13. Structures, trends and turning points of Norwegian and Swedish integration policies

Ulf Hansson, Deniz Akin, Zuzana Macuchova and Per Olav Lund

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade most European countries experienced the arrival of increased numbers of immigrants. Following the dramatic escalation in the number of people fleeing to Europe in 2015, many countries faced a set of short- and long-term challenges. Accommodation and shelters needed to be organized in the short term for refugees; one of the main longer-term challenges has been facilitating newcomers’ integration into European societies (Vogt Isaksen 2020). The latter has also raised questions about how to define and implement integration.

In this chapter we focus on labour market integration challenges and policies in Norway and Sweden. These two countries provide a useful comparison framework for several reasons. First, with their strong welfare systems both countries have high employment rates. However, they both report low employment rates among immigrants (Karlsdóttir et al. 2017). Second, their immigration history has shared features. Both countries experienced increasing numbers of guest workers and labour migrants in the early 1970s, which was gradually followed by the introduction of restrictive immigration measures (Vogt Isaksen 2020, 2). Finally, the speedy transition of immigrants to employment is regarded as crucial in the Nordic countries, because it reduces the pressure on their welfare states, and it contributes to immigrants’ social integration, which enhances their wellbeing (Calmfors and Sánchez Gassen 2019).

Empirically, our study focuses on analysing the Midt-Gudbrandsdal and Nord-Østerdal regions in Norway and Dalarna County in Sweden. They are all rural and mountainous. Previous research has shown that the resettlement of refugees and other immigrant groups can pose both challenges and opportuni-
ties in remote regions. As they are sparsely populated, newcomers contribute both economically and demographically to these regions’ development (see also Zahl-Thanem and Haugen 2019). However, issues such as the lack of employment opportunities can make it difficult for immigrants to participate in the labour market. Through our comparative study, we aim to describe and discuss structural conditions and integration policies that can inform immigrants’ transition to employment in these regions.

We have chosen to emphasize immigrants’ labour market integration in our study for several reasons. As earlier studies demonstrate, integration is a multidimensional term, and it can refer to both a process in which immigrants are becoming ‘an accepted part of the society’ (Penninx and García-Mascareñas 2016, 14), as well as the goal of this process. There is an extensive discussion of the issue, both around the theoretical definition of the concept of integration and how to measure integration empirically (Ager and Strang 2008; Barstad and Molstad 2020; Sætermo, Gullikstad and Kristensen 2021). Various dimensions of integration are commonly considered in the theoretical definition of immigration: employment; education; social inclusion; and active citizenship (Ager and Strang 2008). In the empirical measurement of integration the focus is mainly on its employment dimension. As Diedrich et al. (2020, 4) state, ‘The notion that a person is integrated when he/she has found employment dominates research into integration in many disciplines’. Similarly, Gauffin and Lytyinen (2017, 11) refer to employment as ‘... considered to be the core indicator of integration’. Labour market participation is utilized elsewhere and prioritized by the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) and the Zaragoza integration indicators used by the European Commission, for example. Further, they cite Crul and Schneider (2010), who refer to employment as important in the context of immigrants’ integration in wider society. It is also important that both Norway and Sweden have high employment rates among men and women, and being unemployed can therefore have a further implication for immigrants’ exclusion. In our study we emphasize how language proficiency affects labour market integration, and how living in a mountainous and rural area may pose additional challenges for immigrants’ employment.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The data for this chapter were collected within the MATILDE framework (see Chapter 1). The Norwegian case study relies on data collected through 10 individual interviews and three group interviews, conducted with regional and national policymakers, experts, stakeholders, and public service providers in the first half of 2021. Additional data were collected through participatory action research in the form of world-café workshops organized during the second half of 2021 as two-day events in the two case study regions.
Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe

Midt-Gudbrandsdal and Nord-Østerdal in Innlandet County in Norway. The workshop in Midt-Gudbrandsdal consisted of 30 participants from the public sector, migrants enrolled in language training at the adult education centre, and representatives of the third sector. All the migrants participating in the workshop were TCNs, with varying levels of proficiency in Norwegian (from beginner to intermediate), ethnic background (mainly Middle Eastern and African), marital status (single, married with children), gender (four women, five men), education level, and duration of residence in the case region (ranging from less than a year to four years). Forty people participated in the Nord-Østerdal workshop: individuals from third-sector/volunteer organizations; private sector/businesses; the public sector; and migrants enrolled in language training, the introduction programme, or upper secondary education. Twenty-three migrants participated in the workshop, representing diversity in migration purposes (flight, family reunification, work migration), gender (equal representation), marital status (single, married, married with children), employment status (student, fulltime employee, jobseeker, language course attendee, pupil, etc.) and background (European, African, Asian, Middle Eastern).

A similar approach was used for the Swedish case study. The data drew on 14 interviews held in March and April 2021 with local employees and managers. In addition to the interview the research involved two workshops (action research) in two of the case study municipalities (Hedemora and Vansbro). Furthermore, three roundtable discussions with six stakeholders and 12 students attending Swedish for foreigners/immigrants (SFI) courses offered to migrants. The roundtables and group discussion were organized in May 2022.

NORWAY

Immigration to Norway

Immigration has been on the country’s political agenda since labour migrants began to arrive in Norway in the 1970s. Although immigration was halted in 1975, migration to Norway continued through other legitimate ways such as family reunification and refugee arrivals (Hagelund 2002). At the beginning of 2022 there were 819,400 immigrants in Norway (Statistics Norway). The largest groups were from Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, Syria, and Somalia. By the end of March 2022 8,641 people had applied for asylum in Norway.

