Everywhere in Europe, policy makers are looking for ways to help asylum-seekers and refugees find jobs. It’s a major challenge and the tools being used vary – from language courses and internships to competency tests and training programs. No one, however, has found a surefire approach, as our new study shows.

Given the large number of refugees that have recently made their way to Europe, a key challenge EU member states face is finding better and faster methods for integrating them into the labor market. That is true even in those countries that tend to be skeptical about accepting newcomers. While the Scandinavian nations have many years of experience helping refugees find employment, other countries are now doing more to introduce programs that can aid recent arrivals. Most countries, however, have only begun implementing the required integration strategies.

Those are the key findings from an international study that compares the strategies and policy measures for integrating refugees into labor markets in nine European countries (see box “About the study”). In addition to government
policies, the team at the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute in Florence also examined community-level and nonprofit projects.

The study shows that in the last year almost all of the countries examined have either created new initiatives or expanded existing programs to include refugees. The study’s authors identified 94 different programs in the nine countries. The most common offerings are language and orientation courses, measures for assessing occupational skills, and counseling and placement services. The funding required for these programs has in many cases also been significantly increased.

Many pilot projects, few comprehensive responses

The experts’ sobering assessment: no country has put sufficient resources in place to meet the increased demand for language courses and other programs. Many of the examined measures are merely pilot attempts, and the number of participants is therefore small. A lack of staff and uncertain budgets have resulted in long waiting lists and difficulty in securing a place in the relevant programs.

Refugees receive the least support in France and the UK. In neither country has the government implemented an integration policy, which means refugees there are largely dependent on projects run by nonprofit organizations.

Conversely, Denmark and Sweden have taken the most ambitious approach by defining integration as a public-sector responsibility. Both countries offer all refugees and their dependents multi-year orientation programs which combine language learning, career guidance, internships and subsidized employment, as needed. In light of the increased number of refugees, both countries now face the challenge of further expanding these costly measures.

Employment often fails because of bureaucracy

According to the study’s authors, despite different framework conditions all of the countries face similar challenges, including developing measures that reflect the special needs refugees have. Our expert for labor markets, Joscha Schwarzwälder, explains:

"Most of the countries studied have reacted to the new situation by expanding existing programs for migrants to include refugees. At the same time, however, we know that immigrants who are also displaced persons have a much more difficult time finding a job than other migrants do."
There is also room for improvement when it comes to coordinating the various government employment agencies and the communities responsible for providing housing, as well as the nonprofit organizations and many other actors involved. According to Schwarzwälder, it is crucial that an overall strategy be developed.

The authors also criticize the numerous administrative and legal hurdles which make it unnecessarily difficult for refugees to find work. For example, in many cases, asylum-seekers who have not yet been officially recognized can only be given a job if there is no native job seeker available to do it. In addition, self-employment is often not permitted. Job searches, moreover, are often made more difficult by residency regulations that assign refugees to communities based on the availability of accommodation or slots in integration courses, and not based on where workers are needed. That puts those refugees at a disadvantage who are sent to economically weak regions.

Early experience and flexible programs

A number of factors determine how successful the countries have been in integrating refugees into the labor market. Despite numerous introductory programs in Denmark and Sweden, less than one-third of participants have found gainful employment three years after arriving in the country. In Germany as well, only one-third of refugees have jobs three years after their arrival. In contrast, between 2005 and 2009 almost half of all refugees in the UK were working after 21 months. Although the refugees differ from country to country – in terms of their language abilities and occupational qualifications, for example – the conditions found in each country's labor market also play a decisive role. Case studies from Italy and Spain, for instance, show that refugees in these countries have a very limited chance of finding work given the high levels of unemployment there.

The authors note that the most important success factor is allowing refugees to gain work experience in their host country as soon as possible. Examples from Scandinavia show that refugees benefit from language-learning courses and, in particular, from internships and working in the local economy in government-subsidized entry-level jobs. Even the best-intentioned programs
have little impact if they keep refugees in the classroom and out of the job market. The best responses, the authors say, are flexible programs that combine job-entry measures with language learning and ongoing training.

However, robust findings are lacking on the impact of individual measures, since little data exists and few empirical studies have been carried out on integrating refugees into the labor market. According to Schwarzwälder, "In order to improve refugees' long-term employment opportunities, not only must countries invest more in integration, they must also do more to ascertain whether or not their investments are effective."

Publication

From Refugees to Workers

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Publication
The study "From Refugees to Workers – Mapping Labour Market Integration Support Measures for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in EU Member States" examines which employment-related integration programs are available to asylum-seeks and refugees in nine European countries and what the countries have experienced during implementation of the programs. The study examined programs in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The detailed case studies are based on research carried out by national experts and interviews with practitioners and public-sector employees conducted between January and March 2016. A total of 94 individual measures were identified and evaluated in terms of their objectives, number of participants and funding.