

Challenges and Barriers to the Social Integration of Newly Arrived Immigrants in Sweden

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Abstract. Sweden, like many other European countries, has received a large number of immigrants in the past few years. To tackle the challenge connected with this, a policy for integration including an establishment programme was adopted by the Swedish Government which speeded up the introduction of newly arrived immigrants into the labour market and social life. The implementation of the programme is performed by various stakeholders in the fields of the labour market, language education and non-governmental organisations. The aim of this study was to investigate challenges and barriers to integration from the perspective of stakeholders' experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants. The study used open-ended data collected in a Delphi project targeting civil servants and volunteers working within the policy establishment programme, and a thematic analysis was conducted. The results indicate that focus on organisational structures, issues concerning resources and competence, and a more holistic approach to new arrivals' existential situation are key areas to address to move towards successful integration.

Keywords: *integration, core domains of integration, newly arrived immigrants, stakeholders, thematic analysis*

Introduction

Like other countries in Europe, Sweden has received many immigrants within the past few years, affecting the whole society and actualising different aspects of integration. The goal for integration policy in Sweden is to achieve equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all, regardless of ethnic and cultural background. To tackle some of the challenges, a policy was adopted to provide a framework for integrated action in various sectors (Government Bill 2016). This establishment programme (EP) aims to speed up the introduction of newly arrived immigrants, in this paper also referred to as new arrivals, (i.e., individuals that have been granted a residence permit) into the labour market and social life. An establishment plan should always include Swedish for immigrants (SFI), work preparation and community orientation. The key to the successful implementation

of the policy requires a considerable participation in society within the transition to a more pluralistic community. In this paper, we explore challenges presented by this implementation as described by different stakeholders, and the barriers to the integration of new arrivals.

From a broader perspective, the integration of new arrivals relates to sustainable development goals (SDG) adopted by the member states of the United Nations (2015). Sweden was one of the countries to start early on governmental work towards sustainability (Swedish Government 2018). In connection to SDG, stakeholders working within establishment programmes need to follow the goal addressing sustainable cities and inclusive communities, making demands for good governance with basic human rights as a point of departure (goal 11). The action plan also highlights, among other things, SDG goals with a focus on good health and well-being, quality education with lifelong learning opportunities and decent work for all, and economic growth (goals 3, 4 and 8). Sustainability in everyday practice means utilising the skills and knowledge of new arrivals and emphasising human rights. In other words, empowering immigrants through social participation in inclusive communities with equal life conditions and enhanced democratic participation is vital in developing a sustainable social sector.

The interconnectedness of these goals can be further explained and operationalised by the conceptual framework itemised by Ager and Strang (2008). Their framework includes ten main domains as presented in figure 1 below.



Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration

The framework specifies ten core domains to describe different aspects of the concept of integration. The domains cover the key issues of employment, housing, education, and health. These domains can serve as markers for achievements, but also as means for integration. The three domains of social connection and the two domains of facilitators mediate between the domains of markers and means and the foundational domain of rights and citizenship. According to Ager and Strang (2008) they work as “connective tissue” between the domains.

Social bridges in Ager and Strang’s (2008) framework aim at illuminating the relationships between new arrivals and host communities relating to social harmony and to new arrivals’ participation in the host society. Social bonds are about proximity to family and about sharing cultural practises and maintaining familiar patterns of relationships. This plays an important role when it comes to the feeling of being settled in a society. Social links refers to the connection between individuals and structures of the state when it comes to access to services. Connecting new arrivals to relevant services is essential for establishing integration.

Processes in all the different domains relate to facilitators referring to language and cultural competencies, as well as safety and stability. Ager and Strang (2008) believe that learning the language of the host community is not enough; you also need a broader cultural knowledge of national and local procedures for successful integration. The domain of safety and stability refers to the local environment. Not feeling safe or lack of stability due to being forced to move somewhere else act as barriers to the processes of integration.

