High-Level Conference on the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection
Paris, January 2016

Summary & conclusions
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The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) jointly organised a high-level one-day event focusing on the importance and value of integration. It sought to emphasize the economic opportunity that this presents for receiving societies, while underscoring the need for countries to invest in refugees’ integration, including their social inclusion. This was informed by the findings and recommendations of the OECD and UNHCR through their respective research on the integration of refugees, drawing on the common themes identified. The conference saw participation from 36 States plus the European Union (EU), the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), as well as the German Council of Economic Experts, the Business and Industry Advisory Committee (BIAC), and the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC). It provided participants with the opportunity to share their recent experience and challenges in terms of welcoming and integrating refugees, and to identify good practice that could be scaled-up or transferred to others.

The conference was organised around two roundtable discussions on Facilitating a co-ordinated response to needs at the national level, moderated by the Deputy Secretary General of the OECD, Mr. Stefan Kapferer, and Establishing the infrastructure for integration and supporting welcoming communities, which was moderated by the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Mr. Volker Türk.

A press event was also hosted by the Secretary General of the OECD, Mr. Angel Gurría, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Filippo Grandi, which included the launch of the OECD’s publication, Making Integration Work: Refugees and others in need of protection.

The following summary conclusions do not necessarily represent the individual views of participants, the member countries of the OECD, or UNHCR, but reflect broadly the understandings that emerged from the discussions.

1. To note, for the purposes of this document, the term ‘refugee’ is used to refer to both those granted refugee and subsidiary protection status, unless otherwise specified.
THEMES OF DISCUSSION

General considerations

1. The successful integration of refugees, in all its dimensions (legal, economic and social), is a crucial undertaking. It is a prerequisite for enabling a positive economic impact, but also for refugees to benefit from a welcoming environment as productive members of their new societies and towards building a cohesive social environment.

2. In this process, it is first and foremost important to recognise refugees for their potential and the positive contribution that they can make to societies rather than perceiving them as a burden. To achieve this, there needs to be a collective identification of approaches that ensure good reception and integration standards for all those arriving, consistent with international standards. This would also contribute towards decreased secondary movements. It is acknowledged that the reception and integration of large numbers of refugees entails upfront costs, while it may take several years until such time as a net positive fiscal impact occurs. However, this can be significantly shortened through a timely and effective response, including through the successful integration of refugees into the labour market. The latter can also serve to reduce the risk of social exclusion for newcomers. Providing appropriate integration support must thus be seen as an investment in a country’s future, where evidence-based economic arguments can be instrumental in ensuring local support.

3. This upfront investment is not a negligible one. International solidarity in financing integration by those who take fewer refugees is thus needed. Within the European Union, this could include a significant up-scaling of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and of the European Social Fund. Yet, the non-EU countries most affected by the crisis, notably the neighbouring countries of Syria, also need financial support.

4. International solidarity needs, however, to go beyond the financial aspects. An important element of international co-operation in this respect relates to capacity building and the exchange of good practices regarding the integration of refugees and their children.

Housing

5. Appropriate housing is an essential priority and one in which many countries are facing significant challenges. It is a precondition for creating a welcoming environment and in facilitating refugees’ integration as well as their interaction with their new communities.

6. Housing is also intimately linked to employment, and particularly as it pertains to State dispersal policies. More specifically, States can be confronted with challenges wherein housing is available in locations where there are limited employment prospects, while employment opportunities can be located in areas where there are housing shortfalls. To address such challenges, States require the support and participation of all levels of governance to meet the needs of those arriving and to ensure a balanced approach in the provision of appropriate housing that can ultimately be linked to positive employment outcomes.

Labour market integration

7. The labour market integration of refugees represents an overriding priority, with their practical integration into the labour market one of the biggest challenges confronted by States. Its impact can also be telling on various aspects of a refugee’s integration experience, including, for example, on their social inclusion.

8. Refugees are resourceful and their skills should be utilised to the fullest extent possible. This includes efforts.
towards formally recognising the skills that refugees possess, coupled with identifying the labour market needs that their skills could address. The simplification of legislative and administrative procedures so that refugees can access employment at the earliest opportunity is recommended. Indeed, an increasing number of countries are allowing asylum seekers to work to sustain themselves and gain a first professional experience in their new country after a certain number of months.

9. However, successful labour market integration can only be achieved with the support of social partners, who have a major role to play. More specifically, the business community needs to provide opportunities to refugees through internships, apprenticeships, on-the-job training and, ultimately, employment opportunities, while trade unions must work towards the acceptance of refugees as co-workers.

10. Moreover, the labour market integration of refugees reflects a demographic reality for many States and it is in the interests of all sides to make this a success. This is also recognised by social partners, who acknowledge both the humanitarian and the economic imperative of supporting refugee integration.

11. Ongoing gaps in the employment rates of refugees compared to nationals of their new country have been observed and require attention, as does the participation of refugee women in the labour market. Ensuring refugee women’s participation in the labour market represents an essential investment in their future success and that of their children.

Education and skills development

12. Learning the language of the host country is one of the most important determinants for successful longer-term integration. Although most countries have programmes that enable refugees to learn the host-country language, these are, at times, only accessible once the asylum process has been completed. Moreover, language programmes tend to not sufficiently differentiate the skill profile of beneficiaries and can be unsuited to accessing employment opportunities. The evaluation systems of these programmes also need to be improved.

