

Local Governments' Changing Roles in Labour Market Integration

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This policy brief summarises findings from the research project *Changing roles, emerging networks: Local Governments as procurers, employers and entrepreneurs in labour market integration*, funded by the Swedish Research Council. The study shows that local conditions play a crucial role in shaping how labour market integration (LMI) is organised: territory specific resources and challenges shape the solutions that emerge. Work-integrating social enterprises (WISEs) stand out as particularly important in creating inclusive pathways into employment for groups at risk of exclusion, especially foreign-born women. In addition, networks serve as a backbone infrastructure, both for disseminating knowledge and for preserving competence and quality in times of change. Taken together, the results point to the need to recognise local innovative capacity and to create conditions that enable and strengthen the collaborative approaches to labour market integration emerging at local government level.

Introduction

The reception crisis of 2015 – often referred to as the refugee crisis – marked a shift in Swedish integration policy. In a short period, about 160,000

asylum seekers arrived in Sweden, leading to a rapid increase in both the scope and pace of integration efforts. The national introduction programme (*Etableringsprogrammet*) expanded quickly, while new methods and approaches were developed locally to meet the needs of newly arrived migrants and support their integration. In recent years, the number of new arrivals has declined and is now roughly back at pre-crisis levels. However, the experiences from this intense period continue to shape integration policy – particularly the work carried out by local governments.

Integration is a multidimensional concept which – since Swedish *immigration* policy was renamed *integration* policy in 1997 – has become closely associated with the incorporation of foreign-born individuals into the host society (Eriksson 2019). Following the Establishment Reform (*Etableringsreformen*) in 2010, integration has also, in both Swedish (Larsson 2015, Qvist & Tovatt 2014) and EU policy (Ek Österberg & Zapata 2022), become almost synonymous with employment and labour-market entry. Integration and labour market integration (LMI) are therefore often equated in public debate, which is a considerably narrower interpretation than, for example, Robert Putnam's (1993) understanding of integration as cohesion and social bonds in a society. From such a perspective, integration can take place through participation in working life but also in other spheres of society, and LMI can be seen as a sub-process or one of several pathways to integration.

Local government plays a central and multifaceted role in promoting integration, both in a broad sense and more specifically in relation to labour market integration (LMI). However, *what* should be done, *how* it should be carried out, *who* is responsible, and *when* it should take place are not clearly regulated. This leaves room for local priorities, initiatives, and investments. In practice, this means that integration efforts are largely shaped at the local government level. In this policy brief, we focus specifically on the role of local government in labour market integration.

The text that follows builds on results from the research project [Changing roles, emerging networks: Local Governments as procurers, employers and entrepreneurs in labour market integration](#), funded by the Swedish Research Council (project period 2020–2024, diary number 2019-02109). In the project, we have examined how the roles of local government are shaped and reshaped during a period (2015–2025) in which the political conditions and operating environment for local government integration work are undergoing

fundamental change. The project provides in-depth insights into how local governments and other actors collaborate in the everyday practice of integration.

Background

Foreign-born individuals in Sweden generally face higher unemployment, poorer working conditions and are more often in lower-skilled jobs than native-born individuals (Joyce 2015, Berglund, Elgenius & Frank 2024, Andersson Joona & Josefsson 2025). Research shows that this is due to several factors: mismatches between education and labour market demands (Bevelander & Irastorza 2014), language barriers, limited social capital and professional networks (Håkansson & Tovatt 2017), a highly regulated and skill-intensive labour market (Asplund et al. 2017) and discrimination (Berglund et al. 2025), among others. These barriers affect individuals differently depending on their education, work experience, ethnicity, gender and time spent in the country (Dumont et al. 2016).

Over the past decades, Sweden has introduced several reforms aimed at improving the labour-market and societal integration of newly arrived migrants and other foreign-born residents. These reforms have been driven by prominent ideas of activation, where access to support is linked to participation in measures and programmes (Qvist 2016), and where work and self-sufficiency are seen as the obvious path to integration (Larsson 2015, Eriksson 2019).

