Refugees: social inclusion and integration into the labour market

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs adopted the initiative report by Brando BENIFEI (S&D, IT) on refugees: social inclusion and integration into the labour market.

The Committee on Culture and Education, exercising the prerogative of an associated committee in line with Article 54 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, was also consulted to give an opinion on the report.

Members stressed the need for the EU to base its immediate response to the situation on solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, as stated in Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and on a **holistic approach** that takes into account the need to improve safe and legal migration channels.

Taking note of the high degree of heterogeneity and lack of clarity in the use of the term refugee in the public and political discourse, Members stressed the importance of making a clear differentiation between refugee and economic migrant for the purposes of implementing the various European and international policies.

They stressed that significant differences exist in the times and modalities of processing requests for international protection within Member States and highlighted that slow and excessively bureaucratic procedures may hinder refugees and asylum seekers' access to education and training, employment guidance and the labour market, the activation of EU and Member States' programmes, and the effective and coordinated use of funds in this field, as well as increase the refugees and asylum seekers' vulnerability to undeclared work and precarious working conditions. Members called for an approach, which prescribes appropriate adaptation and presupposes cooperation, and to address a range of serious and multi-faceted issues.

Members **rejected the idea of creating special labour markets for refugees** but advocated that the respective national minimum wage should also remain valid for refugees. They emphasised the benefits of education on social inclusion and integration into the labour market and stressed the importance of guaranteeing all refugees, in particular girls and women, access to formal, informal and non-formal education and long-life training, combined with work experience. Members also stressed the importance of a tailor-made integration approach based on equal opportunities.

Challenges and opportunities: Members called for measures to facilitate effective access for refugees and asylum seekers to housing, health care, education, social protection and the labour market, in order to restore their human dignity and self-worth. They recalled that the Qualifications Directive and the Reception Conditions Directive provides for the right of access to the labour market and to vocational training, both for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

They highlighted the fact that **labour market conditions within host countries is one of the determining factors when it comes to ensuring sustainable and successful integration of refugees**.

The Commission and the Member States should continue to prioritise policies and investments aimed at providing quality employment for the whole of society, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable people, and on economic growth. Members pointed to the major disparities in social and economic

circumstances within the EU. They should be taken into account when refugees are relocated, in order to maximise their labour-market integration prospects.

Members called on the Member States to ensure that welcoming refugees goes hand-in-hand with a **solid integration policy**, such as language and orientation courses, that provide comprehensive insights into fundamental EU rights and values and social inclusiveness.

From a budgetary point of view, Members highlighted the fact that public spending, covering extraordinary investments in social inclusion and labour-market integration measures and programmes, are likely to have a positive effect on national GDPs in the short term, while medium- or long-term impacts on public finances will depend on the effectiveness of these measures. They stressed that the main EU funds available for social inclusion and integration into the labour market, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), have different focuses, target groups and management modes at Member State level. However, Members stated that, as these funds are insufficient, increased public investment and additional resources are required in order to provide, as a matter of priority, local authorities, social partners, social and economic actors, civil society and volunteer organisations with direct financial support for measures aimed at facilitating swift integration of refugees and asylum seekers into society and the labour market (the AMIF has already used up all its resources).

In addition, Members highlighted that integration and inclusion measures aimed at refugees and asylum seekers should not draw on financial resources destined for programmes targeting other disadvantaged groups, but necessarily require additional social investments reflecting the need for additional measures. They called, therefore, on the Commission to consider introducing a **minimum share of 25 % of the cohesion policy budget for the ESF Fund in the revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, in order to ensure adequate resources for labour market integration in the long term. More generally, Members called on the Council, in the context of the forthcoming revision of the MFF, to adjust the ceilings for total allocations and for the individual headings to take account of the internal and external challenges which have arisen in connection with the refugee crisis, and to bring them into line with the needs of the Member States facing greatest integration challenge.

Making integration work: Members are convinced that integrating refugees into the labour market will be difficult without active, large-scale support from microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU. They expressed support for the Commission's efforts in updating the European Agenda on Migration, in particular by revising the Dublin III Regulation in order to improve solidarity, responsibility-sharing and the harmonisation of protection standards among Member States. However, further efforts are necessary to **create a truly uniform Common European Asylum System**, and a comprehensive and sustainable legal migration policy in the EU that meets labour market demands in terms of skills, in which social inclusion and active integration policies play a central role. The Commission should do more to ensure that existing rules are fully and effectively implemented.

