

> Making a Success of Refugee Reception and Integration

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With more than 21 million refugees in the world today¹, it is no surprise that unprecedented numbers of people are seeking protection in prosperous western countries. Wealthy western countries today are largely sheltered from flows of asylum-seekers coming directly from countries in which armed conflict and persecution are rife. So-called “secondary movements” from countries of first asylum are motivated by the dire conditions and lack of prospects that most refugees face when they flee across international borders to the low- and middle-income countries that shelter 86 percent of the world’s refugees. A small proportion of refugees and migrants turn up to seek asylum in the west, but in 2014–2016 these arrivals rose sharply, particularly across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, and across Mexico to the United States. Although many of the receiving countries have refugee resettlement programs, the magnitude and the spontaneous, unplanned nature of the arrivals challenged their capacity to receive and integrate the refugees. In many receiving countries, the unanticipated wave of refugees and asylum seekers generated some degree of political backlash.

RECOGNIZING THE COSTS OF RECEIVING REFUGEES

The most serious challenges of receiving large numbers of newcomers are those related to the absorptive capacity of communities that receive refugees. These have become acute in countries receiving large numbers of asylum seekers in a short time frame. Sweden, for example (with only 10 million residents) received over 35,000 unaccompanied minors among asylum seekers in 2015 alone. This was enough to fill more than 1000 new classrooms in Swedish schools—and does not count the number of children who arrive with their parents. The number of teachers cannot always be expanded simply by increasing the education budget—the supply of teachers

who are specialized in teaching children and adults who are not competent in the local language is often limited. Many U.S. school districts faced similar issues with respect to children arriving from Central America.

Refugees and asylum seekers can place strains on schools, health-care facilities, infrastructure, and many kinds of public services. Even if housing for refugees is subsidized, stocks are inelastic in the short term and may result in competition for low-cost housing with low-income natives, or in overcrowding and substandard accommodations. These strains are most acutely felt at the local level, and they often become electoral issues. Policy dialogue is often made more difficult if refugee advocates are unwilling to acknowledge that the costs of receiving refugees are real and can be difficult to manage, especially in the short term.

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

The challenges of cultural integration are prominent concerns in communities receiving refugees whose language, religion and customs differ from the native-born population. While many communities feel enriched by ethnic diversity, short-term problems of communication and misunderstanding create tensions that can be exploited as wedge issues by populist commentators and politicians. Terrorist incidents like the attacks in Paris, Berlin, London and San Bernardino, California fan these tensions, and populist portrayals do not make a distinction between resettled refugees, refugees who have received asylum, asylum seekers, unauthorized immigrants and legal residents or citizens “of immigrant background.”

The risk of populist backlash indiscriminately aimed at visible minorities is a challenge for many liberal democracies. In Germany, where the population as a whole has been generally welcoming to refugees,

¹ This figure includes about 16.5 million refugees under the responsibility of UNHCR and about 5 million Palestinian refugees under the responsibility of UNRWA. In addition, nearly 40 million people are displaced within their own countries, in circumstances similar to refugees.

whether resettled or awarded asylum, there were about 500 attacks on refugee shelters, transport or gathering places in 2015, including an arson attack in December that injured 10 people, including a two-month-old baby. This kind of pattern, by no means unique to Germany, is a broader challenge to the rule of law.

The electoral success of right-wing politicians running on anti-immigrant (and in Europe, anti-EU) platforms throughout the West, threatens the political consensus that supports the international humanitarian system. In many countries, mainstream politicians are driven to the right on asylum and refugee issues by a passionate minority. In the United States, for example, where the refugee resettlement program has long enjoyed bipartisan support, 31 state governors called for a moratorium on resettlement of Syrian refugees after the Paris attacks, even though no refugees were identified as taking part in the attacks. Measures to slow the pace of arrivals and reduce the volumes are often controversial, as can be seen in the agreements between the EU and Turkey and between the U.S. and Mexico. But by “cooling the fever” of reaction, they may actually make possible more reasoned, and generous, integration policies.

