



Getting Back on Track

A Renewed and Improved EU Action Plan on Integration

International Rescue Committee | October 2019

Front cover: IRC Voice Lena Headey walks with Marwa outside her home in Germany. Tara Todras-Whitehill/IRC.

This page: Moussa is a refugee from the Ivory Coast living in Athens. He aims to open the first Ivorian restaurant in Greece, "Our Home", after receiving support from the IRC/Citi Back My Business programme. Elena Heatherwick/IRC.

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Introduction

Through many years of experience working with refugees and asylum-seekers globally, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has observed first-hand the transformative power of inclusion and the great benefits of successful integration not only for forcibly displaced persons, but also for the communities that host them.

For example, a study by the National Bureau for Economic Research found that refugees who enter the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 45 pay on average \$21,000 more in taxes to all levels of government than they receive in benefits over a two-year period.¹ Recent IRC research has also shown that, if gender gaps in employment and earnings were closed, refugee women could generate up to €1.27 trillion (\$1.4 trillion) to annual global GDP.²

However, this group of third-country nationals living in the European Union (EU) faces specific challenges and barriers to integration stemming from their vulnerabilities as refugee populations, as well as structural issues and divergent asylum policies at the EU and national levels. These obstacles are widespread, persistent and likely to

be exacerbated if not addressed immediately and with a long-term, structured approach.

As the EU transitions into a new mandate for the European Commission and Parliament, and sets priorities for its next multi-year budget, the need to move away from an ad-hoc, crisis-centred approach to migration and asylum must be a top priority. In this respect, supporting the transition of refugees and asylum-seekers into their new communities is essential for the EU to prove itself as a credible champion of protection and inclusion. Crucially, it is vital that integration forms an integral part of the “New Pact for Asylum and Migration” proposed by Commission President-Elect Ursula von der Leyen.

Four years on from the initial increase in arrivals, migration and asylum continue to occupy headlines and the minds of European policy-makers. Despite this, the EU still lacks a common, coordinated approach to integration tailored to the needs and strengths of refugees and asylum-seekers. Rooted in the IRC’s long-standing experience, this briefing will provide a roadmap on how to fill this policy gap, particularly with regards to refugee women and their integration into the labour market.

At this moment of relative calm, principled guidance from the EU is crucially important. The EU cannot continue to ask refugee hosting countries to receive and protect refugees without making any commitments of its own.

While the High-Level Summit on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) held in September and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December are opportunities to advance SDG attainment for crisis affected populations globally, the EU also needs to lead by example in promoting SDG objectives for these communities within its own borders.

A clear, principled and targeted strategy is necessary to complement and coordinate efforts in this direction at all levels, and a renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration would provide the ideal tool to do so.

A renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration

On the 7th of June 2016, the European Commission presented its 'Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals'.³ The document identified 52 measures for the Commission to support member states and civil society organisations in their efforts to foster migrant integration, focusing particularly on pre-departure and pre-arrival measures, education, employment, access to social services and active participation in society.

The 2016 Action Plan, supported by the member states through the Council,⁴ represented a critical step towards shaping a common European framework for integration policy, particularly as the power to legislate and act on integration remains in the hands of individual member states.⁵ Its positive portrayal of migration and integration at a time of pronounced political uncertainty and xenophobic discourse in the EU was particularly welcome. Furthermore, references to the necessity of focusing on the needs of women and other vulnerable third country nationals including young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs), although limited, were also important.

Why now?

In 2018, however, the 2016 Action Plan expired. While many of the individual actions taken by the Commission may be regarded as a success, the overall EU context remains one in which gaps in integration outcomes persist and have even worsened in the last decade.⁶ The current political context provides an invaluable opportunity to act to reverse these trends. Despite the rise in populist and xenophobic rhetoric, we should not forget that overall, European citizens see the EU in a more positive light than at any time in the past ten years.⁷ Furthermore, migration is an area where EU citizens want and expect the EU to deliver: about 67% of Europeans are in favour of a "common European policy on migration"⁸ and a large majority count on the EU to play a key role in the integration of immigrants.⁹ The Council¹⁰ and a majority of European political groups¹¹ also agree that integration needs to be a priority and is a matter of common interest to all member states.

The upcoming Global Refugee Forum provides a crucial chance for the EU and its member states to declare their continued dedication to fostering the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers after the 2019 European Parliament election and the appointment of a new European Commission.

There are indications that certain member state governments are planning to present national action plans as best practices at the GRF; the EU should complement these existing efforts by pledging a renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration, or an equivalent EU framework, with targeted, coherent and robust policy measures aimed at fostering a Europe that protects and welcomes.

