural areas) which will allow stakeholders to support each other and to share good practices.

Local stakeholders should be able to easily get in contact with other regions and, at the same time, it should be made easier to connect researchers and their projects with stakeholders from various levels (including the local level).

ESPON could play a key role by providing a platform and initiating further ESPON studies on the integration process of migrants within different regions of Europe (esp. within rural territories).

Objectives, target groups

The workshop started with a welcome by **Renaud Le Goix** (ESPON Contact Point in France), who also moderated the workshop. In his introduction, Le Goix highlighted that the local level plays an extremely important role in the integration process of migrants and therefore the question is how we can support municipalities in this process.

Sverker Lindblad from the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation and member of the Managing Committee of ESPON in Sweden then opened the workshop. Sweden has a long tradition of emigration and immigration (e.g. from Finland, Italy and former Yugoslavia). Recently, more migrants are coming from Afghanistan, Iran and Syria. As the Swedish industry is still in need of labour, this can become a “golden opportunity” for municipalities where the working population tends to decrease. Nevertheless, the labour market has changed a lot in the last 15 years (e.g. the Swedish language and having a higher education became more important). New challenges need to be overcome in order to successfully integrate newcomers: offering housing and education, validating skills and offering additional education, and establishing a match between the needs of businesses and newcomers. All these tasks ask for efforts from municipalities and their approach can vary significantly.

The introduction was followed by the first presentation by **Laura Todaro** and **Matteo Bocci** presenting the ESPON [MIGRARE](#) study focusing on **Integration into the labour market**. One of the key policy questions was how the skills and qualifications of incoming refugees can influence the regional and local labour markets.

The migrants' characteristics (country of origin, age, gender, skills) can influence their employability performance into the local labour market. The difficulty in accessing the labour market for asylum seekers and refugees is one of the major obstacles to economic independence and social integration, as in many hosting countries they first need a work permit. The study showed that the longer the migrants stay in the hosting region, the better their employment rates become (due to improved linguistic skills, etc.). Therefore, the need for free education and language courses has been highlighted and local municipalities can strongly influence the integration process.

This topic has also been reflected on by **Martin Söderström** from the municipality of Åre in Northern Sweden. The economic activities in Åre are based on the tourism sector and public sector (e.g. elderly care). The local project VALUE ensures that migrants are supported according to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs by providing safety and comfort first and offers them opportunities to stay by building a network of trust and support (e.g. language learning, finding a good workplace and family reunification). Two years are foreseen for this support which is financially supported by the government. Söderström highlighted that in 2011, 600 immigrants came to Åre. 500 are still living there and 50-80% are also working, however, this year has been characterised by setbacks due to COVID-19 (esp. in tourism sector).

The second presentation by **Aude-Claire Fourot** (Simon Fraser University in Canada) focused on **the accessibility of the housing market to migrants**. Her presentation focused on the relocation of refugees and asylum seekers in France. There refugees tend to converge towards bigger cities and create "urban squats" which is a problem in larger cities within France.

The "Magnet Hypothesis" and the Creation of Urban Squats/Slums

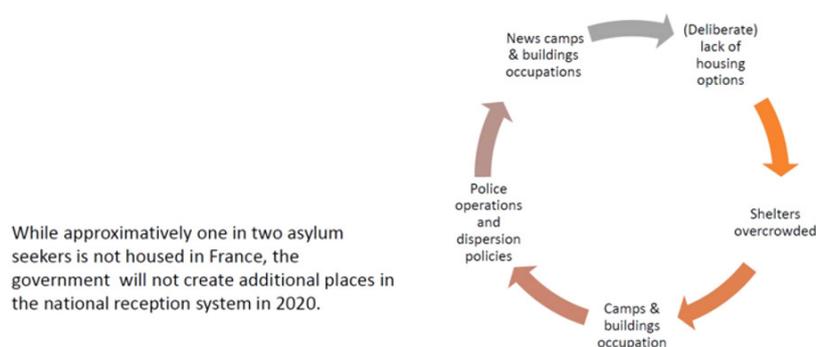


Figure 1 Illustrating the process of the creation of Urban Squats (from Aude-Claire Fourot's presentation on the 19th of October 2020).

