



Understanding the gap between refugee integration policies and experiences of integration

Results from two EU-funded projects, FOCUS and NIEM

Nahikari Irastorza and Sayaka Osanami Törngren

Sweden's comprehensive integration policies are not always reflected in integration outcomes. What is hindering newcomers' and, in particular, refugees' participation in different spheres of society in Sweden? Based on two EU-funded projects, Forced Displacement and Refugee-Host Community Solidarity (FOCUS, 2019-2022) and the National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM, 2016-2022), this policy brief will reflect on this question by addressing where Swedish refugee integration policies stand in relation to the EU-directives and other EU countries, in contrast to the experiences of beneficiaries of integration policies.

Refugee integration policies in Sweden

An evaluation of policies towards the integration of beneficiaries of international protection conducted as part of NIEM shows that Sweden provides the most favourable conditions for integration among the 14 European participating countries. Refugees and other newly arrived immigrants also express satisfaction towards the services provided as part

of the introduction program. However, the employment rates of refugees living in Sweden are similar to the EU average and lower than in some countries with less favourable policies. Moreover, social integration is reported to be difficult by participants in FOCUS and NIEM.

NIEM was funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund to develop a method for comparing integration policies targeting refugees, while FOCUS was funded by the Horizon 2020 program as a collaborative project between academics and civil society organizations to understand and improve the dynamics of integration between newly arrived Syrian refugees and the receiving societies. The findings of these two projects are particularly relevant in the context of the new government's program proposal on immigration and integration, which emphasizes immigrants' responsibility to becoming part of the Swedish society further. While the goal of integration policies continues to be newcomers' self-reliance, the new plan is to push the current "requirement-based" integration policy even further by suggesting that immigrants will have to earn the right to receiving some of the policy provisions that they currently hold simply by having a residence permit. Different requirements are mentioned for different rights (e.g. permanent residency, citizenship, family reunion and even general welfare provisions such as child allowance) but demonstrating language abilities in Swedish, having a job or being able to support themselves are common to many of them. The complementary findings from FOCUS and NIEM provide a picture of current integration policy provisions for refugees (NIEM) and experiences of integration of Syrian refugees (FOCUS) that will help us identify the conditions for equal participation in society and building relationships, some of which are already somewhat neglected in policy and might be ignored if the new government's program gets implemented.

The project identified gaps in refugee integration policies in 14 participating countries within EU Member states during the period of 2016 to 2021¹. The cross-country comparison presented in this section is based on **120 indicators** and covers **12 identified dimensions**² ranging from general conditions to the legal, socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects of

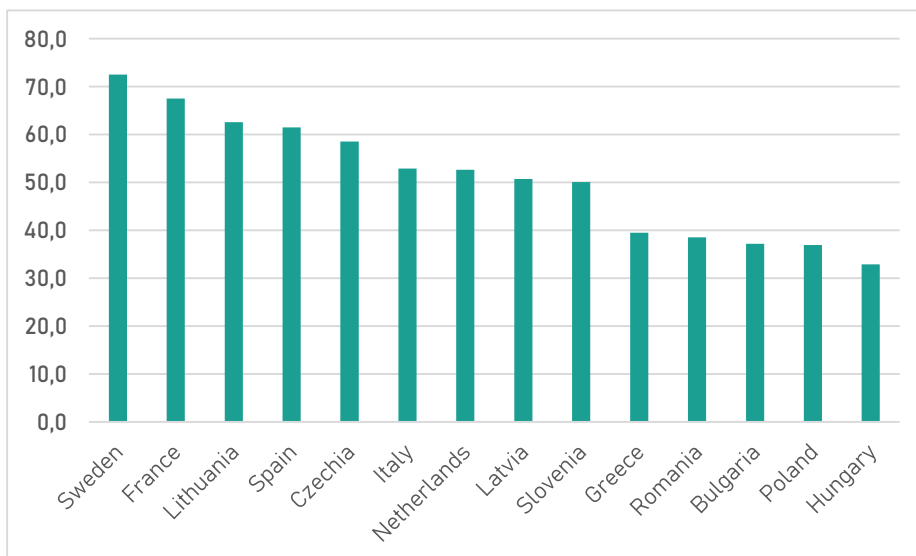
¹ The countries included in the project are (in alphabetical order); Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden

² These 12 dimensions are: Mainstreaming, Residency, Family reunification, Citizenship, Housing, Employment, Vocational training and employment-related education, Health, Social security, Education, Language learning and social orientation, Building bridges.

integration in 2021 as presented in a set of figures below³. These 12 dimensions are analysed in three “stepstones” which point to different needs for action: Legal step for legislative process, policy step for policy development and implementation step for fostering governance and social involvement⁴.

NIEM results show how divergent the quality of governments' efforts is across the 14 participating countries, among which Sweden ranks the highest (see Figure 1). Sweden is the country with the longest tradition in the reception of refugees among NIEM study countries and the one with the most established welfare state. The first coherent integration program (then called “immigrant and minority policy”) with principles of equal rights together with multicultural policy implemented in the country dates to 1975 (Prop. 1975:26).

