EESC Study Group
on Immigration and Integration

The role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees

PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT

European Economic
and Social Committee

Introduction

The report set out below follows on from a major initiative carried out by the EESC in 2015 and 2016.

At the time, the refugee crisis and the situation in the Mediterranean was at its peak – every day Europeans were shocked at the news they were seeing on TV and other media, and in the social networks, about boats sinking and hundreds of people – many of them children – drowning.

Against this tragic backdrop, as the home of European civil society and infused with its particular values of humanism and solidarity, the EESC immediately organised a series of eleven fact-finding missions to Member States that were directly affected in order to observe first-hand the social situation, identify the main difficulties and needs, and compile examples of best practice in resolving or mitigating the problems.

The final report was submitted to the European institutions as the EESC's contribution to finding ways out of the crisis.

The present report describes the repeat missions by the EESC to five of these Member States, with the aim of comparing the situation of nearly five years ago with that today.

The report sums up the five recent missions, presenting the work carried out during the mission to each Member State, outlining the current situation and listing the key messages received.

Eight indicators were used for each of the Member States in order to harmonise the comparison of all the missions. This has enabled us not only to make a comparative analysis of the situation encountered during the missions five years ago and that of today, but also – and most importantly – to frame new conclusions and recommendations.

These five missions reflect the Immigration and Integration Group's ongoing reinforcement of its work in this specific field, and its contribution to ensuring that this important issue is properly monitored by the EESC.

In this way, the EESC will consolidate and boost the recognition – among both the public and the European institutions – of its capacity and its responsibility for taking action, with a view to highlighting the importance of immigration and the imperative need for immigrants in our democratic society.

Carlos Manuel Trindade

The president of the EESC Study Group on Immigration and Integration

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Project Summary Report

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees. Delegations of three EESC members each, supported by the EESC secretariat, visited Sweden, Malta, Germany, Bulgaria and Greece. A detailed summary report was drawn up after each country visit. This summary report provides an overview of the main findings with particular emphasis on policy recommendations.

1. Key messages

1.1 The European Union and the Member States urgently need to create a genuine common European asylum and migration scheme with a sound and functioning EU relocation system to reduce the pressure on frontline Member States, such as Greece and Malta. Without relocations, it is not realistic to expect that frontline Member States would be able to integrate all migrants and refugees currently on their territory.

1.2 CSOs play an important role in migrant and refugee integration in all the countries visited. They carry out valuable work assisting or even substituting for governments by providing guidance and support in integration processes. However, their involvement in the design of integration policies and integration activities does not always correspond to the importance of their role.

1.3 Therefore, Member States should step up their efforts to achieve more structured cooperation between CSOs and government authorities so as to create synergies and make better use of the knowledge and resources available on both sides. Greater use must be made of the expertise of CSOs as practitioners when designing integration strategies and measures to increase their efficiency.

1.4 More generally, Member States should apply a multi-stakeholder approach involving local and regional authorities, employers, trade unions and civil society organisations when developing integration policies to ensure that they correspond to actual needs and circumstances and benefit migrants and refugees in an optimal way.

1.5 Member States should strive to reduce the administrative obstacles to entering the labour market and establish structures providing clear and comprehensive information accessible to migrants and refugees as well as employers. Clear administrative procedures ensuring legal certainty and transparency are needed. The EU and Member States should invest in sharing good practices and reducing complexity.

1.6 Despite playing an important role in the integration process of both migrants and refugees, it is still very problematic for CSOs to obtain funding. Member States should make the necessary resources available to ensure efficient and operational integration measures.

1.7 It should become easier and faster to obtain EU funding, including for small-scale initiatives, without jeopardising the impartiality and transparency of the process. The co-financing requirement should be facilitated or reduced.

1.8 A binding integration framework is recommendable to make sure that integration systems are sustainable and to prevent changing political conditions triggering backsliding. It is very important that integration measures that have already been set up be supported in the long term and in a sustainable manner to ensure the stability of integration processes.

1.9 Migrants and refugees should have a greater voice in the issues affecting their lives. It is important to talk with migrants, not about them. Structures should be put in place to enable migrants to represent themselves.

1.10 It is important to raise awareness among local people of migrant and refugee issues, informing them in a fact-based way about the issues surrounding migration and what is at stake, e.g. demographic change, ageing and evolving social and economic consequences. Due account needs to be taken of the concerns of the local population but intolerance, racism and xenophobia towards migrants and refugees must by counteracted and the positive contributions of migrants and refugees must be highlighted.

1.11 Where possible, integration measures must be designed in a way that benefits the local population as well, to avoid tensions between the host population and the newcomers. This would also facilitate encounters which reduce the level of mistrust and animosity that are often seen in societies welcoming newcomers in their midst. The aim should be to ensure equal rights, obligations and opportunities for all, irrespective of ethnic background.