THE NEED FOR INNOVATION

The challenges of refugee reception are real but not insurmountable. Policy innovation and experimentation are needed; both old and new programs should be monitored closely to develop a more systematic idea of what policies have been effective in eroding the barriers to reception patterns and programs that can handle greater numbers more successfully. Where possible, better communication with communities and local authorities about arriving refugees can ease concerns and help them to prepare to meet the needs and benefit from the personal assets of refugees. Countries like Denmark and Norway offer good practice in the way that municipalities are consulted about timing and readiness to welcome new arrivals through their resettlement programs. It is a relatively simple matter to make sure that receiving communities are well-informed about the characteristics and need of refugees resettling in the locality, but such information is not always forthcoming in a timely way.

Orientations and trainings for refugees who are awaiting resettlement or are housed temporarily in reception centers for new arrivals can be valuable, but what is funded is often brief and perfunctory. Particularly when waiting periods are long, the time could and should be productively used for language instruction, vocational training, and life skills such as

financial management. Germany has a serious program involving 700 hours of language instruction and 300 hours of practical and cultural orientation. These investments are likely to pay off in earlier employment and readiness for school. Resources, especially teachers, could be supplemented with on-line instruction, but such programs should be monitored for effectiveness so that design can be improved. Private-sector engagement at an early stage could be helpful in targeting vocational training; educational and professional associations could also take advantage of this time to assist qualified refugees with recognition of their credentials.

The most comprehensive services of the most competent welfare state are no substitute for personal contact between refugees and members of the community in which they settle. Harnessing the broad good will that many people have toward refugees when they understand who they are and why they have fled is important for successful integration, but a lack of systems to do so can lead to frustration and a lapse into apathy. Local and national authorities should support people-to-people programs that bring together refugees and their new neighbors. Housing policies that lead to residential segregation are inimical to this goal.

Social support of the kind that makes for successful settlement is built into private sponsorship arrangements for refugees. Several countries have experimented with various forms of private sponsorship, but Canada is the acknowledged leader in the field, with a long-standing and successful program. It is co-sponsoring a new initiative to share its experience and mentor other states that are interested in developing programs. Broadening sponsorship opportunities to private citizens, civic groups, the private sector and educational institutions is a path that more governments would do well to explore.

Relatively few studies track the economic and social outcomes for refugee populations, owing to a lack of data. Data collected by governmental authorities does not normally differentiate between refugees and other migrants, making it difficult to formulate evidence-based policies. More systematic collection of data on how refugees fare once they are accepted for permanent residency would be extremely useful.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL REFUGEE RECEPTION AND SETTLEMENT PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Some generalizations about the ingredients for success of refugees can be derived from the extensive experience of refugee resettlement and integration of successful

asylum seekers in a number of countries. The Australian Refugee Council highlights community support; access to training, mentoring and language instruction; affordable housing with access to community-based resources and transportation; participation in the labor force; social connectedness; and access to cultural, sporting and voluntary activities. To these might be added:

- *A clear (and clearly communicated) rationale* covering both the humanitarian and the foreign policy reasons for protecting and assisting refugees in one's own country.
- *Good management of refugee policy and programs.* People get alarmed when they feel that authorities are not in control, as was the case in Germany toward the end of 2015. Moreover, resentment builds when programs are perceived as being poorly or unfairly managed, to the detriment of the native-born population.
- *Adequate resources to support programs.* The federal government in United States gives only 8 months of cash and medical assistance to refugees, which leaves state-level public assistance programs to make up the difference; it pays only half the considerable cost of the public health insurance program for the poor (and most refugees are poor when they first arrive) and very little in school impact support.
- *Strong institutions to implement programs.* The U.S. resettlement program contracts with nine national non-profit, voluntary agencies that have accumulated a wealth of experience in helping refugees, asylees, and other people granted protection in the United States to settle successfully and integrate in their new communities. They, in turn, work with more than 350 local affiliates based in the refugee-hosting communities. Most states have refugee coordinators to act as a liaison between state social service programs and the voluntary agencies and federal authorities. In addition, many cities have an office that oversees responses to the needs of "new Americans," both refugees and immigrants.
- *Personal involvement of community members to help refugees integrate locally.* Often, this requires a system for managing and channeling volunteerism. Without this, the goodwill of people who are willing to commit to helping refugees locally can dissipate, leading to frustration and, ultimately, indifference.

Some of these elements are amenable to adaptation to a wide range of different settings and circumstances.

