

Introduction

Integrating Immigrants: Finding the Right Policy Mix to Tackle a Governance Problem

by

Sylvain Giguère

The issue of integrating migrants, their families and their descendants can be assimilated to two governance issues. There is a clear mismatch between immigration and integration policies in many countries, with policies to manage immigration rarely being accompanied by strong policies to support integration. Secondly, integrating immigrants is a multifaceted issue which cuts across policy areas, creating a collective action problem and a lack of effective public sector action. While local stakeholders such as NGOs can attempt to fill the gaps in public services, this often leads to increased fragmentation at the local level. In order to better tackle the barriers facing immigrants, it may ultimately be more important to increase flexibility in the management of mainstream policies relating to the issue of labour market integration (namely training and education, labour market policy and economic development) rather than create new initiatives and partnerships locally.

One of the most critical issues to be tackled by our societies today

Flows of migrant workers are on a steady increase. Close to three million long-term migrants enter OECD countries every year, not counting temporary and illegal migrants, who are also on the rise (OECD, 2006a). Like capital, labour is freer to move than before, as borders are abolished and restrictions reduced in many parts of the world. And like capital, which seeks profit opportunities across the globe, workers are looking for places where they can increase their standard of living. The power of attraction exerted by advanced economies is strong, enhanced by widespread access to communications technologies and media which project prospects of ease and prosperity. Stricter measures taken in some countries to prevent illegal immigration seem not to discourage many people from taking their chance of a better life.

Immigration offers a number of clear benefits to advanced economies. Given the ageing of the population resulting from low birth rates, the natural growth of the population in many OECD countries is too low to ensure the maintenance of current standards of living in the foreseeable future. In many countries, a number of sectors of the economy are already lacking the labour and the skills they need in order to meet demand. Labour is needed to ensure the direct delivery of services to the population, and these pressures are bound to increase in line with the changing demand for workers in health services and care for the elderly which will accompany demographic change. Immigration fosters the renewal of societies and of the economy, boosts innovation and brings news ideas. As a result, countries, regions and companies are competing for workers on a world scale.

However, while there are many positive drivers towards immigration, *integration* is today a source of concern. The various waves of immigrants attracted by the booming advanced economies after the Second World War and up until the 1980s were integrated relatively smoothly into the labour market in receiving societies, at least on a temporary basis. However, in many countries, the labour market situation of immigrants started to deteriorate in the 1990s, with their rates of unemployment superseding that of the native population. Immigrants are today relatively more exposed to long-term unemployment and social exclusion. Even in countries where migrants have an employment rate similar to that of the native population, immigrants are more likely to suffer from poorer working conditions and temporary employment. A lack of integration not only affects the low skilled but also

increasingly the highly skilled (OECD 2006a), partly reflecting difficulties associated with the recognition of qualifications overseas.

What is more, integration problems that at first glance seemed to apply only to new waves of immigrants appear to also be experienced by second or third generations. Indeed in certain countries, it can be argued that second and third generations are less integrated in receiving societies than their parents who migrated between the 1950s and the 1970s. A recent OECD study found that many developed countries are failing to help children of immigrant families integrate into society through education, with immigrant children lagging more than two years behind their native counterparts in school performance (OECD, 2006b). This has come as a surprise to the many who believed that the offspring of immigrant families born in the host country would not face significant obstacles of integration, having received education in the host country and speaking the language of the majority of the population.

As the population facing problems integrating into the labour market widens, the problem of integration itself becomes more complex. Immigrants suffering from poverty as a result of labour market exclusion can become concentrated in areas of low housing cost, which are often isolated from employment opportunities. In more extreme cases, immigrants become “ghettoised” in areas of high deprivation, with associated high rates of worklessness, high school drop out rates and problems of disaffection. Issues associated with social and economic exclusion in this case form a set of additional barriers for immigrants seeking to access the labour market.

The problem of integration, as complex as it may have become, must be addressed now. This is an issue that concerns the social cohesion of our societies as well as the functioning of the economy. Its urgency is derived both from the recorded decline in integration outcomes, and the increasing importance being given to immigration in the context of gloomy forecasts of population decline. The population in developed countries as a whole is expected to remain unchanged until 2050, with several countries incurring a decline, while the population in many less developed countries is expected to double or triple (United Nations, 2004).

