

Improving access to the labour market for refugees in Cyprus

Key findings and recommendations

Executive summary

Employment is a core part of the refugee integration process: it not only provides an income, but also builds social networks, status and confidence, and enhances independence, as well as physical and mental health. Integration through employment can also contribute to host countries by boosting their working-age population and contributing to human capital, taxes and social income. Despite the demonstrable benefits of integration through employment for both refugees and host countries, significant barriers and gaps persist in European countries such as Cyprus.

Refugee protection mechanisms in particular remain weak. While a third National Action Plan (NAP) on integration is currently being drafted, 2015 was the last year in which a comprehensive policy was put together by the Cyprus government. As no monitoring or evaluation mechanisms had been put in place, evidence on the impact of prior NAPs (2010-12 and 2013-15) is limited. The lack of a solid integration policy has left many refugees struggling to find gainful unemployment, exposing them to much higher rates of homelessness, trafficking and labour exploitation.

In the absence of a comprehensive NAP, funding from European institutions has been the only avenue for third sector organisations and municipalities to implement integration projects. The local authorities are now more than ever involved in integration policies. However, they are faced with huge challenges as social policy in Cyprus is heavily centralised, leaving municipalities with no mandate and little resources to facilitate their own integration activities.

Integration through the labour market remains one of the more weakly developed and under-explored fields in Cyprus government policy. Yet, certain developments at the moment include the forthcoming NAP, impending reforms on the legislation governing local authorities, and the broad expertise offered by local NGOs working with and for migrants and refugees. These may provide the momentum for the challenge to be turned into an opportunity.

This policy brief presents research findings and provides recommendations to facilitate the successful integration of refugees in the labour market.

Methods and empirical research

GLIMER is informed by a combination of rigorous policy analysis, qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders, and secondary analysis. This policy brief is reliant on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from national and local government, as well as the third sector.

The GLIMER (Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees) project is jointly funded by JPI Urban Europe and Horizon 2020.

Bringing together researchers and practitioners from five lead institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Università della Calabria, Malmö Universitet and the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies – it researches how issues relating to governance impact displaced peoples' experiences of integration in contemporary Europe.

Project website: glimer.eu



Context

The ongoing absence of a comprehensive NAP on integration and the gaps in relevant policy reflect the fact that, when it comes to refugees, Cyprus is a country that prioritises border security and redistribution over integration.

Following the financial crisis of 2013, xenophobic discourse increased in both political rhetoric and the media, targeting migrants and asylum-seekers in particular, spreading falsehoods such as that they disproportionately benefit from welfare allowances and health care services. This discourse has had a knock-on effect on both the creation as well as the implementation of public policy.

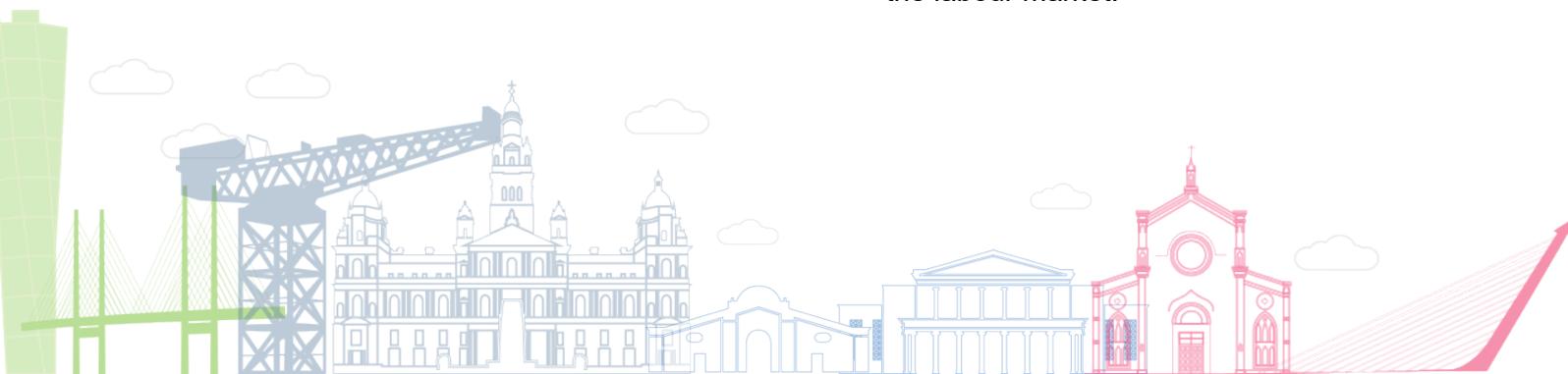
The access of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) to the Cyprus labour market depends very much on

