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The new entrepreneurs

Migrants talk about integration strategies and the meaning of home

Being from Gaza and trying to cross the border for seven years, leaving Palestine seemed an impossible thing due to the siege ... but I did it. Travelling from Palestine to Luxembourg may not take longer than 7 hours by plane ... if we had a Palestinian airport. Yet, my journey to Luxembourg took me eight months, including 13 days by foot. During this journey, I felt like Tarzan but the wish and need for being safe, considered the second priority in human needs according to Maslow pyramid, gave me strength and motivation to continue.

Arriving in Luxembourg

It was almost midnight when I reached the small Grand Duchy at the end of August 2015. I was afraid and exhausted, waiting for sunrise, walking around, looking for a safe place and watching people like a member of a jury during a film festival. However, it was also the beginning of a new journey on the road to integration into a new society, a society with completely different traditions and habits.

When I reached the centre for single women in Rédange, Zina smiled and was eager to help me get to know more about Luxembourgish society. She left the Iraqi capital Baghdad and arrived in Luxembourg as a refugee with her two daughters in 2013. Zina dreamt of living a stable life

with her two kids away from the reception center for asylum seekers. She worked really hard to rebuild her career and start a new life in a foreign country. "The first year was very difficult: traditions, habits, culture, food, music, everything was different. I felt lonely, as I had no one. So I did not have any other option but to integrate well into Luxembourgish society. The first step was to study Luxembourgish, I volunteered in few organizations

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and after two and a half years I ended up working as a coordinator for ASTI, an association for immigrant workers, on a project that strengthens immigrants' skills in order to facilitate their integration into the labour market", Zina explains. Yet, it is not easy to find a job as skills and diplomas required at the employment market are incompatible with the ones in home countries. It takes years to get them recognized or converted while learning many languages in order to be competitive complicates the search for a job.

Although Zina feels satisfied about her integration in Luxembourg, she wishes

being able to see her mother and siblings who she has not seen in seven years, since she escaped Iraq. She assures that when peace will spread its wings over Iraq, she will return and invite her Luxembourgish friends and introduce them to her city and culture. She describes the situation I am living right now as a refugee, sometimes I feel so lonely and hopeless and mostly I miss my family. I realize how important it is to get through this phase and move on with life and Zina is for me an example to follow.

Allow for entrepreneurship

Jacques, an economic advisor at the European Investment Bank (EIB) in Luxembourg and residing in France, left the Netherlands in 1988 when he found a job opportunity in France, shortly after the completion of his PHD. In relation to investment opportunities for migrants, he considers Luxembourg to be "moderately benevolent". While Luxembourg is usually considered a safe haven for capital funds, it is not easy to start a business due to the high costs (paid-in minimal capital), administrative burdens and high labour costs. Luxembourg ranks 61th in the world's "Ease of Doing Business" classification, well behind France (27th) or the UAE (31th), a country where some Syrian

or Iraqi refugees might have experiences or affinities with.

He argues that numerous examples of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt have demonstrated the social and economic potential of these highly skilled refugees and their strong sense for entrepreneurship. I wish to believe that, if Luxembourg (or any EU government) would create enabling mechanisms for refugees to start their own businesses, this would de facto facilitate their social and economic integration in the host country. It would reduce the costs (in the government's budget) of hosting refugees, enable them to generate their own revenues as well as to create additional jobs for fellow refugees and even for the local population. Investments should be relatively small and fall under microfinance. Here the government could help with incentives (guarantee structures, lowering the cost to create a business, business incubation centers etc.).

Jacques further argues that we may learn not only from initiatives in host countries in the Middle East but also from Western countries such as Canada. In these places opportunities for new immigrants and refugees have been created to participate in entrepreneur-, and leadership programs in order to stimulate the creation of business or social enterprises. The type of investments is hard to predict given that refugees have different backgrounds (doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, architects, etc.) and the human mind in designing new business opportunities can be very creative. Nevertheless, it is clear that running a business automatically forces refugees to integrate into the market and hence with the local society. Fears that business creation by refugees would take away jobs from the local population have proven unwarranted in Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt.

"Loss of precious time"

Marianne, a Red Cross employee who I met at a Harika event¹ agrees with this argument. She explains that especially the first months after the arrival of asylum seekers could be used more constructively. People who spend most of their day wait-

ing, lose a lot of energy and will lack the strength to actively seek a job once they have (finally) received their papers. There is a loss of precious time before they can start language classes and engage with professionals to see what job opportunities there are. More and more asylum seekers actually work as volunteers in order to do something "useful", to find a sense of normality and return something to the country that hosts them. This is a very good transition and helps them getting prepared for a job.