1.12 The COVID-19 crisis has spotlighted many positive contributions of migrants; many key workers playing a vital role in the fight against COVID-19 are migrants. European societies would not have managed to maintain basic and necessary functions and services during the lockdown without migrants and this will continue in the recovery period. This needs to be highlighted more to help promote a positive narrative of migration.

1.13 The current COVID-19 crisis hits people in vulnerable situations the hardest and exacerbates structural inequalities in society. Many migrants and refugees are in a vulnerable situation and face numerous challenges. The EU and the Member States must continue to support migrants and refugees and ensure that CSOs active in the area of asylum and migration can continue to do their work by providing them with funding, ensuring their physical safety by providing equipment, and ensuring that an appropriate framework is in place in which they can operate.

1.14 Compared to the situation seen during the visits in 2015 and 2016, progress has been made to achieve migrant and refugee integration but even more still needs to be done. The members of the IMI Group witnessed admirable commitment and dedication of many people working in the field

of migrant and refugee integration. In order for them to be able to continue their work in an efficient and meaningful way, the right conditions must be put in place and one of the key requirements for that is a functioning EU migration and asylum policy. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum currently being developed by the European Commission must give a truly fresh start to how the EU manages migration.

2. Introduction

2.1 In recent years, the discourse on migration has become increasingly negative. This negative discourse is often considered to be grounded in the assumption that migrants are a threat to host countries' culture and social systems. As a consequence, there is an increasing tendency to advocate for closing the borders and trying to stop migration. In the wider discussion about how we create comprehensive and sustainable migration policies, the issue of integration of migrants is important. Unfortunately, integration is not always an easy topic. When it is already difficult to discuss whether and how the migratory trajectory should happen, it is even harder to discuss how and whether immigrants should be helped to integrate. However, if we want to have a truly holistic approach to migration, then we cannot deal with integration "at a later stage".

2.2 Being well aware of the importance of integration policy, the European Economic and Social Committee's Group on Immigration and Integration (IMI Group) has devoted a major part of its time and resources to this matter in its 2018-2020 mandate. A key activity was a project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees, in the context of which the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions between October 2019 and March 2020.

2.3 The project was linked to a previous EESC project on migration: eleven EESC fact-finding missions on migration that were conducted in 2015 and 2016. These latest fact-finding missions took place in five Member States that were also visited in 2015 and 2016, namely Greece, Malta, Sweden, Germany and Bulgaria[1]. The country visits provided an in-depth picture of problems and good practices, documented in individual country reports. This report summarises the main findings, conclusions and recommendations from those individual country reports and puts forward some overall project results. In addition, it presents some examples of the many good practices the EESC members learned about during the visits.

3. Countries

3.1 Sweden

Sweden has a large foreign-born population and is home to around 250 000 beneficiaries of international protection. In recent years, Sweden has become less open to receiving newcomers and the population is increasingly criticising the integration achievements of migrants and refugees.

Integration of migrants and refugees is the responsibility of local authorities (counties and municipalities). The government uses mainstreaming as a method of achieving migrant integration,

[1] A sixth fact-finding visit to Italy was planned, but had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 health crisis.

meaning that many integration measures are general measures, designed to benefit the whole population. Current integration policies focus on education and employment. An extensive array of integration measures and services is available, supported by a significant budget.

CSOs are official stakeholders in the introduction and integration programmes for newcomers. In 2010, the government adopted a policy that explicitly aims to engage CSOs in the provision of social services. The CSOs are dependent on the state for funding (which decreases their independence). Their role in the integration process increased from 2015, but the division of responsibility and roles between the public sector and civil society is complex and there are sometimes tensions about who does what and how integration can best be achieved.

3.2 **Malta**

Until the summer of 2018, migrant and refugee arrivals in Malta were mainly regular arrivals. Since then, migrant and refugee arrivals by sea have increased significantly. In September 2019, the total number of international migrants in Malta was 84 900, around 19% of the total population.

Malta is a relatively young migration country and still adapting to the arrival and integration of newcomers. Consequently, migrant integration management has a short history in Malta. At the time of the previous EESC visit, Malta had no functioning integration policy in place and integration was not structurally organised. Since then, Malta has taken steps to create an integration governance structure and adopted its first integration strategy in December 2017.

The state wants to run confidence-building awareness campaigns, strengthen the integration role of the migrant Health Liaison Office, issue employment licenses equal in duration to the validity of refugee status certificates and develop a local integration fund. However, integration governance in Malta is a work in progress and requires time and effort to become fully functional.

