



Can the social economy help refugees access jobs?

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**Can the social economy help refugees
access jobs?**

Christine Langenbucher

Hello, and welcome to OECD podcasts. I'm Christine Langenbucher, Head of Unit for Local Employment and Skills Policies in the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities. Today we're going to talk about how the social and solidarity economy can fast track the labour market integration of refugees and migrants.

So why is this so important? According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 100 million people are forcibly displaced in 2022. With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Europe has seen the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War is more than 6 million people fleeing Ukraine, a big challenge for refugee protection and reception systems. And clearly something public services cannot stem on their own. This is where the social and solidarity economy steps in and steps up to both support governments and fill gaps and public support.

Well, how does the social economy help refugees access to labour market? To discuss these issues I am pleased to be joined by Anne Kjaer-Bathel who's co-founder and CEO of ReDI School of Digital Integration from Berlin, Germany, and Thomas Liebig, Principal Administrator in the OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, where he's heading up the work on migrant integration. Anne, Thomas, great to have you here. And welcome to OECD podcasts. Before we turn to our social entrepreneur, Anne, let's start with Thomas. There's many different aspects of migrant integration versus discussing. For today we'll focus on labour market integration. What are the challenges here?

Thomas Liebig

Yeah, thank you, Christine. Great to be here with you today. Yes, when we look at the labour market integration of refugees, it's very clear that they face specific vulnerabilities that other migrant groups don't face. Many of which have due to the forced nature of the displacement, right, they haven't chosen to be going on to wherever you're in, but they have been forced to that's the nature of an of a refugee. And so clearly, they often arrive without any links to the host country, they don't have a job. They have often actually good qualification from the origin country. But they were not able to put it in practice for a long time, particularly when you look when you look at long term conflict, as we as we have been facing in Afghanistan, Syria, and some, some of the African countries where a lot of asylum seekers and refugees are coming from.

And, and if they were able to put them into their skills into use, it wasn't a very different context. So when they arrive at the labour market, the question is how you transfer that, that those skills and knowledge how do you connect them with employers. And, and if you look at the broader picture, then you see that in the past, employment track record of refugees has not been great, particularly in Europe, but more recent refugees have actually fared much better. And there's a number of reasons for that. First of all, because more recent refugees actually more educated than previous refugee arrivals. Secondly, because the labour markets are generally now in a more favourable situation than previously the case. So there's more job opportunities out for them. And, thirdly, also, because clearly, integration policies are also picking up. And we see actually a lot of blossoming of, of integration activities. It's not only the state who does it all, but it's also a lot of, of other social economy, stakeholders, and others

who are doing that. And anteriorly we see a lot of activities going on, notably in some of the big cities, where, where refugees are strongly concentrated.

Christine Langenbucher

Thank you, Thomas. And I think this is exactly where the ReDI school story began large flows of refugees arriving in big cities and fact in the case of ReDI school, the starting point was Berlin, in Germany, but now it's actually many more cities in Europe. So what is ReDI school about?

Anne Kjaer-Bathel

I think the best way to explain what we're doing is really, to start by a story. So in 2015, like so many other people, I was watching the news and seeing that there was such a big inflow of people arriving in Germany.

So many young people similar to me in Germany, I'm Danish, I was also in Berlin. So I was wondering, what can I do to make a difference to those who are arriving. And I was in a refugee camp where I met a young man called Mohammed who was a refugee from Iraq, who was telling me that he was a computer scientist educated from the university. But he didn't have a laptop. So he couldn't continue programming. And the tech sector is moving so fast that if you don't use it, you lose it. They say, so I thought, how can this be Germany is absolutely desperate for tech talents. Here's a young tech talent. What piece of infrastructure seems to be missing here that we can create a win-win situation where Mohammed gets into a tech job, the tech industry gets a Mohammed or another talent to come in to do the job. And that's how ReDI school really started. So we are Tech school teaching refugees, migrants, and marginalised locals as well all kinds of tech skills. So we have high end tech education, where we're teaching data science, we're teaching coding, cloud computing, cybersecurity, very advanced tech skills. And on the other side, we also teaching digital literacy. So there are people who are arriving in Germany, Denmark, or Sweden, who don't know how to use a laptop, and they need to be picked up because our societies are becoming more and more digital. And if you can't access online banking, then you will be really outside of the system even more than you already were in the beginning. So ready school now has a portfolio of 109 different courses. So it's quite diverse.

Thomas Liebig

If I may ask a question. When you look at the situation of the Ukrainians, and Germany has taken a lot, probably now, it's probably past Poland as the most important destination country of refugees from Ukraine, and many of them have actually some tech background from the first data that we have some figures suggests about 10%. So clearly, the Ukraine is a highly digitalised country. So what are you? What are some of the activities that you're doing for that group? And do you see any specific challenges? Or like, what do they do better? Or worse? And, and how do you connect that?

