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POLICY BRIEF

Constructive solutions for immigrants' social inclusion – lessons for multilevel governance

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Housing is more than a place to stay, it is a human right and one of the cornerstones of the integration process.
- There is a need for holistic thinking, formulating coherent policies to address integration from the moment people arrive in Europe.
- Lack of housing is not only a severe problem in itself, it also prohibits refugees from accessing other social services.
- Policy and regulatory legislation challenges related to the categorizations of asylum seekers, refugees and homeless people need to be addressed as they result in exclusion from the right to housing and in increased barriers to integration.
- Local NGOs have an important role in facilitating housing and integration policies implementation on the ground and need more support.
- Most comprehensive knowledge of the housing needs exists at the local level. Resources and political will are needed to take more action and support local initiatives.
- There is a need for new policies which can address housing for beneficiaries of international protection in new ways, recognizing the added value of the direct involvement of local communities in integration processes.
- Policies need to be developed at the local level, where integration happens, in addition to being implemented there.
- There is a need to take stock of national and local administrations' efforts in reception and integration of immigrants and implement long-term strategies for social inclusion of refugees and beneficiaries of international protection.

Since 2015 forced migration has been on the frontline of EU politics. Reception and consequent integration of people who arrived in 2015 and 2016, as well as those who continue to arrive till today posed challenges for both administrations, civil society and immigrants. Indeed, migrants still struggle to become included into local communities, social and economic life of the countries where they now reside despite political decisions and integration programs.

Governance of migration and asylum policies has a strong international and transregional aspect. However,

policies for immigrant integration are implemented at national and local levels. The number of immigrants arriving in Europe each year increases, and the local and regional authorities face growing integration challenges. According to the IMO (2021), migrants represent 11.6% of the population in Europe in 2020 (+1.5% compared to 2015).

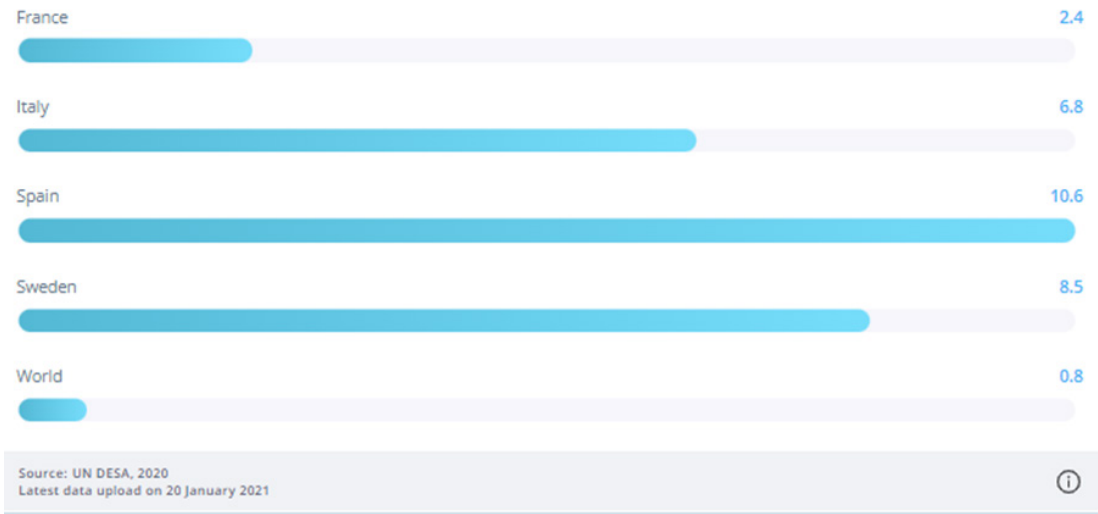


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Within the MERGING project, we analyzed immigrant reception and integration policies in Spain, France, Italy, and Sweden on national, regional and local level. Spain is one of the most important gateways for African immigrants in Europe and it is currently registering the highest number of asylum seekers from Latin America, France faces an important increase of application for asylum (+11% 2019/2018), Italy for many years has been

a transit country for asylum seekers. In 2014, 170,000 asylum-seekers disembarked on Italian shores. Sweden has the highest number of immigrants per capita (IMO 2020; the French Office for Refugees 2020). On average, the proportion of migrants received in France, Italy, Spain and Sweden between 2000 and 2020 increased up to 12 times more than the world average (figure 1).

Figure 1: Changes in migration stock (2000-2020)



Immigrants are often located in cities that already suffer from severe housing shortages. The right to housing is one of the human rights declared in several international documents and conventions. It applies to everyone regardless of their migration status. The right to housing is among the social rights that promote integration. The other social rights that facilitate integration include the right to health and education, as well as specific rights provided for the beneficiaries of international protection. These elements have been developed in MERGING D2.1 as part of the national reports on migrants’ access to housing (see www.merging-housing-project.eu).