Therefore, CSOs have a very important role in migrant integration in Malta, bridging gaps where integration measures are lacking or not yet functional. There are many CSOs working on migrant issues and the main obstacle experienced by them in their work is the lack of dialogue with the government. The government bodies met during the visit claimed that they do cooperate with some CSOs but referred to the fragmented landscape of the CSOs as a complicating factor. The CSOs have made efforts to reduce fragmentation and improve cooperation among themselves.

3.3 **Germany**

German governments have so far drawn up two integration plans to integrate or promote the social inclusion of population groups with a migrant background. The National Integration Plan of 2007 focused on education, training, employment and cultural integration, while the National Action Plan on Integration of 2012 created instruments to make the results of integration policy measurable.

The integration strategy adopted in 2016 outlined government policy based on a "two-way" principle: offering support, training and job opportunities to foreigners, but also requiring efforts in return and highlighting their duties (*Fördern und Fordern*). The services offered are modular, target various immigrant groups, and cover the remits of almost all the federal ministries, from employment to

education and social integration. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*) oversees asylum, migration and integration issues in Germany. It is in charge of the asylum procedure, promotion and coordination of integration measures, and data collection and research, while local bodies are often responsible for implementing its measures.

As before, CSOs play a very important role in the integration of migrants and refugees. Many civic initiatives assist immigrants in all areas of life, especially since asylum seekers began arriving in unprecedented numbers in 2015 and 2016. They provide a safety net for refugees and migrants who are not entitled to benefit from state support measures and make a major contribution to improving their chances of integrating. However, CSOs met felt that they are not being taken sufficiently into account and ask to be more involved in the debate and decision-making as they are doing integration work on the ground and are aware of the practicalities.

3.4 **Bulgaria**

At less than 2%, the migrant and refugee population in Bulgaria is rather small. Although Bulgaria has granted international protection status to around 25 000 persons, the number of refugees with international protection status who have actually settled in Bulgaria is very low: between one and two thousand. This indicates that for refugees, Bulgaria is in fact a transit country.

This seems to be a missed opportunity, because all the organisations met explained that there is a high demand for labour and that the prospects for integration and a decent life in Bulgaria are good. Yet although Bulgaria has the potential to welcome and successfully integrate a good number of newcomers into its society and labour market, the EESC delegation identified a series of obstacles and challenges to overcome.

Since 2017, municipalities have been responsible for the integration of refugees. The state does not play a major role in fostering the integration of refugees. There is an integration strategy, but no real programmes to implement it. Therefore, CSOs play an important role in the refugee integration process. There is a need for a nationwide platform to coordinate CSO work and exchange experiences and good practices.

3.5 **Greece**

Like Bulgaria, Greece too has mostly been a transit country for migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Europe, although the number of people arriving has been much higher. As a frontline Member State for migrant arrivals since 2015, Greece is clearly overwhelmed by the situation and urgently needs help from other EU Member States to manage the situation.

The most burning issues are still reception and a vast backlog of asylum applications, currently at around 90 000. The waiting times can be two to three years, during which the applicants have no access to language training and cannot work legally and the long waiting time without purpose and commitment makes the integration process even harder.

In recent years, Greece has become a host country. This is a new development and as a result, migrant integration issues have not been high on the political agenda to date. A National Integration Strategy

exists, but implementation is lagging behind. A holistic approach to migrant integration has not yet been established. Foreigners have limited access to structured services aiming at social integration and there is no standard integration programme.

CSOs therefore have a crucial role in migrant integration in Greece, filling gaps where integration measures are lacking. Relations between CSOs and state authorities seem to be rather challenging. The CSOs met felt that they did not receive support and recognition for their work from the state and that trust was lacking between them and the state level. There has not been an official register of CSOs and therefore the landscape of CSOs active in the field of migrant issues could be described as fragmented. The state recently launched a registration system for recognised CSOs active in the field of migration.

4. Main findings, conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Employment

Employment is a core part of the integration process and finding a job is crucial to becoming part of the host country's economic and social life and thus developing a sense of belonging to the host society. Smooth and timely labour market integration of migrants and refugees is also in the interest of host countries in order to help cover the growing need for workforce in many Member States and to enhance the sustainability of the welfare systems against the backdrop of an ageing population and workforce.

In most countries visited, there is a significant shortage both of skilled and unskilled labour and employers are interested in hiring migrants and refugees. However, in all these countries, complex administrative procedures and lack of information and transparency deter employers from hiring migrants and refugees. Similarly, a common problem for migrants and refugees in most countries is the lack of information on how to access the labour market.

In Greece, legal access to the labour market is made almost impossible for migrants and refugees, forcing them to seek jobs in the black market and exposing them to abuse and exploitation. Also in Bulgaria and Malta, many migrants and refugees work without a legal contract, exposed to exploitation and abuse. In addition, human trafficking in Malta was highlighted as a severe problem requiring an immediate solution.