A central part of these reforms was the 2010 Establishment Reform, through which the state, via the Swedish Public Employment Service (AF), assumed overall responsibility for the establishment of newly arrived migrants. At the same time, local governments were given an important role in programme implementation, both as providers of various measures and programmes and as local collaboration partners (Emilsson 2015). However, national activation programmes have been criticised for being too general and for overlooking the barriers many foreign-born individuals face — such as family responsibilities, personal trauma, low literacy, and housing and financial difficulties (Bucken-Knapp et al. 2020, Schierenbeck & Spehar 2021; Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023). These challenges largely fall to local government to address.

Many local governments have therefore developed their own initiatives and collaborations, often together with civil society, business and academia. In Gothenburg, for example, only one third of integration efforts were state-funded in 2016 (OECD 2018), while more than 180 local initiatives focusing on labour market integration were identified in the region (Diedrich & Hellgren 2018).

Although many initiatives were implemented as time-limited projects and lacked long-term strategic planning (Diedrich & Hellgren 2021), innovative forms of collaboration emerged, such as socially responsible public procurement (Qvist & Ek Österberg 2022, Ek Österberg & Zapata 2023, Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023), cooperatives, job-placement services and business incubators with a focus on inclusion (Zapata & Zapata Campos 2023). These initiatives were often made possible through combinations of EU funding and national support programmes, thereby going beyond the formal implementation of state integration policy (OECD 2018). In parallel, many citizen-driven initiatives have propelled the development of alternative forms of labour market integration, for example in the form of social enterprises, work-integrating social enterprises (WISEs) and economic associations, often in collaboration with local governments.

Despite the extent and importance of these bottom-up initiatives — and the supportive and coordinating role of local government — they are often overlooked in research and public debate, where attention typically centres on the national level. A consequence is limited knowledge about the causes and consequences of differences in organisational solutions and local practices, and how these can be understood in relation to demography, local labour markets, geographical conditions and local policy.

It is precisely these local conditions, roles and practices for LMI that formed the starting point for our research project. The aim was to increase knowledge about the multifaceted and changing roles of local governments in LMI. We began with two guiding questions. First, how do local LMI initiatives emerge, develop, and become consolidated — and why? Second, how are networks between such initiatives formed and stabilised, with what motivations and resources, and with what consequences? The project took LMI as its point of departure, meaning that we focused on initiatives connected in various ways to employment and working life. To what extent these initiatives came to include other dimensions of integration, or were linked to other types of integration projects, was an empirical question for

us. In addition to the three of us authoring this policy brief, Nanna Gillberg, Andreas Asplén Lundstedt, Maria Norbäck and Amelia Olsson also took part in the project.

We approached the first question through three roles that previous research (our own and others') had shown to be central to understanding how local governments work with LMI in practice: the role of procurer, the role of employer and the role of entrepreneur. The second research question initially directed our attention to how networks are formed and how they support expansion by enabling experimentation with new ideas and the spread of knowledge about what works. Over time, this line of inquiry also came to encompass how networks help maintain preparedness, expertise, and quality in integration efforts when volumes and resources decline and political priorities shift.

During the project period, much has happened. After the reception crisis of 2015, a more restrictive migration policy and tightened border controls led to a sharp decline in the number of newly arrived migrants, although the Temporary Protection Directive¹ entailed a temporary increase. In Swedish national politics, the work-first principle remains dominant, but the perspective of duty has become more prominent and the individual's responsibility to "integrate oneself" has increased. Contemporaneously, the covid-19 pandemic brought special challenges, both for practical integration work and for the labour market at large. Several local governments we studied also faced specific local challenges, with Skellefteå standing out as a particularly clear example given the turbulence around Northvolt's establishment.

In various studies during the project, we have followed these changing conditions for local actors and local initiatives for LMI. The intention has been to explore the diversity of local measures for labour market integration and the conditions that shape them, rather than to compare different local governments or networks with each other. Seven researchers have participated in carrying out the project; presenting the methods of all studies in detail is not feasible. Our studies have had an organisation-theoretical

¹ The Temporary Protection Directive is the EU directive that grants temporary protection to people fleeing an armed conflict or a situation that poses a serious threat to their life or safety. It was activated in the EU on 4 March 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which means that people from Ukraine fleeing the war can obtain residence and work permits in EU countries, including Sweden.

starting point, focusing on what is done, why it is done, the consequences that follow, and for whom.

