

Social Services Europe

Role of social service providers in the integration of migrants

Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon for Europe. Migration within the European Union and from outside the European Union has been an increasingly normalized pattern of our demographics for many years. However, in recent years the increasing numbers seeking to migrate to the EU has been combined with the increasing number of people coming to the EU looking for international protection because of global political crises. UNHCR estimates that over 1 million people sought international protection in the EU in 2015 alone¹.

Thus, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have rightly become an urgent topic on the EU political agenda. The European institutions continue to search for solutions amid a sense of crisis – a crisis that for many citizens and organisations such as those in Social Services Europe is borne out of a lack of solidarity. Yet the political discourse in Europe is increasingly dominated by growing anti-migrant, refugee and asylum seeker sentiments, which wrongly considers migration as a threat to cultural identities, security and our welfare systems among other concerns. Such fears and exaggeration of both numbers of actual arrivals and actual impact have resulted in increasing xenophobia and hate and has also been used to justify restrictive immigration policies and increased discrimination of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in accessing their economic, social and cultural rights.

Against this complex context, Social Service Europe (SSE) members² – being not-for-profit social and health care service providers and civil society organisations – have been involved in the provision of short and long-term solutions for building welcoming societies and fostering the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the receiving countries, as well as the integration of other disadvantaged people within their own country. The kind of interventions provided by our members are very heterogeneous and go from humanitarian and emergency support for new arrivals to long-term integration and inclusion services and support in destination countries. The provision of services is often combined by advocacy work to ensure policies meet the needs of service providers and most importantly, the people requiring such support. The work of not for profit social and health care service providers is crucial for migrants' self-empowerment and confidence building, as well as for their social and labour market inclusion. Such supportive services provided by our membership include, but are not limited to, the fields of housing, social care, health and psychosocial care, post-trauma support, education, training and employment.

The protection of human rights and the achievement of human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights must be at the heart of all discussions, policies and provision of services. This paper presents five key points that should be addressed and discussed to highlight the essential role played by not for profit social service providers in the support and integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Our five points also underline the main challenges that not for profit social service providers are confronted with and are points for discussion and debate. We also put forward some recommendations on how to enable the environment for social service providers to offer quality support and integration services and welcome discussion as to how these recommendations could be realised.

¹ GLOBAL TRENDS – Forced Displacement in 2015, UNHCR 20 June 2016 <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7>

² The members of Social Services Europe are: Caritas Europa, CEDAG, The European Association of Service Providers for People with Disabilities (EASPD), European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), Eurodiaconia, FEANTSA, Red Cross EU Office and Solidar. www.socialserviceseurope.eu

1) Migration is a social and economic opportunity for the European Union.

Contrary to much of the negative rhetoric surrounding migration, refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, Social Services Europe believes that there is a social and economic opportunity for the EU. This view is shared by many institutional commentators including the IMF³ and OECD⁴ who forecast that migrants are likely to make a net contribution to public finances and be important contributors to growth in our economies. Beyond the economic contributions are the social contributions made by many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. However, for migrants to be able to make such contributions, and most importantly, to ensure their fundamental human rights are observed, access to services is essential.

2) Social and Health Care services are a key component for the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Access to social and health care services is a fundamental right and meets many of the basic needs we have as people.⁵ . As such, it is a right that must be applied regardless of origin or status, regular or irregular. Access to affordable and quality services along with adequate income support and inclusive labour markets, are the cornerstones of effective integration and sustainable inclusion policies. Social service providers have an important role to play for successful integration as they have the know-how and experience of supporting vulnerable people, for instance in accessing the labour market or overcoming trauma. **Specific and tailored services must be made available for those in acute situations such as pregnant women, women who have suffered from sexual violence, unaccompanied minors and people with disabilities. Access should be immediate, particularly as concerns preventative healthcare and to psychosocial and post trauma support as well as access to housing, education and labour market integration services. Asylum seekers and refugees must also have access soon after their arrival to language courses and translation/interpretation services.**

Our members have demonstrable experience of how social services enable access to job markets, support local integration, prevent poverty and destitution, ensure dignity and support people with disabilities or other special needs to be recognised and included in their societies. It is also our experience that **effective social and health care services provision must be integrated and coordinated** wherever possible to support accessibility and effectiveness. In the same vein, services relating to employment, housing, education and other areas should ensure good communication with each other to ensure that migrants receive the appropriate services in their personal situations with a holistic approach.