Language skills are an important precondition for entering the labour market. There are very good practices in Germany and Sweden where language courses are organised at state level. Malta has recently started providing language courses in a structured manner, but there is not yet enough capacity and CSOs are trying to fill the gap. In Greece and Bulgaria, very few language courses are provided by the state and the CSOs have to step in. However, their capacity is limited and the need remains mostly uncovered.

In Germany, over the last four years, more than 50% of refugees have entered the labour market. However, there is a big problem with asylum seekers who are not allowed to work and are also not entitled to attend language courses. These are mostly people from countries of origin that are deemed safe and who have poor chances of being granted protection status.

Another common obstacle in entering the labour market is the lack of mechanisms for recognising skills and qualifications. Many migrants and refugees have diplomas and professional experience but those are often not recognised, which is a waste of recourses.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Member States should strive to reduce the administrative obstacles that migrants and refugees encounter when entering the labour market.
- Member States should establish structures for providing transparent and comprehensive information accessible to migrants and refugees as well as employers. Clear administrative procedures must be put in place to ensure legal certainty and transparency.
- Member States where exploitation in the labour market or human trafficking exist need to take immediate action to eliminate these problems.
- Employers and trade unions have to be involved in social dialogue to address the issue of integrating migrant workers into the labour market and ensuring that all their rights are upheld, including a healthy and safe working environment.
- In order to boost integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market, an effective structure for identifying and recognising their skills and qualifications is crucial. The EU skills profile tool[2] could be used for this purpose.
- Member States should provide access to childcare facilities and schools. This is paramount for integrating women into the labour market and for integrating families in general.
- Member States should provide the necessary resources and structures for language training.
- Member States should encourage employers to invest in training refugee apprentices and ensure security for both the refugee and his/her employer, by allowing the asylum applicant to remain in the workplace for a couple of years, even if the asylum procedure was unsuccessful.
- A multi-stakeholder approach involving local and regional authorities, employers, trade unions and CSOs should be used when designing measures to promote labour market integration, ensuring that they are effective and that migrants and refugees develop skills needed in the labour market.

Good practices

- The Bavarian State Government has launched a "job mentor" programme for refugees (Jobbegleiter für Flüchtlinge) who receive mentoring and support to help them access the labour market. There is individual mentoring for refugees, as well as for the employers who employ them. The second programme targets education and training. Training promoters (Ausbildungsakquisiteure) visit vocational schools attended by school-age refugees to disseminate information on site. They also mentor refugees individually. If a refugee already has a job, contact is maintained for one year for follow-up assistance to further support them and their employer if there are any questions or problems. This is also helpful for employers, as they know that help is there if needed.

2 https://ec.europa.eu/migrantskills/#/

- Bavaria still uses the "3+ 2" model: after three years of vocational training within the dual system of training and work, refugees can continue to be employed for two years. During this period, they are tolerated even if their asylum application is ultimately rejected.
- The German trade union Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund has launched a "Fair Integration" project that provides nationwide advice on social and labour law issues for refugees and other non-EU migrants.
- The Labour-INT project in Greece, jointly coordinated by ETUC, CEEP and EUROCHAMBRES, with the involvement and support of several national, European and international organisations. The objective is to improve the capacity of the target group to activate integration paths based on labour market inclusion, together with protection against exploitation and undeclared work. The aim is to activate multi-stakeholder cooperation for integration through labour-related activities.
- In Sweden, the government has created "fast tracks" to labour market entry for newly arrived immigrants with education or skills relevant to approximately 20 different occupations for which there are labour shortages. The system of subsidised employment includes support measures known as "introductory jobs" and "extra jobs" for those in the greatest need, in particular long-term unemployed and newly-arrived immigrants. The measures are implemented together with employers and unions in the public, municipal and non-profit sectors, with wage subsidies of up to 100% in some cases for employers offering additional jobs.
- The Maltese public employment service Jobplus has launched initiatives to improve the integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market and offers different advisory services for different categories of migrants. Through its employment advisers, it provides individual counselling for migrants. It has set up a Job Brokerage Office for temporary jobs to tackle the problem of irregular work and exploitation of workers.

4.2 **Education**

Education and training play a key role in ensuring the smooth integration of newcomers to the society and labour market of host countries.

The situation in the area of migrant education varies enormously in the countries visited. Some countries have well established structures for providing language and civic orientation courses to migrants and refugees, while in other countries these structures are being planned and developed, and in some countries almost no courses are provided by the state and CSOs and international organisations are trying to fill the gap.