In several studies we have focused on local initiatives that have emerged in different parts of the country. One example is our studies of WISEs in the Malmö region, where Yalla Trappan has expanded from Malmö to several locations across Sweden, and Social Trade in the Gothenburg region — an association created by WISEs themselves to strengthen institutional relations and sell services to public and private actors. Further examples include our study of social considerations in public procurements in the City of Gothenburg, as well as our study of local labour market expansion and the hunt for labour in Skellefteå during 2024.

We have also examined local integration work and networks through a study of municipal integration coordinators and other networks such as the Ambassadors Network for socially responsible procurement and SALAR's (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions) Development Network for Social Enterprises, which was set up to strengthen relations between WISEs and local governments. In a specific study on the organising of the compulsory education in Västra Götaland, we studied regional collaboration and practice in a changing policy landscape. Some studies were set from the outset, while others evolved in step with policy development.

In all studies, data collection was conducted using qualitative methods: interviews and documents and, in some cases, observations. These methods have provided rich, nuanced and contextualised data that are well suited to interpretive analysis. We have also continuously communicated our (tentative) analyses and results with local practitioners and policymakers through workshops and feedback seminars. In this way, we have been able to check our findings while also tracking emerging trends. Below, we present and discuss the results from our studies based on five central observations, and conclude with recommendations for decision-makers, practitioners and researchers.

Findings – five central observations

1. Places provide different conditions that matter for LMI

Our studies show that local conditions create opportunities for different, often successful, ways of working. When these are grounded in the specific characteristics and resources of a place, they create the conditions to develop solutions tailored to local needs. A territorial starting point can therefore foster innovation and harness the unique assets present in an area.

In our study in Gothenburg, the importance of local embeddedness — in this case, within a suburban district (Zapata & Zapata Campos 2023) — highlighted the need to start from the specific conditions of peripheral places. By *peripheral* places we refer to geographic areas located further from municipal, regional, or national centres, such as suburbs, small towns, or rural areas. When organisation and practice are grounded in these local conditions, opportunities arise to draw on a broader set of resources — for example language skills, cultural knowledge, and familiarity with local institutions, residents, and neighbourhoods. At the same time, such grounding can create a safe space for critique, autonomy, and creativity in working methods, relationship-building, and resource use. This stands in contrast to more municipality-wide approaches in which the pursuit of transferability, scaling-up and comparability risks overlooking the locally specific and innovative practices that can develop in peripheral areas.

One such resource is closely tied to culture and language. Public officials and civil society actors can act as so-called *cultural brokers*, able to move between different value systems and cultural contexts. By understanding both Swedish norms and language and the experiences and perspectives of newly arrived migrants, these actors can handle cultural tensions and contribute to more locally effective integration efforts. In Gothenburg, this is illustrated by several initiatives, such as One Stop Future Shop, which supported entrepreneurship among foreign-born individuals, and Clean Car Service, a cooperative that hired people facing labour-market barriers through collaboration between the district of Västra Hisingen, the transnational company Volvo Cars, the WISE Vägen ut!, and an Advisory Board linked to the district administration, a consultative body complementing the district council with a focus on migration and inclusion,

composed of local actors who collaborate and contribute from their different perspectives.

Local actors can drive change by acting within the brief windows of opportunity that arise when political and institutional conditions open up, for example during crises such as the 2015 reception of refugees or when social anxiety around crime increases. Such opportunity windows are time-limited and can close quickly if politics and rhetoric shift. Changes must therefore be implemented while the window remains open.

Our study shows that constructive questioning of centrally organised, traditional public-administration routines and their limitations in handling complex integration challenges, particularly where speed and flexibility are required, can create space for alternative forms of organisation and collaboration. The aim was not to replace existing functions but to broaden the public commitment within LMI. Through change work driven by institutional entrepreneurs (individuals or groups who identify opportunities and mobilise resources and networks to change institutions), the LMI repertoire was broadened and renewed with new methods, working practices and resources. Examples include the above-mentioned Advisory Board and Clean Car Service.