A Europe that protects and welcomes

Significant popular support for a European approach to integration is complemented by realities on the ground which demand pragmatic and resolute action. First, the migration context in Europe has begun to shift away from one of sudden high numbers of arrivals (from 1.04 million in 2015 to 137,080 in 2018),¹² opening up space for a more measured approach to migration and asylum from European policy-makers. Secondly, of the 2.48 million refugees in the EU, many are unable to return due to continued insecurity in the main countries of origin. Likewise, 900,000 asylum-seekers remain in limbo due to the lengthy and inefficient processing of their claims.¹³ In the meantime, despite significant progress in several member states, both of these groups continue to lack the support to integrate fully in the European countries they have fled to.

If the EU is to continue to be guided by its founding values of unity and solidarity, it must be serious and bold in paving the way for a common path to supporting the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in the societies of their new home. In this period of transition, it is imperative that the EU supports new arrivals on their often challenging pathway towards integration and empowers them to regain control of their future.



Right: Hami and Valy, asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, participated in the IRC's Healing Classroom programming in Germany. Timo Stammberger/IRC.

Ultimately, inaction risks a 'lost generation' of socially excluded populations and a further increase in anti-migrant sentiment in member states, while also calling into question the EU's ability to act collectively to protect refugees within its own borders. The EU will not be able to achieve its objectives of ensuring respect for the European Pillar of Social Rights, harmonising protection standards and developing a sustainable resettlement framework unless member states effectively support the integration of their refugee populations and promote wider societal cohesion.

Promoting policy coherence

A European approach to the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers is a crucial ingredient for moving forward as a welcoming, inclusive and diverse European society.

The next EU mandate should include priorities and actions which match the expectations of EU citizens and strive to improve the daily realities of refugees and asylum-seekers in their new homes. Notably, ongoing negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021-2027 provide an important opportunity to define the future of EU action and funding for the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the next decade and beyond.

An updated Action Plan would help guide decision-making under the new MFF, in line with the ongoing update of the Toolkit on EU Funds for Integration.

A renewed and improved Action Plan on Integration is also essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within EU member states. Too few member states currently recognise the specific needs of displaced people as a community at risk of "being left behind".¹⁴ The Commission and member states should therefore work towards including refugees and asylum-seekers in the SDG Voluntary National Review process, focusing on integration within member states and especially on how integration outcomes for these populations relate to SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth.

An Action Plan which specifically makes the link between integration policy and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would provide a key framework to support the implementation of these long-term global objectives.

Case study: Ileana

The long road to safety



Ileana, a young doctor from Honduras, arrived in Spain two years ago. In Honduras, she worked long hours as a hospital assistant: "Every five days I had to be on call for 12 hours... I didn't have holidays so I was tired very often, but I was happy."

In addition to her hospital work, Ileana volunteered at an NGO, talking to young people so as to dissuade them from joining the 'Maras', powerful and violent gangs which operate in Central America. However, because of this activism, troubles began: "I received death threats which forced us to flee my home country and abandon my job." Both Ileana and her husband were pursued by these gangs: "we had no choice but to flee as far as we could."

Together, they arrived in Barcelona. Whilst studying at medical school, she took Catalan language classes at Accem, an IRC partner working to improve the quality of life of refugees and migrants in Spain. As well as assisting with Ileana's asylum application, Accem offered Ileana active job-seeking support. Services include personalised guidance interviews, pre-employment and occupational training. With the organisations assistance, Ileana managed to validate her degree in Spain, meaning she could find work as a medical assistant.

Ileana recognises that transition is never easy: "I was afraid... I felt insecure in employment despite my previous work experience. Having medical knowledge wasn't enough, I had to master many administrative tasks that were not familiar to me. Fortunately, I was provided with assistance when I needed it."

Evaluating and reviewing the renewed and improved Action Plan

The design of the renewed and improved Action Plan should be informed by a robust evaluation of past initiatives and include a dedicated review process to monitor progress under its renewed mandate.

In contrast to the 2016 Action Plan, which was limited in its evaluation and reporting, the next Action Plan should be conceived as a dynamic, inclusive and sustainable tool, backed by political commitments and robust mechanisms of oversight.

Inclusive and interactive evaluation and reporting

Although the 2016 Action Plan ‘expired’ in 2018, a formal and comprehensive evaluation process has yet to occur as was originally planned.¹⁵ Before replicating a similar strategy in 2020, the 2016 Action Plan and wider integration policies in the EU should be thoroughly assessed by DG Home in collaboration and consultation with the diverse group of actors involved in the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the EU: member states and the Council, national managing authorities implementing EU funding for integration, DG Employment and other relevant Commission Directorates, the social partners, the European Parliament and civil society – including refugee-led organisations. An inclusive evaluation process would ensure that the measures included in the resulting renewed Action Plan are the product of a thorough examination of policies that are already in place, and keep in mind the successes and shortcomings of the 2016 Action Plan.