Yet, there could be a more systematic screening of competencies, more support from professionals on diploma homologation, specific trainings to improve the skills they may be lacking in their field of

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expertise, etc. A professionally run coaching program starting shortly after their arrival could potentially allow migrants to find a job more quickly once they are allowed to work after six months.

However, she acknowledges that most likely it will be difficult for non-residents to have the same opportunities than resident job seekers who speak the local languages. Some professions will be especially difficult to have access to, such as pharmacist and high school teacher given the specificities of these professions in Luxembourg. A pharmacist from Syria told me for example that in Luxembourg, it will be easier to open a restaurant than a pharmacy.

Marianne is convinced that integration has many facets: besides professional integration, it is about learning the habits and values of the country, how you have to behave, getting to know your rights and obligations. However, there are often not enough opportunities to meet Luxembourgish residents and activities to get to know the country. Cultural activities and sports can be important integration vectors. "I helped for example many young

migrants joining football clubs and most of them have successfully integrated their teams. They feel they belong to a group and feel accepted", explains Marianne. Another vector of integration may be hosting asylum seekers and refugees in private families. Yet, Marianne clarifies that "better regulation is needed, as it would be beneficial to Luxembourg families to allow migrants living in their home and learning from each other. So far, it is still not clear if migrants are entitled to receiving the RMG (guaranteed minimum income) when they live in a private home. This is why many asylum seekers that I know are hesitant to move out of the centres for asylum seekers. I have been trying for at last 4 months to get legal approval to allow an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan to live at my house. From personal experience, I know that some minors function well in a group. Some unaccompanied minors need more "supervision" and some would be very happy to have more privacy and to live in a more reassuring, cosy environment.

"I am a multi-local"

Jacques introduced me to interesting people in Luxembourg, among them Firas, an economic consultant. We met in one of the oriental cafés in the centre of Luxembourg City and he told me "I have always been keen to gain more knowledge and experience at the international level. This is why I studied abroad, in Lebanon, went back to start a career in Syria and then moved to Italy to do a Master in European Studies. I got my first international job opportunity in Dublin but ended up in Luxembourg, a hub for international and European institutions. I was selected to join a one-year programme for young professionals from Mediterranean partner countries at the European Investment Bank." Firas continued: "When I came to Europe, my hometown was a safe place but I chose to be away, to start a new life, get an international work experience and share great moments with new people. Yes, I was lucky! I have not experienced war contrary to Syrian fellows who arrive come to Luxembourg as refugees."

I asked him about what home meant for him and he replied: "Home land is the

place I have childhood memories of, where I used to live with my family during a certain time of my life. Home is a place that I did not choose but which I love. Aleppo, Sanaa, Beirut, Parma, Dublin and Luxembourg are places where I lived and feel at home.” Although he still faces many difficulties as a non-European citizen (extra time and energy for administrative papers, permits, travelling, etc.), he feels at home in the Grand Duchy.

Similar to Firas, Igor, an Italian lawyer, moved to Luxembourg in 2006, after finishing his master degree in law and working in Belgium, Germany, France and the UK. Now he works as a lawyer at the European Union. “I had always wanted to travel to widen my knowledge, through the Erasmus program I got the chance to study law in Germany.” Luxembourg is

special because despite the small size, the international character makes it easier to build strong social and professional networks that facilitate integration. Yet, Igor

“Home does not represent a country for me, I am a multi-local and feel at home in several cities.”

admits that he still feels nostalgic: “I have a special feeling for Italy, I love Italian food, the sun and the sea. I want to keep some Italian traditions and visit Italy quite often for professional reasons or to spend time with family and close friends.”

Social integration does not stop at the clear rules set by Luxembourgish and in general European law. Learning the language, en-

tering the job market and respecting the regulations in the host country are not enough. Traditions, habits or dress codes often make migrants feel closer to their own people and isolated from the host society. They are afraid that assimilating to the host society will endanger their cultural and religious beliefs. Efforts to build an enriching environment that allows the exchange of cultural heritage is therefore necessary. Lastly, media also plays a role in reporting about integration in an objective manner while presenting the diversity of cultures and promoting the equality in access to the job market in Luxembourg. ♦

1 Harika is a project that organizes different activities to encourage the integration process between refugees and residents.