In Greece, there is no comprehensive approach towards language courses and permanent and structured programmes are urgently needed. There is no civic education programme in place nor any vocational training programmes. The 2019 integration strategy identifies the promotion of integration in the education system, labour market integration and access to public services as important factors for the integration of immigrants and beneficiaries of international protection, but the strategy is not being implemented. People have to stay in the refugee camps for a long time: during this period, they cannot access language training, they cannot work and they become dependent on the system. Therefore, it is much harder to act independently later.

In Malta, the state has developed an integration itinerary that entails Maltese and English language classes, basic cultural and societal orientation and a record and assessment of qualifications, trade, work experience and skills. At a later stage, a course on the social, economic, cultural and democratic history and environment of Malta, with particular focus on the Constitution, law, democratic values and an advanced Maltese course will be provided. However, this work started only recently and needs to be developed further in order to increase the range of courses available to migrants.

In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees is responsible for the language integration of migrants. There are two federal programmes running: integration courses and vocational language courses. Integration courses consist of two parts: a language course and an orientation course, which covers language, history, culture and values based on uniform standards that apply across Germany. The general objective of the integration courses is to make immigrants fit for everyday life. The vocational language courses tie in directly with the integration courses with a view to preparing job-seeking migrants and refugees for the labour market.

In Sweden, newly arrived migrants and refugees have to follow a mandatory introduction programme, run by the Swedish public employment service. It lasts 24 months and is a condition for receiving social security benefits. The introduction programme focuses on finding work and includes validation of education and professional competences, complementary education and training, internships and vocational training. It also includes a civic orientation programme that aims to provide newly arrived migrants with a basic understanding of Swedish society and knowledge about human rights and fundamental democratic values, individual rights and responsibilities, the organisation of Swedish society and everyday life.

In Bulgaria, civic education, language classes and vocational training are not offered. In light of the labour shortage, and as language skills are considered essential to obtaining a job, it is crucial that the Bulgarian government invest much more in language training. At the same time, refugees need to be encouraged to take part in the language training and job placement programmes run by the employment agency.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Member States should strive to integrate newly arrived migrants into education structures as early as possible to increase the chances of successful integration.
- As language skills are the first step towards integration, it is crucial that the Member States set up a permanent structure for providing language courses to migrants and refugees.
- Mechanisms should be established to provide support and training to teachers, school leaders and other education personnel in handling diversity and sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom.

Good practices

- In Malta, an induction course is offered to migrant children of primary school age who cannot communicate in basic Maltese or English. This one-year course aims to prepare migrant children for mainstream schooling. In 2019, the induction course was started for children of secondary school age as their numbers are growing.

- In Malta, there is a programme aiming to develop a holistic approach to integration and language acquisition by migrant learners. One component of the programme is recruiting community liaison workers, who are third-country nationals themselves. They form a bridge between home and school. They provide considerable useful insight into how to communicate with the community, how to reach out to parents and how to strengthen the contacts between parents and schools.
- In Germany, a CSO (Hilfe von Mensch zu Mensch e.V.) has created a language centre that offers integration, literacy and German courses along with childcare. There is also a refugee and integration advisory service to support refugees and their families. The migration advisory service supports adult migrants. These courses are for those whose status is not recognised and who are not entitled to the state language support provided by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

4.3 **Housing**

Housing is one of the most fundamental human needs. It is of crucial importance for the opportunities and pathways available for integration and has a major influence on migrants' and refugees' employment options, educational opportunities and social interactions. It is key to successful societal integration.

However, housing is a core problem for migrants and refugees in almost all the countries visited and poverty levels among migrants and refugees have been increasing because of unaffordable housing. A very important aspect here is that in many countries, housing is also a constantly growing problem for the local population, even those who have jobs.

In Bavaria, where the housing situation is very difficult and homes are expensive and hard to get, a set of measures has been created for cheaper housing, which should lead to new state or state-supported rental accommodation for recognised refugees and the native population.

In Malta, the Housing Authority recently proposed a rent reform to solve this issue.

CSOs are trying to relieve the housing gap by creating lodging possibilities but they cannot do by far enough to cover the need. It is a broader problem that needs a structured solution at state level. There are accommodation projects conducted by international organisations (UNHCR, IOM), with the financial help of the EU.

Frontline Member States Greece and Malta struggle with a large number of arrivals and have difficulties providing decent accommodation for newcomers. Conditions in reception centres are extremely bad, centres are massively overcrowded and basic needs are not met. This has resulted in riots and tension in both countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Member States need to take urgent action to find structured solutions to the housing problem and mitigate the situation for migrants and refugees as well as local people.
- All migrants and refugees should have access to affordable, habitable, accessible and safe housing, without discrimination. Member States must take necessary measures to ensure access

to basic shelter and housing to all in their territory, and protect them from discriminatory and degrading treatment.

