



Key findings on the International Conference about effectiveness on integration activities for refugees and asylum seekers in March 2019, Riga / Latvia

“IntegRIGAtion: Humanity as integration tool”

Summary of the conference:

An international conference was held in Riga, the capital of a Baltic country Latvia on 27 March 2019. The conference was followed by a study visit to some of the key institutions of Latvia that play major roles in shaping up the social integration process of the Refugees and Asylum Seekers (RAS). The entire programme was arranged and well organized by Latvian Red Cross under the European Union (EU) funded AVAIL (Amplifying the Voices of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Integration and Life Skills) programme, coordinated by the British Red Cross, in partnership with Italian Red Cross, Irish Red Cross, and International Red Cross Federation.

The conference was marked by the presence of colleagues from different yet relevant Red Cross societies, key government officials of Latvian administration, members of different civil society organizations, and representatives of UN agencies. Presence of some refugees in the entire conference has added a great value to the outcomes of the discussion.

During the conference, Latvian Red Cross invited three (3) refugees, who narrated their own stories in the country of Asylum, i.e. in Latvia. Their stories not only reflected the ultimate success in integration into Latvian society but also voiced their immense struggle to reach to their ultimate goal. This session played a great role in conveying an overall impression on the difference between expectations level of refugees and the actual scenario.

In the conference, there was Regional Representation from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and they have underlined the perspective of UNHCR on integration in Baltic States. This thorough presentation was enriched with the statistical figures, focusing the status of AMIF fund in different EU countries. Also, concentration was given on the current integration process of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Estonia is in better position than the other two countries in ensuring the sustainability in integration process, whereas Latvia and Lithuania have still a long way to make before making the entire integration system a sustainable one.

In the conference, Italian, Latvian and German Red Cross had made presentations on the integration activities as a tool for inclusion in their own respective societies.

The British Red Cross made a presentation, on the importance of the involvement of host communities and other asylum seekers in ensuring successful refugee integration process in UK.

After all the presentations were made, a panel discussion was held to engage the participants on the key issues of integration and challenges endured during the implementation of integration activities. This brief panel discussion focused on channelling the best practices of the representative countries in context of Latvian integration system.

Study visits:



The study visit in different key institutions of Latvia, involved in the RAS integration process turned out to be as an insightful outcome. The visit included a thorough tour in the one and only Asylum Seeker Centre for the RAS in Latvia- “Mucenieki”, located in Ropazi municipality (40 kilometre distance from Riga). Before that, the group met with the representatives of Ropazi Municipality to get an approximate idea on their mode of operation in managing the RAS and their experience in the RAS integration in local society.

Afterwards in Mucenieki, the group observed the services available for the RAS during their asylum process. They also gave a brief idea on the buddy program and presentation of the Latvian Red Cross service of social workers and social mentors as support to RAS.

The study tour ended with the visit in the Riga Secondary School no 93 which is renowned amongst the RAS, as many of the refugee children are attending this school and this school has a special support program for RAS education. The teachers had detailed out the current situation of the refugee children in the school.

Analysis on the overall Latvian Social Integration Process:

a. Social Integration in Latvian context:

Latvia, one of the distinguished Baltic countries, has a very little history of immigration and up until 2015 they faced no situation of entertaining asylum requests in large amount. Thus, the refugees lack community connections and there are very few scope of jobs for the RAS. Under the agreement of 2015 to share the responsibility of 160,000 refugees between the EU member states, Latvia has shown generosity in receiving 531 refugees over the course of 2 years: 481 persons from Italy and Greece, and 50 persons from third countries. Unfortunately, most of the refugees that received asylum in Latvia have left the country, and most of the refugees went on to try their luck in Germany. But in most of the cases the forward-migration westwards turns out to be a failure as they won't receive social benefits, cannot apply for work or reside. Finally they are sent back to the first country of asylum.

b. Services available in Mucenieki:

After arriving at the Mucenieki reception complex, AS are assigned a social mentor that will assist in integrating into the Latvian society. Latvian Red Cross is the pioneer in running this social mentorship programme. These mentors help them with their daily activities and help them learn the Latvian language, culture, and social norms. The mentor stays with the AS for one year and multiple AS, e.g. families, will have one mentor assigned.