The foundational domain of rights and citizenship is about a shared understanding of what integration is. The concept can be interpreted in different ways. It can be associated with assimilation based on ethno-cultural political exclusion. Ager and Strang (2008) relate the concept to the notion of the pluralist society and the right to maintain cultural and religious identity and practices. They emphasise that ideas of nationhood, citizenship, rights, and responsibilities are fundamental to understanding the principles and practice of integration.

In connection to sustainability through inclusive communities, experiences from Norway reveal that the meaning of inclusive communities has different goals for the stakeholders, and the primary aims for social participation are dictated mostly by priorities concerning administration of the daily practice or controlling dilemmas (Hagelund 2009; Hagelund and Kavli 2009). Furthermore, Reynolds and Sariola (2018) argue that the effects of community engagement activities are

established in several pathways in which the concept of community engagement itself is defined and legislated. It is important to scrutinise stakeholder-oriented aspects of governance, even at a conceptual level (Hajer et al. 2015). Research may assist in analysing the processes of integration that affect the social inclusion of new arrivals and put the focus on existing inequalities in different life stages. Because inclusive communities are socially, environmentally, and economically beneficial, it is essential to investigate stakeholders' everyday practice from this perspective. In connection to the overall concept of sustainability, McMillan (2014) states that the concept is fragile and dependent on the processes and the stakeholders who create its content. Therefore, their experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants in existing establishment programmes can teach us about current flaws and deficiencies in the process of integration. The aim of this study is to investigate challenges and barriers to integration from the perspective of stakeholders' experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants.

Method

Design

The study has a qualitative approach. It is a part of a wider Delphi project with the aim of describing the attitudes, perceptions and experiences concerning refugees' mental health and social participation among employees and volunteers in the fields of the labour market, language education and non-governmental organisations in Sweden (Larsen, Eriksson et al. 2021). By 'refugees', this study means newly arrived immigrants that have been granted a residence permit. A two-round Delphi was chosen as a strategy for the collection of data (Hägg-Martinell, Eriksson et al. 2021). This includes an initial overview of existing knowledge to construct items and questions for a two-round sequential questionnaire communication with participating experts.

Setting and sample

The data for this study consists of answers to 15 open-ended questions included in the questionnaires from the first and second rounds (Hägg-Martinell, Eriksson et al. 2021). A total of 238 informants participated in the study. Fifty-five percent of the informants had worked with newly arrived immigrants for one to five years and 39% for more than five years; 46% worked with immigrants in the labour

market, 37% worked in language and education, and 17% worked with social activities. Twenty-one percent of the informants had refugee or migration experience.

Informants and data collection

Informants were recruited by using certain key persons who were asked to contribute and to recommend other suitable persons. These key persons also had the opportunity to distribute the questionnaire to other relevant participating experts. Our definition of an expert was a person who was an employee or a volunteer working in the field of establishment efforts for new arrivals and who had been in that position for more than a year.

The informants recruited for the study represented three different areas within what we define as "establishment efforts for new arrivals". Namely: 1. Social activities: mainly volunteers who organise various social activities for immigrants, such as language cafés, wellness and sports activities, cultural activities, and friendship-building activities within municipalities and organisations. 2. Language and education: mainly SFI teachers and persons responsible for the social orientation for new arrivals. 3. Labour market: actors in labour market establishment such as employees of the Swedish Public Employment Service or similar private alternatives.

Data analysis

The analysis of data was performed with the six-step model for thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first phase involved reading the answers to the open-ended questions several times to become familiar with and get a first impression of the data. The second phase was more structured, aiming to identify passages that appeared to represent experiences related to the aim of the study. In this phase an initial coding was performed. These two phases were performed by the first and second authors separately.

The coded passages were sorted into potential preliminary themes in phase three. This was done by the first and the second authors and discussed with the last author. In phase four the preliminary themes were critically scrutinised. Was a theme really a theme, was there enough data to support it? Could two preliminary separate themes form one theme? Could the themes be linked meaningfully to each other,

and still be distinctively different? This critical reading was done by the first author and discussed with the last author.