Figure 1. Average of all indicator scores per country



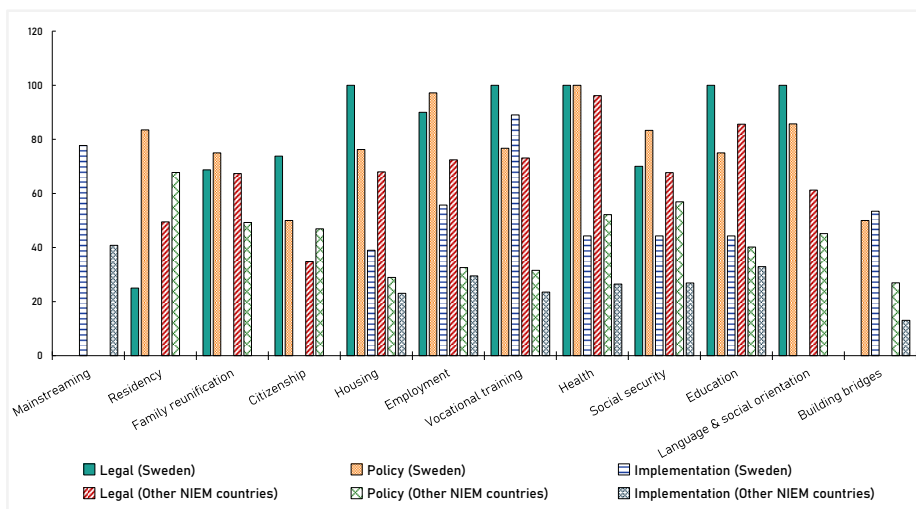
Source: NIEM

³ All reports in the project, including comparative and national reports, can be found at www.forintegration.eu.

⁴ The complete list of NIEM indicators consists of more than 160 indicators. The analysis of three steps is composed of different indicators, and not all 12 dimensions are reflected on all the steps due to data gaps. 100 points are awarded to the most favourable policy options and 0 to the least favourable. The higher the scoring is, the more comprehensive the legal and policy frameworks are in line with the standards required by international and EU law. More information about the indicators and scoring in the comparative reports and data gaps in NIEM reports which can be found at www.forintegration.eu.

Figure 2 shows the results per legal, policy and implementation steps (in blue) comparing the Swedish scoring to the average of the other 13 countries (in yellow). The Swedish legal framework is clearly more favourable than the average of other NIEM countries in all dimensions for which we have data except for three: residency, family reunification and social security. Whereas the Swedish scores are still slightly above the average of the rest of study countries for family reunification and social security, when it comes to residency they are substantially less favourable. While other study countries grant a 5-year permit for recognized refugees, Sweden currently only offers a temporary permit of 3 years, and a 13-months permit for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. We observe a significantly more generous legal framework for citizenship in Sweden compared to the average of the other 13 countries. Besides, until now, Sweden is the only NIEM study country that does not enforce language assessment for naturalization. The country also stands out in the legislation concerning language training and social orientation, and housing.

Figure 2. Scores for the legal, policy and implementation framework



Source: NIEM, analysis of the authors.

The results indicate that Sweden has a more favourable policy framework compared to the average of other NIEM study countries in all 12 dimensions and the differences for most dimensions are larger than in the legal framework. Sweden especially excels in terms of provisions of health, housing, employment, vocational training and publicly funded language

training, which is a fundamental component of the introduction program for refugees.

The implementation of integration policies is shown to be difficult across the NIEM study countries. However, Sweden also shows favourable results in this aspect compared to the average of other countries. The lower scores in this framework indicate the need for a stronger multi-level governance and social involvement for refugee integration. Sweden, together with France and Italy, are the only NIEM study countries with national strategies specifying the responsibilities for state, local, regional and third sector actors (mainstreaming). Sweden also stands out in the implementation of vocational training (e.g. access to and mainstreamed vocational training and the provision of employment related education) and building bridges (e.g. coordination with regional, local authorities and civil society organizations, including support for refugees to partake in civic activities).

In sum, in some aspects Sweden's legal framework is similar to the average of the other 13 NIEM study countries; however, Sweden is more generous in the provision of facilitated conditions, initiatives and targeted programs through its policies. Whereas Sweden has a long history in the implementation of refugee reception and integration programs, half of the NIEM study countries are from the Eastern European block, which have recently adopted asylum systems after joining the EU by focusing on instrumental aspects (the legal framework) while lacking a longer-term integration framework (the policy framework)⁵.

The difference in policy provisions and their implementation in some dimensions like building bridges, vocational training and employment policy provisions between Sweden and the average of other NIEM study countries is also remarkable. However, this is not always reflected in the outcomes of refugees in those dimensions. For example, according to the European Labour Force Survey, the employment rates of refugees living in Sweden in 2014 were only slightly higher than the EU average⁶.

⁵ Read more about the differences between the countries in the comprehensive comparative NIEM report which can be downloaded at <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub/the-european-benchmark-for-refugee-integration-evaluation-2-comprehensive-report/dnl/109>.