People who are legally recognized as refugees usually stay at Mucenieki for an extra four weeks. During that time they deal with the formalities, like forming documents, opening a bank account, and other things. They usually leave Mucenieki a month after the recognition as a refugee.

Buddy programme is also one of the attractions of Mucenieki, run and coordinated by Latvian Red Cross but the challenges are also visible here in this programme, as not many community members are found to continue this Buddy Programme regularly.



c. Available support for the RAS to make them 'local':

In Latvia duration of support for local integration is- 3 months before and 12 months after status is granted. This is a very narrowly tailored duration which is not enough to meet the humanitarian needs of the refugees in an unfamiliar society. The daily payment for the individual refugees is 3 euros a day while living at reception centre. Besides that, they are also provided with accommodation in reception centre and some basic NFI (Non-food items) which is given in weekly basis. When receiving an asylum status, they have to move out of the shelter and have to find an accommodation. But with the monthly benefit payment of 256 euros, or 76 euros for those under 18, it is rather hard to find an accommodation and cover costs of living.

d. Challenges faced during the integration process:

The challenges faced by the RAS are of multi-fold. Some of the key challenges as highlighted by the Latvian Red Cross are as followed:

- i. Language acquisition, especially for the elderly RAS
- ii. Limited, if not at all, job market for the RAS
- iii. No accreditation of previous education/skills of RAS in Latvian context
- iv. Shortage of community
- v. Short duration of the cultural orientation and financial support by the government
- vi. Comparatively cold weather
- vii. Financial difficulties and inadequate support by the government
- viii. Difficulties to find adequate work
- ix. Not equal socioeconomic rights for beneficiaries of international protection

As discussed during the conference and observed during the study visit, the key factor to be counted as the main challenge in successful integration of RAS is lack of expertise in Latvian language. This is both a practical and formal issue. At a formal level, access to certain professions requires defined levels of Latvian language fluency. There is a language training programme at Mucenieki, but this training is very basic and is insufficient for a person who wishes to work in Latvia. However, there are some additional language courses for fees, which can partly be financed by the state.

e. Situation of the RAS who are forced to return to Latvia:

As discussed during the conference, many of the west-bound refugees are forced to come back to Latvia. Even though the Latvian State Border Guard received applications for readmission or return in the year of 2017 and 2018, in reality only very few persons actually came back to the country. There is no track or statistics from the Government about those people who applied to return but did not enter into the Latvian territory.

Those, who return become more helpless as they don't have a place to stay. They often choose to stay in shelters but families suffer the most as the shelters separate people by gender and never accept children.



f. Measures taken to overcome the challenges:

State supported pilot integration project: As discussed during the conference, the Latvian government is nurturing a broad approach to meet the challenges while integrating the refugees. As part of a pilot project, the government is now covering the rent for an apartment for half of the year. Considering the six months to be a short duration, the State is also working to extend the implementation of the pilot project to support the RAS further. But the gap in the project is that, it only focuses on the families and the individuals are not allowed to take part in the project.

Replicating the best practices from other countries: One of the main objectives of arranging this programme was to discuss the best practices across the other EU member states. There were a number of government officials who attended and listened to the discussions of this conference. Since, Latvia as a State has no previous experience in managing a refugee or immigration situation, therefore, the best practices from other refugee receiving countries gave a thorough insight to feed into their further action.

Managing the expectations of the refugees: To reduce the west-ward movement of the refugees, the State Government can arrange some sessions in the reception centre. The sessions will particularly focus on the actual scenario of asylum and refugee status determination process in Germany or other western countries and the gist of Dublin Agreement will also be conveyed to the RAS so that they probably don't undertake the risky journey to the west.