As a solution, the prefectures requested mid-sized and small cities to house asylum-seekers in order to create more housing options. However, the reaction of the local actors are quite varied: some see it as an opportunity as they face demographic and economic decline, but others are hostile and rather critical. Additionally, cities in France received a new role with regards to the reception of refugees as the state implemented territorial contracts for the integration of refugees and therefore it is funding local actions complementary to national integration strategies (e.g. French language classes, housing and social participation...).

Lars-Erik Rönnlund from the municipality of **Hultsfred** reflected on this contribution that the hosting of migrants in Sweden is generally seen as an opportunity in rural areas. For this reason, welcome centres have been established in rural areas in 2015 but due to the high volumes of arrivals it proved challenging at first. Often newcomers plan to go to bigger places, as it is difficult to receive further education in smaller areas, and many struggle to enter the local labour market. Therefore, people are moving within the region and beyond. Nevertheless, **Rönnlund** concluded that if every municipality would have taken similar responsibilities in 2015, the burden could have been shared and it would have been easier for everyone.

The third presentation by **Aisling Healy**, from the Université de Jean Monnet in Saint-Etienne, originally focused on education of migrants. She presented this topic as closely intertwined with the integration into the labour

market and thus both topics were addressed in this presentation. In France, education is decided on national level (state level). However, local authorities are responsible for language courses and often lack national support. Overall, migration could offer a win-win situation but since the refugee crisis in 2015, France's reaction was to prevent them from working by making it difficult to receive a working permit. Refugees will not receive help in finding a job and asylum seekers are not allowed to work. The support comes mainly from NGOs at local and regional levels that offer integration services.

Helena Renström from the municipality of **Skellefteå** reacted by explaining the local perspective in North Sweden. Skellefteå is part of a dynamic region and has the highest investments per capital in Sweden. The municipality's goal is to grow as population size did not change during the last 50 years. Skellefteå started a citizen dialogue where the potential of welcoming migrants is highlighted by the public sector and private industry. Newcomers could integrate well (e.g. low housing segregation), however, challenges do exist. Sweden is characterised as a trust-based society with high social capital and migrants might have difficulties to adapt due to the existence of stereotypes present in the public opinion. The local project Relocate aims at developing new recruitment methods that meet companies' needs. It targets foreigners who are far from entering the work force (with at least 6 months unemployment) and addresses people from larger cities.

Discussion about similarities, discrepancies and mutual learning points

The researchers from France were especially interested in the local examples from Sweden and therefore wanted to know more about the regulation of refugee resettlement in Sweden and the explicit responsibilities of municipalities. At first, it is the responsibility of the Swedish Migration Agency, then the Swedish public employment service and then the municipalities.

Martin Söderström underlined that it has been very important for the hosting country to explain to the migrants that: "You are a citizen of this municipality now and no longer a refugee" to give them a feeling of arrival and for them to be able to feel safe as the individual needs play a very important role in Sweden. **Helena Renström** also emphasised that in order to understand the perspective of the migrants, the local administration is arranging individual meetings to hear their own perspectives and if they do not feel well-integrated, they can air these difficulties during the meeting.

The researchers asked if the municipalities in Sweden are organised in national or European networks to discuss and exchange migration issues. The Swedish representatives underlined that cooperation between municipalities takes place within Sweden and abroad partly in a formal setting, supported by the national level, and partly in an informal setting initiated by the municipalities themselves to support learning from each other.

The local examples from Sweden showed that matching migrant skills with job opportunities at the local level can be a success when collaborating with local businesses' and by offering migrants counselling and further education services.

Delivered input (was the target group reached?)

The peer-learning workshop, which has been organised virtually with Microsoft Teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was rated successfully by the participants and they were satisfied with the digital format.

34 participants registered to the event (mainly from Sweden and France, but also from Belgium and Italy). The profile of the participants was diverse, representing academics (13), public bodies (11), and others (10 – including the ECP audience and LGI). Therewith, the target group was sufficiently reached as the workshop facilitated the exchange between public stakeholders and researchers from different countries (focusing especially on Sweden, France and Italy).

The inputs provided by the peer-learning workshop are summarised as follows:

At first, the workshop provided an overview of the ESPON study MIGRARE and illustrated data on the flows of refugees and asylum seekers within the European territory.