- The conditions in reception centres in Greece and Malta need to be improved urgently. The EU could help with more training, staff and resources for improving the infrastructure. In the longer term, the concept of isolated receptions centres should be replaced by a different type of accommodation that would not isolate refugees.

Good practices

- In Greece, UNHCR works with the Greek government, local authorities and CSOs and with the help of the EU to provide urban accommodation and cash assistance to refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. 25 000 accommodation places have been created under the accommodation scheme (as part of the ESTIA programme) for vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, with translation services, minimal psychosocial support and cash support for people accommodated in apartments and in refugee camps.
- The Malta Emigrants' Commission has 14 homes, with a maximum capacity to accommodate 400 refugees, free of charge. Some of these homes are privately owned, while others are church homes.

4.4 **Healthcare**

Health and wellbeing are paramount for successful integration and access to good quality healthcare is as equally important as housing and employment. Migrants' physical and mental health is often poor in the initial period after arrival, and risks worsen without care.

In the countries visited, access to healthcare services for migrants and refugees varies. In some countries, health care provision for migrants and refugees is at the centre of integration policy, some have taken measures that function relatively well and in some, access to health services is difficult and problematic.

One issue in almost all countries is that often legal entitlement does not guarantee access to health services, because further barriers may exist in terms of the organisation of healthcare, lack of awareness of entitlements by healthcare providers and beneficiaries, limitations of health staff and cultural and language barriers. Often, irregular migrants do not have cost-free access to public healthcare services other than emergency care.

Another issue is that in some countries, asylum seekers do not receive a social security number that is needed to access health services and hospitals and it is up to doctors to decide whether they get the necessary services or not.

Some countries have a system of cultural mediators, who often have migrant backgrounds themselves. These trained mediators assist healthcare professionals and migrants to overcome language and cultural barriers.

In almost all countries, more attention should be paid to the mental health issues of migrants and refugees. There is a need for more psychological or social support as many refugees and asylum seekers suffer from trauma and have fragile mental health. This makes integrating very difficult for them. In

some countries, CSOs provide mental health services for migrants, as there are no mechanisms at state level.

Conclusions and recommendations

- It must be ensured that everyone living in Europe has access to healthcare and this should not depend on a person's legal status. Administrative barriers to accessing health services should be reduced.
- The wellbeing of each resident group has a direct effect on public health and has social and economic implications for the entire country. Therefore, improving migrants' and refugees' (early) access to basic healthcare services is in the public interest.
- Migrants and refuges must be provided with easily understandable information in the most common mother tongues regarding the host country's health system, explaining when and where to seek medical help, how to access health services, etc.
- Training should be provided for doctors and other healthcare professionals who face new challenges due to cultural differences and need to manage complex differences in communication styles, attitudes and expectations, e.g. when explaining the causes of disease and interpreting symptoms.
- Member States could consider setting up a structure of cultural and healthcare mediators who can assist healthcare professionals and migrants and refugees to overcome language and cultural barriers.
- Member States should ensure that necessary services to treat migrants' and refugees' mental health problems are in place and easily accessible.

Good practices

- The Maltese Migrant Health Liaison Office provides migrants and refugees with information on available healthcare services. The Transcultural Practice Nurse gives health education sessions for migrants, on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, nutrition and child health. Special sessions are provided for unaccompanied minors. The Office trains cultural mediators and offers diversity training for healthcare professionals. A cultural mediation (interpreter) service is offered in health centres.
- In Sweden, Skåne County Administrative Board runs "Partnership Skåne", which involves organisations responsible for the reception and establishment of newcomers in Skåne. The Partnership is responsible for regional cooperation and coordination of resources, focusing on the human right to health. It provides civic and health communication in the migrants' mother tongue, provided in a comprehensive programme consisting of 80 to 100 hours of mandatory civic orientation supplemented by health communication. It cooperates with civil society in order to increase newly arrived migrants' opportunities for social networking and participation, language training and health promotion. In 2019, the World Health Organization recognised Partnership Skåne as a model of good practice in the area of migrant health.

4.5 **Access to adequate and reliable information**

Access to good quality information is key to successful integration but in almost all the countries visited, difficulties in accessing reliable information were brought to the attention of the EESC members.

Often, migrants and asylum seekers lack information about their legal status and rights, relevant procedures, access to the labour market and life in the host country in general. In addition, misinformation is a common problem. On their way to Europe, refugees often rely on false information received through informal channels and from smugglers. In addition, they rarely speak the language of the host country, exacerbating the problems even further.

In Greece and Malta, people in refugee camps do not know what will happen to them and how long the asylum procedures might take. Often they are under the false impression that they will soon leave the country and so do not need to learn the local language. This reduces their chances of integration even more and they lose motivation.

In many cases, CSOs try to fill the information gap and reach out to migrants and refugees by providing information and counselling about their rights and obligations and helping them to find their way in the new country.

