

New Measures for Refugee Integration in the European Union



Project New Start

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Two transnational pilot projects financed by the European Social Funds and national funding in Sweden and Germany have successfully created innovative measures for vocational rehabilitation, language training, and social integration among traumatised refugees. Results include general increase in language competence, social integration, entrance to local labour markets for refugees, and considerable savings for social welfare budgets in the host countries.

The psychosocial situation of refugees in the European Countries

Furthering social integration. Preventing segregation and social exclusion among migrants and refugees, as well as racism and xenophobia, have become important issues in the European Union. Research has documented the difficulties immigrants and refugees are facing in their attempts to enter EU labour markets and manage social integration processes. Thus, they remain at high risk of becoming dependent upon the social welfare system.

Traumatised refugees. Refugees who suffer from primary traumatic experiences due to organised violence in their home country or from traumatic experiences during their flight are especially exposed to hardships and stresses in their integration process, and thus, are even more disadvantaged on the labour market. Research has shown that this is not a marginal group. Many refugees are depressed and suffer from a variety of psychological symptoms after extremely traumatic experiences due to "*organised violence*", which means torture, war, imprisonment, acts of terror, and acts forcing people into exile. Specifically, discussion on the influence of *cognitive and vegetative* post-traumatic symptoms upon the integration process is necessary. What impact do post-traumatic reactions, e.g. concentration difficulties, memory disturbances, sleep disorders, and spontaneous re-experiences of the trauma have on the individual's ability to acquire language and education, to find employment, and to lead a satisfactory family and social life? Post-traumatic reactions, as possible causes for the major obstacles of refugee integration, have not been sufficiently focused upon.

Focusing on trauma as a hindrance to integration. Institutions working with refugees on a local level, as well as decision makers for social politics on local and state level, may want to reconsider their measures in the light of the late findings on trauma symptoms and its impact on integration. So far, this has not been focused on sufficiently. Refugees who become dependent on social welfare miss the opportunities available to them on the local labour markets. This loss of opportunities is a problem that needs to be addressed both for the sake of the refugees themselves and also in consideration for the wider social and economic aspects of EU communities.

Secondary traumatisation. The difficulties traumatised refugees meet with in the integration process do not only originate in the traumatisation to which they were exposed in their home country. Positive integration is also made more difficult by what is called *secondary traumatisation*. Secondary traumatisation takes place due to stressful events in the refugees' contact with the host society: the refugee reception procedure, unemployment, the social welfare system, the educational system, the labour exchange offices, the health care system, etc. This secondary traumatisation also needs to be counteracted actively.

Innovative measures under scrutiny. Two projects in Sweden and Germany have examined the effects of primary and secondary traumatisation. The participants in both projects were traumatised by war, torture, imprisonment, witnessing family members being exposed to

organised violence, etc. The projects - "**New Start - Employment and Social Integration among Traumatized Refugees**" in Stockholm, Sweden, and "**Project IIF - Integration Irakischer Flüchtlinge in Neuss, Germany**" - have developed tools for handling vocational rehabilitation and language acquisition, as well as counteracting secondary traumatisation on a local level - each adapted to national contexts. These innovative methods have greatly helped refugees to enter the local labour market and have furthered their social integration. Both projects were financed by the European Social Fund, as well as by national funding.

Comparative psychological research at New Start, Sweden and Project IIF, Germany. The projects New Start and Project IIF include psychological research on aspects of primary and secondary traumatisation and its effects as to integration or social exclusion among the refugees. The aims of the research are:

1) to investigate the prevalence of traumatic experiences and secondary traumatisation, factors which might cause secondary traumatisation in Sweden and Germany, obstacles for a positive integration and entrance into the labour market, factors which facilitate integration and adaptation – especially in regards to employment, the interaction between traumatic experiences and the integration process, and the refugees' resources and coping strategies;

2) to evaluate the effect of the intervention programme in facilitating integration, rehabilitation, independence, preventing social exclusion, and secondary traumatisation, and;

3) to provide suggestions for measures to prevent secondary traumatisation and social exclusion and to facilitate integration through vocational and psychological/medical rehabilitation.