The study shows that cross-sector collaboration in administrative and geographical peripheries, starting from local conditions, can generate innovative ideas and methods that find their way into a local government's regular operations and thus influence and develop traditional LMI, even beyond the place where they first took shape. How far such influence from peripheral actors can reach is an open question, the answer to which depends on how much central actors see, how open they are, and how the idea is packaged.

There are also significant variations between local governments, reflecting their respective conditions, which are often linked to place-specific characteristics such as administrative boundaries, resources, population composition, infrastructure, and socio-economic factors. One example is the variation in how procurement functions are organised in small municipalities compared with large cities, and the different opportunities this creates to use public contracts to generate employment opportunities for foreign-born residents (Ek Österberg 2024).

Another clear example is Skellefteå, which for a period (up to October 2024) organised its LMI work based on conditions that differed markedly from the rest of the country (Asplén Lundstedt et al., forthcoming). Skellefteå's peripheral geographical position, in relation to the capital Stockholm, its relatively isolated location without rail connections and the distance to other urban centres, the reorganisation of the Swedish Public Employment Service, and the major industrial establishment led by Northvolt meant that the local government's LMI work was based on a large supply of jobs and a pronounced labour shortage.

For the local government, it therefore became strategically important to create conditions for newcomers to remain in the area — by securing housing, services, and infrastructure — without compromising services for existing residents or its responsibilities towards industry. Here, the interplay between mobility and territory is particularly significant: from the local government's perspective, those who arrive, as individuals or companies, need to move from being mobile to becoming long-term residents. Enabling this transition has been central to Skellefteå's strategy and has, as our study shows, given rise to new ways of working with integration at the local level.

2. WISEs develop alternative and effective methods for LMI

A type of organisation that plays an important role in local integration work in several local governments is work-integrating social enterprises (WISEs). WISEs combine business activity with a clear social purpose, where the main goal is to create work and participation for people who face major barriers in the labour market.

A particularly vulnerable group, which has been a focus in several of our studies, is foreign-born women with low levels of education and limited work experience (Zapata Campos 2024, Andersson Joona & Josefsson 2025). For this group, generic education and labour-market measures have proven ineffective, and in some cases even counterproductive. Such measures risk undermining individual agency by creating passivity and silence, where a control-based steering logic is prioritised over empowerment (Zapata Campos 2024, Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023). Furthermore, responsibility for integration has gradually shifted from the state to the individual.

WISEs work with people who often “fall between the cracks” and who rarely become employable within the timeframe of short, standardised measures.

In line with previous research, our studies show that WISEs succeed in creating meaningful employment and developing methods adapted to these individuals' actual life circumstances (Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023). By adopting a "life-first perspective" grounded in a caring logic, rather than a "work-first perspective" grounded in a market logic (Zapata Campos 2024), these methods have emancipatory potential by making visible and mobilising women's and migrants' resources such as language, culture and local neighbourhood knowledge. Our studies show that WISEs create safe learning environments, an in-between space where ordinary norms are set aside and participants dare to fail both at work and in language. This safety is crucial for language learning and is strengthened by the fact that mentors themselves may have a foreign background or have made a similar personal journey, which fosters belonging and strengthens participants' identity (Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023). WISEs also shift the focus from individual to collective agency, with women themselves organising their workplaces (Zapata Campos 2024). Through their business models and work-training methods, WISEs transform previously invisible and unpaid women's skills, such as cleaning, cooking and sewing at home, into marketable professional competence, for example in the women's cooperative WISE Yalla Trappan (Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023).

WISEs' collaboration with public actors takes several forms: from agreements for work-training services; idea-based public partnerships (IOP), i.e., agreements between the public sector (e.g., local governments or regions) and idea-based organisations (such as associations, foundations or cooperatives) to achieve a public-interest goal; and contracts in reserved procurements; to special projects or collaboration platforms. Although WISEs sell commercial services (e.g., repair, second-hand retail, cleaning and gardening), they are highly dependent on long-term relationships with public actors, primarily local governments and the Swedish Public Employment Service, according to a 2024 mapping of WISEs (Björkenstock 2024). For WISEs, stable relationships with the public sector, that are maintained and upheld, are absolutely crucial for operations.

