

From refugee to employee: work integration in rural Denmark

Martin Ledstrup and Marie Larsen

The launch of Red Cross Denmark's Fast Track programme, which focuses on early refugee employment, offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between local employment of refugees and the sustainability of rural life.

Since 2015 Denmark has turned the employment of refugees into a national strategy. Through a tripartite agreement with the Confederation of Danish Employers and Local Government Denmark (the union of municipalities) this reconfiguration of thinking about integration has reverberated throughout municipal and corporate Denmark.

for example, by providing translation of a refugee's documentation into Danish – to understand the educational background of a particular refugee.

Many of these initiatives are tied together by a newly launched, practice-oriented and state-initiated programme of employment education, the 'Integrationsgrund-suddannelse' (IGU), or 'basic integration education', which – through a combination of formal schooling and practical internships – is aimed specifically at aligning competencies of refugees with demand in the Danish labour market. But while the IGU is oriented towards recognised refugees, the new Red Cross initiative begins in the asylum phase.

The Fast Track programme

The Fast Track programme is an effort to facilitate early access to the local labour market for refugees while they are still in the asylum phase, and it has been tested and implemented in five Danish municipalities between 2015 and 2017. Normally refugees in Denmark are distributed across its 98 municipalities, in effect detaching the locality of where they claimed asylum from the locality where they come to live as refugees. With Fast Track, however, the asylum seeker signs up for the programme at a Danish Red Cross-run asylum centre and the immigration authority places the participant, if granted refugee status, in the local community in which they have claimed asylum. When the asylum seeker is not someone in transit but has the potential to remain as a refugee, it naturally motivates both local people and refugees to invest in their mutual relations.

Asylum seekers prepare for Fast Track by undertaking a skills assessment. The eight-week Fast Track programme then provides



The 'Me and My Friendly Neighbour' photographic exhibition on World Refugee Day in Copenhagen, Denmark, telling stories of refugees and Danes who have become close friends.

For example, a major initiative was set up by the eight municipalities of Copenhagen to establish refugee internships, for which promotional posters have been distributed around the capital. Employment initiatives aimed at refugees have also been established in larger companies such as IBM, Microsoft, Danfoss, Grundfoss, Arriva and NCC. In addition, in order to facilitate quicker assessment of refugees' work competence, the government has sponsored a phone hotline to provide assistance to municipal authorities, in particular to help employees –

participants with a hands-on introduction to Danish culture, language skills, vocational training and potential local internships, techniques for job search, information about local work culture, network building and sustaining motivation. Taken together, these represent a holistic effort to link employment integration and local belonging. Throughout the months of waiting in asylum centres, this facilitates a crucial sense of purpose. The new resident might have a job or internship to continue when moving into the local community, thus making the transition from asylum seeker to refugee more a continuous process than a series of new beginnings.

Previously, municipalities often reported that refugees arrived with unrealistic expectations about housing and employment opportunities. But according to feedback from both municipalities and refugees, we have found that refugees who have been through the Fast Track programme are less disappointed and more realistic, as well as, generally speaking, less confused, more motivated and altogether more confident in beginning their life in a locality that is already well known to them.

Of the 70 participants over these two years who were granted refugee status, 61% are now self-supporting, 9% have moved to other municipalities for various reasons, 4% are on maternity leave, and 26% have continued internships that are preparing them for mainstream jobs.

Implementation in rural and island communities

In 2015 a team of anthropologists from the University of Copenhagen concluded research on the encounters between asylum centres and rural societies.¹ They found anxieties about crime and declining house prices, but at the same time these familiar concerns were entangled with a surprising local optimism. In rural areas where asylum centres successfully form part of the social fabric, alongside nurseries, schools, supermarkets and local associations, they were seen as a much-needed boost to local sustainability.

Changes in Denmark's approach to refugee employment are taking place as part of a

growing conversation about the depopulation of rural Denmark, including its island communities. The island of Bornholm, for instance, has lost nearly 20% of its population since 1965. The islands of Samsø, Ærø, Læsø and the Association of Danish Small Islands have therefore actively been promoting themselves as locations that are particularly suitable for asylum seekers and refugees.

In March 2018 the Fast Track programme began on Bornholm, a socio-economically vulnerable island of 40,000 inhabitants, located far away from urban Denmark, in the Baltic Sea. Bornholm's vulnerability is due not least to depopulation and lack of skilled labour. Our interviews on the islands of Bornholm and Samsø, conducted in 2016 and 2017, presented three main findings that identify the challenges that lie ahead. While the interviews were conducted in light of the Fast Track initiative, they concentrated more generally on asking about the encounter between refugees, integration, and the local labour market.

The first and most often repeated challenge, perhaps unsurprisingly, is language; although having sufficient Danish to function in the workplace is key to stable employment for refugees, continuous language development is needed for career advancement as well as to extend interactions beyond the context of work.

The second challenge relates to the uncertainty around whether refugees will stay in the local community after the mandatory three-year placement period. For the local municipality, there is an important difference between asylum seekers and refugees. While the state is responsible for all expenses connected with asylum seekers, those expenses connected with refugees are the responsibility of local municipalities. In interviews with representatives from the municipality of Samsø, the most important question raised was rooted in deeper concerns about how local investment in refugee employment can at the same time be part of the struggle against depopulation.

Thirdly, the type and size of workplaces are significant in terms of facilitating integration. Typically, larger workplaces are able to assign refugee employment to certain

employees, often on a voluntary basis, as a specialised task within the organisation. Smaller workplaces obviously do not have the same organisational means to work with refugees. In addition, there is an acute demand for skilled labour but not for unskilled labour. This means that when refugees come as skilled workers, they play a crucial role in local sustainability, but when refugees search for unskilled jobs they compete with local Danes. More research is needed, however, in order to understand more fully the resulting perspectives of locals and refugees.

A municipality that performs statistically better in terms of including refugees in the labour market is also seen as a success with regard to integration. But because rural refugee populations are often too small for statistical research, they are often not included in surveys. For instance, while the island municipalities of Samsø and Ærø have been deeply engaged with and affected by refugees, they are not included on comparative maps of

refugee employment in Denmark. This means that the islands and what we can learn from them do not form part of discussions around the question of integration. In addition, stable employment and successful integration are often assumed in statistics to be mutually dependent but we know nearly nothing about whether and how this connection unfolds in daily life. The Fast Track programme offers an opportunity to explore just that.

Martin Ledstrup ledstrup@sdu.dk

Postdoctoral researcher, Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark www.sdu.dk/en/

Marie Larsen marl@redcross.dk

Developmental consultant, Danish Red Cross <http://bit.ly/DanishRedCross-asylum>

1. Larsen B R, Whyte Z and Fog Olwig K (2015) *Den nye landbefolkning: Asylcentrenes betydning og konsekvens for lokale fællesskaber i danske landdistrikter*, Institut for Antropologi, Københavns Universitet <http://bit.ly/Larsen-Whyte-Olwig-2015>

