



SOC/668
Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027
[COM(2020) 758 final]

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC is pleased to note that the Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (hereinafter the 'Action Plan') is part of a comprehensive response to the challenges linked to migration, as put forward in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.
- 1.2 The Action Plan is broader in scope than the previous one: unlike its 2016 predecessor, the new Action Plan covers not only migrants, but also EU citizens "with a migrant background". Although integration is important for this category of citizens too, and for all citizens and residents, this may also result in less targeted actions, as the problems faced by newcomers are different from those of second- and third-generation migrants.
- 1.3 The integration and inclusion tools are mainly in the hands of national, regional, and local authorities. Action at EU level is complementary and designed to promote, facilitate, and coordinate collaboration. As a consequence, in the Action Plan there are no global or specific objectives for Member States, but only recommendations. Given the current situation and the impact of the pandemic, there is a risk that these integration issues will be considered as having lower priority.
- 1.4 The Action Plan addresses all policy areas that are essential for the socio-economic and political integration of newly-arrived migrants, and gives an overview of the list of European initiatives in different fields that can have an impact on migration and integration. The EESC points out that the real challenges lie in implementing these policies.
- 1.5 The EESC supports the objectives proposed by the Action Plan in key sectoral areas. However, it also wishes to point out that these are examples of possible actions rather than measurable targets. For this reason, their effective implementation seems to be conditional on a monitoring process that is yet to be put in place. The EESC encourages the Commission to put in place continuous monitoring of the Action Plan's implementation.
- 1.6 Compared with the 2016 Action Plan, more attention is paid here to the gender dimension of integration in general. Gender aspects should also be highlighted in the different sections on the sectoral areas.
- 1.7 The EESC emphasises that the value of work in general should be a thread running through the Action Plan, as work in all its different forms is a key aspect of integration and personal development.
- 1.8 The Action Plan gives an overview of all the funding instruments available in each sectoral area. However, these instruments seem to be designed for subsidy experts, and the EESC suggests that the Commission make access to funding easier, for instance by creating a dedicated integration instrument. The EESC also fears that funding for integration will gradually slip down the priority list.
- 1.9 The EESC emphasises the importance of civil society in general for integration into the local way of life, as well as the specific role of unions and employers' organisations.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 is part of a comprehensive response to the challenges linked to migration put forward in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. It builds upon and updates the commitments of the 2016 EU Action Plan on Integration and it lasts seven years with a mid-term review in 2024, in line with the MFF for the same period.
- 2.2 The need for an Action Plan arises from the striking differences between migrants and natives in levels of education, employment, poverty, and housing conditions. To mention one figure illustrating this gap, the percentage of young migrants (aged 18-24) who are neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) in the EU is 21% compared to 12.5% for natives. There is also an important gender gap, with the percentage of young migrant girls falling into this category standing at 25.9%¹.
- 2.3 The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on deep-seated inequalities in access to health care for migrants, with risks for society at large. It has also revealed that migrants are more likely to work in jobs requiring close interpersonal contact and are therefore more exposed to COVID-19.
- 2.4 Fully integrating migrants into the labour market could generate large economic gains in national welfare, including for pension schemes and in terms of fiscal contributions². This is a win-win outcome as fully fledged integration also benefits migrants by giving them access to the host country's welfare system.
- 2.5 The Action Plan refers to a set of general key principles and values common to all EU inclusion policies, including a reference to the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- 2.6 The specific actions presented in the Action Plan concern four sectoral areas, namely Education and Training, Employment and Skills, Health, and Housing. For each one of these integration gaps are identified. These actions are complemented by cross-cutting actions, including building strong partnerships, increasing the various opportunities for funding, fostering links with the host society, enhancing the use of new technologies and digital tools, and monitoring progress in integration.
- 2.7 The EESC acknowledges that the focus of the Action Plan is on the integration process as such and not on entry to the EU. Despite this, it wishes to emphasise that the issue of family reunification remains an important factor of legal and social integration.