13. More generally, it is critical to offer opportunities to upskill and/or complement refugee’s existing skills. The limited evidence available suggests that a significant share of refugees have good vocational skills, but there is also a sizeable group who lack basic qualifications. Highly-skilled persons have very different needs in terms of integration support and generally have difficulties in getting their qualifications recognised. For those with no or insufficient documentation of their foreign qualifications, it is important to offer alternative ways to assess their skills.

14. Early intervention regarding language and skills development is key, but upscaling this approach can be challenging. In this regard, early intervention programmes, as currently implemented in Germany, Norway and Sweden, provide good examples of how to assess the qualifications of asylum seekers directly in the reception facilities with the help of case workers and, in some cases, with the support of new technologies and/or refugees themselves.

15. Another priority is to ensure that refugee children are quickly integrated
into the school system, including through support for targeted preparation classes where these are needed with the aim of ensuring a swift transition to regular classes. This is a key challenge, as almost one-in-three asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 were children. Particular attention should also be paid to those who arrive towards the end of obligatory schooling to ensure that they are equipped with the basic skills that are needed for successful long-term integration into the labour market and society more generally.

16. The unmet needs in terms of sufficiently available teachers poses practical problems in most affected countries. The possibility to mobilise refugees with the relevant skills can add to the education workforce. In Sweden, for example, where thousands of recently arrived refugees from Syria are teachers, they receive a fast-track assessment combined with bridging courses in Swedish pedagogy to enable them to instruct newly-arrived refugee students in their mother tongue.

Unaccompanied and separated children

17. The particular needs of unaccompanied and separate children (UASC) are of paramount importance, with capacity challenges associated with the current unforeseen numbers of arrivals. The provision of education to UASC is a key activity. However, as noted previously, there are challenges for schools in ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of teachers available, including those who can teach the host-country language as a second language. Moreover, many UASC have been traumatised and abused, and therefore require child-sensitive processes and support. In this effort, civil society can play a vital role in the provision of services and in reaching out to the most vulnerable, in supporting them, and in serving as an interface between refugee children and the system (i.e. they can mobilise children and adults).

Health

18. The provision of appropriate and accessible health services for refugees, with many having survived violence and trauma, is a key support measure to address refugees’ psycho-social needs and their long-term well-being. Without access to such services, the integration experience of the individual refugee and his/her family will be unduly affected.

Welcoming communities

19. As is widely acknowledged, integration is a dynamic two-way, multifaceted process, placing obligations on both the receiving community and refugees themselves. However, it is also about recognising what refugees and receiving communities have in common, which should not be lost in the discourse. Integration starts with mutual respect and acknowledgement of shared values. There are undoubtedly challenges in countering negative public perceptions, in dispelling myths and in better facilitating the potential positive impact of refugee arrivals. However, it is also about uncovering the perceptions, both positive and negative, that refugees have of their new countries.

20. A ‘whole of society’ approach is considered beneficial, which should include associations – including diaspora –, sports clubs, volunteers and refugees themselves in the development of an effective communication and engagement strategy. The full participation of civil society in both supporting refugees and in creating welcoming communities is of central importance.

21. Both previously and newly-arrived refugees and civil society need to be involved to make integration work and to help refugees to become fully
participating members of their host-country society. Mentorship programmes have been a longstanding and effective form of civil society involvement in countries settled through migration, such as in Australia, Canada and the United States. These programmes not only represent a cost-effective way of promoting integration, but they also create opportunities for those newly arrived to engage more fully with their host-country society.

22. Essentially, integration is inherently local, community-based and community-driven, though it also requires the close support and coordination of governance at the national, regional and municipal levels.

Data

23. A better use of data, including longitudinal data, is an important contributor to improved understanding on the outcomes for refugees, the impact of integration programmes, how refugees can and do contribute to rebuilding their countries of origin, and to support future arrivals.

24. This also relates to labour market needs and ensuring greater coherence between labour mobility and migrant policy. Gathering reliable, usable data on the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers and refugees needs to be the starting point for integration support for those who will remain and for those who are expected to remain.

Conclusions

25. There have been many positive responses in Europe and beyond to previous significant refugee movements, including for Hungarians, the Vietnamese boat people and for those from the former Yugoslavia. There will be more crises of this nature, which underscores the importance of exchanging expertise, including with non-European countries, both for the benefit of those arriving now and for future policy development. Moreover, there is a positive economic motivation to support the full integration of refugees, and not just moral.

26. Realities constantly change and policies need to adapt to these realities. In this process, government structures must also be adaptable. Early investments in supporting integration, including during the asylum process for those with high prospects to remain, will produce dividends in the mid- to long-term, reflecting that refugees are important contributors to the economic, social and cultural life of their new countries.

27. Building on the success of this first co-operation on integration, and reflective of the respective expertise of each organisation, the OECD and UNHCR will sign a Memorandum of Understanding to delineate mutually beneficial areas of engagement.

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Useful links

www.oecd.org/migration
www.oecd.org/migration/integrationindicators/
http://www.unhcr.org/
http://www.unhcr.org/56a9decf5.html