

A new policy paradigm from the LSE Maryam Forum: 6. Human mobility, integration and social cohesion

*Migration is a politically sensitive topic, and the narrative surrounding it is often not rooted in solid evidence. Yet integrating refugees into labour markets not only benefits refugees, but also host communities and refugee-citizen relationships. **Dominik Hangartner, Angelo Martelli, Bilal Malaeb, Doménica Avila** and the **LSE Maryam Forum Working Group on Human Mobility** offer practical policy recommendations.*

Recommendation 1: Use technology to match labour market supply and demand for refugees

For resettled refugees, labour market integration starts by placing people in the location where they are more likely to find a job. Too often this fails to happen, either because of a lack of information about refugee preferences and dispersal policies that do not take this information into account. Recent academic research has developed data-driven matching mechanisms to overcome these barriers and to connect refugees to places. These matching algorithms are an extremely cost-efficient policy intervention that can be adapted to country-specific contexts, dynamically updated over time, and implemented at scale.

Recommendation 2: Holistic, active labour market programmes to help refugees



Refugees from Mosul shelter in a school in Iraq in 2014. Photo: [S Baldwin/UNHCR/ACNUR Américas](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Refugees face three main barriers when accessing the labour market: proficiency in the host country language, knowledge of the local labour market, and lack of qualifications. They also face institutional barriers that stop them working legally, such as restricted occupations or difficulty in obtaining work permits. In addition, refugees may face discrimination in hiring decisions, forcing them to accept lower-paid and informal jobs. The earlier refugees have access to the labour market and active labour market programmes, the faster they integrate.

Language training is imperative to break basic cultural barriers. While training in schools is effective, the evidence suggests a multiplier effect when learning language in the workplace. Short-term work placements with language training and cultural orientation modules can help.

Due to labour market frictions and a lack of transferable qualifications, refugees are often overqualified for the jobs they do. Host countries could consider more flexible screening processes, incorporating translation services, and standardising cross-country educational frameworks.

However, some refugees lack the necessary education and skills to join the labour market. In this case, entrepreneurship programmes and volunteering opportunities are powerful options. They help to create social networks and prevent exclusion, while enhancing skills that increase future job opportunities.

In many countries, refugees have problems obtaining legal work permits, pushing them into the informal sector and precarious work – especially in fragile states and emerging economies. Denying refugees the legal right to work places them at a serious disadvantage and exposes them to exploitation and trafficking. It forces them to take perilous decisions, perpetuates dependency on aid, and increases their vulnerability to health issues and workplace hazards. Governments in host countries should facilitate new regulatory frameworks to overcome this obstacle.

Labour market programmes should give particular attention to women, making sure they have equal access to job opportunities, work permits, and financial services.

Recommendation 3: Redesign the asylum process with a focus on integration

Besides the violence they fled from, refugees can also be at risk of deprivation, gender-based exploitation, and threats to their lives when housed in camps. Cumulative exposure to violence and traumatic events has long-term impacts on refugees' physical and mental health, complicating social and economic integration.

Recent evidence suggests that lengthy asylum decisions are particularly detrimental to refugees' chances of finding work. Ensuring fast and adequate asylum processes, perhaps with the help of technology, can improve this.

For resettled refugees, who do not have to take perilous journeys to their destinations, pre-departure programmes may facilitate integration by smoothing cultural and labor transitions. Effective programmes do not just provide general information about the host country. They also embrace cultural orientation, with bicultural trainers, language courses, job market information, an early qualifications assessment, job search orientation and support for job applications where possible.

Frontline cities are key to promoting better reception processes and faster processing of asylum decisions. They need to build capacity to respond effectively to refugees' needs while easing the path for their future integration. Multilateral and international cooperation can enable this by providing technical assistance and funding. Refugees should receive user-friendly roadmaps to access public services, to receive guidance from cross-cultural, trained locals, and to provide information to facilitate labour integration.

Recommendation 4: Governments, business and civil society should actively leverage research and evidence to counter disinformation about refugees

Tackling hostility towards refugees—often expressed in the form of xenophobia and discrimination—should be at the top of the migration agenda. The cost of these tensions for the host community is poorer social cohesion and a lack of shared prosperity. The role of media and public figures such as politicians is key in encouraging positive attitudes—explaining the public effort to receive and resettle refugees, emphasising the humanitarian element of helping people in trouble, and providing an accurate description of both the costs and benefits of successful integration.

Governments that invest in inclusive education actively promote cross-cultural relations and prevent segregation within schools. They provide an opportunity for language skills training, social cohesion, and pro-social behaviour, as well as exposure to other ethnic communities. Programmes can also train school staff to create multicultural curricula and enhance cultural diversity narratives in teaching. They can also include parental engagement, with the help of interpreters.

The pandemic has highlighted the central contribution that refugees and migrants make to their host countries. They often make up an essential component of the workforce, working in key sectors of the economy like the health and care sector, public transport, schools and universities. During the crisis they helped save lives, provided essential services, and developed new treatments, despite the undervaluing of their skills and legal barriers that they face. Given their vulnerability, they may have been disproportionately affected by the economic fallout. Promoting these positive contributions can contribute to improving attitudes towards them.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.

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