

UNHCR Agenda for the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

An Agenda for the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe



UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe

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Introduction

UNHCR considers the integration of refugees to be a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity and a corresponding readiness of the part of the host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse community. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees enumerates a range of social and economic rights that are geared towards the process of integration. These include freedom of movement, access to education and the labor market, access to public relief and assistance, including health facilities, the possibility of acquiring and disposing of property and the capacity to travel with valid travel and identity documents. Furthermore, in Article 34, it calls on States to facilitate integration and access to citizenship for refugees.

UNHCR recognizes the progress that has been made towards developing and implementing a range of policies and programs to facilitate different aspects of refugee integration in the countries under the responsibility of the UNHCR's Regional Representation for Central Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). It also acknowledges the increasing interest in the region - and, in the case of the Czech Republic, present involvement - in the selection, reception and integration of resettled refugees.

The Agenda for the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe in conjunction with the Note on the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe outline UNHCR's position on selected themes pertaining to refugee legal, economic and socio-cultural integration in light of currently prevailing conditions and realities in Central Europe.

UNHCR hopes that the Agenda for Integration together with the Note on the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe will serve as a reference framework for any review or evaluation of current integration arrangements in the RRCE region or the development of future government and other stakeholders' activities on the integration of persons in need of international protection including refugees arriving as part of resettlement programs.



1. Strengthening Partnerships among Key Stakeholders

Integration policies can only be effective if built on partnerships. These need to be underpinned by systems and structures that allow for coordination and ongoing dialogue between all key stakeholders involved in the phases of reception of asylum seekers and integration of refugees as well as in the provision of mainstream social and community services.

UNHCR promotes the development of inter-agency platforms which bring together all key actors including State institutions, local community and civil society stakeholders as well as refugees and their communities. These should be tasked with developing and implementing refugee specific integration strategies and services as well as reviewing mainstream social policies on their impact on the process of refugee integration. They should also be charged with developing evaluation tools and systematically monitoring the implementation of refugee integration policies and programs.

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2. A Needs-Based Assessment and Targeted Integration Measures

Refugees and holders of subsidiary protection status may have special needs and face particular challenges with regard to integration due to past experiences of persecution, flight and exile. Hence, they often need targeted/specialist services that address their specific needs and complement mainstream support services.

UNHCR considers that targeted integration measures for refugees can only be successful if they are part of a broader strategy that actively promotes equality and seeks to transform public institutions and the society at large by rendering them more open and flexible to respond to the challenges of increasing diversity. The Office encourages governments to position refugee integration measures within integration policies, programs and plans drawn up for migrants or EU nationals moving to countries in this region. Refugee integration measures should also form part of broader efforts to ensure protection from discrimination, equitable treatment, social inclusion and access to opportunities on the basis of equality for all.

3. Fostering Participation and Building Bridges with Local Communities

Integration is an interactive process involving refugees, nationals and the institutions of the receiving country. The end result is the creation of a society that is both diverse and open where people can be part of the community regardless of differences.

UNHCR recommends that participatory and community development approaches permeate all activities aimed at enhancing the capacity of refugees to integrate locally. To that end, the Office underlines the importance of engaging local communities, institutions and refugees alike in the design, implementation and evaluation of integration policies and programs. It also encourages the establishment of local level networks and specific projects that facilitate dialogue between refugee and local communities and enable them to work together in pursuit of common agendas and priorities.

4. Acknowledging the Links between the Reception and Integration Phases

Reception policies are more effective if they are guided by the potential longer term outcomes of the asylum process including the integration of those persons who are ultimately recognized to be in need of international protection.



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UNHCR recommends that State institutions acknowledge the impact of conditions of reception of asylum seekers and the length of asylum procedures on the integration of refugees into the broader society. Reception policies should be designed to minimize isolation and separation from receiving communities and to provide opportunities to asylum seekers at the earliest possible to develop their human potential and skills including through vocational or basic skills development.

5. A Secure Legal Status and Equal Access to Rights

A secure legal status and equal enjoyment of rights, services and programmes without discrimination are essential for the integration of refugees and persons with subsidiary protection.