Conclusions and recommendations

- It is crucial to set up mechanisms that provide clear practical and legal information to migrants and refugees in a language they understand.
- Availability of good quality interpretation and translation are vital for the success of integration processes, especially at an early stage. The standards and integrity of the interpreters and translators need to be guaranteed.
- In many cases, migrants and refugees tend to trust CSOs more than government authorities or employers. Member States should reach out more to the CSOs to make use of this when developing relevant strategies and measures and include them when disseminating information to ensure it reaches the target groups.
- Greater use could be made of social media channels to distribute information among communities and migrants.

Good practices

- In Greece, the Migrant Point EKA of Athens Labour Union's Organisation aims to help and support migrants and refugees to have equal access to labour and social rights and provide reliable information and support to Greek and migrant workers on labour relations and insurance, as well as on employment and training issues.
- UNHCR Malta organises information sessions for migrants and refugees to inform them about their labour rights, e.g. introducing the concept of trade unions and why is it useful to be a member.

4.6 Unaccompanied minors, women and migrants with disabilities

One of the most problematic issues is the situation of unaccompanied minors. In Greece and Malta, there are many unaccompanied minors in refugee centers. Age determination takes a long time and during that period, the people have to stay in the refugee centres where the conditions are not appropriate for them. Often they are traumatised and have mental problems but their mental health is not attended to.

In some countries, support for unaccompanied minors is limited. These children have seen a lot in their lives and are already adults in their mind, therefore it is not easy for them to follow the rules, such as reporting when they come and go. Often, they lack previous education. They are too young to work, but too old to start formal education from scratch.

There are projects conducted by CSOs to improve their situation or relocate them from the refugee camps. For example, more than 90 children have been allocated to Greek foster families. The EU and UNHCR have also facilitated relocation of unaccompanied minors from Greece to 11 member states.

In most countries, specific integration measures targeting women exist. In Bavaria, the State Ministry supports low-threshold projects that reach female migrants through practical offers related to everyday life. For example, there is a project in which women who have never taken a language course can receive individual job-specific language training. However, the situation of women remains complicated as many of them are excluded from integration measures due to the lack of childcare and the inability to attend courses. It is important to ensure that women can benefit from the support measures in the first place.

In Sweden too, measures are in place for the labour market integration of foreign-born women, including language training and introduction courses with special childcare arrangements for foreign-born mothers, and guidance on possible paths to further education and employment specially provided to foreign-born women by adult education associations.

There are many CSOs in most countries focusing on helping female migrants and they are providing a valuable contribution to the integration of these women.

In a few countries, there are special integration courses for people with disabilities (for those with the same disability), e.g. deaf or blind people. However, in most countries there are no such measures and migrants with disabilities remain a vulnerable group highly exposed to exclusion.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Unaccompanied minors are one of the most vulnerable migrant groups and Member States need to ensure that that these children are protected.
- To provide effective protection for unaccompanied minors, Member States should allocate the necessary resources to deploying public services and providing appropriate facilities, e.g. through special training and enhancing the capacities of child protection professionals.
- Adequate accommodation and access to education must be provided for unaccompanied minors from the beginning.
- Women play a key role in the integration process and their willingness to integrate is crucial for the successful integration of the whole family, so women should be supported in their integration efforts as much as possible.
- Adequate childcare options need to be created.
- Member States should provide the tools to set up special integration measures for migrants with disabilities, e.g. language or civic orientation courses designed according to the specific needs arising from different disabilities.

Good practices

- Yalla Trappan in Sweden is a social enterprise that mainly employs migrant women, who often started at a mature(r) age, with little education, little to no work experience and limited Swedish language skills. It integrates migrant women into the labour market by capitalising on their skills, which for most of them are cooking, sewing and cleaning. Starting out as a lunch restaurant/café, it later expanded its business to cleaning and sewing. It operates mainly on the basis of business-to-business contracts, with clients including IKEA and H&M.
- Condrobs in Germany runs a facility for the care of unaccompanied minors and young people from third countries. There are also places for students in the facility. Integration takes place right from the beginning, and young refugees can share everyday experiences with students, spend their free time together, make friends and also receive help with school work. The students work at the reception, provide language lessons and are trained to care for the minors. The aim is to make these young people independent and assist them as they lead independent lives.
- Ensamkommandes förbund in Sweden was set up and is run by former unaccompanied minors to provide a social space and services to newly arrived unaccompanied minors. The facility houses a communal space, space for doing homework, a meeting room, several games rooms (pool table, football table, PlayStation room) and a music room. The organisation offers a variety of services for unaccompanied minors, such as homework support, language classes and social activities including sports and cultural events. In addition, the organisation provides support for unaccompanied minors to advocate for their rights in the asylum process as well as in society in general. All these activities help the unaccompanied minors to build a social network, take their mind off their difficult situation and find their place in Swedish society.
- In Greece, a successful project was conducted where shared apartments were provided for unaccompanied minors of 16-18 years. This enabled them to develop a sense of independence and have some stability and normality in their life.