Members also regretted that the agreement, adopted in September 2015, on sharing refugees among the Member States is not being implemented satisfactorily. They stressed that the quotas for receiving refugees are not being met in the majority of the Member States.

Recommendations and best practices: the report made a series of recommendations to facilitate labour market integration of refugees. Members called on the Member States to:

- ensure swift and full labour-market integration and social inclusion of refugees, in accordance with the principle of equal treatment, the national labour market situation and EU and national legislation;
- shorten the processing time of applications for international protection;

- ensure early, easy and equal access for refugees and asylum seekers to training, including internships and apprenticeships, in order to ensure rapid, effective and full integration into our societies and the labour market;
- set up dedicated platforms and multilingual internet portals aimed at providing concise and easily accessible information about recognition possibilities, existing integration programmes and lists of the institutions responsible, recalling that every EU and EEA Member State has a designated National Academic Recognition Information Centre, which provides a way to compare academic qualifications;
- facilitate the sharing of the experience and practices accumulated at city level to promote inclusive labour markets for all residents, including beneficiaries of international protection, and to involve cities and local authorities in the design and implementation of social and economic inclusion policies.

As for the Commission, it is called upon to:

- consider a targeted revision of the Reception Conditions Directive in order to ensure that applicants of international protection have access to the labour market as soon as possible, but **not later than six months after their applications were lodged**;
- promote upward convergence of social protection standards and a swift delivery of work permits in the Member States;
- intensify its efforts to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are granted effective access to the labour market, in particular by verifying that Member States do not impose too restrictive conditions for access to employment;
- consider a revision of the Blue Card Directive in order to ensure its wider flexibility for those high-skilled beneficiaries of international protection who would potentially be entitled, as third-country nationals, to access the Blue Card system, by taking into account the extraordinary conditions with which refugees and asylum seekers are faced;
- combat all forms of discrimination, xenophobia and racism;
- enhance the dialogue with social partners, based on a balanced representation of interests, with a view to identifying labour market and employment opportunities for refugees;
- provide financial support to transnational schemes ensuring the transferability and adaptability of good practices – such as the peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching projects involving all levels of governance and multiple stakeholders, designed and implemented by different stakeholders at EU level.

Members called for monies to be redeployed as quickly as possible within the ESF, the AMIF, the ERDF and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) so that those Member States bearing the brunt of the refugee crisis are given more effective support.

Culture, education and sport: lastly, Members stressed the urgent need to ensure that unaccompanied minors receive particular protection from exploitation at work, violence and trafficking. They called on the Commission to increase the profile of culture, education and training in those operational measures undertaken as part of the European Agenda on Migration. They called for the EU and the Member States to **give priority to integration through early targeted measures** on education, training, culture and sport.

While underlining the important role of sport as an instrument for fostering social and intercultural dialogue, Members recalled their support for the existing initiatives of sports organisations, and encouraged the exchange of best practices between different entities engaged in sports activities aimed at the social integration of refugees. In this regard, Members insisted on the need for Member States to facilitate the enrolment of refugee students at all educational levels, and called for greater efforts to be

made to distribute pupils and place them effectively in national school systems. Members also called on the EU and the Member States to establish ‘education corridors’ by promoting agreements with European universities and the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED).

Member States are called upon to provide targeted support to refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people as they enter the school system and to guarantee their protection.

The report recommended that supplementary language classes be provided to refugee children in their home-country languages. In this regard, it stressed the **essential role of teachers in integrating refugee and migrant children and young people into the education system.** Member States are called upon to help migrant teachers and professors find teaching jobs, with a view both to improve their situation and to put their language and teaching skills and experience to good use in the school systems.

Members expressed support for the setting up of helpdesks for teachers that offer timely support in handling various types of diversity in the classroom, and in promoting intercultural dialogue and guidance when they are confronted with conflicts or students at **risk of being radicalised**.

They also emphasised the importance of promoting and further developing educational apps, videos and exercises, as well as learning platforms for refugees, in order to facilitate and complement their education and training.