Main challenges identified in relation to housing for refugees across the EU

1. People who seek and receive international protection in Europe end up in-between different regulations and laws around reception and integration. This is due to the long and different process between arriving in an EU member-state, applying

for asylum, waiting for a decision, and receiving international protection. This « Limbo period » results in precariousness, despair and even homelessness. Recent research showed, for example, that 25% of people that received a refugee status or an international protection in France are homeless, due to the saturation of the social housing market, and to different attribution policies across counties/cities (Dihal, 2021). According to EU law, Member States must implement policies to prevent the discrimination of beneficiaries of international protection and ensure equal opportunities regarding access to accommodation. However, nothing binds Member States to make sure that newly-recognized refugees do not become homeless. In these cases, we see very diverse solutions at the local level since each municipality implements EU and national law differently (Meer et al., 2021)

2. The challenge of discrimination and a precarious position of beneficiaries of international protection after they receive their status. In most countries, the state is highly implicated in the

asylum procedure process but once individuals receive international protection, responsibility for their sheltering and well-being is often passed to other actors, notably social housing providers and private actors that benefit from a high bargaining power due to the tensions existing on the real estate market across Europe. Many beneficiaries of international protection as a result have to compete in housing markets with very high rental prices and in a context of racial discrimination (AIDA, 2019). We have documented the legal barriers and financial barriers often faced by refugees who are homeless or do not have a stable residency. Their inability to open a bank account and provide some form of financial guarantees to landlords is highly detrimental.

3. Policy fragmentation and lack of coherence challenge. Refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection need to have identification papers to access social services and housing. However, to receive such papers they need to have an address. These mutually exclusive con-

ditions leave people in precarity (AIDA, 2019). A similar problem is that integration in relation to forced migration is treated by EU policies and member-states in a fragmented way. There is no coherent plan for the integration of people already when they apply for asylum. Often, they need to wait for a very long time in poor living conditions, which has adverse effects for their overall integration (PICUM & ECRE, 2020).

4. The increased politicization of reception and accommodation of refugees over the past years is a barrier since there is a discourse which favors detention and restrictive asylum policies. Political agendas (i.e., French presidential elections), the sanitary crisis and the rising populism affecting European countries represent a major challenge for policy makers that opt for more restrictive reception measures in order to meet local population's expectations. The politicization of migrants' reception divides people across Europe, leading sometimes to clashes between local residents and migrants.



Social housing for immigrants, Cinq Toits in Paris, France. Source: MERGING

The local turn in integration governance, the role of NGOs

In the aftermath of what came to be called a “refugee” crisis in 2015 local governments across Europe claim a more meaningful involvement in policy making and implementation of a future refugee relocation scheme within Europe (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018). In many cases the local governments have no say in how many asylum seekers and refugees they need to provide housing for and in all cases across Europe municipalities have no say in asylum policies overall. Thus, on top of being actors who close the policy gaps caused at the national level, cities identify larger roles for themselves and in their own right, organized horizontally as networks addressing refugee issues and bypassing the national governments (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018).

Overall, in terms of governance, governments at the local level in all of the analyzed countries have a better knowledge of the housing needs. However, they do not always have enough resources or political will to address them. The national governments can support decentralization of integration and housing, but this comes with political negotiations over the specific policies and practices to be pursued at the local level.

Having analyzed housing initiatives and integration policies across the four countries, in particular in France, Spain and Italy, we find that activities of NGOs clearly improve and facilitate implementation of integration policies. Moreover, NGOs activities filled governmental gaps in providing housing for refugees and immigrants. This offers flexibility, variety of different locally adapted approaches and quick reaction in the context of increasing need for housing for refugees since 2015.



Immigrants in Cinq Toits in Paris, France. Source: MERGING

At the same time, the increasingly important role of NGOs in migration policy making comes with challenges alongside solutions. Although the third sector often facilitates access to resources that the State is unable to satisfy and many NGOs maintain a critical point of view on state policies and regulations, their professionalization has brought critique on their role and often they are seen as complicit to the state instead of representing the civil society (Caponio & Cappiali, 2018). Moreover, NGOs rely either on charity or on public financing. In both cases this limits their possibility to design long term programs, their projects tend to be short term. This can have adverse effects in a long process such as integration.

The work of NGOs further stimulates the wider inclusion of society into the process of immigrant integration. The role of citizens in refugee housing initiatives is significant, as our analysis shows. Most notably, we documented hosting or co-housing

initiatives which were initially grassroots initiatives in 2015-2016 that later were coordinated by NGOs and groups such as “Refugees welcome”. These often informal, small-scale initiatives can offer larger insights on the link between housing and integration. Housing is more than a space to stay, it is also about being part of a community and therefore living with or close to members of society can be very valuable in terms of learning the language, familiarizing with the culture, and building social networks.

In terms of governance this conclusion can translate to both a need to support NGOs who usually act as brokers between locals and immigrants in hosting and co-housing initiatives but also to a need for new policies which can address housing for beneficiaries of international protection in new ways, recognizing the added value of the direct involvement of local communities in integration processes.

About MERGING

MERGING is an international interdisciplinary study of immigrant integration and social inclusion through participatory housing initiatives in Spain, France, Italy and Sweden. MERGING reviews existing knowledge, integration policies and initiatives in which housing has a central place. It provides evidence-based policy recommendations with the aim to facilitate policy and practice innovation for immigrant integration in Europe, among other. Furthermore, the project aspires to study the feasibility of participatory immigrant housing through the construction of pilot housing to implement, test and evaluate them in three European countries (Spain, France, Sweden).

MERGING focuses on policies and practices related to a specific part of immigrant population – refugees and beneficiaries of international protection, including subsidiary protection and protection based on humanitarian grounds.

This policy brief is based on the analysis of the governance of housing for immigrants in different local contexts in Europe. It draws on studies of participatory housing examples from France, Italy, Spain and Sweden, qualitative interviews with stakeholders, policy analysis, literature review and other case relevant document analysis.

More information: www.merging-housing-project.eu

Contact

Olga Stepanova

Researcher, School of Global Studies,
University of Gothenburg
olga.stepanova@globalstudies.gu.se

Alexandra Bousiou

Researcher, Centre for Global Migration,
University of Gothenburg
alexandra.bousiou@gu.se



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