Phase five was about naming the themes by capturing the essence of each one. This more abstract reflection had the ambition of describing stakeholders' experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants and deficiencies in today's establishment programmes at a more general level. The naming of the themes was performed by the first author in discussion with the second and last authors, and finally with all the authors. The last phase was about producing the report with a set of fully worked out themes, and with data extracts to support the analysis. This final analysis was done by the first author in dialogue with the last author, and then discussed with all the authors.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (2018/871-31/5) and data was gathered between October 2018 and March 2019. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has been applied. All participants were given written information on the study by letter, and their consent was assumed if they proceeded to complete the questionnaire. In addition, the participation was voluntary. To ensure confidentiality, information that might reveal informants' identities, such as working place, names, etc. was concealed (WMA 2013).

Results

Three main themes emerged from the data as follows: organisational structures and individual needs; allocation of resources and competence development; and health and existential vulnerability

Organisational structures and individual needs

Achieving a person-centred focus in encounters with newly arrived immigrants was described as a goal. At the same time, this goal was perceived as challenging in the daily practice. There was a lack of attention to individualised adjustments in activities and processes for this. Furthermore, the impact of leadership was argued to hinder quality improvement of daily routines. The

problems with leadership were described as lack of proper information in the organisation and lack of insight into the employees' workload. Still, engagement associated with the daily work was argued to be high and the informants received support from their team. Nevertheless, at times with large numbers of new arrivals, a shortage of support from the management was reported to make the workload substantial and tough to cope with. The following quotation illustrates this aspect:

“... it was a real challenge that almost broke me and my willingness to help as I did not get help either from managers or others, except the closest colleagues.”

The daily practice seldom included face-to-face encounters with the newly arrived immigrants. Lack of the face-to-face interaction could lead to confusing and problematic situations for the newly arrived due to language barriers. Usually, they might manage their administrative affairs by themselves, but consultations by a mobile phone being the norm they might feel perplexed and require more assistance. Furthermore, due to the anxiety caused by their life situation they had a need for face-to-face encounters. An informant described this:

“The participants feel very bad and often want to meet. We do not have the capacity for physical meetings and a lot is done by phone, which worries the participants.”

Another challenge in the EP process has to do with external factors such as various authorities with different routines regulating newly arrived immigrants' everyday life. For example, educational activities follow national laws and regulations, with small margins for individual solutions.

Organisational and collaborative challenges could be actualised when various stakeholders needed to co-operate concerning different issues and problematic situations with new arrivals. The informants described poorly organised coordination between different actors and how the newly arrived immigrants directed here and there without concern for what would be best for them:

“Different activities around the new arrivals should work better together to create a more favourable situation for them. Sometimes they are dragged here and there, and no one seems to think about what is best for the person.”

The EP is a joint venture between several community actors with different responsibilities. A lack of collaborative efforts with different stakeholders and community actors may shatter the adjustment process for an individual. A problem described was not about responsibilities for specific aspects of the EP, but about gaps between organisations with non-existent systems for collaboration. This gap between organisations could have a negative impact on the progress in the EP for

the newly arrived immigrant. Furthermore, it was described as complex to proceed within the EP due to challenging time limits which were not always aligned with the opportunity for joint work processes.

Lack of shared methods and systems for collaboration between organisations, as well as tough regulations and time limits were described as troublesome for the EP processes. However, contacts with humanitarian organisations appear to have been easier. Support in contacting humanitarian organisations is offered to the newly arrived immigrants and innovative collaboration with volunteers characterises the involvement of humanitarian groups.

Allocation of resources and competence development

A distribution and mobilisation of resources was considered as an important conditioning factor for EP processes. Positive mobilisation of assets was exemplified when newly arrived immigrants were given several opportunities to complete a course introducing them to the Swedish society and how it works.

To engage new arrivals in different activities to support them in their unfamiliar and often problematic situation is one thing. Another challenge has to do with mental health issues among them, which were described by the informants as widespread. At the same time, the resources within the organisation to help and back them were limited. The same also applies to the healthcare sector with its long waiting times, and there was also adequate information on treatment and support, as an informant illustrated:

“Mental health problems are widespread and the resources to meet it both within the organisation and outside are limited.”