3) Universal access to services is key for inclusive, hate-free societies

Universal services and benefits should cover essential needs and all persons should have equal access. In recent years, fundamental rights have come under pressure throughout the EU and world-wide, partly because of measures taken in the context of austerity policies pursued by governments'. Such measures have reduced the quality of and access to education, social assistance, healthcare and services of general economic interest, while the right to work and the right to basic social security guarantees has also been affected. In many cases, limitations of fundamental rights in the public debate are being justified by the need to prioritise fiscal consolidation within the EU. Among the groups most affected by this logic are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the organisations supporting them through service provision. **Social Services Europe rejects the logic of austerity and the reductions this has led to in social service provision.**

Trade-offs between social budgets for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and other groups of users are not acceptable. They are not based on economic logic but on politically vested interests, which block the provision of

³ IMF Staff Discussion Note – The Refugee Surge In Europe, January 2016 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1602.pdf>

⁴ OECD Discussion Note – Is Migration good for the Economy ? May 2014
<https://www.oecd.org/migration/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Numero%202.pdf>

⁵ C.f. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Articles 21, 24, 25; 26; 34, 35; 36

social services and benefits. **Resources must be extended to cover the needs of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, rather than general social budgets being redistributed.** Such redistribution is creating new provision gaps and promoting competition for resources. This is potentially damaging in relation to the public perception of the impact of migration on social cohesion; welfare standards and the common good. Such negative perceptions can create social disharmony which can lead to disaffection, discrimination, racism and xenophobia. **Social services must be supported in combatting such rhetoric and actions and provide more opportunities for community cohesion.** In addition, **the EU and Member States must defuse any emerging culture of competition and rights based on identity and devise and effectively implement anti-discrimination measures in all policies including those concerning access to social services and other welfare provision.** This should include specific anti-discrimination measures for women, persons with disabilities and other groups, who could suffer from multiple discrimination.

4) Unlocking the full potential EU funds is crucial to ensure integration

In order to ensure a sustainable provision of social services that contributes to integration and social inclusion for all people, irrespective of their background and status, not for profit social and health care service providers must be adequately funded. This can be done at EU level by **ensuring complementarity between the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Funds (AMIF) and specific funds such as the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived (FEAD).** Additionally, more resources for social inclusion and integration could be provided through earmarked funds in the ESF and the AMIF. **The European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) could also play a role in supporting investment** into the field of social services if additional efforts are made by the European Commission and European Investment Bank to ensure it is accessible and better adapted to not for profit organisations. Moreover, SSE reiterates its call for **more flexibility in the macro-economic imbalance procedure as included in our letter of recommendations on the Annual Growth Survey⁶,** allowing investments in social protection to be exempted from the Macro-Economic Imbalance Procedure, therefore encouraging Member States to invest in social services for positive social and economic development. At the national and local levels, more funding should also be made available for the social inclusion of all and the value of not for profit organisation in providing such services recognised, supported and valued

5) Invest in human capital and communities through social and health care services.

SSE calls for an increase in investments in social policies general and specifically social inclusion and the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Such social investment is essential for boosting employment outcomes and empowering people to become self-sufficient as well as preventing the potential high cost in terms of social cohesion of not investing. Investment in early years' education, high quality, accessible and affordable housing, measures supporting access to the labour market including quality and affordable vocational education and training are just some examples where there are demonstrable positive social and economic returns on investment.

Investment will not only provide much needed services but also employment opportunities for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the wider labour-seeking population. However, **investment must also be made in equipping staff and volunteers in all social services to meet the needs of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker service users.**

Investments must be made in instruments that facilitate the recognition and validation of skills, competencies and knowledge. This would allow migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to pursue and excel in further education and in accessing the labour market. This should be accompanied by the speeding up of the process of recognition and validation of the learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning (as adopted in Council's recommendation of 2012). Furthermore, soft skills, such as language knowledge and intercultural competence must also be recognised.

⁶ http://media.wix.com/ugd/9f45fc_82ecf9c0f2934f28bdee2055ec49dc46.pdf