¹ EC, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3. **General comments**

- 3.1 Unlike the 2016 Plan, the current one covers not only migrants, but also EU citizens "with a migrant background". The EESC takes note of the broader scope, as integration aspects are also important for this second category of citizens and for all citizens and residents; this promotes the European way of life, where rights and inclusion needs are also linked to responsibilities.
- 3.2 Despite this, the EESC fears that the broader scope of the Action Plan may also result in less targeted – and, therefore, less effective – actions. The problems faced by newcomers are different from those of second- and third-generation migrants. In addition, including the social needs of second- and third-generation migrants in migration and integration policies risks stigmatising them and perpetuating racism.
- 3.3 The Action Plan of the Commission gives a good overview of the list of European initiatives in different fields that have an impact on migration and integration. The document addresses all essential policy areas that are required for socio-economic and political integration of newly-arrived migrants. It also discusses the availability of funds and partnerships with institutions and organisations to facilitate integration.
- 3.4 The EESC underlines that, alongside these policies, work remains a key driver of integration and as such should be safeguarded and promoted as a central element throughout the Plan.
- 3.5 The EESC underlines that the real challenges lie in implementing these policies. For example, even when migrants' previous qualifications are recognised, employers hesitate to hire them because of lack of trust concerning their skills level. This seems to be the case for migrants from the MENA region, and South and Central Asia.
- 3.6 The commitment to strengthening the involvement in EU integration and inclusion policies of regional and local authorities, civil society, and migrants and their organisations is a positive aspect of the new Action Plan. The EESC notes that civil society should also include unions and employers' organisations.
- 3.7 The Action Plan rightly acknowledges the importance of national, regional, and local authorities in integration policies and promotes cooperation between them. In fact, it should be noted that most integration tools are in their hands. Action at EU level is complementary and designed to promote, facilitate, and coordinate collaboration, when useful. As a consequence, the Action Plan contains no overall objectives or specific ones for Member States, but only recommendations.
- 3.8 Since the text is non-binding and Member States are ultimately responsible for integration policies at the national level, the EESC stresses the need for clear commitments by EU Member States and the establishment of appropriate forums, including regular meetings, to coordinate policies and evaluate progress.
- 3.9 The Commission clearly sets out what it wants to achieve in each area. The EESC supports the diagnosis and proposed achievements, but notes the absence of any clear general or action-

specific targets. The effectiveness of implementation seems to be conditional on a monitoring process that should be put in place.

- 3.10 In the opinion SOC/649 (A New Pact on Migration and Asylum), the EESC wondered about the scale and support of integration measures. The tools and incentives offered to the different stakeholders by the Action Plan may not be sufficient to improve integration in a sensible way, especially given the long-term nature of measures in this field. It is therefore necessary to monitor the implementation of this point.
- 3.11 Funding is an important part of the Action Plan. Member States and other stakeholders are encouraged to make full use of EU funding. The Action Plan also gives an overview of all funding instruments available for each sectoral area.
- 3.12 While mainstreaming is mentioned among the guiding principles informing the Action Plan, the Plan does not provide satisfactory guidance on how to mainstream integration policies into general social cohesion measures.
- 3.13 The EESC welcomes the reference to the gender dimension of integration in the new Action Plan. At the same time, it highlights that the gender-related challenges of integration deserve more attention and more specific action in each of the sectoral areas.

4. Specific comments

4.1 Education and training

- 4.1.1 The Action Plan states correctly that education and training are the foundation of successful participation in society. Schools and other education facilities provide an important environment for building an inclusive society and fighting segregation. In addition, acquiring civic education about democracy and citizenship lay the groundwork for active participation in society while also preventing young people from being attracted to extremist ideologies. This is an area where an active participation in civil society should be encouraged since it promotes trust, social cohesion and belonging.
- 4.1.2 Regarding the specific actions to improve participation in education and training, the support provided by the Commission should be further specified, as the Action Plan contains only general references to targeted support activities. The most specific action mentioned is the toolkit with practical guidance on Early Childhood Education and Care that will be published at the beginning of 2021.
- 4.1.3 The Action Plan also mentions the need to facilitate the recognition of qualifications acquired in third countries. It puts forward several instruments to improve recognition of qualifications: the ENIC-NARIC networks, the Erasmus Programme, the EU Qualifications Framework, and the Europass portal. In addition to strengthening existing instruments, it is also important to identify and map existing barriers to recognition, including lack of trust and other social barriers.

- 4.1.4 The Commission emphasises the importance of language learning and proposes to further develop comprehensive and accessible language learning programmes. The EESC believes that language learning should be at the centre of actions in the areas of education and employment, starting from the first stages of the integration process. Learning the language of the receiving community ensures access to appropriate education and training levels, with far-reaching impacts on integration. Language learning programmes should therefore also be informed by a holistic approach³.
- 4.1.5 Based on the upcoming objective of the Child Guarantee, it is important to recommend that Member States support greater access to education for migrant children by ensuring that immigration procedures do not interfere with schooling or with children's rights more broadly. Education should assess, meet and reasonably accommodate the individual needs of migrant children with disabilities, or other needs, in order to facilitate development of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential.
- 4.1.6 All actions in these areas should aim to achieve inclusive education systems at all levels and lifelong learning.
- 4.1.7 The Plan highlights the importance of gaining an understanding of the laws, culture and values of the receiving society as early as possible through civic orientation courses. The Commission proposes good-practice exchanges between Member States in these areas. Information about these matters should be provided in a way that is understandable and accessible to all.