The system lacks capacity, and a low quantity of employees was described as the greatest problem and as a growing issue today. Beyond this, deficient strategies for competence and skills development were described by the informants as a challenge for their practice. They were faced with the complexity of the newly arrived immigrants' situation they were not prepared for. An informant illuminated this:

“The job is so complex; it would be presumptuous of me to claim that I have sufficient knowledge in these matters.”

A challenging factor described by the informants regarding their

competence is related to different aspects of the newly arrived immigrants' health. Beyond the lack of resources, they pointed out a need for competence development in mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another area with a need of competence development concerned methods for investigating mental disorders that work across language and cultural barriers.

Health and existential vulnerability

In their daily work, the informants encountered new arrivals with traumatic experiences of war and escaping. They described that severe mental problems while you must cope with other consequences of a changed life situation make it hard to learn the language and establish yourself on the labour market and in the society. They also said that knowledge of health-related concerns in this group is generally low in the society. Expectations of them to educate themselves while suffering from mental health problems might just increase if they were not offered proper health care:

“I am convinced that the general knowledge of newcomers' mental well-being is lacking in society at large. They are expected to educate themselves quickly and adopt a new language at the same time as they often have severe anxiety and PTSD.”

Prolonged and inadequate actions to get families together were described as endangering EP processes. Not having knowledge of the family members' health situation or if they were alive impacted on how the process within the EP proceeded. An informant described a common existential situation for the newly arrived:

“Persons who are separated from their family or do not know what happened to a close family member often feel very bad.”

Furthermore, the fact that where the work is there might be no housing, and vice versa, complicated and put more pressure on the EP process, as one informant described:

“The housing situation is very stressful for many, but especially for the new arrivals, and does not provide the peace needed to cope with establishing oneself”

Safety aspects were described as of the highest importance, and if feelings of security were noticeable in the daily life the new arrivals might connect with new people and improve their social networking. The opposite situation was illuminated by an informant:

“If you don’t feel safe, you will not be able to take the steps needed to create your networks, either inside or outside your own group.”

Segregation was pointed out as a structural problem in the society that affected new arrivals’ possibilities to adapt to everyday life in the new country. To counteract this was considered a responsibility for everyone, not only for different stakeholders in the society. Openness and a will to get to know persons with different backgrounds was described as essential, but to create conditions for this was claimed to be a question of politics. Furthermore, the importance of tolerance was underlined regarding differences between people.

Discussion

So, what can stakeholders’ experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants teach us about challenges and barriers to the integration in today’s establishment programmes? The results indicate that a focus on organisational structures, issues concerning resources and competence, and a more holistic approach to new arrivals’ existential situation are key areas to address to move towards successful integration. The results are discussed in relation to previous research and Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework of integration, as described in the background of this paper.

To find a balance between a substantial workload with many new arrivals and the overall goal of achieving a person-centred focus in encounters with them was problematic for the informants, partly due to issues connected to leadership. The impact of leadership and lack of proper information in the organisation was argued to hinder quality improvement of daily routines. Achieving the overall goal of the person-centred approach was made more difficult by the fact that the informants seemed to have little influence over planning and structuring their work. A major barrier described was the growing problem of the EP system’s lack of capacity, with far too few employees. These aspects taken together have negative consequences for the EP processes, resulting in challenging and time-consuming procedures without opportunities for individual solutions for new arrivals.

Beyond these internal factors the situation of the immigrants is complicated by problems connected to collaboration with external stakeholders and authorities. These structural barriers affect the processes of integration connected to Ager and Strang’s (2008) domains of employment, housing, education, and health. Disparities

in routines and poor coordination between different actors make the new arrivals' already problematic integration into society even harder. Furthermore, the bureaucracy with time pressures and lack of continuity in the immigration process can be a challenge (Larsen, Eriksson et al. 2021; van Loenen et al. 2018). What is needed is shared fostering actions by different stakeholders and joint accountability to achieve social justice and equal opportunities for new arrivals (Kraft et al. 2017). The importance of this more holistic approach with integrated partnership is also described by Murphy et al. (2021) in their study of African asylum-seekers in Ireland.