Furthermore, a renewed and improved Action Plan on Integration would benefit from an extended implementation timeframe of five years, which matches EU institutional mandates and should include an annual review of planned actions. This would allow for long-term and predictable reporting mechanisms for the different priorities laid out in the Action Plan.

The European Parliament, as well as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, have repeatedly shown interest in generating policy change on integration but were largely left out of the 2016 Action Plan. A truly inclusive and transparent Action Plan needs to provide a fair balance of responsibilities between EU bodies and institutions. The Parliament should have a formal role in monitoring the effective implementation of the Action Plan. This should include issuing an annual resolution and a structured exchange of views with the Commission tracking progress towards the indicators mentioned below. Members of the European Parliament working in this area may wish to consider establishing a parliamentary inter-group on the integration of third country nationals, which would coordinate and add to related actions across the relevant committees.

We further suggest that any yearly reporting process for the new Action Plan be supported by an interactive online platform, to be hosted for example on the European Website on Integration, to monitor progress and allow for contributions from a wider range of partners. Rather than providing a list of results related to action points, as was the case in 2016,¹⁶ this moderated online resource could allow partners, and especially member states and the Parliament, to provide their own inputs towards the review process. In addition to continuing to exist as a space to share good practices from around the EU, member states could also share lessons from their own national Action Plans, especially with regards to the three priorities outlined in this brief.

Measuring outcomes, not outputs

For it to be a sustainable and measurable framework, the renewed Action Plan also requires an outcome-oriented approach to the actions undertaken – paying particular attention to results rather than actions. Accordingly, review and monitoring should be supported by common indicators to monitor progress both at EU and member state level. As a starting point, the Commission and member states, through the Council, should re-affirm the common definition of successful integration set out in the Common Basic Principles,¹⁷ in line with the more recent European Pillar of Social Rights. Furthermore, results from specific actions and how they contribute to progress on integration more widely should be evaluated with regards to readily available standards and indicators. These should include the Zaragoza indicators,¹⁸ the Migrant Integration Policy Index,¹⁹ and related indicators to be articulated in the context of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).

Such indicators should inform data collection at both EU and member state level (see Priority 2 and 3 below), especially when it comes to predictably monitoring the integration outcomes of asylum-seekers and refugees in the EU. Currently, data are often missing or not comparable at the national level, and member states should do more to address this issue: if complemented by more disaggregated and comparable data collection at the EU and national levels, the above-mentioned indicators could also be used to improve existing monitoring mechanisms on refugee and asylum-seeker integration. For example, the European Semester process would benefit from common indicators to better structure the guidance it provides to member states on improving integration outcomes, and to ensure these are accorded sufficient weight in the process. These common indicators should also be used by member states to report progress towards achieving the SDGs for displaced people specifically.

Recommendations on evaluating, reviewing and monitoring the Action Plan

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- 1** Evaluation
- The Commission should, as originally planned, **evaluate the 2016 Action Plan** to assess gaps and identify strengths and successes. This evaluation of past and current measures should be interactive and inclusive, inviting views from actors involved at all levels and stages of the integration process. Furthermore, the outcomes of this evaluation should be made public wherever possible.
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- 2** Annual review and regular reporting
- The Commission should set a clear timeline for the implementation of the Action Plan, ideally 5 years, and should strengthen the mechanisms to review priorities and monitor implementation by including a **transparent annual reporting process**, with an interactive and moderated online platform to assess progress. This should be aligned with the annual reviews for the European Semester process and include a joint debate in the LIBE and Employment Committees, followed by a Resolution.
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- 3** Indicators to monitor progress
- The Zaragoza Indicators should be agreed as a baseline to **identify one common set of indicators to measure progress towards a commonly accepted definition of integration**. However, these indicators should be further disaggregated by gender and immigration and/or protection status **to better monitor the integration outcomes of forcibly displaced people**, including refugee women, specifically. Member states should coordinate the collection of relevant data and provide this regularly to the Commission, with a view to monitoring progress towards achieving the SDGs for displaced people specifically.
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- 4** Involving Parliament
- The European Parliament's **relevant committees should exercise a scrutiny role over the Action Plan's evaluation, renewal and implementation and draft a Resolution initially on the EU's role in integration policy and subsequently on progress made under the renewed Action Plan**. In support of this role, interested Members of the European Parliament could also consider setting up a parliamentary inter-group on the integration of third country nationals. Following the Resolution, this group should meet with the Commission on an annual basis to assess progress and facilitate civil society engagement.
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- 5** Global leadership in welcome and integration
- The Commission should present the evaluation and renewal of the Action Plan with a strong focus on refugees and asylum-seekers as a pledge at the Global Refugee Forum** in December 2019 in order to strengthen global credibility and emphasise the role of the EU as a global leader in welcome and integration. Member states should explicitly support this pledge, ideally through the Finnish Council Presidency.
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Five principles and three priorities for a renewed and improved Action Plan

