

# Toward Better Integration of People in Need of Protection



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**There is a consensus that better integration of migrants would benefit Swiss society. Yet especially when it comes to asylum seekers and people that have been granted protection, the debate is often based on distorted public perceptions rather than facts. Shorter asylum procedures, pragmatic integration measures targeting asylum seekers early on, and a realistic dialogue with and the participation of the people who are directly concerned offer a better basis for discussion.**

Officially, Switzerland defines the aim of integration as *“the cohabitation of the Swiss and foreign populations on the basis of the values of the Federal Constitution and on mutual respect and tolerance.”*

On June 19, 2017, the third national integration conference once again brought together political, economic and social stakeholders to discuss the integration of foreigners in Swiss society. The conference marked the end of the tripartite dialogue at the federal, cantonal and local levels (“tripartite conference”), which had been underway since 2012. Looking at topics such as labor, early childhood and “living together” (“Arbeiten”, “frühe Kindheit” und “Zusammenleben”), this dialogue focused on better integration policies and practices. The commitment to better integration that benefits both Switzerland and migrants was highlight-

ed in the conference press release as well as in the conference speeches. The need for more practical cooperation, especially at the local level, was also emphasized. The conference also highlighted the progress being made in this area. This all sounds well and good, but is it true? Are we actually on the right track?

The discussion of integration often focuses on asylum issues, especially on people who have a right to stay in Switzerland because their human rights might be violated if they return to their home country. This debate is overshadowed by the more general debate on the options for deterring migration as a whole, in Switzerland as elsewhere in Europe.

However, the European integration debate is not really about integration, but rather about money. In Switzerland, too, the focus on costs

creates an interesting yet worrying dynamic. The most powerful argument for integration policies seems to be that it benefits Swiss taxpayers, as it costs less if migrants pay taxes instead of being subsidized by the state. Recently, integration has also been identified as a measure to prevent the radicalization of migrants: the Swiss Security Network – part of the Federal Department of Defense – has launched a process to develop a national action plan to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. The initial report stresses that integration is one of the key factors to preventing radicalization. Both the integration and the security debates focus on the need for language training as a starting point for integration of all sorts. However, in the asylum area language training is not considered a priority as a matter of policy or in practice. Instead, the focus is on administrative measures, such as

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registering and monitoring migrants at centers as well as managing asylum applications.

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## **Ignoring Reality: Public Perception Rather than Fact-Based Knowledge**

With the arrival in Europe of large numbers of asylum seekers who are actually in need of protection over the last several years, the integration debate has become increasingly urgent. However, there is a lack of political will to accept that a majority of people who apply for asylum in Switzerland are actually in need of protection and that it is highly likely that these people will stay for a longer period of time. Instead, the debate focuses very often on people with weak asylum claims or those for whom Switzerland is not required to review their asylum application under the Dublin system. This leads to a political debate that is focused on sanctions and incentives to leave rather than on proactive integration policies from the time the people arrive. It should be noted, however, that some interesting initiatives focusing on early integration have been launched at the federal level that should be pursued and expanded.

**“The legal reality and the public perception are often completely different, a fact that does not help to create a fact-based political debate on this subject.”**

More often than not, the legal reality in asylum matters does not match the public perception. For instance, whereas the wider public – based on common sense – might view

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Syrians as “refugees” and even as perfect examples of people in need of protection, in administrative reality, only a small proportion of Syrians is granted asylum in Switzerland, while the majority is granted only provisional admission on the grounds that their return to Syria is unreasonable. The legal reality and the public perception are often completely different, a fact that does not help to create a fact-based political debate on this subject.