The impact of structural barriers connected to the organisation is exemplified in this study in relation to the domain of health. Lack of resources and competence when it comes to new arrivals with mental health problems was described as a problem, both within the organisation and the healthcare system. Previous research shows that traumatic incidents from war and escaping, combined with experiences of social hardship in the host society, meaning social exclusion along with the loss of social significance and networks, increases the individuals' vulnerability (Sengoelge et al. 2020; Nordling et al. 2020). For stakeholders, these aspects of vulnerability of new arrivals requires both increased knowledge and practical skills training in identifying trauma-related stress and depression at an early stage of the establishment programme as well as a heightened ability to provide information about health-related illnesses (Tinghög et al. 2016). To tackle the complexity of the new arrivals' health-related conditions the need for resources, competence development and collaboration between stakeholders must be highlighted. With Ager and Strang (2008) a connection can be made to the domain of social links. To connect new arrivals to relevant services is essential for establishing integration. Furthermore, it is crucial from the perspective of empowering new arrivals by encouraging self-care and thereby alleviating human suffering. Ager and Strang (2008) emphasise the interdependence between the domains in their framework. This means that we can understand the impact of the new arrivals' health, especially their existential health, on the other domains, and vice versa. From the wider perspective of sustainability, the need for intersectional collaboration to link health with other areas of sustainability is also described in previous research (Waage et al. 2015).

Another important issue to deal with concerns the domains of employment and housing. Employment can be related to education by vocational training and further education (Ager and Strang 2008). Employment means economic safety and

the possibility to plan for the future. It also means to have the opportunity to connect with members of society and thereby build social bridges (Ager and Strang 2008). This in turn has an impact on the facilitators in the framework, namely learning the language and the acquisition of cultural competence. A recent study by Cetrez, DeMarinis et al. (2020) shows that despite a comprehensive establishment programme and the strong motivation of newcomers, they had a hard time integrating into the labour market. The researchers attributed this to the lack of communication between multiple levels of government and a failure to coordinate language learning and job-training in accordance with individual skills. Language and lack of information were important barriers to integration, as well as the nature and type of work offered, often with temporary contracts and short hours. Finally, discrimination seems to be a major obstacle, preventing newcomers from obtaining a permanent occupation. When it comes to the domain of health, having an employment with income means that you can provide for yourself and your family. This is important in relation to a person's self-esteem and development of self-reliance (Ager and Strang 2008).

The new arrivals' possibilities to be integrated into a community are complicated by the fact that where the work is there might be no housing. The fragmented existence can have a negative impact on the continuity of the different levels of social connections (Ager and Strang 2008), but it even actualises problems when it comes to new arrivals' already vulnerable existence. Social connections relate to social participation, such as being an active member in a social environment. Social participation plays a key role in physical and mental health and protects against poor psychological health outcomes (Yildirim, Isik et al. 2020; Fiorillo, Lavadera et al. 2017; Webber & Fendt- Newlin 2017). Furthermore, previous research by Beirens et al. (2007) shows that social relations promoted a sense of belonging and community, a stronger cultural identity and increased confidence among refugees and asylum-seeking children and families, which helped them in their interaction and engagement with their wider social environment.

An important issue to address is family reunification and with reference to Ager and Strang (2008) the domains of social bonds and health. The proximity to family and one's own ethnic group with the possibility to share cultural practices and maintain familiar patterns of relationships plays an important role when it comes to the feeling of being settled in a society. Previous research shows that family provides the strongest meaning-giving for newcomers, alongside with religion, children, and

work (Cetrez, DeMarinis, et al. 2020). In this study, the informants said that not having their family with them, or worse, not knowing if they were alive, severely affected the new arrivals' health and well-being. The connection between health and the presence of family is also shown in previous research (Hägg-Martinell, Eriksson et al. 2021). This existential anxiety due to the lack of social bonds can make it hard to connect with new people and establish social bridges, and further, social links in the society. Therefore, actions to get families together should be a priority in the EP processes. Previous research also stresses the importance of family reunification for social support (Sengoelge et al. 2020). This has an impact on how the process within the EP continues towards integration. Again, the interconnectedness of the domain of health with the other domains is apparent.

