



Sustainable integration: Activities for a More Inclusive Society

As part of the project “Sustainable Integration: Activities for a More Inclusive Society,” financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Latvia, a study visit from 11 to 16 of August 2024 took place in Uppsala, Sweden. Participants from *I want to help refugees* (Latvia), *Estonian Refugee Council*, and *Studiefrämjandet* (Sweden) exchanged experiences related to the integration of newcomers in their respective countries. Each participant presented the unique aspects of their work, the target groups they serve, and the integration activities implemented by their organizations.

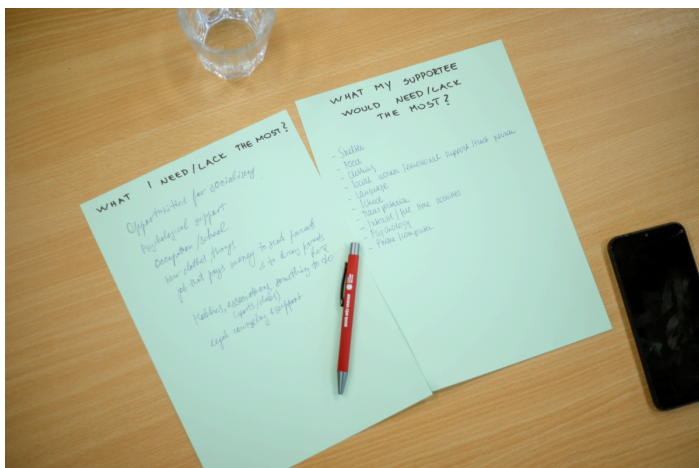
Integration encompasses many dimensions. In some contexts, offering targeted activities for specific groups is essential to address their unique needs and acknowledge their marginalized status in society. However, integration should ultimately ensure that all individuals, regardless of their country of origin, skin color, religion, sexual orientation, or social status, have equal access to the activities and opportunities. Throughout the study visit, participants shared, discussed, and analyzed different approaches to integration in various contexts. Additionally, examples of best practices from different organizations are compiled and described.

When learning about how to organize their lives within new cultural and legal framework some of the activities and programs should involve whole families, that way parents and children can together learn about the country they now live in. However, it is also important to distinguish cases when parents and children should have separate learning sessions, for example when learning about parenting in new cultural and legal context.

All three partner organizations agreed on the great value of volunteers. However, it was also acknowledged that volunteers are a resource that requires quite big investment from the part of the organization as well. Enrolment of new volunteers, coordinating their tasks and involvement, maintaining communication with them as well as their interest in the organization can only be done successfully and in a sustainable manner if there are staff members who can dedicate their time to it. Additionally, to that involving people from the target groups as volunteers and ambassadors for activities help to reach people for whom the activities are organized.

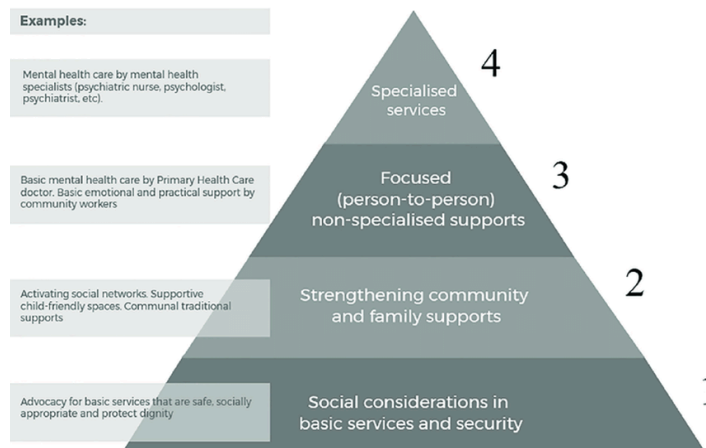
Even though context in each country varies and each partner organization has slightly different ways of working with integration, there were quite a lot of shared experiences. The current political situation in Europe, where policies regarding migration are becoming increasingly hostile towards migrants and often target NGOs as well, poses significant challenges to initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive society.