Within its broader aims to support the integration of all third-country nationals, the IRC believes that a key priority of the renewed Action Plan should be to catalyse and support partnerships and strategies aiming to foster the labour market integration of refugees and asylum-seekers, including by tackling the specific obstacles faced by refugee women. The European Commission should ensure that the actions laid out in a renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration reflect the strengths and needs of refugees and asylum-seekers throughout their integration pathways. While the Action Plan should address the integration of all third-country nationals, in this section we set out the minimum standards we believe it should include to ensure it meets the needs of the people the IRC serves.

Five principles to be reflected in a renewed and improved Action Plan

The IRC's efforts to support the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers are shaped by five key principles (see box below), outlined in the report 'Forging a Common Path' (2018).²⁰ These principles are informed by, and the product of, the IRC's many decades of experience in supporting the integration of refugees internationally, in the United States and in Europe. Any renewal of the EU Action Plan on Integration should be done with an understanding of these convictions. As guiding standards based on decades of humanitarian experience, they can inform a common policy framework to assist member states as they further develop and strengthen their national integration policies.

Five Key Principles for Integration Support Measures



Context Specificity

The unique characteristics of EU member states - a product of varying of cultural, economic and historical contexts - means that there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to integration. Rather, integration measures designed to be specific to the context of the receiving community are imperative for refugees and asylum-seekers to fully participate in their society.



Strength Based and Refugee Focused

At national, regional, and local level, integration support measures employed by member states should be driven by a fundamental understanding: each individual brings with them strengths and skills to help them thrive in their new environment. It follows that integration assistance must be designed so as to empower these individuals to make the most of their potential. When provided with the correct support, refugees and asylum-seekers can contribute socially, culturally and economically to the welcoming society, and integration policy and practice should aim to maximise their potential to do so.



Rooted in the Community

Expecting refugees to integrate into a new environment, without understanding the pivotal role played by recipient communities, ignores deep structural barriers to full participation. In this way, effective integration must be a 'two-way street'. It requires a holistic approach - wherein integration measures engage people in the receiving community beyond government, policy or political circles.



Sensitive to the Needs of Specific Groups

A renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration should recognise that integration support offered by member states through mainstream service providers may not address the needs of specific groups: in comparison to other migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers may have more difficulty in accessing essential services. Within this population, women, children, the elderly and individuals with disabilities may face additional hurdles which should be recognised and addressed.



A Partnership Approach

As part of any renewal, the EU should emphasise the importance of multi-dimensional partnerships, inclusive of a variety of stakeholders, within integration programming. Such stakeholders include national and municipal authorities, civil society organisations, the private sector and academic institutions.

Priority 1: Partnering for a long-term common approach to integration

The IRC's experience in integration programming has shown that coordination is crucial to ensure shortfalls for both beneficiaries and providers are minimal.

Starting with a robust evaluation and review (as laid out above), the Commission should work to ensure a dialogue inclusive of member states, civil society (and especially refugee-led organisations), as well as the private sector throughout the long-term implementation of integration policies in the EU.

The relationships and networks that partnership initiatives create between these sectors should be mutually reinforcing, taking into account the long-term nature of the integration process.

Ensuring effective EU funding on integration

The proposed restructuring of integration funding under the new MFF highlights the urgent need for new partnerships at various levels. Going beyond the state-focused partnerships created through the 2016 Action Plan, such as the European Integration Network, the increased role for the new and wider reaching European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers provides a fresh necessity for bolstered and more visible collaboration between Commission departments. While DG Home is rightly understood as leading Commission initiatives for the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers, it cannot do so alone, and integration must be mainstreamed across all policy areas, with other Directorates General taking a more proactive and visible role.

In particular, DG Employment should seek to play a more prominent role to reflect expanded responsibilities of sharing the management of funding for medium- to long-term integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the EU. Directorates other than DG Home and Employment should consider establishing specialised working groups on the social inclusion of displaced populations. Finally, the existing inter-service group on integration should regularly report and proactively raise issues to the political level, and should to this end closely collaborate with the above mentioned Parliamentary inter-group.

