From Refugees to Workers
Mapping Labour-Market Integration Support Measures for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in EU Member States

Volume I: Comparative Analysis and Policy Findings

Executive summary

Policy context

**An extraordinary flow.** According to Eurostat figures, 1.3 million men, women and children (1,260,000 of them first-time asylum seekers) claimed asylum in Europe in 2015, more than double the number in 2014, more than three times the number in 2013 and by far the highest in the last 70 years. Whether or not this trend will continue (and there are indications that, in one way or another, it will for some time), all analysts agree that a large share of these asylum seekers will settle in Europe for good (in 2015, 52% of total asylum applications resulted in positive outcomes, and a standard policy assumption is that at least half of the total number of asylum seekers will remain). There is also a wide consensus that the way they integrate into the labour market, and the time they take to do so, will determine the long-term impact of this inflow of migrants on the European economy (whether they are ultimately an injection of fresh blood or largely a burden for European economies), as well as the chances of social and economic integration in European societies.

Key findings

**General policy trend.** In general, it can be stated that, regardless of the political stance concerning the arrival of new asylum seekers (a field where many countries are taking an increasingly restrictive approach), for those asylum seekers who are already in the country, policies are generally being put in place to facilitate their integration into the labour market (with some notable exceptions such as France and the United Kingdom). However, even in countries aiming to support the rapid labour market integration of asylum seekers, the administrative obstacles remain huge, and often render the legal provisions void.

**Common challenges and patterns.** One first conclusion stands out clearly from the comparative analysis of the nine country case studies: despite the differences in social contexts, labour market structures and support measures, the challenges, policy trade-offs and choices involved in the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers (the key questions emerging from the country case studies) are relatively similar across countries. There is, then, very real scope for mutual learning, cooperation and even Europe-wide solutions.

Study aims

**Objectives of the study.** The overall objective of this study is to identify the policies and practices being implemented in different EU Member States to facilitate the labour market integration of recent refugees and asylum seekers, i.e. those having arrived in the respective country in the last year. An analysis is then carried out in a comparative perspective. The study is based on nine brief country case studies of EU Member States, namely: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. More specifically, the study aims to:

- review the legal and policy framework concerning labour market access of recent refugees and asylum seekers;
- provide an up-to-date and structured overview of different types of labour market integration support measures for refugees (REFMISMES), programmes and initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers, including measures by civil society and private actors (such as NGOs, employers, etc.);
- identify and discuss good practices and lessons learned in the different countries as well as contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of different measures.
Converging policy response. The 94 REFMISMES identified and analysed in the nine country case studies (see Appendix 10 of Volume II for details on each of them) suggest the emergence of a kind of “standard” package, the emerging “conventional wisdom” perhaps, in the field of labour market integration support measures for refugees and asylum seekers. The four key elements of this package are: 1) early skills assessment; 2) “introduction” programme including general cultural orientation, but sometimes also socio-professional orientation and even some training; 3) intensive language courses; and 4) access to general job intermediation services. This “model of intervention” is rarely questioned, and should be subject to testing and closer analysis to ensure that there are no better policy options or policy mixes. One recurrent issue, however, is whether REFMISMES are more supply-driven or outcome-oriented, i.e. to determine the extent to which they are offered and implemented regardless of any evidence of their actual impact.

Success factors difficult to identify. As noted before, the challenges and policy-response patterns across the surveyed EU Member States are structurally similar. However, it is difficult to draw any conclusion or lesson on the effectiveness of different kinds of REFMISMES or the failure or success factors that emerge from policy practice. The first reason is that, in most cases, the REFMISMES are too recent for any conclusions about their implementation to be drawn. To this extent, only Sweden and to a lesser extent Denmark (and in a minor way Germany and Austria) provide a sufficient body of time-tested evidence allowing for policy recommendations. In this regard, the analysis of the literature on former research of these experiences is crucial (see Section I.4 and, at greater length, Volume II of this study). But even when REFMISMES have already been implemented over a reasonable period of time, in most countries there is no systematic follow-up and impact evaluation of those policy interventions, preventing researchers and policymakers from drawing policy conclusions. This points to another clear need: the systematic generation and the collection of information and the evaluation of policies should be the first step for an evidence-based policy – something which has rarely been attempted for these projects.

Fragmentation of REFMISMES. The general overview of REFMISMES, described in each of the countries studied, shows a high degree of fragmentation and a thorough lack of coordination in their implementation. There are too many actors taking initiatives and intervening at a local, regional and national level without any kind of coherent strategy or actual exchange of information. This has made our REFMISMES inventory particularly difficult. In any case, there is a desperate need for coordination across government levels and between actors.