Resources are obviously the most difficult part, for poor and middle-income countries especially, but also for richer ones under pressure to limit government expenditures at every level.

Explanation and involvement are important in building support for refugee programs. So is personal encounter. People who have never met or interacted with a refugee are less likely to develop empathy toward them. Evidence of the fact that most refugees do well in the United States is not as widely disseminated as it could be, and data is hard to find. An MPI study on outcomes for refugees in the United States confirms that integration is strong over time.

It is also important to manage expectations. Integration takes time, and economic costs are front-loaded while benefits take time to emerge (tax payments, revitalization of neighborhood, business creation and so forth. A study by an expert panel assembled by the National Academy of Sciences measured two outcomes for immigrants: integration (the process by which immigrants and the native-born come to resemble each other, which is a two-way street) and well-being. Greater integration does not always produce greater well-being: notably health, crime, and intact families are areas in which immigrant well-being declines as integration proceeds—that is, as they more closely come to resemble the native-born. It is also important to acknowledge that, while most refugees succeed, some individuals and groups will not thrive and will need long-term support.

The Refugee Council of Australia points out that while the short-term costs can be high as refugees settle and adjust, successful integration brings permanent social, cultural and economic benefits—not least that five of Australia's eight billionaires have refugee backgrounds. In particular, receiving countries may benefit from the young age profile of refugees, in countries where new retirees outnumber new labor force entrants—a factor that applies in most European countries as well as Australia—and the potential for revitalization of rural areas and other regions outside of major metropolitan areas.

Several U.S. communities have also experienced the dynamism that new refugee populations can bring—to the extent that some struggling post-industrial cities such as Baltimore, Detroit and Pittsburgh have actively sought refugee resettlement. The small city of Boise, Idaho, found that the arrival of refugee families stabilized the school population in an area where declining enrollment had threatened the viability of some schools.

Public policy and political expression have an impact on how refugees are regarded and on their chances of integration. French policy of *laïcité* is damaging, especially when it picks fights over things like headscarves and burkinis. Politicians who portray refugees as security threats or scroungers obviously encourage marginalization and exclusion. This may create a self-reinforcing loop, as some of the people who are excluded react by rejecting the norms of the broader society.

Mass media and social media have a strong impact on how people view refugees, which can be positive or negative. In many countries, they amplify negative political messages about refugees. But they can also amplify positive messages—the social media campaign “I’ll ride with you” started with a single individual in Australia and went viral worldwide with its message of solidarity and inclusion for Muslim minorities. Civil society can call upon common values and traditions of welcome where they are strong, and try to inculcate them where they do not exist.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

A common, critical factor that in determining whether refugees will be accepted and integrated into receiving societies is the self-confidence that societies have, or lack, at the individual and collective levels. A confident society is less likely to feel the need to marginalize newcomers and to enforce hierarchical structures that need to have an out-group at the bottom. A confident society is more likely to be a welcoming society, as individuals and institutions are able to overcome their

fears of being disadvantaged by the successes of the “other”—in other words, they are less likely to see interactions as taking place in a zero-sum game.

Conversely, marginalization and inequality within a country set the stage for policies and attitudes of social exclusion of newcomers. The regions within countries that are most hostile to refugees are, in many cases, those that have been left behind in economic and social development—the emptying rural areas, the rustbelt cities (which, ironically, are likely to benefit from an infusion of population). Northern France and Appalachia are two examples. By contrast, the great global cities—New York, Amsterdam, London, Chicago, Toronto—tend to welcome refugees, as do the thriving “blue” cities in U.S. “red” states—cities such as Austin, Texas; Boise, Idaho; and Iowa City, Iowa.

To foster attitudes of inclusion in places where it does not come naturally, local residents and local institutions need to be engaged in planning and reception of refugees, so that they do not feel that settlement is something that is being imposed on them without their involvement. Civic leaders, such as clergy, teachers and principals, elected officials, employers, and leaders in local institutions such as Rotary Clubs, Women’s Institutes, labor associations and sports leagues can help to communicate the purpose and needs of refugees in their midst to the broader community. This kind of leadership from within, which gives people an opportunity to help another person, can foster social inclusion of refugees while also building a larger edifice of solidarity within communities too often fractured by class, race, religion or politics.