All three involved NGOs share an approach aimed at avoiding duplication of services provided or intended to be provided by the state or local governments. By doing so, they focus on reaching refugees and asylum seekers whose needs are not adequately met by the support provided by the state or local authorities.



During the study visit, the creation of accessible spaces was identified as one of effective community practices. Organization *Studiefrämjandet* has a facility in a shopping mall that is in one of the neighborhoods where a lot of migrants and their families live. Upon arrival at this facility people do not have to provide any personal details about themselves to enter and use the space. There are rooms for studying, dancing, different musical activities, as well as a library where everyone can borrow a book and bring their books. To be noted that coffee at this place is offered for a symbolic price. Additionally, to the space itself support personnel that can assist people with different tasks is a great plus. For starting this kind of facility, one does not need several rooms or providing different activities. The core idea for such space is getting together, therefore to begin with providing a common room that can be used for studying, reading, playing games and having a coffee is enough.

As discussed between all three partner organizations, gaining trust from both local and newcomer communities takes time and what works best for this trust building is a word of mouth. Also, when thinking of integration and activities that should include different groups it was discussed that when avoiding asking people of their legal and social status in the country people feel more welcome. Asylum seekers, refugees and others can be afraid to be ostracized or sometimes ashamed of their legal and/or social status when participating in the activities, therefore if it can prevent them from participation.



Such study visits are of crucial importance for learning about the situations and contexts in other European countries. When meeting people with the same goal that work in different settings and ways, inspiration for further work is one of the most valuable gains. Working with integration and often observing injustice can be very draining and overwhelming, therefore by meeting others with similar experience tools for maintaining mental health of oneself are shared. Demand is always greater than the supply in the case of social support, and for a person who on daily basis encounters situations where it seems that provided help is not enough it can seem that the support one can give is not as professional as it should. Intervention pyramid is a tool that can help to put it in another perspective.

Making sports and other recreational activities more accessible to everyone is another way of building communities and ensuring that children, youth and adults have meaningful ways of spending their free time. Great example of that is *Fritidsbanken* (leisure bank in English) where people free of charge can borrow all kinds of sports and other leisure equipment. Additionally, to their library-like spaces, employees often go to different neighborhoods where there are not a lot of opportunities for meaningful leisure activities and bring their equipment there for some time. This way they are encouraging mainly children and youth to engage in activities together with their peers and fill their free time.

Another example of good practices for community building are self-organized community groups. NGOs, for their part provide the space for meetings and encourage people to get together. Only rule that should be advisable from the side of an organization is stating that these groups should not be politically, ideologically or religiously orientated, but more about learning new skills, doing something together in small groups and discussing daily life topics.

Particular study visit was the first meeting point for *I want to help refugees*, *Estonian Refugee Council* and *Studiefrämjandet*. All partners have discussed possible future collaborations in the form of trainings that are focused on specific skills and topics. For example, when starting a new activity or program, that before has never happened in one of the three countries it is advisable to invite a person from a partner organization who has such experience to train and prepare partners who are just about to start. Already during the study visit exchange of available materials and tools for both activities and employee support was provided. The *Estonian Refugee Council* with the others a game “Diamond Island” that they have created. Game is meant for facilitating meaningful dialogues about cultural and social norms, stereotypes and can be used for different groups of people.

Even though Latvia, Estonia and Sweden have very different ways of approaching integration and the human and financial resources for *I want to help refugees*, *Estonian Refugee Council* and *Studiefrämjandet* differ greatly it is easy to find a common ground since the goal is the same - more inclusive society. Sometimes seeing how different the same things can be approached is what generates ideas and solutions that before seemed to be impossible!

Prepared by Kristiāna Blūma, project “Sustainable Integration: Activities for a More Inclusive Society” manager.

Riga, 20 October 2024.