## **Measuring Integration?**

Debates on integration raise the more general question of how integration can be measured in the first place. Methods and ideas for measuring integration have been one of the recurring debates in the field of asylum for years. The debate in Europe over integration has changed since the riots in the Paris suburbs in late 2005 created an uproar over the failure of large groups of migrants to integrate, but we still do not know what integration really means. The question of how to measure integration is both interesting and difficult at the same time. The indicators of refugee integration are highly contested and enormous in numbers.<sup>1</sup> Yet the difficulty in deciding which integration indicators to use starts even earlier, as it is important to define what integration actually means:

**“Who is better integrated? The Nestlé manager in Vevey who does not speak a word of French or the rejected asylum seeker from Kosovo who scores a lot of goals for the local football club?”**

While the logical answer to me would be the Kosovar striker, Swiss policies exclude him from even being recognized in that debate because he is not the subject of integration policies. As the State Secretariat for

Migration website writes: “Integration shall provide foreigners with a long-term and legal stay with the possibility to participate in the economic, social and cultural life.”

As a consequence, integration policies often fail to address people who lack a legal basis for a long-term stay or residence in Switzerland, but who will stay because it is not likely that they will be returned to their home country (see also the article by Kurt in this issue). One of the most striking examples of this in the Swiss asylum area is the case of people from Ethiopia. Even though it is well known that Ethiopians cannot be returned to their country because the Ethiopian government does not issue return documents to them, Ethiopian migrants are not given the opportunity to stay in the long term. As a result, 40% of asylum seekers from Ethiopia who have filed an asylum application over the last five years in Switzerland are dependent on emergency aid. This means that their asylum request has been rejected and they no longer benefit from the social aid granted to asylum seekers.

However, the rest of this article focuses on people in need of protection and the current challenges in this area.

## **The Waiting Period: Decreasing Individual Agency**

Currently the asylum cases of people with a strong case for protection come second in the authorities’ priorities after those cases whose basis is deemed as highly likely to be weak. The current priority in Switzerland is thus on deterrence rather than on integration. Moreover, integration measures often only start once the decision on the status of the people concerned is final. The signal is: “Please leave, we (the Swiss authori-

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ties) do not have the capacity or the will to deal with you.” This signal leads to frustration and a decrease in people’s individual agency. The administration will not tell them how long the process will last (“you have to wait”) and the people concerned are left with little choice but to try to cope with the waiting period. Even though the need for occupational programs and language courses is evident, the availability of these occupational resources are scarce during the asylum procedure. Moreover, language courses are often taught by volunteers. This fact – regardless of the quality of the language classes – sends another signal of rejection by the Swiss authorities. The need to be recognized as a person regardless of one’s legal status is either forgotten or ignored in practice, thus risking a diminishment of the individual capacity of these people to act for themselves.

Here is an example:

N. M., a young Afghan man living near Weinfelden, in the Canton of Thurgau, has fought this waiting period and the accompanying rejection in his own way. He finished school and has found an apprenticeship as a paver, despite the fact that he is still waiting for his asylum decision. His case had been pending for two and a half years as of the time of writing. He says his lawyer is tired of him constantly asking when he will receive a decision. He has thought about traveling to Bern to ask the asylum authorities when they will decide his case. He has also thought about collecting signatures to force them to hear his case. Talking to him, it is evident that waiting and the uncertainty connected with it have come to dominate his daily live (see also the article by Womersley et al. in this issue). With respect to his apprenticeship, he says: “I hope that the decision will be handed down

before I start school. I am not sure I will be able to be successful with all this uncertainty.”

**“The restructured asylum procedure will reduce waiting periods, but it will also lead to new challenges and the need for the cantons to develop integration programs that are adapted to the new reality.”**

Studies show that lengthy asylum procedures have a long-term effect on the employment rate of people granted protection (see the article by Hainmueller et al. in this issue).<sup>2</sup> It is highly likely that the restructured asylum procedure that will be rolled out in Switzerland in 2019 will reduce waiting periods and enhance integration prospects. However, it will also lead to new challenges: cantons have not yet developed integration policies suitable for people who receive a positive asylum decision after only a few weeks. It will be necessary to develop and tailor integration programs that are adapted to the new reality.

