



The Integration of Refugees

A Discussion Paper

The rationale for integration

1. Ideally, the situation of being a refugee is not permanent. In practice, the refugee will either return voluntarily to his or her home country when the conditions that forced him or her into exile have been reversed, or will have to find a lasting solution within a new community either in the country of first refuge or in a third country.
2. The 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and its 1967 *Protocol* place considerable emphasis on the integration of refugees. The Convention enumerates social and economic rights designed to assist integration, and in its Article 34 calls on States to facilitate the “assimilation and naturalization” of refugees.
3. The rationale of the *Convention’s* framework is that gradually refugees should be able to enjoy a wider range of rights as their association and ties with the host state grow stronger. In this sense, the 1951 *Convention* gives refugees a solid basis on which they can progressively restore the social and economic independence needed to get on with their lives.
4. UNHCR has consistently advocated for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection to be accorded the same level of integration facilities as persons recognized as refugees under the 1951 *Convention*. Their need for international protection is equally compelling and frequently as long in duration as that of refugees. Integration measures for persons granted subsidiary protection would also enhance their capacity to contribute productively to the societies which have accepted them.

Integration is a two-way process

5. The integration of refugees is a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population. The process of integration is complex and gradual, comprising distinct but inter-related legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions, all of which are important for refugees’ ability to integrate successfully as fully included members of the host society.
6. Virtually all European countries have sizeable refugee populations who are likely to remain in their midst. A good number of them are doing well economically in their new societies, and many have become citizens. But far too many others have not been integrated whether economically or socially. Unemployment and underemployment is endemic, many who want to naturalize find barriers to citizenship, and residential and social segregation continues in some countries.

7. In the Republic of Cyprus, 454 people were granted refugee status and another 1,792 subsidiary protection at the end of 2013. These are all people who live year after year with little hope of ever returning to their home countries. While the Republic of Cyprus has achieved a lot since the introduction of the national asylum system twelve years ago, a lot more remains to be done in the area of integration. Although refugees are by law entitled to the same socio-economic rights as nationals, there are a number of impediments they have to contend with in their integration efforts. This would range from problems of access to subsidized housing and practical barriers that may make it difficult for refugees fully to enjoy the right to work, to challenges relating to the recognition of their academic and professional qualifications, restrictions on family reunification and stringent criteria for naturalization.

Integration is a continuum

8. A key question to be asked is at what point integration programmes for refugees should start. Upon application for refugee status? After recognition of refugee status? Upon the granting of citizenship?
9. Every refugee is first and foremost an asylum-seeker. A good reception policy for asylum-seekers is therefore vital to the would-be refugee's eventual integration in legal, psychological and social terms. It is in the best interests of both the host society and asylum-seekers and refugees to promote a reception policy with a long-term perspective. Refugees who began their life in the host country in detention, or isolated for several months in a state of enforced inactivity at a collective reception centre for asylum-seekers are likely to be hampered when they later attempt to integrate.
10. The conditions in which asylum-seekers find themselves during the immediate reception stage are therefore of important significance as regards the future possibilities for integration. A reception policy that combines effective and adequate services (in particular as regards skills training, access to gainful employment and health care) with a swift asylum procedure and that is based on giving asylum-seekers as much autonomy as possible would increase the chances of successful integration in the host country.

Conclusion

11. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to integration. The situation of refugees must be analyzed in the context of the respective host society and with regard to the living and working conditions of nationals. However, it is also clear that international events, discourses and frameworks have an important impact on the integration of refugees and respective policies at the national and local level. There are a number of broad goals of integration that apply across countries. These include efforts to enable refugees to reach and develop their full potential, to protect their human rights, prevent their marginalization, and foster social cohesion and harmonious co-existence.