Our studies further show that experiences of this collaboration vary greatly across the country (Björkenstock 2024). Many WISEs work under uncertain conditions, with time-limited agreements and without long-term support. Local governments' tradition of producing services in-house can further complicate matters for WISEs. This uncertainty hampers long-term planning,

limits organisational growth and makes it harder to create holistic integration solutions (Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2022).

At the same time, new, more collaborative arrangements are emerging. An example from Gothenburg (Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2022) shows how some of the first reserved procurements were used to build flexible and informal forms of cooperation, so-called loose governmental arrangements, combined with strategic use of legal grey areas, which enabled more collaborative agreements. The result was a less hierarchical relationship between the local government and WISEs, with greater scope for joint problem-solving and local innovation, in line with a collaborative governance model.

3. Networks can serve as a backbone infrastructure for LMI

A large share of knowledge diffusion within LMI occurs through various networks. These networks have emerged as both formal and informal collaboration arenas that often persist over several years. Within the networks, dialogues are held to develop new, creative solutions to complex problems, often through collective learning and the exchange of experience. Networks can be initiated and run by government agencies and interest organisations, such as SALAR, SKOOP (the industry organisation for WISEs) or the National Agency for Public Procurement (*Upphandlingsmyndigheten*). They can also be specialised and have a local, regional or national focus, for example networks for social procurement, for municipal integration coordinators, or between WISEs. Beyond experience sharing and learning, networks often help to create new collaborations.

In collaborative governance models, networks constitute a backbone infrastructure. Networks are crucial for the dissemination of knowledge and for identifying what can be improved in practice when new ways of organising and collaborating are tested and developed. They enable learning across local contexts and connect local actors with one another (Ek Österberg & Rehnberg 2022).

Our studies show that networks are not only important when operations are growing and new solutions are being developed. They also play a crucial role in downturns, when integration initiatives are reduced or phased out. Networks then become important in handling necessary adjustments, preserving and further developing knowledge, maintaining the quality of measures despite reduced resources, and preparing for future increases in

volume. This is particularly important in smaller local governments where individual actors often carry substantial responsibility. Networks thus function as a form of preparedness (Ek Österberg et al. 2021, Olsson et al., forthcoming).

A benefit of networks is their flexibility. They can be adapted relatively easily to new conditions. However, they require resources and time to be maintained. They do not emerge or sustain themselves on their own. When central actors withdraw from coordination, as in the case of the SALAR-created (ESF-funded) network for social enterprises that ended when the project period and funding expired, a vacuum arises that can be difficult to fill. A similar pattern was seen when the number of asylum seekers decreased and thus also the LMI target group: networks for integration coordinators were weakened, resources thinned out, and many staff were reassigned or left their posts (Olsson et al., forthcoming). In such changes, a kind of “scale effect” can occur, where the consequences of reduced resources are greater than the reduction itself.

A smaller target group does not necessarily mean a lesser need or lower costs to provide the measure. Rather, the need for innovation and bricolage increases, i.e., the ability to creatively combine and reuse what is at hand with limited resources, to find workable solutions in times of contraction. This often requires major commitment from individuals, with the risk of a “champion burnout” problem (Zapata Campos 2024, Gillberg et al., 2022).

4. A narrow definition, understanding integration as employment and in relation only to migrants, hampers local integration work

In our studies, as in previous research (e.g., Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018), actors at different levels and in different organisations highlight problems associated with a narrow definition of integration. Integration is often understood as something that concerns the foreign-born, and primarily about obtaining work. Being integrated thus becomes something a person (who is foreign-born) either is or is not. This understanding places responsibility for integration unilaterally on the individual, rather than on society at large. An alternative perspective, emphasised in both research and practice, is to see integration as a mutual, ongoing process involving society as a whole, not only those currently experiencing exclusion.

