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Integration: The Role of Communities, Institutions, and the State

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Feature by Rinus Penninx

The moment immigrants settle in a country, they have to acquire a place in that new society. This is true not only for physical needs such as housing, but also in the social and cultural sense.

Integration is the process by which immigrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. This definition of integration is deliberately left open, because the particular requirements for acceptance by a receiving society vary greatly from country to country. The openness of this definition also reflects the fact that the responsibility for integration rests not with one particular group, but rather with many actors—immigrants themselves, the host government, institutions, and communities, to name a few.

How Integration Works

There are two parties involved in integration processes: the immigrants, with their characteristics, efforts and adaptation, and the receiving society, with its interactions with these newcomers and their institutions. It is the interaction between the two that determines the direction and the ultimate outcome of the integration process. These two, however, are unequal partners. The receiving society, in terms of its institutional structure and the way it reacts to newcomers, has much more say in the outcome of the process.

That process of integration of immigrants is thus not—as is often supposed—only taking place at the level of the *individual immigrant*, whose integration is then measured in terms of housing, employment, education, and social and cultural adaptation to the new society. It also takes place at the *collective level* of the immigrant group. Organizations of immigrants are the expression of mobilized resources and ambitions, and also at this level mechanisms of the integration process apply.

In addition, there is the level of *institutions*, which come in two broad types. The first are general public institutions of receiving societies or cities, such as the education system or institutional arrangements in the labor market. Laws, regulations, and executive organizations, along with unwritten rules and practices, are part of such institutions. These, however, may hinder access or equal outcome for newcomers, or even completely exclude them. The functioning of these general public institutions (and the possible adjustment of

them in view of growing diversity) is thus of paramount importance. It is on this level that integration and exclusion are mirrored concepts.

The second kind of institution belongs to specific types of immigrant groups themselves, such as religious or cultural institutions. These specific institutions and their possible integration can be viewed in the same way as immigrant organizations: they may become an accepted part of society on the same level as comparable institutions of native groups, or they may isolate themselves or remain unrecognized and excluded.

The mechanisms working at the individual, group, and institutional levels are different, but the results on each of these levels are clearly interrelated. Institutional arrangements determine the opportunities and scope for action of organizations. Institutions and organizations together create the structure of opportunities and/or limitations for individuals. Conversely, individuals may mobilize and change the landscape of organizations, and ultimately even contribute to significant changes in institutional arrangements.

Since the outcome of the integration process results from the interaction of two parties that takes place at different levels, the outcome cannot be expected to be uniform. On the one hand, studies that compare the integration process of different immigrant groups in the same institutional and policy context show that immigrant groups follow different patterns of integration. On the other hand, the integration process of immigrants of the same origin in different national contexts also leads to very diverse patterns.

The Logic of Policymaking

Integration processes, for both individuals and groups, are long-term by nature. At the group level this means that the litmus test for integration, and for the success or failure of policies in this field, is the position of the second generation. However, political processes in democratic societies demand policies that bear fruit within much shorter terms, frequently measured in the brief span between elections. Unrealistic promises and demands derived from this "democratic impatience" often lead to a backlash against a policy's failings, real or perceived, in public or political circles.

In view of the peril of this backlash, and because global developments are expected to lead to the growth of immigrant populations worldwide, there is a need for comprehensive integration policies. While many schools of thought exist, and policies will vary from country to country, some key elements that appear in successful integration policies are those that:

Offer a vision for both immigrants and receiving societies. Explicit policies offer a framework for thinking about common goals of guaranteeing viable and liveable communities, and can provide guidelines and instruments for all parties concerned about how to contribute.

Coordinate with immigration policies. This connection is critically important in light of the tendency of many governments to handle international migration within a framework based on traditional notions of nation-states. Within this framework, the world is divided into separate political communities with distinct national citizens and territories. Migration across political borders is considered an anomaly.

As a consequence, migration policies have been primarily defensive and control-centered instead of proactive. Similarly, integration policies for immigrants have been reactive, if not absent. These two reinforce each other, because the lack of a consistent and transparent immigration policy is an impediment to effective integration policies. In many cases, poor integration policy has contributed to negative perceptions of immigrants, which in turn has led to the reinforcement of defensive immigration policies.

A key element of such a policy is transparency in the admission of immigrants, particularly with regard to what is expected from them and what they can expect. Any expectation that immigrants will receive long-term residence should be accompanied by efforts to provide them with an adequate legal position, tools to function successfully in society, and access to public facilities on an equal footing with nationals. Long periods of uncertainty about future residence (and in the case of asylum seekers, dependency on government largesse) should be avoided, both for their negative implications for the migrants concerned, and the negative image and endangered legitimacy of admissions policies.