At member state level, a similar partnership approach should be taken by putting in place structures to allow for continuous communication between the various national authorities responsible for implementing integration funding under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and ESF+. For example, national joint monitoring committees can also be set up between Ministries responsible for social policies

Case study: Care Forward

Catalysing labour market integration through close coordination



CARE Deutschland/IRC

In 2017, the IRC partnered with Care.com to address the issue of labour market integration for refugee women in the context of Germany's competitive labour market. The result of this collaboration was Care Forward: a career guidance training program for refugee women, aimed at facilitating their entry into caregiving and early education professions. It begins with a two-week course through which participants are taught the basics of these professions. Centred upon an understanding of local labour market needs in close coordination with the private sector, the programme has proved highly effective.

Linda Robens, Project Manager of Care Forward, said: "We want to empower these women by providing information and guidance on a labour market that is completely unknown to them and that works differently from one they are used to from their home countries."

The training answers common questions such as: What kind of jobs are out there? What are the training options? How does the application process work? The course also explains German labour rights and workplace culture, and explores types of employment for which formal training is not required, such as private care of the elderly. Most of the participants are from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.

The course has helped to inspire Nour, a refugee from Syria, to work in the care sector. Nour had to flee her home in Syria with her husband and young son. She registered for the programme when they arrived in Berlin. Nour feels that the course has taught her a lot about possibilities for vocational training, application processes in Germany and how to write a curriculum vitae. The experience has inspired her to become a nurse: she is looking forward to an internship at a renowned Berlin Clinic.

and home affairs, cooperating directly with the Commission and its own Directorates.

The establishment of consultation structures between national authorities and local implementing partners of EU integration funds would also help guarantee input from a wide range of civil society actors and should ensure the burden of reporting does not rely extensively on service providers.

Joint ownership and decisive leadership

There is a clear need for leadership on integration at the EU level. A renewed and improved Action Plan led by the Commission with buy-in and related Global Refugee Forum pledges from a number of Member State ‘champions’, in close partnership with relevant stakeholders, would provide stronger legitimacy for common European actions at national level. At the same time, private sector involvement through fora such as the IRC-coordinated Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN)²¹ and following the 2017 Partnership for Integration²² are essential in catalysing the role of European businesses to create a refugee-friendly business environment.

Ask the experts: Giving space to refugee voices

We also believe that the success of integration policy is largely dependent on the degree of inclusion of the perspectives of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth. As laid out explicitly in the Global Refugee Compact,²³ the Commission should prioritise formally including refugee voices in integration policy at the EU level. Including displaced populations in consultations concerning the evaluation, renewal and monitoring of the Action Plan could represent an important first step in this direction, while initiatives such as, for example, the RISE network,²⁴ G100²⁵ and the European Network of Migrant Women²⁶ should be given a platform to directly contribute to policies governing their own integration pathways in the EU.



Above: Hanna and Wener with their friend Aiman and his baby son Werner in Germany. Tara Todras-Whitehill/IRC.

Recommendations on a partnership approach

- 1** Inter-service collaboration within the Commission

Ensure that the functions of the existing inter-service group on integration are extended, more visible and expanded to include at least annual meetings on integration among Director Generals of all relevant Commission Directorates and regular reporting to Commissioners. DG Home should champion the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers within these structures, and should encourage the establishment of specialised taskforces on social inclusion of displaced populations within other Directorates.
 - 2** Collaborative agenda-setting

Building on existing initiatives, the Commission should propose and coordinate **creative ways to include refugee voices and the private sector** in integration policy. At a minimum, these stakeholders should be consulted throughout the evaluation, design and implementation of the Action Plan as described above. The perspectives of displaced populations should form an integral part of EU integration policies.
 - 3** Joined-up monitoring of EU funding for refugee and asylum-seeker inclusion

The Commission should encourage all member states to establish joint monitoring committees and should itself **ensure coordination among existing Commission monitoring committees**. The Commission DGs managing integration funding through the ERDF, ESF+, AMIF and Erasmus+ should organise yearly meetings with managing authorities – and joint monitoring committees where relevant – in each member state.
 - 4** Partnering at the local level

The Commission should continue to support and coordinate **cross-border practitioner-focused peer-to-peer exchanges** and communities of practice, including through regular and local workshops, study visits and (online) discussion, and in particular on the topics of labour market integration and refugee women's economic empowerment.
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Priority 2: Focusing on early intervention and labour market integration

Adapting expertise derived from over 50 years of integration experience delivering programmes in the U.S., the IRC has, since 2015, worked across EU member states to improve the quality and speed of refugee and asylum-seeker labour market integration.

The inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in European labour markets is central to ensuring their effective integration into the host community and the 2016 Action Plan reflected widespread recognition that early labour market integration is key to achieving better overall integration outcomes.

Subsequent EU-funded projects promoted the labour market integration, vocational training and fast-track insertion of refugees into local economies. Other positive initiatives included a toolkit for the timely identification of skills of newcomers²⁷ and the sharing of good practices in the area of qualification recognition, under the 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe.²⁸

The persistence of the refugee employment gap

Whilst there are often gaps in labour market data specific to the disparity between refugees and other third-country nationals, our work with refugees and asylum-seekers continues to highlight how these groups face significant barriers to labour market integration in the EU. They have lower employment rates than nationals (56% vs 65%) and migrants who come for employment or study (71%).²⁹

In addition, widespread and persistent delays in asylum procedures across member states have meant that the likelihood of asylum-seekers finding employment is significantly lower than that of recognised refugees. New research suggests that the early involvement of asylum-seekers in employment promotion during their asylum process is critical to labour-market outcomes.³⁰ For refugee women these barriers are felt particularly acutely (see Priority 3 below),³¹ despite this group being, on average, more qualified than refugee men.³²

Early intervention as a crucial determinant of labour market integration

‘Fast-track’ insertion into the labour market is key. Early employment carries a number of benefits in particular for refugee women, including economic empowerment, increased gender equality and social inclusion. Delaying labour market integration at this early stage has significant effects: research shows that refugee income, occupational quality and labour market participation is weaker than migrants with similar characteristics, a gap which persists for ten years after arrival.³³

Case study: Muna

Making the most of early labour market integration



“I don’t have dreams. I have goals and do whatever is necessary to accomplish them” says Muna Hussen. The daughter of Somali refugees, she came to Germany at the age of 15. She learned German at a vocational school in Mannheim where her academic prowess was widely recognised by peers and professors. Following an apprenticeship, the 23-year-old now works for one of the world’s biggest pharmaceutical companies.

In Germany, apprenticeships have proven to be an effective means of integration into society and the labour market. They usually last two to three-and-a-half years and are designed for school graduates as an alternative to studying at a university. Companies and publicly funded vocational schools come together to offer dual training programmes, whereby they employ students who spend part of each week studying and the rest of their time doing on-the-job training.

When Muna’s parents were forced to leave their home country Somalia they fled to Libya. Muna was born in the small town of Janzur, where her family lived until the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. “Until I was 15, we had a wonderful life in Libya. Then weapons were distributed, air raids started, there were explosions and a lot of dead people every day. That’s when my parents decided to move again,” Muna remembers. Being smuggled to Europe on a boat was the only way to escape.

Initially, Muna and her family had concerns that an apprenticeship would bring fewer opportunities than a university degree. Muna nevertheless applied and was offered a position at an international pharmaceutical company. Today she recommends that other refugees access vocational training and start working as soon as possible.

“It’s a much easier way to integrate yourself into society, to learn the language fast and to get further qualifications. I can do my dream job and have the prospect of being offered a job after my training at this company. It’s a great education that improves our quality of life.”

A renewed Action Plan should therefore understand early intervention as critical to facilitating labour market integration and therefore to the success of long-term integration more widely. This is particularly true in the context of protracted asylum procedures. Offering support services such as professional training before status determination can also prevent 'blunting' of existing professional skills and individual motivation to learn and work. The EU and its member states should increase the number of language courses on offer and relax access conditions so that those with whose asylum claims are yet to be assessed can access courses and gain qualifications earlier. Such measures are atypical of a largely status-orientated approach employed by many member states.

Privileging strength based and refugee focused programmes

Supporting individualised pathways is also essential to long-term labour market integration.³⁴ This requires holistic case management, including a strength-based approach that understands each individual brings skills that can help them prosper in their new home.

This approach promotes skill development and fosters independence, self-direction and self-support. Targeted professional support remains very important, but is more effective if the individual plays an active role in setting and meeting their own goals.

Implicit here is the recognition that self-sufficiency can also be reached through entrepreneurship and self-employment. On the pathway to self-sufficiency, refugees and asylum-seekers require 'bundled' services — employment services such as job matching and referrals, vocational training, and entrepreneurship support must be offered in parallel with services like language training, childcare, soft-skill development and support in accessing professional networks.

Policy-makers at regional and national levels must continue to work with employers to identify strategies for employing refugees and to overcome the policy barriers that constrain labour market integration. Employers Together for Integration,³⁵ launched by the Commission in 2017, is one such initiative, much like BRAN³⁶ mentioned earlier.