The narrow definition dominates the practical design and follow-up of integration policy, where the share of foreign-born individuals in work often

constitutes the principal outcome measure. A consequence is that those with the best conditions to establish themselves quickly in the labour market are prioritised within LMI. This leads to the “low-hanging fruit” being picked first (Ek Österberg et al. 2022, Ek Österberg & Zapata 2023b). At the same time, people facing larger barriers are often deprioritised, or never given a real chance to participate in integration measures tailored to their circumstances. There may be some logic in directing resources where results can be achieved and measured most quickly, but this comes at the expense of a more holistic view of integration. Research shows that work is indeed a central aspect of integration, but not the only one. Factors such as housing, access to education, health, meaningful leisure and culture also play decisive roles for people’s sense of belonging and participation in society. A recurring conclusion, in both our studies and others, is that some groups are systematically left out. At present, this particularly affects foreign-born women (Ek Österberg et al. 2021; Norbäck & Zapata Campos 2023; Andersson Joona & Josefsson 2025).

5. Organisational and institutional conditions change over time, creating stop-go dynamics

Local governments and other public organisations are often seen as stable actors and assumed to constitute the cohesive, long-lasting partner in LMI networks. Our research suggests this view should be problematised. In practice, much of local governments’ LMI work is carried out in project form, which entails inherent temporality. Direction and scope can change rapidly due to shifts in funding opportunities (e.g., access to European Social Fund support), as well as reforms, election results, budget negotiations and leadership changes. The Public Employment Service’s reorganisation(s) and various initiatives are a clear example of instability that can characterise state actors, but similar stop-go dynamics are also found in the local government sector.

In addition to organisational changes, the LMI field is shaped by different actors’ varying overall perspectives and influence over individuals’ measures, when, where and how they occur, which complicates coordination. Collaborating with actors under such conditions creates both unpredictability and difficulties in planning and prioritising.

There is also volatility at the individual level. Many successful initiatives to promote LMI have been built and driven by dedicated individuals, both in

public organisations and in civil society. This commitment constitutes a substantial extra resource. Our study of Yalla Trappan shows, for example, how their expansion to ten other municipalities was enabled by local actors' bricolage, that is, the ability to creatively combine and reuse what is at hand with limited resources. This could involve personal contacts with local organisations to find potential customers for their services or arranging premises and equipment. It could also be based on caseworkers' own experience of being foreign-born and their knowledge of participants' cultures, languages and local embeddedness. This work was crucial, for example, in compensating for the Public Employment Service's closure of local offices and withdrawal of support (Zapata Campos 2024).

Dependence on individuals creates vulnerability because the system becomes sensitive to the loss of key persons (Zapata Campos 2024, Ek Österberg & Zapata 2023a, 2023b). This was evident in our study of integration coordinators, where individuals with substantial responsibility tried to sustain networks, knowledge and coordination despite resource shortages, shrinking target groups and diminishing organisational support (Olsson et al., forthcoming).

The Skellefteå study illustrates how quickly conditions can change and how organisation needs to be robust to cope. From a local perspective, developments in Skellefteå during 2024 were as dramatic as the 2015 reception crisis. The local government's experience is especially instructive because it contrasts with how LMI has been designed in the rest of the country since 2015. Unlike many other local governments, measures here were primarily directed towards employers in the local labour market (e.g., which language requirements were set) and towards the place as a whole (what is required for people to thrive and want to stay) rather than towards individuals. A very large number of workers came to Skellefteå in a very short time. The local government was able to act quickly and flexibly, largely because it has control over the production of public services and central infrastructure, which enabled short decision-making paths (Asplén Lundstedt et al., forthcoming). This example shows that robustness is not about specific organisational forms but about how the work is organised based on local conditions. Robust organisation means having access to multiple courses of action and being able to activate different resources when needed (Torfing et al. 2012). This type of preparedness is particularly

important in a field like LMI, where conditions often change rapidly and are influenced by external factors.

Recommendations

What *should* and *can* be done are ultimately political questions — at both local and national level — and strongly shaped by external developments such as conflict, social polarisation, geopolitical instability, and the increasingly tangible effects of the climate crisis. Evidence suggests that migration, both globally and locally, will continue to increase. This makes it essential to build and maintain resilience in the capacity to create inclusive societies.