### The Link between Secure Status and Integration

The story of N. M. also highlights that the security of the status is a very important if not the most important factor for successful integration. This is also relevant for people who have only received provisional admission. Provisional admission – or an F permit – is a non-status under Swiss asylum law that allows people to stay in Switzerland, but does not offer them the benefits of legal residence – both in terms of social welfare benefits and with regard to social rights (travel and family reunification, for example, are severely restricted under this status). A recent study shows that these people are highly likely to end up in precarious working conditions and job situa-

tions as well as doing work that does not match their qualifications and profile.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, a positive correlation exists when people receive citizenship: the attainment of citizenship fosters integration and significantly enhances the social status of the naturalized persons.<sup>4</sup> The effect is long lasting and can be found in different areas: the political integration and social situation of new citizens is far better than the situation of people who have not received citizenship in a comparable situation.

These studies show that integration is dependent on individual as well as collective factors. However, favorable conditions, such as a fair and efficient asylum procedure, attention to cultural, linguistic and family factors and a stable protection status help to enhance integration.

### Provisional Admission vs. Refugee Status

A long-term myth about Swiss integration policy in the field of asylum is that people with the less secure status of a provisional admission are economically better integrated than people with a more secure refugee status. This myth suggests that being granted asylum actually puts people in a too comfortable situation and that there is no incentive to integrate in the labor market once this status has been secured. However over the last several years, studies have dispelled this myth. A UNHCR funded study on the labor market integration of refugees and persons with provisional admission shows that in the medium term refugees are far more likely to find a permanent job matching their qualifications than persons with provisional admission.<sup>5</sup> Other research highlights the difficulties in comparing people granted asylum with persons granted provisional admission.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the labor market

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integration of persons admitted provisionally is often precarious and not stable and ultimately leads to higher costs and less stable social integration.

**“A non-paternalistic approach is, from my perspective, essential, as it is important to empower people and not try to solve all their problems for them.”**

Based on these various studies, there is a need to counter the narrative that is common in public debates, according to which refugees receive benefits that are so generous that they lack the will to look for a job. Cantonal integration policies also need to acknowledge that a more secure status enhances the capacity to integrate. Research shows that the best integration policy is to open local networks to refugees and contact with the local population.<sup>7</sup> It helps to decrease fear and to enhance the motivation for integration. It would also help to remove the fear of return and the feeling – dominant among asylum seekers – of not being accepted in Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> A non-paternalistic approach is, from my perspective, essential as it is impor-

tant to empower people and not try to solve all their problems for them.

### Working toward Solutions

Refugee integration in Switzerland is currently debated at different levels. There is a clear gap between the fierce political debate on deficiencies and the alleged lack of desire to integrate on the one hand, and the practical challenges encountered at the cantonal level on the other hand. What is clear is the need for enhanced cooperation between the various stakeholders and for the inclusion of the civil society and NGOs working in that area in order to develop successful integration programs.

The recently adopted measures to lower the administrative requirements to access the labor market for refugees and persons granted provisional admission are a first and important step in this direction, moving from a mindset of control to a mindset of participation.

In this respect, the upcoming debate on the improvement of the status of provisional admission following a report by the Federal Council is of

crucial importance. There is a need for pragmatic and solution-oriented discussions on the topic of the integration of people in need of protection. Reality on the ground and facts have to feature more prominently in this debate and this should start with a dialogue with the people concerned rather than with an all-encompassing model of integration for this group. The perception that refugees and provisionally admitted people constitute a homogeneous group is, in my opinion, one of the fundamental errors in the whole integration debate. Integration is about individual participation in economic, social and cultural life and not about different groups that live together in Switzerland.

- 1 UNHCR 2013
- 2 Hainmueller et al. 2016
- 3 UNHCR 2014
- 4 Hainmueller et al. 2015
- 5 UNHCR 2014
- 6 Efonayi-Mäder and Ruedin
- 7 Goodall 2015
- 8 Costello and Kaytaz 2013

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