Above: IRC staff and participants from Project CORE, a programme where the IRC provides web development training to refugees and asylum-seekers in Germany. IRC.

Recommendations on early intervention and labour market integration

1 Improved data collection

The Commission and member states should gather **more recurrent and updated disaggregated data on the employment gaps faced by refugees and asylum-seekers** at the EU and national level by, for example, creating more frequent midterm updates as part of the European Labour Force Survey. In addition, comparable data should be collected on issues beyond employment outcomes (job/no job) to provide insight for example into duration of employment, average remuneration, certification, and career progression.

2 Targeted language learning

The DG for Education and Culture (EAC) should **continue its provision of online linguistics support for refugees** (OLS for Refugees) and member states should actively encourage its use. Understanding labour market integration as a priority, **the curriculum should be re-designed to include a strong labour market component, be more intensive in nature and also expanded to serve asylum-seekers**. As part of this re-design, the Commission should consult with employers, social partners and civil society organisations to ensure the curricula are fit for purpose.

3 A focus on marginalised groups

In line with the New Skills Agenda for Europe, a renewed Action Plan should **target low skilled refugee adults (particularly women) with specific measures designed to help them acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or to develop a broader set of skills**. To that effect, the Commission **should encourage better ‘matching’ of available job opportunities in line with the previous experience and existing skills of refugees** alongside an awareness that ‘soft’ skills held by refugees and asylum-seekers are transferrable.

4 A principled leadership role

The Commission should **challenge misconceptions among employers and the general public related to refugee and asylum-seeker employment rights under EU law** through awareness-raising campaigns and training. The Commission should also **promote examples from member states that afford asylum-seeker access to the labour market earlier** than the nine-month deadline outlined in the Reception Conditions Directive, and issue a specific call for proposals on early integration measures.

5 Build on humanitarian experience

The Commission should **encourage member states to explore and pilot strength-based and client-focused approaches to refugee and asylum-seeker labour market integration**. The Commission should research and evaluate approaches used in the past five years covering, for example, case management, early intervention and bundled services, and present findings and recommendations in a Handbook.

Priority 3: Prioritising the strengths and needs of refugee women

Although the Action Plan is aimed at all third-country nationals, refugee and asylum-seeking women should be understood as a specific group requiring particular attention – their strengths and needs need to be prioritised rather than simply focused upon.

Going beyond mere mentions of a “special focus” on the labour market integration of migrant women present in the 2016 Action Plan, a renewed and improved EU Action Plan on Integration should exist as an effective tool to prioritise and foster a gender transformative approach to the integration of displaced women in the EU.

In line with the IRC’s recent research on (refugee) women’s economic empowerment,³⁷ such initiatives would provide the opportunity to develop targeted and long-term inclusion efforts at both the individual and structural level.

Obstacles faced by refugee and asylum-seeking women in the EU

Whilst all refugees and asylum-seekers face a range of challenges associated with forced displacement, refugee and asylum-seeking women face additional barriers because of their gender and protection status, intersecting further with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion and disability. Concrete obstacles include the possible absence of affordable child care, gender-based violence, pre-arrival disadvantages in education and a lack of employment history. Gender cannot be divorced from other barriers to integration faced by displaced communities, except to recognise that refugee women feel their impact more acutely.

These hurdles are particularly evident in the case of labour market integration, where disparities between refugee women and refugee men, as well as refugee women and women of the host country, are consistently high due a combination of discriminatory social norms and factors highlighted above. In fact, the IRC’s recent research shows that even in “exemplar countries” such as Germany, only 6% of women who are recognised as refugees are in employment (as opposed to 27% of refugee men and 53.5% of German women).³⁸ Work that is, in many cases, also largely exploitative and underpaid.

Case study: Fariba

The transformative power of refugee women’s economic inclusion



Elena Heatherwick/IRC

In partnership with Citi through the Citi Foundation, the IRC offers young entrepreneurs living in Greece the chance to kick-start their businesses and reach their full potential. Back my Business is implemented in Greece by Solidarity Now, in collaboration with Knowl Social Enterprise.

Two years ago, Fariba arrived in Greece. She had no job, no identity documents and no home. Her future looked uncertain as she spent many nights sleeping in a camp: “If it rained, we got wet; if it was hot, we would burn. The heat was very bad and we didn’t have enough money to rent a house.” Despite this, she felt free: “I had this feeling that I am going to fly to the sky.”

Through IRC’s Back my Business programme, Fariba took part in a training course, where in three weeks she learned how to run a business, gaining digital and entrepreneurship skills and practicing pitching and public speaking.