The overall structural problem of segregation was described as an obstacle to new arrivals' possibilities to adapt to everyday life in the new country. Even in the study by Cetrez, DeMarinis et al. (2020) segregation was a major issue connected to geographical segregation areas with a high concentration of immigrants. Among other things, not being able to make social contact with Swedish speakers slows down language learning. Regarding discrimination and segregation, the Swedish government has set the explicit goals of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background (Cetrez, DeMarinis, et.al. 2020). In this context it is interesting to discuss Ager and Strang's framework with language and cultural knowledge as facilitators of integration. They think that learning the language of the host community is not enough; you also need a broader cultural knowledge of national and local procedures for successful integration. Daley (2007) stresses the importance of active community engagement and education to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions and to prepare existing communities for contact with new members. Cetrez, DeMarinis et al. (2020) relate citizenship to a general feeling of belonging. They make a connection to a variety of factors such as geographical location, language skills, existential meaning-making, and value systems.

Feelings of belonging are also related to cultural understandings. We consider this as a joint responsibility for everyone, not only for politicians and different stakeholders in the society. Are we open to getting to know persons with different backgrounds? What about our tolerance when it comes to allowing a person to keep his or her origin while at the same time building a life in a new country? Segregation and aspects of it are connected to the foundation of Ager and

Strang's (2008) framework with human rights and citizenship, as well as to shared understanding of what integration is.

Strengths and limitations

Given the design of the study, we did not perform any interviews regarding the experiences of stakeholders in the fields of the labour market, language education and civic organisations in Sweden. The results are based on stakeholders' written descriptions of their experiences of encounters with newly arrived immigrants. Some of the written descriptions were rather short and this could therefore be a limitation. To increase trustworthiness and transferability, we have included qualitative data from different stakeholders. All themes were discussed with the research team and the data from participants was cross-checked when contradictions occurred. It was important to tackle the problem of pre-understanding that may lead to important aspects remaining unnoticed. This investigator triangulation was applied through the whole research process, and all researchers engaged in the analysis contributed different perspectives to strengthen credibility and mitigate the risk of bias (Patton 2015). Although we studied the stakeholders' experiences in a Swedish context, the results might be transferable to similar settings.

Finally, we consider using the conceptual framework defining core domains of integration by Ager & Strang (2008) as a strength. The discussion of the results of the study in relation to several of these domains provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of different aspects of integration and their interdependence.

Conclusions

Several barriers to successful integration of newly arrived immigrants were identified. Organisational structures connected to leadership and the employees' lack of influence over planning and structuring of their work made it difficult for the informants to reach the goal of implementing a person-centred approach. A major barrier was the growing problem of the EP system's lack of capacity, with far too few employees. Beyond these internal barriers the collaboration with external stakeholders appeared to be a problem. Disparities in routines and poor coordination between different actors make the new arrivals' already problematic

integration into society even harder. Lack of resources and competence when it comes to new arrivals with mental health problems was described as a problem, both within the organisation and the healthcare system. To tackle the complexity of the new arrivals' health-related conditions due to their existential vulnerability, the need for resources, competence development and collaboration between stakeholders must be highlighted

The new arrivals' possibilities for integration into a community are complicated by the fact that where the work is there might be no housing. This fragmented existence has a negative impact on the continuity of different levels of social connections. Another important issue to address is family reunification and its impact on new arrivals' health and existential well-being.

A major barrier for integration into inclusive communities is the structural problem of segregation. To tackle different aspects of this is a huge challenge that we need to address on all levels for peaceful and sustainable societies. Furthermore, our results suggest that a more holistic approach when it comes to integration processes would facilitate new arrivals' path to a meaningful everyday life.

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