4.2 Employment and skills

- 4.2.1 In this area, problem diagnosis and global targets are well defined, showing the importance of migrants' contribution to the economy, especially in COVID-19 times. The Action Plan also stresses how not only migrant workers, but also migrant entrepreneurs, will be key to growth during and after the pandemic.
- 4.2.2 To achieve the objectives mentioned, the Action Plan encourages the use of existing EU tools, including the European Partnership for Integration, to work with social and economic partners, the *Employers together for integration* initiative, InvestEU supporting entrepreneurship, the European Integration Network, the European Network of Public Employment Service, and the Europass platform for sharing and scaling up skills assessment practices, the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals to facilitate the validation of skills, and the upcoming Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme to support people with a migrant background.
- 4.2.3 Among other objectives, the Action Plan also mentions overcoming the difficulties in access to financial services and information, but it proposes no specific action to resolve these difficulties. In this respect, the Action Plan should foster migrant workers' empowerment by ensuring access

³ Concerning target language levels for integration, see also SOC/641 on *Integration of women, mothers and families with a migrant background in the EU Member States and target language levels for integration* (exploratory opinion requested by the German presidency), [OJ C 10, 11.1.2021, p. 1](#).

to financial and legal information, complaint mechanisms, and safe reporting, in understandable and accessible formats.

- 4.2.4 The Action Plan rightly emphasises the importance of ensuring more effective and faster skills assessment systems or tests, also taking into account past experiences in this respect.
- 4.2.5 Nevertheless, skills assessment tools are not sufficient to ensure greater access to the job market, but action is needed to address distrust and discrimination. It is important to provide support and specific guidelines to national employment agencies and stakeholders in the employment sector to develop anti-discrimination policies and promote participation at all levels. It is also crucial to recommend national policies that ensure greater and smoother access for third country nationals to all employment sectors by easing visa procedures.
- 4.2.6 The Action Plan should further stress the importance of promoting greater access to apprenticeships, traineeships, vocational training and even volunteer work that may lead to a proper full-time job. This will provide migrants and residents with migration backgrounds with an opportunity to work, increase their skills level and have an income to support themselves and their families. Specifically, programmes promoting young people's access to the labour market (e.g. the Youth Guarantee) should have specific provisions to guarantee the participation of third country nationals.
- 4.2.7 The Action Plan should also envisage targeted actions aimed at empowering migrant and refugee women and improving their access to the labour market, including by strengthening anti-trafficking measures and through specific needs support.

4.3 Health

- 4.3.1 Importantly, the Action Plan highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the existence of deep-seated inequalities in access to health services, and that this poses risks for society at large.
- 4.3.2 In light of the pandemic, the EESC considers that all migrants, including irregular migrants, should have access to basic healthcare, and specifically testing and vaccinations, in all EU Member States.
- 4.3.3 In terms of the proposed actions, the Commission refers to funding possibilities through the AMIF, the ESF+, the ERDF and under the upcoming Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme. The Action Plan rightly encourages the use of EU funding for the provision of health services.
- 4.3.4 The EESC emphasises that it is key to recommend that Member States remove barriers to accessing health services and barriers within health services, including through information campaigns on national health systems, assessing and meeting the individual health needs of migrants with disabilities.

4.3.5 The EESC highlights the importance of raising awareness about and promoting the mental health of the migrant population as part of the integration process, particularly in light of the ongoing pandemic, also by ensuring culturally sensitive mental health services.

4.3.6 Actions to ensure greater access to health services should also cover reception facilities for asylum applicants, particularly in the preparation of the new Health Programme.

4.4 Housing

4.4.1 The Commission will set up an Affordable Housing Initiative as announced under the Renovation Wave and promote non-segregated, dignified, accessible and affordable housing. Special attention will be paid to models of autonomous – as opposed to collective – housing for asylum applicants.

4.4.2 Among the objectives listed in this area, fighting discrimination in the housing market and reducing residential segregation should be top priorities.

4.4.3 This should also involve greater emphasis on expanding affordable housing, including social housing, through mainstreamed solutions that target third country nationals as well as all residents facing housing needs⁴.

4.4.4 Member States should be encouraged to also use EU funding to design and enforce mechanisms for accessing justice in cases of exploitative housing.