Two integration projects for traumatised refugees

Project New Start

New Start was an integration project 1998 - 2000 for 31 traumatised Iraqi refugees. The *project focus* was the interaction between traumatised refugees and social and political actors involved in the refugee reception procedure, as well as the consequences of this interaction in regards to social exclusion or integration among the refugees. New Start consisted of (1) an *intervention programme* and (2) *psychological research* studying factors which might influence the social integration and vocational rehabilitation of traumatised refugees. A socio-economic analysis of New Start was carried through in order to estimate socio-economic gains of early, adapted measures aimed at facilitating the integration of traumatised refugees. New Start was staffed with one project manager, who also did the psychological research, one work consultant (two in year 2000) who provided vocational rehabilitation and psycho-social support, three Swedish language teachers, and one work psychologist who provided a work psychological investigation.

Working with traumatised Iraqi refugees. The participants in New Start were Iraqi Muslim, Kurdish, and Christian refugees with differing social, educational, and occupational backgrounds.

One third of them had completed university training in their home country. The others had achieved rather low education. Nine were quota refugees who had lived 4 – 7 years in a prison camp in Saudi Arabia. Most participants had been in Sweden a relatively short time, one month - four years, when they came to the project. Before the project, all but one had participated in the national refugee integration programme. A majority of them (71%), had studied Swedish with great difficulty due to serious concentration difficulties and a high degree of absence from school. None of them had access to labour market policy measures or had a job. When the project started, the participants received their maintenance from social welfare benefits.

The participants were mainly recruited from a centre specialised in psychological and psychiatric rehabilitation for traumatised refugees. The centre referred many of their most severely traumatised patients to New Start. The centre hoped that the project would give the refugees the special aid they needed in language training and in their integration process. While all participants suffered from post traumatic stress reactions, twenty-nine (93 %) met all criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and two more met almost all of them. All suffered from concentration difficulties and sleep disorders, and most from memory disturbances. Many suffered from physical illness

(in most cases as a sequel of torture or war injuries), depression, anxiety disorders (e.g. phobias), and compulsive disorders.

Traumatised refugees and the Swedish labour exchange. In Sweden, the demands required by the labour exchange for a person to be accepted as a work applicant are so high that severely traumatised refugees have very little chance to utilise the exchange's services. One of the reasons for this is the refugee's low competence in the Swedish language. To a very great extent, their difficulties to learn the language are connected to concentration difficulties, memory disturbances, and psychological stress due to traumatic experiences in their home country or stressful events in their life in exile. Before the project, the participants were not given support from the labour exchange to find employment.

The New Start intervention programme. The innovative methods utilised by New Start can be summed up by the following intervention catalogue:

- (1) *Vocational rehabilitation* by a *work-consultant*, providing counselling, guidance, and psychosocial support to remove obstacles in the integration process and to support the participants to seek employment;
- (2) *Specialised Swedish language training* in small groups, where the refugees' difficulties and needs on account of their traumatic experiences were especially considered. A few participants had so severe psychological difficulties that they could not participate in the language training, even in small groups. For them, individual teaching was arranged. An Arabic interpreter and a social worker were teachers;
- (3) *Psychological investigations* of work related cognitive, intellectual, perceptual and motor functioning;
- (4) *Psychological/medical rehabilitation* parallel with the practical interventions in the programme, and;
- (5) *Psychological research interviews* with each participant concerning traumatic experiences, physical / psychological well-being, and experiences of their life in Sweden.

The aims of the intervention programme was to develop and evaluate especially adapted methods within vocational rehabilitation and Swedish language training in order to facilitate traumatised refugees' social integration, rehabilitation, independence, attainment of employment and meaningful occupation, and to prevent social

exclusion and secondary traumatisation. The corner stone of all interventions in the project was to offer *flexible, individually adapted measures*, based upon the person's particular needs, resources, and level of receptivity. The measures were characterised by openness for creative and non-traditional solutions.

Vocational rehabilitation in New Start. The project's *work consultant* provided practical psycho-social support and employment guidance - a combination of measures which was unique for the project and which is not offered by the Swedish labour exchange. Several participants had great needs for practical psycho-social support in their vocational rehabilitation, e.g. support in contacts with social welfare offices, other authorities, health care, etc. Such support was essential for the participants to obtain a solid platform for their life in Sweden, and thus, become more receptive for measures aimed at bringing them closer to the labour market.