⁶ Refugees living in Switzerland and Slovenia have the highest employment rates among EU countries where these data are available, whereas those living in the UK and Spain have the lowest. For more detailed information, see Bevelander and Irastorza (2021). We are aware that the EU average is not comparable to the average of NIEM study countries. However, Sweden is

To contribute to the understanding of the gap between refugee integration policy and outcomes, in the next chapter we include personal accounts of refugees' challenges to participate in these and other spheres of society in Sweden.

Experiences of integration of refugees in Sweden

Data collection methods in FOCUS include a mapping of refugee-receiving society relations, a survey and focus group interviews conducted among newly arrived Syrian refugees and the receiving society members in the main refugee-receiving cities of four countries: Croatia, Germany, Jordan and Sweden. The findings of these studies informed practice-oriented interventions in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and ultimately the development of the FOCUS Living Well Together Resource, a guide to help policy makers and practitioners promote integration⁷.

A random survey (n=595 for Syrian refugees and n=1,314 for receiving society members) and separate focus group interviews (n=12 for each of both groups) were conducted in 2019 and 2020 among Syrian refugees who arrived in Sweden after 2013 and members of the receiving society, including foreign-born people who, at the time of the survey, had been living in Sweden for more than six years⁸.

Some key findings are as follows:

- Syrians who participated in the focus group interviews identified the good access to services, the support they received from the state and having children as facilitators for integration. The main barriers were temporary residence permits, racism and discrimination, the labeling and stigma associated to being "refugees", the lack of personal contacts to get access to jobs and the limited knowledge of Swedish for some of them. Racism was noted to have been

also one of the top MIPEX (Migrant Integration Policy Index) countries and this data still reflects a gap between more favourable policies and average outcomes. MIPEX uses policy indicators to measure integration policies for immigrants in countries across six continents from 2007 onwards.

⁷ More information on the project and the deliverables can be accessed at: <https://focus-refugees.eu>.

⁸ Full references and links to the reports for the survey study by Irastorza and Korol (2021) and the qualitative study by Abdel Fatah et al. (2020) are included in the reference list.

experienced mostly at work, in trying to secure employment or in the SFI language courses.

- Focus group participants from the receiving society also perceived racism and discrimination as an obstacle for integration. The length of asylum applications was also mentioned as a limitation for refugees' participation in society. They saw their understanding of refugees' views on women's rights as a barrier for intergroup relations. The segregation and an increasing polarization in Swedish society was also considered to be a problem for social integration. They were concerned about the consequences of the changing political landscape with increasing support for parties that hold anti-immigrant/immigration positions after the 2018 national election.
- When asked about intergroup contact, Syrian focus group participants reported that this was challenging partly because they perceived Swedes as being reserved. This perception was also shared by the receiving society members. Points of intergroup contact were work, the neighbourhood, school or university, language courses and organizations such as choirs or gardening clubs. All these interactions with Swedes were seen as limited to that time and space, lacking in depth or having the potential to develop further.
- Regarding social proximity, Syrian survey respondents were more willing to accept a relationship of any kind with a member of the receiving society than the other way around, with the biggest differences being those related to romantic and family relationships.
- Some of these findings are validated by the qualitative inquiry in NIEM based on five focus group interviews with stakeholders from the public sector and civil society organizations, plus 20 individual interviews with refugees who arrived in Sweden between 2010 and 2020. Especially the lack of social contact between refugees and receiving society members were pointed out, both by practitioners in both public and third sector, but also by refugees themselves. The interviews also identified the importance of the third sector's role in building bridges between refugees and the receiving society⁹.

⁹ A full reference and link to the report by Osanami Törngren et al. (2021) is included in the reference list.

Policy recommendations

This policy brief summarizes key findings from two EU-funded projects on integration that include Sweden: NIEM and FOCUS. The following policy recommendations derive from these findings¹⁰.

- The engagement and coordination of public and private sector employers in introduction and employment programs is fundamental to provide training and suitable employment opportunities according to the qualifications of refugees.
- There is a need for a long-term commitment beyond the two-year duration of the introduction program to promote integration. This is particularly relevant for those with lower qualifications, women with children and those with lower language competence in Swedish.
- Faster and more flexible approaches to the recognition of qualifications is needed to facilitate access to suitable employment for refugees.
- Inclusive community-level groups could be supported to organize activities that can bring refugees and receiving society members together by encouraging intergroup contact on equal terms, presenting narratives that offer alternative images to stereotypes. For example, encounters around common interests such as sports, crafts, first aid courses, film clubs, etc. Information about these groups needs to be disseminated among refugees.
- Providing systematic training about the role and mechanisms of racism and discrimination would help increase awareness among the recipients and, ultimately, reduce discriminatory practices. This should be implemented as an integral part of employment and educational contexts including officers in governmental services, educational institutions, employers but also other key societal actors such as housing companies, unions and civil society actors.
- Language and cultural interpreters in a broader range of institutions are needed to ensure better communication and reduce discrimination.

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive list of recommendations, see the full report by Kiralj et al. (2022).

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