4.7 **Involving and acknowledging CSOs**

CSOs play an important role in migrant and refugee integration in all the countries visited. They carry out valuable work assisting or in some cases even substituting for governments by providing guidance and support in integration processes. In all countries, CSOs run a wide range of integration activities. They provide accommodation, information about rights and obligations in the host country, interpretation, legal and social counselling, language courses, cultural guidance, job search assistance and carry out advocacy and awareness-raising activities. CSOs help migrants gain access to education, training and employment, and they can challenge discrimination in the education sector, labour market and society as a whole.

In some countries, CSOs are formal partners of the state and official stakeholders in the introduction and integration programmes for newcomers. In other countries, the relations between CSOs and state authorities are rather challenging and there are strong issues of mutual trust. In some cases, the government bodies we met referred to the fragmented landscape of CSOs as a factor complicating cooperation. Some CSOs felt that their services were used by the state to fill urgent gaps, for instance providing language courses and interpreting services, but their work was not recognised and they did not receive the necessary support.

In countries, where integration policies and measures are in place and relatively efficient, CSOs also act as a safety net for refugees and migrants who are not entitled to benefit from state support measures and make a major contribution to improving their chances of integrating.

In general, cooperation between CSOs and local authorities, international organisations and trade unions seems to be efficient. However, in many cases more and structured contacts with employers could be established.

One issue brought repeatedly to the attention of the EESC members was the impact of political change on integration measures. In cases where integration is not the focus of the new government, much that had been accomplished previously is scaled back for political reasons. This makes CSOs' work more difficult and harms the circumstances and prospects of migrants and refugees.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Given their experience on the ground, CSOs are best suited to recognise the needs of migrants and refugees. Member States should step up efforts to establish more structured cooperation between CSOs and government authorities so as to create synergies and make better use of the knowledge and resources available on both sides. This would help ensure that integration activities are efficient and benefit migrants and refugees in an optimal way.
- CSOs should be more involved in the debate and decision-making as partners, since they are doing integration work on the ground and their experience can bring practical benefits in achieving integration goals.
- Multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together state and local authorities, social partners and civil society as well as migrant organisations should be created to coordinate the expertise of actors involved in migrant integration and foster cooperation between them.
- A binding integration framework is recommendable to make sure that integration systems are sustainable and prevent changing political conditions triggering backsliding.
- Where relevant, CSOs should strengthen cooperation and coordination among themselves to reduce fragmentation.

Good practices

- Jobsplus, the Maltese Public Employment Service, involved a number of CSOs working in the field of migration when it started planning employment measures for migrants, as it did not have experience with migrants. A working group was set up that meets once a month.
- UNHCR Malta offers training sessions for refugee-led CSOs to help them improve the internal administration of their organisations and improve their communication skills. It is developing a one-to-one coaching model for an individual approach where the emphasis is on the individual problems of these CSOs.

4.8 **Funding and support for CSOs**

As already heard during the visits in 2016, one of the biggest problems impeding the work of the CSOs remains access to funding. Despite playing an important role in the integration process of both migrants and refugees, civil society organisations have great difficulties in obtaining funding for their activities.

In many cases, the funding is project-based and activities are organised on an ad hoc basis, which does not foster the creation of sustainable procedures or protocols that can be used long term. These kinds of one-off projects without follow-up hinder capacity-building and progress, because the experience gained is often lost when a project ends. Civil society finds itself firefighting instead of focusing on long-term progress.

CSOs consider EU financing to be very important but also very difficult to obtain because of the co-financing requirement, which is very difficult to meet. In addition, applying for EU funds involves a lot of bureaucracy and is often so complicated that more and more CSOs are not keen to do it. For example, reporting obligations for EU funds change often, which makes it very hard to comply with them. Some CSOs feel that there was not enough transparency on how EU funds are used.

Social entrepreneurship was mentioned as a way to sustain CSO activities, to avoid relying on project funding alone.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Member States should make the necessary resources available to ensure that integration measures are efficient and operational in the long term.
- It should be made easier and faster to obtain EU funding, including for small-scale initiatives, without jeopardising the impartiality and transparency of the process. The co-financing requirement should be facilitated or reduced.
- There is a need for the long-term programming of the allocation of EU funds, based on clear rules.
- Funding from the EU should go directly to CSOs or local governments and the challenges related to co-financing and pre-financing should be addressed in order to make it easier for small(er) organisations to obtain funding.

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