A double governance problem

The problem of the integration of migrants, their families and their descendants can be assimilated to two governance issues. The first is the mismatch between immigration and integration policies. The second is the multifaceted nature of integration.

A policy gap

There is a clear mismatch between immigration and integration policies in many countries, with policies to manage immigration rarely being accompanied by strong policies to support integration. While most countries provide specialised support to immigrants on arrival, particularly language training, after this initial period labour market integration is generally felt to be the responsibility of mainstream labour market policies.

The goal of labour market policy is to ensure the efficiency of labour markets and to increase the productivity of workers. Labour market policy usually has two components: integration into the labour market and the development of the employability of the labour force. Programmes to fulfil these purposes include placement, counselling, jobs subsidies to provide work experience, vocational training and assistance to self-employment. Migrants can access these services as anybody else if they fulfil the respective eligibility criteria.

Unfortunately mainstream labour market programmes do not always significantly help migrants to access the labour market. This is due to specific obstacles that migrants face: lack of local referees and work experience, lack of knowledge about the value of qualifications, lack of familiarity with local social networks, lack of language skills. In addition, certain migrants will have failed to see the qualifications obtained in their native country recognised, and find it difficult to make the right decisions to adapt their skills to local needs. Employment services, not well equipped to assess the value of foreign qualifications and to profile the capacities of the migrant, find it difficult to provide the right advice.

The transition from a native to a foreign labour market can be a lengthy one. During this process of trial and error, motivation can deteriorate while skills depreciate. Financial pressures may encourage migrants to take the most immediately available and accessible jobs to ensure a living, even if these jobs are not at a level commensurate with their skills and experience. Clearly skills can be lost during this process. When this happens, a loss is incurred for society as a whole: it is a loss for the receiving country as well as to the individual and the sending country. Moreover, by harming the migrant's standards of living, it may have longer term consequences for the prospects of integration for her/his family and descendants.

A coordination problem

The second governance problem relates to issues of coordination. As identified above, immigrants and their offspring often face multiple barriers to the labour market. Solutions require actions to be taken in areas as diverse as education, vocational training, economic development, social assistance,

health care and security. An integrated approach is needed, involving cross-sector policy coordination and strategic planning. In particular, when new immigrants and their offspring become concentrated in areas of urban deprivation they may face social and economic problems which have become embedded over a long period of time. Only an intensive and long term coordinated action will be able to address these issues successfully.

Yet, such coordination is not an easy task for public policy. The search for competitive advantages that is a key driver of progress in our globalised economies has had a significant impact on the way public policy is designed and implemented. Like the private sector, public services are run today following strict efficiency principles. Public services are managed by objectives, which means that performance is evaluated on their attainment of predetermined targets. To achieve those targets, government agencies often contract out to private service providers and non-profit organisations. In addition, a number of policy responsibilities are devolved to regional or local authorities, which often carry out their own complementary programmes (in the area of social or employment policy for example). As a result, public policy overall is delivered through a complex set of organisations operating at various levels and linked through various bilateral mechanisms. Coordination or strategic orientation is often what is said to be lacking in this system.

The fact that responsibility for immigrant integration falls across several government departments, in addition to being reliant on bringing together services which have been contracted out and delegated to others, raises a collective action problem. As the public departments working in the field become aware that policies fail because a complex situation demands a coordinated response, all have the possibility to initiate an action, propose a diagnosis, establish collaborative relationships, build a network and lead a process of strategic planning aimed at solving the local problem identified. However, there are costs associated with such an exercise. Clearly, it costs time to organise an effective partnership to tackle a complex issue such as the integration of immigrants. The exercise would involve establishing relationships with organisations of different administrative culture (municipalities, branches of the national public service, business organisations, civil society organisations), meaning that significant attention may need to be devoted to communication and governance issues. The agencies working in different policy areas (training, social assistance, economic development) pursue different agendas each with their own priorities. Some agencies may in addition be reluctant to be involved in tackling a politically-sensitive issue through an activity that may fail to bring positive results. At the same time, as the gains from collective action are likely to benefit all who are involved, there are limited incentives for any one department to take an active role and lead the process. Thus there are obvious disincentives to launch an

action, collective or not. The outcome is often a lack of public sector activity, which is obviously suboptimal for society as a whole.