The work consultant prepared the participants for a prospective work placement by giving information, guidance, providing traineeships, education, and work place orientation (traineeships where the participant is an observer), etc. This included supporting the participants in finding a realistic future occupation. The work consultant provided traineeships to those who were psychologically/physically capable to work and were considered to have enough knowledge in Swedish to manage a particular employment. The work consultant introduced the participants to the employers at the first meeting. She gave continual support to participants at the trainee place. Several participants needed at least 8-9 months to learn more Swedish before it was possible for them to get a traineeship.

Intercultural orientation took place individually in all meetings with the participants, during the language course, in discussions with the work consultant, and during the psychological research interviews.

Adapted language teaching. The measures taken in language training follow directly from the psychological problems resulting from traumatisation that impede language learning abilities. Successful learning is best achieved when students feel relaxed. Tension constitutes a major obstacle to learning. Therefore, a main objective in the language-training programme was to create a relaxed and positive atmosphere in the classes and a calm and peaceful study

environment, resembling a home, rather than an institution (like a jail or hospital).

The teaching took place in *small groups*, with 6 - 8 participants in each, because traumatised students often experience stress and anxiety when attending large classes. In addition, traumatic experiences caused concentration difficulties and memory disturbances. As far as possible, the language training was *individualised*, including individual, undisturbed conversation and working in a separate room with individual tasks. Many of the students were disturbed in their language training by worries and anxieties resulting from political, economic, health, and other problems which their families in Iraq were facing. The teachers took action to re-direct the students' attention and energies away from their traumas to their studies. In this, laughter and a sense of humour were important tools. The teachers gave psycho-social support by observing when the students did not feel well physically or psychologically. The participants then could talk a short time about their worries in private. Still, the teachers did not play the role of psychotherapists. They avoided dealing therapeutically with the students' emotions, as they were not professionally trained for this. The teachers listened and acted with empathy, as fellow human beings.

Language training was not based on a traditional textbook. To a large extent, the students themselves chose the content of study, based on their own interests, needs, efforts, every day problems, and news in different media. Training in the spoken language needed for communication in daily life was emphasised. Reading, dictation, writing small essays, listening comprehension, and pronunciation were also part of the programme. Grammar was integrated in a natural, non-formalistic way. The teachers also provided information about Swedish culture and society, i.e. the political and social system, history, geography, as well as customs, traditions, and attitudes. Study visits were of particular significance. A great majority of the participants reported that they were able to learn considerably more Swedish in this programme than in their former, large classes.

Re-establishing trust. Due to their experiences prior to flight, most participants' trust in authorities and others was deeply damaged. The staff devoted much time in helping participants rebuild trust in others, a process which often included the staff being tested for their trustworthiness by the participants. This demanded

much patience, time, and energy, but the results were obvious. Showing respect for the participants was a key in this process. In many cases, trust established between participants and staff was a necessary first step for participants to become receptive to language teaching and for searching and finding a platform for their life in Sweden. Another important result was that participants changed from passivity to active participation in the integration process and language classes. This came about after continuous and recurring supportive and motivational talks for more than half a year.

Some results from New Start: The results show that it *is* possible for many severely traumatised refugees to enter the labour market if they are offered appropriate support in language training, vocational rehabilitation, psychological/medical rehabilitation, and psycho-social support, particularly when such interventions are based on the individuals' resources.

In general, the life situation for most participants changed in a positive direction, resulting in a better quality of life. Most participants developed an increased capacity for trusting others and for social functioning. None dropped out of the programme, even if some had long periods of absence from the language course due to poor medical/psychological health. In order to prevent drop-outs, it was essential to devote much time to psycho-social support, motivation, and follow-up talks. At the end of the project, nine participants had received work. Three had gone to a preparatory occupational course. Two went to studies preparing for university. Sixteen had finished (or were about to finish) traineeship, and two finished workplace orientation. Eight continued Swedish language studies in ordinary classes. During the project, sixteen received IT and driving licence courses paid by New Start. Two received temporary disability pensions, six were on the sick list, one on mother's leave, and eight received social allowance without having an occupation, mainly because of medical/psychological poor health. Thirteen participants have an obvious need for more psychological/medical rehabilitation before traineeship or work is possible.