Need for specific, tailor-made measures. One consensual finding emerging from the discussion of the country case studies is that asylum seekers and refugees have specific needs, profiles and incentive structures which explain their systematic underperformance in the labour market in relation not only to the population in general, but also to other migrants. Their labour market integration requires, therefore, targeted, specific support measures. The “mainstreaming” of refugees, i.e. their referral to the general active labour market policies and support measures offered by public institutions to national workers is not enough, even if this is the most widespread policy implemented so far in this field.

Early intervention has a positive impact on labour market integration. At the same time, in line with all former research and unanimous expert opinion, the country case studies endorse the principle that the sooner support measures occur, the faster labour market integration will take place. The legal obstacles to the labour market participation of asylum seekers in many Member States is, then, counterproductive. It is important, instead, to remove the administrative and objective obstacles which prevent many refugees from joining the labour market, even once they are legally entitled to do so. In particular, the labour market tests that asylum seekers must pass to take a job in some countries (like France and the UK) run counter to the rationale of considering them as part of the national labour market.

Policy pointers

Policy recommendations hard to draw, but mutual learning possible. The nine-country REFMISMES inventory cannot translate into clear-cut policy recommendations at this stage. It is too early (in most of the countries analysed, systematic implementation of labour market integration support measures is less than a year old), and too little is known about them. But there is comparability, both in terms of the structural challenges faced (see Section II.1) and in terms of the policy response to them (Section II.2). This policy convergence allows for mutual cross-country learning at least at two levels: first, learning from those countries, in particular Sweden and Denmark, which have a long track record of labour market integration
support measures for refugees; second, putting in place mechanisms which allow for the rapid dissemination of promising initiatives.

**More information required.** Another common element to all country case studies is the emphasis on the gap between available and collected information on refugees (both individually and as a group) and the information required to design effective labour market integration measures and policies. In order to ensure a learning curve across Europe on this key development, more systematic collection of information on actions is needed. However, there is also a need for the more systematic evaluation (in terms of impact and cost–effectiveness) of all those actions, and a specific follow-up of labour market outcomes for this specific group of workers.

**Increase of resources commensurate with the social and economic stakes required.** In any case, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this exercise. First, more resources – financial, human and institutional – need to be dedicated to promoting the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Even if all countries have approved successive budget increases in the last year or so, the available resources are not up to the magnitude of the economic, social and even political stakes. Extraordinary challenges require extraordinary responses.

**Need for multilevel governance mechanisms.** The dispersion and fragmentation of labour market integration support measures for refugees and asylum seekers highlights the need for powerful multilevel governance mechanisms to deal with current challenges in an integrated way (and this might also include the European level). Labour market and more generally social integration of refugees and asylum seekers takes place at a local level, and initiatives to facilitate that process are often taken and implemented by local and regional actors. However, asylum policy is largely national, and this creates a tension that has to be addressed with appropriate exchange of information, coordination mechanisms and integration across actions.

**Scope for EU-wide action.** Integration is definitely a local process and labour markets largely operate at local or national level, rather than at EU level (even if there is a trend in this direction). However, from the analysis and discussion carried out throughout this study, a few lines of potential EU action emerged. Indeed, the EU is the appropriate level to establish an information exchange platform and to develop a pool of knowledge to improve policy practice for all Member States. This EU-wide knowledge and exchange platform might work not only as a lever for exchanges among practitioners, but it could also serve as a disseminator of information and analysis initiatives in this field including the evaluation of practices and the development of policy guides. In addition, in some fields, such as the recognition of qualifications or the free movement of workers, the EU legal framework provides a potential venue for EU-wide initiatives. Last but not least, though EU funding covers only a small part of the total cost of the refugee crisis (including labour market integration measures), the European Commission has a leverage in spreading basic standards on policy practices, the collection of information and evaluation of programmes and follow-up on beneficiaries. These are all key dimensions for an effective and efficient labour market integration equation for refugees.

**Further research needs.** As stated in the introduction, the present study was conceived only as a first step aiming to inventory existing REFMISMES in a number of EU Member States and for undertaking a very preliminary analysis of the same. But there is much that can be done in terms of research to better policies in this field:

- There is an acute need for more data and more information on refugees and asylum seekers, on their qualifications and skills as well as on their personal and professional profile and on their spatial distribution (in relation to the distribution of labour demand across the labour market). This can only be done through representative surveys of current and past refugees: the surveys carried out to date among refugees have been too partial and too scattered.

- There is also a need for more tracking studies of refugees, following up their professional records and their labour market outcomes over time.

- Finally, there is a need for more REFMISMES (comparative) case studies, deeper and wider analysis and more detailed analysis of different kinds of labour market integration support measures. It would be extremely useful to extend the comparative country case approach of these studies to more EU Member States, but also to non–EU countries with different but relevant experiences of integrating refugees into their labour market.

REFMISMES and their impact on labour market integration of refugees may seem technical but it will prove key in Europe’s future.