Second, the accessibility of education and the housing market to migrants has been represented by focusing on the current situation in France, highlighting the challenges for big cities (creation of urban squats) and in smaller towns and rural areas.

As each presentation has been reflected on by a local public stakeholder from Sweden, input has been provided for the researchers as they could learn from the more decentralised system in Sweden.

Third, the open discussion afterwards offered room to go into details and to discuss similarities and differences between experiences. The active discussions – which also took place in the chat box - illustrated the high interest from both the stakeholders and the researchers and the need to foster further exchange on both a vertical and horizontal level.

The efficacy of the proposed structure

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, ESPON outreach activities were adapted to be held virtually.

The advantage of organising such a workshop virtually is that representatives from different countries can participate more easily without having to travel to Sweden (the workshop was initially foreseen to take part in Sweden).

As such, the structure of reflections turned to be an efficient way of getting a larger picture without having too many presentations. For virtual events, the diverse forms of activities within a meaningful time format serve to hold the attention of participants.

The mix between theory and practice has been appreciated and especially the dialogue between local practitioners and researchers was evaluated positively from both sides. Learning from the Swedish local experiences was highly valued in the post-event survey. In addition, it has been suggested to set up a **follow-up session** to further enable discussion among participants and beyond.

At the same time, we received feedback that the goal and target group were unclear to potential attendants. It was also suggested to have more time for discussion (also between the different speakers). Content-wise, one participant proposed to include more local experiences from local actors in France.

With respect to technical affairs, the event was running smoothly. However, the possibility to interact for participants is limited and networking cannot be so easily achieved. Therefore, it has been suggested that one-to-one chat should be made possible.

Main conclusions

The peer-learning workshop on ***Good practices in the integration of migrants from European and local perspective*** ended by the conclusion of **Renauld Le Goix** (French ESPON Contact Point) who emphasised that we can learn from each other and that we should initiate such dialogues on migration in the future by enabling an open discussion between different actors (academics, public stakeholders, representatives from NGOs and businesses, and migrants) from various levels (local, regional, national and European).

The workshop illustrated that, from the beginning, it depends on how the issue of migration and integration is perceived by different stakeholders as their understanding will influence their reactions and responses: Is migration seen as a “golden opportunity” or is the integration of migrants seen negative and challenging? The hosting environment at the local level will influence the integration of newcomers directly.

Cities, towns and even villages are key actors within the integration process. The presentations of the workshop illustrated that the local level is facing similar challenges across countries (offering housing, education and labour market integration), but at the same time, differences appeared, and some countries and regions showed a lack of preparation and willingness.

Besides, the influence of media should not be neglected: social media and newspapers can influence the opinion of the local population and the public sector, and migration can become a highly politicised subject (e.g. in Italy).

Additionally, the ESPON study showed that labour market forces do influence the responses towards the support of refugees at the local level. A lack of local community support and political response can influence the action of local authorities (e.g. in Italy). Therefore, the need for a European coordination has been highlighted to be able to break up this negative reinforcing cycle in some European regions and instead foster cooperation with multiple stakeholders involving civil society, policymakers, local actors, business owners and immigrants themselves. Especially, rural areas in Europe could exchange and support each other in a more structured way (e.g. establishing twinning networks between north and south, east and west).

It has been suggested that ESPON could take a driving role – especially in supporting rural territories within Europe to allow peer-learning – as cities are already better connected within Europe. Therefore, networking opportunities for rural areas and smaller towns should be strengthened on a European level.

Further recommendations

Based on the open discussion four recommendations are provided to support integration of migrants at the local level:

1. More public advocacy and policy agenda-setting is needed on the issue of integration of migrants and refugees by researchers, NGOs, think tanks and the private sector.
2. Exchange of local integration practices should be fostered within Europe (esp. within rural areas) by establishing networking opportunities on a wider scale and sharing capacities: supporting twinning programmes for smaller towns and rural municipalities and increasing the dialogue between practitioners and researchers.
3. Integration is not a one-way path and in order to see it as an opportunity, the involvement of the local community and businesses' is very important. By involving stakeholders from the public, civic and private sectors, newcomers can be more easily integrated.
4. Burden Sharing: If more municipalities would be willing to welcome migrants, the difficulties and challenges would be minimised.



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