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Project IIF – “Integration Irakischer Flüchtlinge”.

IIF was a project initiated by the city of Neuss to help integrate 33 Iraqi refugees from October 1997 to September 1999. IIF's structure was geared to the Swedish project New Start to secure comparability. As in New Start, the project's focus was on the refugees' problems with the reception procedures and its aim was to achieve the highest possible social and economic integration and psychological rehabilitation. Like New Start, IIF consisted of psychological research interviews (following the design of the Swedish researcher and psychologist Gunilla Björkqvist), as well as an extensive intervention programme made up of 5 modules for integration. IIF has been multi-culturally staffed with a project manager (two part-time workers), a social worker, and part-time language teachers.

Iraqi refugees in IIF. According to test results, the participants of IIF were somewhat less traumatised than those of New Start. This lesser degree of traumatising may be due to the fact that recruiting of participants for IIF was done through the social welfare department and not through psychological services. While almost all participants suffered from some post-traumatic stress symptoms, six (38%) met the full criteria for PTSD, while three others almost met those criteria. Eleven participants (69%) suffered from depression, eight (50%) from compulsive disorders, and six (38%) from phobias.

The German refugee reception procedure. As with the Swedish participants of New Start, the length of stay for the refugees in Germany prior to project participation varied from some months to several years. While in Sweden refugees take part in a national integration programme consisting of extensive language training and some orientation training, there is no such organised programme in Germany. Refugees coming to Germany not only suffer from the duration of their asylum application procedure, during which they usually are not allowed to work - most of them will not be granted asylum after that. Unlike the participants of the Swedish New Start project, most German IIF project participants had not received any language training before participation, as this is only provided for those few refugees that have been granted asylum according to German constitutional law. Most of the refugees, however, received only a provisional status in accord with the Geneva convention. This allows for the granting of a work permit, but no language

training. Nevertheless, language competence is often used as an indicator of the refugee's willingness for integration. Obviously, their chances of finding a job remains minimal when they lack German language competence and when unemployment totals about 10%. Traumatization and secondary traumatization were additional hindrances to employment. Consequently, the IIF participants had been classed by the local social welfare department as job seekers with most severe hindrances for employment. All of the participants received welfare benefits.

IIF project integration programme of 5 modules. As in the New Start project, the aims of Project IIF were social integration, psychological rehabilitation, socio-economic independence, the attainment of employment and education, as well as the prevention of secondary traumatization. The interventions used in Project IIF are grouped into five modules that may be adapted to individualised needs of refugees and that develop their full impact when used together in a feedback, dynamic accelerating development. The five modules will be summarised below.

Module 1: Communication and language training. In groups of up to ten persons, language training is offered consisting of changing learner teams or individual training. Group learning is organised in a way similar to the teaching of the Swedish language in the New Start project, i.e., in a home-like, informal atmosphere, stress-reduced learning situations are offered, as well as the individual use of PC-supported teaching units, and practical learning periods around town. Teaching, training and counselling revolves – as in New Start – around the problems and questions students bring with them, including questions concerning future employment and intercultural conflicts. Intensive job-related language training, including job application training, takes place when work becomes a definite prospect. Teachers have been specially trained to deal with intercultural and multilevel learning situations. Project IIF participants usually claim that learning German is the most important integrative step they have taken.

Module 2: Self esteem and orientation. A refugee who is unemployed has to cope with the negative effects of unemployment on self-esteem and emotional well-being, as well as with intercultural issues and possibly, even disorientation. For traumatised refugees, trauma and its effects further complicate the integration process.

While in Sweden and other European countries complex orientation programmes are offered to refugees, there are no such programmes in Germany. There is very little information available to refugees about their host country, about employment opportunities, and the educational system.

Information on Germany, however, is only a first step in this module; more important is intercultural competence training adapted from a Dutch orientation programme that successfully helps refugees to reflect upon the cultural aspects of their decision making to understand culturally rooted so-called "soft skills" relating to employment and, above all, to use the intercultural setting in the classroom to deal systematically with intercultural communication problems.

Module 2 is knitted closely together with module 1, language acquisition. Project IIF has learnt that there is no better way to deal with intercultural orientation than to learn a new language. Learning a language with a reflective attitude in everyday settings which include all aspects of one's social life gives a refugee opportunity to relate freshly to old and newly acquired aspects of cultural self-understanding.