The recommendations below are directed at actors engaged in integration work: policymakers and public officials at different levels, those working in WISEs and other civil-society organisations, as well as the research community.

1. Give the periphery a more central place in policy and public administration

Recognise and harness the innovative capacity that exists in local communities and in the outer edges of public organisations — capacity that often remains invisible to central actors. Create arenas in which local public officials and civil-society actors can contribute their local resources, language, culture, experience and solutions, and make it easier for them to influence the integration work of local governments. At national level, create flexible support structures that acknowledge and accept that successful local models for LMI are not always scalable or standardisable. National policy should promote experimentation and local adaptation, not uniformity.

2. Cherish relationships with WISEs

Strengthen the supporting, cross-scale institutional infrastructure built up in recent years. This can be done by ensuring access to information and guidance for public officials and politicians on implementing procurement tools and idea-based public partnerships (IOP); enabling more long-term work-training agreements; and providing financial resources to support intermediary organisations and networks at both local and national levels. This is crucial for enabling the long-term

establishment and spread of alternative integration practices developed by WISEs.

For this to be possible, decision-makers and representatives of LMI measures, e.g., national activation programmes or local governments' work-training programmes, need to be more open, supportive and receptive to the bricolage and the working methods developed by WISEs, migrants and public officials (Carstensen et al. 2022, Zapata Campos 2024). This implies that public organisations must become more flexible and support improvisation, experimentation and joint learning, in collaboration with actors such as WISEs and migrant organisations. Specifically for local governments, which under local self-government are free to choose how they organise their operations, it is important to be attentive and apply a caring logic towards WISEs' particular character and the need for long-term conditions for their work when changes are discussed.

3. Support networks to grow and be sustained

Ensure long-term support for network infrastructure within LMI through targeted resources, coordination and national knowledge platforms. When central actors such as government agencies withdraw from network-building, vacuums arise that weaken the entire system's ability to handle change and retain competence over time. Continuous support is also needed for interest organisations such as SKOOPI, SALAR and other actors that coordinate LMI networks. WISEs also need networks to collaborate and learn from each other, a key function for their success in local LMI work. These networks require public support to be maintained.

4. Understand integration more holistically

Effective integration processes require a holistic approach that starts from the person's whole life situation, including health, language, origin, housing, social networks, caring responsibilities and time, to enable sustainable participation in working life. At the policy level, integration measures therefore need to be understood to a greater extent as parts of a holistic process that is not reduced to a question of employment, and not only in relation to the foreign-born but attentive to individuals' different needs and potential.

5. Create organisationally stable and robust conditions

Local governments' roles in LMI are fluid, intertwined and change over time. They are influenced by national policy, global events and the composition of target groups, as well as by how local governments themselves choose to act based on local conditions. This results in a diversity of ways of organising the work. Taken together, there is a great need for local coordination, not least between local governments and state actors at local level, primarily the Public Employment Service and the County Administrative Boards, but also between WISEs, state and private actors, and between different WISEs.

Coordination is facilitated by institutional stability. The state should therefore provide local governments with long-term and predictable conditions, in the form of resources, presence and clear regulations. Local governments should ensure flexible yet robust organisations that can scale up and down without losing capacity, to safeguard future handling. Local governments should also give civil-society actors stable, long-term conditions, for example through opportunities for public contracts, simple channels of communication and durable relationships.

Future research and discussion on integration

What the consequences will be for local actors of the reorientation of integration policy that the Government recently summarised in new goals and principles (Government press release, 28 May 2025) will become evident in the coming years. Local integration work continues and is no less important now than when volumes were larger and the issue more visible and framed differently in public debate.

Research and debate often focus on the national level, or adopt a top-down perspective in which local governments are viewed as implementers of national policy. Such a perspective risks missing the local dynamics and variation that our studies show are crucial for understanding when and how integration work can succeed and why. Local capacity to plan, organise, coordinate and implement measures is decisive for how integration policy functions in practice. Supporting local conditions and local capacity-building should therefore be a cornerstone of state initiatives, now and in the future. Future research should, we argue, focus on local collaborations between local governments, civil society and business, taking account of the varying conditions of both local governments and target groups.

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