Anne Kjaer-Bathel

So when the situation in Ukraine started escalating, we of course, asked ourselves, what can we do to support and what we always do at ReDI school is co creation. So we invited the people we already knew

who were Ukrainians already in Germany, to come together with us meeting with some of the first arrivals? Who were all mostly women, to really sit down and do brainstorming to figure out what do you need? When do you have time? What kind of support do you need? And from that, within, I would say about three weeks, we were able to create the first pilot project where we were teaching high end tech skills. And the biggest challenge that we could see was language, because normally we either teach in German, or we teach in English. And when we were asking the people arriving from Ukraine, what their language skills were and what they feel comfortable learning in, the answer was really either Ukrainian or Russian. So we were thinking, well, how do we manage this? How can we teach cybersecurity which was one of the insights that they really, really wanted. So together with our partner, Cisco, we actually did one cybersecurity course where the teacher was teaching in English. And then we had a machine doing translation in real time. Of course, it's not 100% accurate, but it was 90% accurate, maybe. And that was enough for them to really understand what they were learning. So the way that we were able to face this language challenge was, in the case of our partner, Cisco, we were teaching cybersecurity. And we were using machines to do the actual translation. And anyone who has seen machine direct translation know that it's not 100% accurate. But it was accurate enough that our students could understand what the teacher was saying. And when it came to actual certification, they could do it online in either Ukrainian or Russian. So that was our way of just being very open and playful, and try to figure out what works. And then try to see how can we learn from that? How can we improve our courses so that in the second implementation, the courses would become better, but not thinking that the first time will be perfect, it was more important for us to pick up speed.

Christine Langenbucher

That's such an amazing story. And it always gives me shivers. And I think ReDI is a real success story. I think the tech sector can be really lucky to have you. But in fact, there's 1000s of other social economy organisations out there in OECD countries that make a real difference to refugees lives on a daily basis. And I think governments and other, whether at the local or national level, could benefit more often from organisations like yours, if they work with them from a very early stage. And this is, in fact, focus of new OECD research, which finds the added value from working with the social economy derives from three main factors. And I think we've touched upon all of those already now. The first would be how social economy offers responsive and innovative solutions. I think one of the reasons why it's innovative, it's working, for example, this volunteers, and this is what ready does it's tissues of volunteers. Innovation of often actually stems from collaboration at a local level, with either a wide range of partners or new partners. And in fact, like the tech industry, I mean, who would have thought of them, right?

The second is the suit like socially economies, holistic and people-centered approach. And I think I know you said it all. It's this idea of co-creation. And I know you often say it's, you know, it's not about talking about refugees, it's talking with them. And I think this is really an important point.

And finally, there's also the locally rooted governance models, you haven't given it away, but in fact, ReDI school operates in nine different cities across Europe. And then yet, every ReDI school is different, because every school caters to the local needs, the needs of the local communities. And I think this is what a lot of social economy organisations can bring to the table, loads of great stuff. And then many of

these organisations struggle on a daily basis to actually provide this amazing support for refugees and other migrants. And this is the point where I'd like to turn to our listeners, many of whom are policy makers and leaders in cities. Anne, if there was one message you could give to them today, what would it be?

Anne Kjaer-Bathel

I guess, I have a lot of ideas. But if I had to just say one thing, it would be, have a look at the model of how ReDI school is working with the municipality of Munich, because it's extremely outcome oriented. And it's extremely non bureaucratic, which is a rare thing to have the combination of the two. But for the last five years, we have been working with the municipality in a public private partnership model that has also won the Euro cities award. So it has been externally evaluated. And this is workable. And it's also scalable. And this is what we would love to do with many more municipalities across Europe.

Christine Langenbucher

Okay, so Munich is the place to look. Thomas, I will hand over to you for some final observations.

Thomas Liebig

Yeah, thanks. No, very interesting initiative. And I think it's, it's shown a couple of things. First of all, you need an idea, obviously. But it also needs to be scalable and transferable. And I think you've shown that in your, in your approach, but by implementing it in other in other cities, that and I think also that, that has a lot of future and that public private partnership, the state cannot do it alone. But it cannot be all on the private either. So it must be some kind of co-operation. And that's actually one of the most fascinating observations for me and integration policy in recent years, that there's a bit of a convergence of policies at the highest level, the countries that previously used to do it all by themselves. And I think Sweden is a good example, have a lot more NGO, public, private, or social economy initiatives that are not completely only the state, blossoming and a lot of initiative on that end, and in other countries where there's been completely on the private side, for example, in North America, we see a lot more initiatives also at, at the state level at from the government side. So we see a bit of a convergence there. And I think these public private partnerships, that's precisely what's happening. And the final observation at the phone are very interesting because everybody thinks in the tech industry, language doesn't matter. Everybody speaks English. And that's it. And you have your experience and I find it very fascinating actually shown that the language is an issue isn't everywhere. And it's important to be aware of that and that its challenges should not be underestimated.

Christine Langenbucher

Thank you so much, Thomas. I think that's unfortunately all the time we've got for today. Thank you so much. Anne, Thomas, a real pleasure to have you with us today. All the best for ready school and be cube following you, Thomas, it's always good to talk to you about integration policies.

Listeners, if you're interested in finding out more, check out the OECD webpage www.oecd.org. For more information on the social and solidarity economy, as well as migration policies, and on bringing

these two topics together, check out our new paper called “The social and solidarity economy as a partner along the refugee journey”.

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