Practically, this complex module is put to work in classroom and action group settings, including the invitation of refugees' families to participate in meetings, or, for example, by exploiting refugees' hobbies and interests for arranging new contacts with members of the community. When understanding culturally defined aspects of employment situations or vocational training, refugees are guided to understand their decisions for a traineeship or job application in intercultural terms and to test their decisions by offering several traineeships when necessary. The participants usually find this module most interesting and helpful.

Module 3: Social work in intercultural contexts. The lack of national integration programmes in Germany has been noted. Non-governmental organisations' attempts to bridge the gap; still, there is a great need for refugees in Germany to receive support from all kinds of institutions and authorities. Project IIF offers support from an intercultural and family perspective, using a social worker with multicultural experience. The complete family is included to give the project participants some rest from the myriad of everyday problems that hamper their learning capacities. This is done

partly in group situations, when participants are shown how to offer support to each other, as well as in individual counselling that can be augmented by therapy when needed. Participants set a great deal of trust in the support of Project IIF when they see how many problems can be held at bay with intercultural social work.

Module 4: Traineeships and work placement. As may be noted, topics concerning employment and vocational training permeate modules 1 and 2. When language competence is sufficient, a first traineeship is offered and additional courses or certificates are considered, including the German driver's license for those who will professionally benefit from it. Participants often see this as a special benefit; there are no other benefits for joining the project.

There are always several chances at traineeships for participants. During traineeships, duration and degree of support depends on each individual and situation. Often, vocational training is considered. For the highly educated, who are not able to continue their former careers, a long-term career plan is developed that attempts to combine some of the refugees' original interests with a professional path starting at a less educated level. In those cases, initial employment of refugees is seen as a first step towards economic integration, based on previous aspects of work identity.

Module 5: Integration through voluntary community work. Voluntary work is used for integration in many ways: to revive earlier interests and help refugees to combine new and previous aspects of their professional identities; to encourage refugees to meet other people outside the project and to help open their personal environment to include new persons, and; to give refugees a chance to be on the helper's side. In the project itself, some training is dependent on refugees' individual resources to aide the staff and other participants.

On the other hand, expertise of voluntary professionals of the local community is an important aspect of the project's success: they support language teachers with individual tutoring of refugees and they offer help for refugees' children and wives. Only the enormous efforts demanded to organise this activity prevents this module from becoming even more central to Project IIF than it has been thus far.

Some results of Project IIF. In total, between 1997 and 1999, there were 33 participants in

project IIF. Twenty-six (79%) found employment after the project (some part-time), two started studies, three women became pregnant, two left the community and are now living in other cities, and one of them still receives social welfare benefits. Of those employed, some still receive additional social welfare benefit payments because their earnings are insufficient to support their families. This is a problem worth noting: In Germany it is not uncommon for unskilled labourers to earn less in a full-time job than they would receive in social welfare benefits for themselves and their large families. Overall, the social welfare department in Neuss reduced expenditure by a considerable amount because of these participants' employment. The IIF Handbook offers a good overview over the impact on municipal spending through the project's efforts.

Almost all of the participants have shown a marked increase of language competence, in

intercultural competence, and in their psychological well-being. Many have started employment and studies with a new and more optimistic perspective on life in Germany. As in project New Start, final results of psychological developments will be researched specifically and published separately.

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Common experiences in New Start, Sweden and Project IIF, Germany

The implications of traumatisation. When describing the projects' results, it is necessary to keep in mind that the projects' participants are traumatised refugees and to remember the way in which their trauma reactions influence their integration processes. Many refugees, especially those not living with a family, are suffering from social isolation and an insufficient social network. Many suffer from loneliness, have lost belief in the future, and have difficulties to find meaning in their life in their host country.

Exposure to war or torture often seriously impairs a person's self-esteem, self-confidence, ability to take initiative, and his/her belief in being able to have influence upon his/her own life - all of which needs to be re-established actively in the refugees. This is also the reason why they initially need more practical support for vocational rehabilitation than refugees with less trauma. Many participants never had a long period of work experience in their home country because they had been in war or were imprisoned for many years. In many cases, this has resulted in poor self-confidence and in difficulties in trusting their own ability to manage in a Swedish/German work place. An important part of the vocational

rehabilitation, therefore, has been to strengthen the participants' self confidence, their feeling of being valuable as a human beings, and their trust in their own capacity to manage a job and participate in social gatherings at a work place.