their legal status and financial situation. At one end of the spectrum, asylum seekers are forced to work in low-skilled, low-paid jobs regardless of the qualifications they hold. At the other end, economic migrants such as employees of multinational companies face no restriction in their access to the labour market. High-net-worth investors, enjoy full rights to live and work in Cyprus through the ongoing and controversial Cyprus citizenship-by-investment schemes. Current integration policies have therefore created a two-tier system with regards to the labour market. This has created an unfavourable integration environment for asylum seekers and other displaced migrants. As such, the need to better integrate refugees and asylum seekers into the local labour market has yet to be addressed.

Findings

Policy framework

1. In the absence of a NAP, project based funding from European institutions remains the only avenue for third sector organisations and local authorities to implement integration projects.
2. Social policymaking is centralised, which excludes municipalities from having a say in key decisions around integration policies. Funding is also an issue: The central government does not provide additional funding for integration actions. This can only be described as a lost opportunity, considering that local authorities are those closest to citizens and therefore often best placed to assess displaced migrants' integration needs.
3. The development of screening mechanisms to assess refugees' qualifications has been wholly absent from national policy, causing negative consequences for refugees' quality of life, as well as for the local economy, which fails to benefit from their talents and expertise across a wide spectrum of professions.
4. Gender blind integration policies do not cater to the specific needs of women displaced migrants in Cyprus. This is very problematic as fewer labour market opportunities lead to weaker social integration. Women's exclusion is greatly exacerbated by the lack of public childcare services. Women refugees face multiple forms of discrimination when attempting to integrate into the labour market.



Employability services

5. The waiting time between submitting an asylum application and being able to legally look for work was recently reduced from six months to one. Although this was meant to ease access to the labour market for asylum seekers, local stakeholders reported that, due to the way the system is set up, this change effectively exacerbated administrative obstacles in accessing material assistance, as opposed to an increase in asylum seekers engaging in employment.
6. A holistic approach is missing: while NGOs have extensive experience and expertise with front line services their role is not given due importance in national policymaking. Nevertheless, the third sector continues to work in parallel to the state, with significant third sector initiatives currently being implemented to help refugees access the Cyprus labour market.

Private sector

7. Discrimination and stereotyping are negatively affecting labour market integration. Racist incidents—both overt and covert—were noted in the course of conducting the GLIMER research. Many interviewees said that racism is a clear barrier in displaced migrants accessing the private sector on equal terms.

Vocational training

8. Several EU-funded projects provide vocational training and skills-building courses for migrants in Cyprus, mainly implemented by organisations such as NGOs and universities. Vocational training and the building of soft skills can be enormously beneficial to refugees and asylum seekers. That said, such trainings are not usually linked to employment opportunities, thus greatly weakening their impact.

Recommendations

These policy recommendations are designed to improve labour access for refugees in Cyprus. They are based on the findings of the GLIMER research as a whole, which include our above local findings.

- I. **Radical changes to the legislation governing refugees in Cyprus.** Integration policies cannot work if unsupported by key amendments to the refugee legislation, which does not currently permit asylum seekers into the full spectrum of the labour market.
- II. **Decentralisation of policymaking powers.** In short, putting more competence in the hands of local authorities where these are better placed to design and implement social policies for asylum seekers and refugees.
- III. **Implementation of a comprehensive NAP** on integration, which should include robust indicators to measure success (both short- and long-term evaluation).
- IV. **Re-allocation of existing European funds towards integration through employment.** This is a key aspect of integration. Vocational training should be linked with job placement and job services should cater to the needs of different categories of refugees. One size does not fit all.



- V. **The Human Recourses Development Agency** should adapt its successful vocational training schemes to refugees, in order to meet their specific social and linguistic needs.
- VI. **Ensure gender mainstreaming** of the activities in the forthcoming NAP as well as in integration policy in general. As the research has shown, women face multiple forms of discrimination and experience the impact of policies differently. Therefore, gender mainstreaming should be built into every level of policymaking.
- VII. **Labour market integration should go hand in hand with social integration.** Free and accessible childcare, better access to public transportation, language training and social

networks are necessary for the successful integration of refugees in the labour market and more generally in local society.

- VIII. **A shift in public discourse.** We must change the narrative around refugees as a threat to society and engender an evidence based discussion of the needs of vulnerable people.

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This policy brief is supported by our full report into labour market integration in Cyprus, available at: glimer.eu/outputs | Further enquires: michaelagh.broadbent@ed.ac.uk