Local responses

What is common to these two governance problems undermining the integration of immigrants and their families in receiving societies is that responses have been provided at the local level. Local initiatives have been taken to fill the gap between migration and integration, complementing labour market policy in various ways; others have targeted the multifaceted barriers to the labour market encountered by immigrants and their descendants by encouraging co-ordinated action on the basis of a unified strategy. What can be learned from these initiatives? Are there mechanisms which have been piloted by local stakeholders that could also be used by government? What are the lessons learnt on how to tackle the challenges posed by the failure to integrate immigrants and their offspring?

It is in order to answer such questions, that the OECD has carried out this study on the local integration of immigrants in the labour market. The local initiatives carried out, the mechanisms, instruments and governance mechanisms they use, and their results contain information which can only benefit the current policy debate on this critical issue, as a complement to national level statistical and policy analysis.¹

The project selected a number of local initiatives in five volunteering countries (Canada, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom²) and carried out field examinations based on a methodological framework designed to extract lessons from local practices. The initiatives selected are as diversified as possible in order to reflect the breadth of issues faced on the ground. Actions range from facilitating the transition from school to work for young immigrants and providing vocational training, to delivering services to refugees, fighting discrimination and building social networks.

Combining the forces, developing tools

The study shows that the gap between migration and integration *can* be filled. However, for this to happen, a combination of actions at both central and local level is required. The examination of local practices reveals that there are certain mechanisms that seem to be essential in any successful policy initiatives to integrate immigrants and their families. One of them is the gathering and analysis of information on the local labour market, on the structure of the labour demand and of skills shortages in relation to the migrant population. Any effective action needs to be based on this information analysed locally. Another mechanism is intermediation between migrant groups and employers, employment services and vocational training

organisations to link the demand with the supply of labour. Both these actions are determinant in explaining if a policy initiative is successful or not in delivering long term employment outcomes for immigrants at a level commensurate with their skills.

Yet, such actions have been used in too few places, and the means put at their disposal insufficient. The challenge for government is to find ways to support these relatively resource intensive mechanisms and to incorporate them into broader policy initiatives. This can be achieved not only by providing financial support to local labour market intelligence and intermediation but also by providing analytical tools that the market fails to provide and that can help local stakeholders conduct effective actions. “Job profiles” are one such tool that can help stakeholders – employers, employment services, consultants, community colleges and the immigrant themselves – make the right decisions. These profiles help to make the labour market more transparent by providing concrete information on the various skills required for particular jobs, and approximating the level of competence required for each of them. Such information is helpful in the preparation of skills assessment tests that can be used by employers, assisted by a local intermediary, to identify whether migrant workers are suited to a job. This is particularly useful where migrants do not have local references and their previous qualifications are not recognised. Where this information is made more broadly accessible, it can also help migrants to nurture the right expectations when deciding to emigrate and make appropriate qualifications decisions.

Increasing the flexibility of mainstream policies

While progress is slowly being made in combining public sector actions at national and local levels and developing effective policy mechanisms, a wide variety of other actors have undertaken to play a role in making up for the lack of effective actions by the public services. A whole range of non profit organisations, notably, provide services to immigrants and ethnic groups. Most of these services can be grouped into two categories: i) personal and skills development; and ii) access and networks. The first category of services aims to complement the services provided by government. They comprise language courses, vocational training, and courses to foster acculturation. These activities are sometimes tailored to ethnic groups and supported by individual mentoring and assistance. They are strengthened by the non-profit organisations' efforts to reach the groups most remote from the labour market. The second category of services aims to provide better linkages between migrant communities and other stakeholders (government agencies, employment organisations, non-government organisations) and enhance access to the programmes available. They serve as advocacy organisations and

lobby for new programmes or changes to be brought to public programmes to better suit the needs of the immigrants and their offspring. They support anti-discriminatory measures and wage campaigns to encourage employers to welcome immigrants. Other activities include the stimulation of networks for hard-to-reach groups and the building of capacity for self-organisation and representation.