Unemployment and the sense of self worth. All participants who are unemployed report that they suffer from a lack of self worth. Those with an academic degree from their home country suffer from not having work that corresponds with their competence. All those who receive social welfare report that they regard their dependency as degrading and express a desire to become independent and self-sufficient. Many say that social welfare gives them a feeling of being "imprisoned" in Sweden/Germany, as the social welfare office through payments decides how they lead their lives. When conflicts with the social welfare office arise concerning the benefits, severe anxiety and strong worries among many of the participants are caused.

In both countries, traumatised refugees are struggling not only with problems arising from the past, but they are in danger of struggling unnecessarily with the future because host countries and their citizens are unaware of their fates.

Conclusions and Recommendations for the integration of traumatised refugees in European Countries

Preventing secondary traumatisation - challenges for refugee reception and integration programmes

Research in the projects has shown that refugees encounter many obstacles in their integration process in Sweden and Germany. The participants report a number of factors which they experience obstruct their integration: 1) to be met by authorities and host country population in an unfriendly manner and/or with lack of respect, i.e., when they are not listened to ("from the heart") by the representatives of the authorities; 2) unemployment; 3) economic problems; 4) that different actors in the refugee reception counteract each other, e.g. that social welfare office breaks the planning made by labour exchange; 5) a too rigid, bureaucratic application of rules by the social welfare office, schools, and other authorities, which does not allow for individually adapted solutions departing from the person's own needs and resources. Many participants want individually adapted measures in their integration programmes and react against that the uniqueness of their life situation is not considered in decisions concerning their lives in Sweden/Germany; 6) not being allowed to utilise their own capabilities, resources, and competences; 7) that the teachers set too low or too high demands in the Swedish for Immigrants training; 8) worries about their families in their home country - about their illness and economical problems, political events, and that they yearn for family members in Iraq, especially for their mothers, whom they fear they will not meet again.

Socio-economic integration and vocational rehabilitation. In vocational rehabilitation for traumatized refugees, labour market policy measures and adapted language training should be offered at an early stage after arrival in the host country. In general, those measures tested and approved by the projects New Start and Project IIF, including the five modules for socio-economic integration, can be used effectively.

Psychological and medical rehabilitation is necessary in order to give refugees basic rehabilitation so that they can participate in language education, traineeships, courses, and education. Simultaneously, these measures give

refugees an opportunity to come in contact with work life and acquire access to the labour market.

An Identity Strengthening Work Environment. In vocational rehabilitation, it is essential that traumatised refugees are offered the opportunity to be met in *an identity strengthening work and living environment*. Refugees are in need of flexible, individually adapted measures, based on the persons' own needs, resources, and receptivity. They need to be met with respect and to be seen and confirmed as persons. They should be helped with regaining the capacity to feel basic trust, self-confidence, integrity, and the experience of being valuable and worth respect. They need to regain influence over their own life and to re-establish their capacity for communication. They need to regain hope, will, purposefulness, competence, trust, faithfulness, love, care, and wisdom. Refugees need to regain meaning and coherence in life. They need to increase knowledge about their host society, as much as the host society needs to know more about them.

Integration projects. Understanding and mutual acceptance is basic to socio-economic integration of refugees. *The attitude* shown by host society representatives in the meeting with the refugee is perhaps the most important factor preventing secondary traumatisation. Of great importance are those possibilities for rehabilitation, personal development, and socio-economic integration that are created through the practical measures offered in the refugee reception programmes. Here small scale and individual programmes, like the two discussed above, have shown great success. Organisational and financial *continuity* in these measures, as well as in relationship to the staff in the reception programmes and language teaching, is also of great importance to create a safe platform for rehabilitation and integration. *Co-operation between actors* in the refugee reception procedure, as well as communication, networking, and exchange of experience and knowledge are especially important in the reception of traumatised refugees. Co-operation between actors contributes to creating context, coherence, structure, and meaning in the lives of refugees and counteracts the disruption to which their lives were exposed.