4.5 Partnerships for a more effective integration process

4.5.1 The Commission intends to strengthen the European Integration Network by providing targeted funding and capacity-building to the Member States.

4.5.2 Special attention is given to support for local and regional authorities, including expansion of the Urban Academy on Integration and strengthening of inter-religious dialogue among communities, supporting cities in preventing radicalisation under the EU Cities against Radicalisation initiative launched in 2019. The EESC stresses the importance of inter-religious dialogue for integration.

4.5.3 The Action Plan also mentions the annual European Migration Forum organised in collaboration with the EESC, and with its IMI thematic study group in particular, as a way to support the consultation with civil society and diaspora organisations.

4.5.4 Finally, the Plan announces support for foundations and organisations through structural dialogue on migration integration and exploring possible tools for cooperation, without detailing what that support could be.

⁴ For an overview of innovative and inclusive housing solutions, see Housing Europe Observatory, 2018. *Housing & Migration. Research Briefing*. Brussels: Housing Europe Observatory.

4.6 Increased opportunities for EU funding

4.6.1 Funding aspects run like a thread through all the actions proposed in the Plan, and are linked to the 2021-2027 MFF. An overview of the main EU funds that supported integration and inclusion under the 2014-2020 period is added, but no figures are given for the future. Here the EESC realises that it is necessary to wait for the programming phase to be completed to know how much Member States will allocate under each fund on integration issues.

4.6.2 The list of funds that can be used for integration and inclusion or that are relevant to the actions to support migrants is impressive, including the AMIF, the ESF+ and the ERDF. At the same time, synergies with other funds should be clarified, e.g. with Erasmus+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the EAFRD, and InvestEU. Once adopted, the Technical Support Instrument will also be able to provide support to Member States for developing or improving integration and inclusion policies. Finally, the upcoming Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme could also play a role in funding specific actions targeting EU citizens with a migrant background. It has been decided to have a large portfolio of possible funds, but a better solution might have been to opt for specific funds for integration matters. The EESC suggests that the Commission make access to funding easier, for instance by creating a dedicated instrument for the integration of migrants.

4.6.3 The European Child Guarantee is also important in this framework, as the most disadvantaged children also include children with a migrant background.

4.6.4 The complexity of EU funding makes it necessary to update the toolkit developed in 2018 for using funds for integration during the 2021-2027 programming period.

4.6.5 Another interesting aspect of funding policy is the Commission's intention to develop public-private partnerships with foundations and private donors.

4.7 Fostering participation and encounters with the host society

4.7.1 The EESC welcomes the idea of involving the newly-created expert group on the views of migrants, composed of migrants and organisations representing them, in the design and implementation of future policies on migration, asylum, and integration. This could contribute to improving the participation of migrants and EU citizens with migration backgrounds in the consultative process and also ensure that policies reflect real needs. For these reasons, it is important that opportunities for two-way exchanges between third-country nationals and receiving communities be created starting from the early stages of reception and integration.

4.7.2 The objective of the Action Plan is to promote dialogue and raise awareness among all Europeans about the realities of integration and migration. But this objective risks being too vague, despite the clear efforts made to raise awareness about facts and figures. Changing the narrative on migration in the public mind is an absolute must, and the EESC wonders what will be done to achieve that.

4.7.3 The EESC supports initiatives such as football festivals that target young migrants in the host cities of EU championships, which could have a positive impact on migration positive narratives. Other ad hoc measures of this kind, however, like integration awards for local schools or communities/organisations, may reinforce perceived differences, and stigmatise certain groups.

4.8 Enhance the use of new technologies and digital tools

4.8.1 The Commission's Action Plan rightly acknowledges the real risk of a digital gap between migrants and natives for different reasons: 8.1% of people born outside Europe cannot afford a computer, compared to 3.1% of natives, and parents from migrant households may have more difficulties supporting their children with remote learning.

4.8.2 The Action Plan recommends increasing the digital literacy of the migrant population, but does not contain specific proposals, or targets on how this should be achieved in practice.

4.8.3 An interesting idea is the engagement of migrants in creating and delivering digital public services. The EESC assumes that this has already been achieved in relation to EU administrative activities.

4.9 Monitoring progress: towards an evidence-based integration and inclusion policy

4.9.1 The EESC welcomes the objective of achieving a more evidence-based debate on migration. If better data and presentation tools can contribute to this objective, they must be collected, developed and spread. EU indicators on integration have existed since 2010, but despite extensive efforts knowledge gaps remain. In this respect, useful tools could be a new barometer and a joint scoreboard to support comparison across countries and over time.

Brussels, 27 April 2021

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