UNHCR advocates that beneficiaries of international protection, whether Convention refugees, resettled refugees or persons granted a subsidiary or other humanitarian form of protection, are accorded equitable treatment and access to all rights and services necessary to facilitate their integration in the host country. These should include the right to family reunion and a secure legal status that is not subject to frequent reviews. The Office strongly encourages all governments to accord persons recognized to be in need of international protection the same rights and entitlements with regard to employment, social housing and other public services in parity with nationals of their country. Governments should also review the legal framework pertaining to the status of persons with subsidiary protection with the aim of addressing any obstacles to integration or to equitable treatment with refugees that might be inherent in current provisions.

6. Access to Safe, Secure and Affordable Housing

As well as being a fundamental human right, safe, secure and affordable housing plays a critical role in determining overall health and well-being and providing a base from which refugees can seek employment, re-establish family relations and make connections with the wider community.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Ensuring that refugees have early access to secure and affordable housing is a formidable challenge. In developing strategies or programs to address the housing needs of refugees, UNHCR notes the importance of coordinated action involving all relevant stakeholders including central government, local authorities, NGOs and community networks or groups. Beyond housing availability and the specific characteristics of national housing markets, the Office underlines the need to consider the broader integration potential of any areas where refugees might settle. This would involve an assessment of the local labor market conditions, employment and educational opportunities, community relations and attitudes and the availability of social services including schools, child-care centers and health facilities necessary for refugee integration.

7. Active Participation in the Economic Life of the Receiving Country

Employment is key to the integration of refugees and central to their participation into the broader society. In developing strategies or programs to facilitate refugee self-reliance and access to meaningful employment that is commensurate to refugees' skills, knowledge and aspirations, UNHCR notes the importance of partnership development and capacity building involving a range of employment actors including employment agencies, individual employers, employer associations, training providers and local community networks.

The Office further underlines the need for closely monitoring the implementation of legal provisions aimed at preventing discrimination and racism in the workplace. It supports the development of community level, targeted legal advice and employment counseling services that enable refugees to effectively exercise their rights to work and at work.

8. Participation through Education

Education is critical in facilitating refugee participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the refugee receiving country. In the case of refugee children and adolescents, it reinforces a sense of normality and routine into their lives while also being essential to their intellectual and psychological development.



PHOTO: IVAN GRIGOROV

UNHCR strongly recommends that governments review the conditions for the reception of asylum seekers to ensure age sensitivity. Targeted and specialized support should be provided to asylum seeking and refugee children and their families as early as possible upon arrival in the receiving countries. This should be geared towards helping refugee children to adjust to the educational system of the host country, acquire language skills and start redressing some of the effects of potentially disrupted education or intellectual or developmental delay due to past experiences of flight and exile. For refugees who have not completed a basic education, UNHCR underlines the importance of literacy programs by specialist educational institutions given the role of literacy as a necessary skill in itself as well as a foundation of other life skills.

9. Language Learning as a Path to Independence and Self-Reliance

Learning the language and having some knowledge of the receiving country are basic requirements for achieving independence and self sufficiency as well as becoming part of the local community. They are also means for refugees to regain a sense of security, dignity and self worth.

UNHCR recommends that governments and other stakeholders involve refugees in the planning, implementation and evaluation of learning activities that are of relevance to their everyday lives and needs as parents, consumers, citizens, or employees. They should also provide refugees with ongoing opportunities for language learning beyond the first year from status recognition including inter alia in conjunction with other activities such as vocational training, work placements or volunteering. The Office stresses the importance of adopting a flexible, age, gender and diversity sensitive approach to language training and cultural orientation that responds to individual needs.

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10. Monitoring and Evaluation of Integration Policies and Programmes

UNHCR recommends the development of methodologies and tools by governments in close consultation with UNHCR, NGOs and other stakeholders to guide, monitor and evaluate the implementation of integration policies and programmes with the aim of increasing their effectiveness and longer term impact.



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