Promote integration policies that acknowledge diversity. At the individual level, an adult immigrant may adapt significantly in terms of his or her knowledge over the long-term integration process. However, feelings, preferences, and evaluations of good and evil are fairly persistent within a lifetime. As a consequence, much more attention should be given to the question of how to frame immigration and integration policies politically in order to recognize and accept a diversity of attitudes.

Provide for national realities. While a view beyond the nation-state is important, it is also obvious that integration policies are necessarily shaped by the national context. In the socio-economic sphere, for example, integration mechanisms in societies with a strong liberal market orientation (and limited welfare and social facilities) differ from those in welfare states where a greater part of the national income is redistributed. In addition, in the cultural and religious domain, historical peculiarities of institutional arrangements create significant differences in the feasibility of policies.

As a consequence, the scope, actors, and instruments of policy action differ. National policies, and by implication also regional integration policies, such as those for the European Union, can strive to set *general* frameworks, rules, and instruments that facilitate local actors.

Understand the importance of urban areas. Cities, so often the port-of-entry for immigrant populations, face special challenges and specific responsibilities that differ from those of national authorities ([see article in this issue by Brian Ray](#)). It is at this local level of municipalities and cities that tensions between national and local governments become visible and the need for coordination between immigration and integration policies becomes urgent.

Large cities in particular are confronted with rapid changes in their population. Migrants, often "steered" to the cities by government policy, have vastly varied cultures, religions, and lifestyles. Their integration into the social embroidery of the city is not a natural process.

Social segregation, social exclusion, and marginalization of (certain of these) immigrant groups can threaten the social cohesion in these cities.

Cities therefore face a special challenge and a specific responsibility, different from that of the national authorities. At the same time, city neighborhoods offer special opportunities. There, important events affect the daily life of all residents, including immigrants. It is also where the loyalty of newcomers and old residents can be gained, or, for that matter, lost.

Recognize the local context. Since integration processes from the point of view of immigrants themselves are taking place at a local level, and since circumstances there may vary significantly, local policies for integration that build on active interaction between immigrants and local society should receive the highest priority. Such local policies should be given more tools and room to act in ways appropriate for the locality.

Local integration policy should follow strategies and tactics that engage partners in the integration process at different levels. It should combine "top-down" activation elements with "bottom-up" mobilization. It should define the process of integration as "open" within the rules of liberal democratic societies, leaving room for an outcome of a society that is more diverse, but still cohesive. The diversity achieved in this way is neither predetermined nor static, but negotiated, shared, and ever-changing.

Involve non-governmental organizations. Agencies from the local, national, regional (e.g., the EU) levels are potentially important actors, but they are not the only ones. There are numerous non-governmental actors that strongly influence, whether positively or negatively, the integration process. These vital institutional actors include churches, trade unions, employers' organizations, political parties, the media, and other civil society actors. Government policies that aim at steering processes of settlement and integration should actively involve not only immigrants themselves, but also important players in civil society.

Such non-governmental partners are important in two ways. First and foremost, they function as direct partners in the implementation of policies. But they are perhaps even more important as political actors. They may influence the political climate and political outcomes, and may be important agents in combating exclusion, discrimination, and xenophobia.

Delegate authority appropriately. Integration policies should define clear priorities for action in a number of domains. For long-term immigrants, priority should be given to areas where authorities have effective instruments to promote integration, especially with regard to work, education, and housing.

In the long term, however, policies in the political and cultural domain, including religion, are indispensable. Ultimately, the forms these policies may take depend to a great extent on existing institutional arrangements in receiving societies.

Conclusion

Migrants are newcomers, who are often regarded as the classic "other" who does not belong. Such constructions of the "other" may be based on legal grounds, physical appearance or race, (perceived) cultural and religious differences, class characteristics, or on any

combination of these elements. Such constructions have been used politically, e.g., by the anti-immigrant movement, and express themselves in discriminatory practices, deteriorating inter-ethnic relations, and weakening of social cohesion in communities, cities, and states.

In this context, it is critically important that the two actors in the integration process, immigrants and the receiving society, become connected by sound integration policy. Formulating the appropriate policy depends greatly on conditions at all levels, from town halls to national capitals. A long-term framework that balances the concerns of both sides may succeed; a short-sighted policy that puts politics before realities can lead to losses on all sides.

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