Fariba has already turned that training into action with her accessories business. Through the programme, she developed and pitched a business plan, and is now working with mentors to refine it. She also received a grant to support her on the road to starting her own business.

“I feel like my hands are full of power” Fariba says. And it’s true: Fariba creates beautiful, robust bags out of materials that other people might throw away. They’re made out of the rubber of boats that have transported refugees to Greece and the life jackets they wore to help keep them safe. She creates them for a small German organisation that supports refugee women in Greece.

Monitoring and reducing the gender gap

There is a global scarcity in reliable statistics on gender employment and pay gaps among refugees.³⁹ As for EU-wide data, the latest gender disaggregated data available dates back to the 2014 European Labour Force Survey ad-hoc module on the labour market situation of migrants,⁴⁰ before the so-called “refugee crisis”. While a similar focus is planned for the 2021 Survey, the urgent needs faced by refugee and asylum-seeking women demand better and more recurrent data on employment gaps at EU level through midterm updates on key figures including labour-market integration. Common indicators, as mentioned above, should serve as a guide for any disaggregated data gathering beyond employment levels, such as health, education and wage rates.

A renewed and improved Action Plan should also underline the need to sustain recent funding priorities related to women under the next MFF in order to directly tackle the gender-pay and decent-work gaps among refugees. In fact, “programmes that specifically target and seek to economically empower women can have an impact far beyond the immediate financial benefits, potentially reducing intimate partner violence, increasing decision-making authority for women and reducing tolerance of gender-based violence in the community”.⁴¹ Relatedly, the IRC’s experience has shown that programmes should prioritise developing strengthened and sustainable partnerships with refugee and women-led organisations.⁴² This would need to be a priority for the Action Plan to be truly gender transformative in its approach.



Above: Game of Thrones actress Maisie Williams hugs Syrian refugee Haya, age 13, after seeing her play, at the Cherso refugee camp, in Northern Greece. Tara Todras-Whitehill/IRC.

A coherent and structural approach to empowering (refugee) women

These objectives also require specific and long-term transformative approaches to women’s economic empowerment at the national level. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has found “little evidence of action plans and strategies with a particular focus on women or gender issues” across all member states.⁴³ Member states should make it a key priority to implement both individual ad-hoc projects and structural actions to the integration of displaced women in their national action plans on integration. A second priority should be to promote long-term and binding European legislation to help ensure that specific discriminatory practices against refugee and asylum-seeking women are tackled head on. This could be done by, for example, restarting negotiations on the European Anti-Discrimination Directive, focusing on provisions with regards to protection status and links with gender, racial and religious discrimination.

Overall, these efforts should be regarded as part of an inclusive and structural approach to tackling gender discrimination and expanding opportunities for women both within and outside the EU. The renewed and improved Action Plan on Integration, with a strong priority on women, would complement European tools such as the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality, the Gender Action Plan, and the Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security.⁴⁴ Other consistent actions such as supporting a Global Refugee Women in Work Commission⁴⁵ are also crucial in order to accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including commitments by all EU member states to end poverty (SDG 1), achieve gender equality (SDG 5) and promote inclusive growth and decent work (SDG 8).

Recommendations on prioritising the strengths and needs of refugee women

1 Putting women first

In addition to being a mainstreamed concern throughout any renewed and improved Action Plan, the integration of women, and in particular displaced women, **should become a priority in its own right**. Any such priority should take a broad approach to tackling gender discrimination and the often intersecting integration barriers faced by women.

2 Better data

The Commission should fund and coordinate tools to collect more **recurrent gender disaggregated data** on gaps in employment by, for example, creating more frequent midterm updates as part of the European Labour Force Survey, to better assess progress against the Zaragoza Indicators at EU and national level.

3 Continued funding

The Commission should continue to **target funding and promote the implementation of projects focused on empowering refugee women** through AMIF Union Actions, prioritising consultation and partnership with refugee and women-led organisations.

4 National action plans

Member states should **prioritise the integration of refugee women through action plans and/or strategies on integration** which include and monitor the implementation of both mainstreamed actions and specific priorities aimed at taking a structural approach to tackling gender gaps. These national frameworks should underline SDGs 5 and 8 as specific objectives in the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking women.

5 Global leadership

Following the IRC's call for the establishment of a **Global Refugee Women in Work Commission, the EU and member states should champion this idea at the Global Refugee Forum and on the international stage**. Representing host governments, donors, international organisations, and the private sector, such a body would work to advance the recommendations made by the U.N. High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment. Related goals would be to close gaps and accelerate progress on the SDGs and the implementation of the GCR.

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Above: A family seeking protection in Greece. Tyler Jump/IRC.



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