While both categories of initiative may help to meet the needs of the target group and influence the implementation of mainstream programmes, the sheer number of local initiatives contributes to the further fragmentation of the local policy environment. Initiatives are launched in all policy areas: social inclusion, community development, entrepreneurship assistance, education and training. These services are often relatively small scale, linked to a limited target group and delivered in a single location. Organisations often have a low critical mass and duplicate what other organisation or public services do. They have few resources to invest in their own training to enhance their capacities. Their expertise in the local labour market and their links with the employment services are especially weak. Though initiatives are sometimes organised in the form of a relatively inclusive partnerships, they are rarely genuinely able to coordinate relevant policy areas.

This is by no means a failure specific to organisations dealing with migrant-related issues. Quite on the contrary this is a shortcoming of much action taken locally, especially where community-based organisations play a strong role. In a number of local areas, area-based partnerships have been set up to attempt to tackle the challenges posed by fragmentation of employment and economic development policy, but these do not always have considerable success if not accompanied by other policy measures. As the OECD Study on Local Partnerships made clear, the establishment of area-based partnerships is not a sufficient condition for policy co-ordination. Partnerships have on average a marginal impact on the capacity for services to join forces and take an integrated approach to local problems. Problems include poor accountability relationships that limit inter-organisational commitment and strict performance management requirements that encourage individual agencies and organisations to take a narrow approach to policy implementation as seen above. To be in a position to have an impact on local governance – and to influence policy co-ordination, adaptation to local needs and participation of business and civil society in the shaping of measures – partnerships need to be accompanied by mechanisms to foster the convergence of policy goals at the national level, increase flexibility in the policy management framework and strengthen the accountability of partnerships in three ways : between the members, between the representatives and their organisations and to the public (OECD, 2001, 2004).

In order to tackle the barriers that immigrants and their descendants face, it may therefore be more critical to increase flexibility in the management of policies developed at the national level relating to the issue of labour market integration (namely training and education, labour market policy and economic development) rather than generating new policy initiatives and establishing new providers and new partnerships at the local level. Training and labour market policy must be tailored to the needs of the local population, including migrants. If information on the local labour market and on the skills held by migrant groups is properly gathered and analysed, this is a highly feasible task. Flexibility is required to link employment services with current business needs. It is important to articulate labour demand and to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of sectors, and to develop labour market and training actions accordingly, with the involvement of the business community as well as economic development agencies. Conversely the opportunities offered by immigration should feature directly in any strategic planning exercise on economic development issues. Mechanisms which foster skills upgrading and promote career progression opportunities for migrants already in employment (see for example OECD 2006c) are also crucial as they reduce the time migrants are forced to spend outside the labour market in re-training.

The integration of immigrants and their offspring is an issue in which all actors, at local and national levels, have an interest in tackling with success. It is a complex and challenging policy area, as integration involves a number of interrelated issues, however it is by no means impossible to achieve. The success of the exercise depends on the quality and effectiveness of the mechanisms implemented and their appropriateness to the local labour market. It requires political courage, and a willingness to address some complex administrative issues in addition to policy issues. Central government needs to trust local organisations, but at the same time give concrete guidance, build capacity and monitor policy outcomes. A good mix of local and national actions is what will make a difference.

Notes

1. The study was carried out under the supervision of the Directing Committee on Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED), in co-operation with the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee (ELSAC) and its Working Party on Migration.
2. Each study involved fieldwork by OECD staff and international experts, where discussions with local, regional and national policy makers were accompanied by visits to local initiatives in case study regions. While four of the case studies analysed at least three localities, in the United Kingdom, greater focus was given to London. The initial findings of the study were debated at an international

conference organised by the OECD LEED Programme and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York on 15th December 2005, "From Immigration to Integration: Lessons Drawn from Local Responses", attended by leaders and directors of major United States workforce training programmes, community development organisations, unions, foundations, and community colleges, as well as academics, and state and local political leadership.

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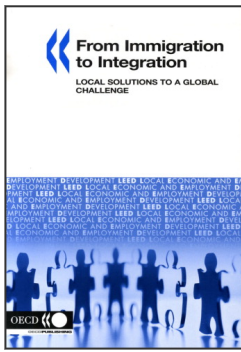
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