As a destination country for various types of immigration, integration has been a key term in Norway’s immigration policies and politics. It seeks to ensure immigrants become part of society, economically, socially, and/or culturally (Sætermo, Gullikstad and Kristensen 2021). However, there has
been a lack of clarity in the definition of integration. As a political concept its meanings have also changed over time in Norway (ibid.).

In the 1980s formulations of integration revolved around concerns regarding immigrants’ responsibility to adapt to Norwegian society, while protecting them from assimilation (Hagelund 2002). The 1990s were marked by the ‘imperative character of integration’ (Hagelund 2002, 407), when it was formulated in terms of obligations to participate in the political and policy context. In 2022 the political focus is on integration’s functional aspects such as employment and language training (Gullikstad 2009; Valenta and Bunar 2010).

In Norway the Directorate for Integration and Diversity (IMDi) implements the state’s refugee settlement policy as stipulated in the Integration Act. A key element of this ‘state-assisted integration’ (Valenta and Bunar 2010, 463) is the Introduction Programme, which is designed for newly arrived refugees between 18 and 55 years of age and family members who arrive in the country later. Participation in the introduction programme is both a right and obligation for the target group members. During this compulsory course participants receive not only language tuition but also information about Norwegian society. Failure to participate in this programme is not only penalized through withdrawal of cash benefits but has negative consequences for refugees’ judicial status (ibid.). It is also important to mention that several organizations are involved in integration work.

At the regional level municipalities play a key role in integration: not only do they settle refugees in cooperation with the IMDi, they also ensure refugees and their families receive training in social studies and Norwegian. Municipalities must also facilitate integration by participating in working life and society. Municipalities generally organize the refugees’ settlement through ‘refugee offices’. Smaller municipalities sometimes cooperate with neighbouring municipalities. It is also noteworthy that several NGOs are involved in regional integration work at volunteer centres, the Red Cross, sport clubs, Grendelag (small neighbourhood organizations), and so on, which facilitate the participation of children, young people, and adults in becoming part of a community. The population decline in rural and remote municipalities means the resettlement of refugees and other immigrant groups in these regions is deemed valuable by policies and regional strategies in Norway, as well as in other European countries (Zahl-Thanem and Haugen 2019). However, settlement in remote areas can create problems for refugees in social inclusion and integration through labour market participation.

Concerning social inclusion, a recent study shows that people living in rural areas express significantly less positive attitudes towards immigrants than people living in urban areas in Norway (Zahl-Thanem and Haugen 2019), which may affect immigrants’ overall integration. Previous research has iden-
Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe

Identified barriers to labour market integration, such as low demand for labour in small districts and employers’ reluctance to hire immigrants (Søholt, Tronstad and Bjørnsen 2014). Refugees who have settled in remote areas have considerably fewer employment opportunities than those who have settled in more centralized or urban areas, especially around the capital of Norway. Those who have settled in the most remote areas also relocate most often to more urban centres (Hernes et al. 2019; Svendsen, Valenta and Berg 2017).

However, it is also crucial to note that rural and remote areas can provide other qualities for immigrants’ wellbeing and social inclusion. Children’s wellbeing and access to schools and social activities are emphasized as attractive features of rural and remote municipalities (see Solheim and Røhnæbæk 2019). However, it is also pointed out that there are fewer opportunities for socialization in district regions for immigrants who do not have families (ibid.). In what follows we give an overview of the two Norwegian case regions where we have studied local structural conditions and integration policies.

Overview of the Case Regions

The Norwegian case focuses on two regions, Midt-Gudbrandsdal and Nord-Østerdal. Both are in Innlandet County, which had a population of 371,253 in 2021 and is one of 11 counties in Norway (Figure 13.1). Midt-Gudbrandsdal comprises three municipalities with a total of 13,077 inhabitants, while Nord-Østerdal comprises six municipalities with a total of 14,684 inhabitants. Table 13.1 illustrates the population distribution and background in the case regions.

Both regions are rural and mountainous, characterized by smaller settlements and dense populations. Compared to Norway overall, the regions’ municipalities are classified as second least central municipalities or least central municipalities (Høydal 2020). Depopulation and unemployment characterize them (Lund et al. 2016, Vareide 2008), and compared to Norway overall the region’s inhabitants have a proportionally greater need of public welfare services (Prop nr 1S (2021–2022), Grønt hefte-Table-e-k). TCNs thus represent a potential resource for the whole region, adding to the workforce and contributing to demographic growth. There have been some challenges with integration. However, these regions are known to have an asylum seeker settlement strategy, and they have shown good results in integration work compared to the county’s other regions.

In both regions the municipalities have chosen to establish regional offices to organize the introduction programme. In Midt-Gudbrandsdal the Midt-Gudbrandsdal Flyktningetjeneste and in Nord-Østerdal the Tynset opplæringssenter are responsible for training in Norwegian and social studies, primary school education for adults, and the introduction programme. Tynset
### Table 13.1 Inhabitants in Midt-Gudbrandsdal and Nord-Østerdal regions (counting date: 1 January)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Midt-Gudbrandsdal</th>
<th>Nord-Østerdal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation immigrants</td>
<td>1,145</td>
<td>1,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian-born with immigrant parents</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population without first-generation immigrants and Norwegian-born</td>
<td>12,051</td>
<td>11,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,328</td>
<td>13,177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Norway, Table 09817 and 07459.

opplæringssenter also coordinates the settlement of refugees in Tynset and provides guidance and practical assistance to asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants who have been reunited with their families, and working immigrants. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) cooperates with the municipalities on issues such as social security and job training when the introduction programme is finished.

### Findings

According to the informants, issues related to education and formal qualification play an important role in determining immigrants’ labour market participation, largely because there is a dearth of unskilled jobs and considerable competition for the few that exist. One of the informants at the ministry level reflects on this:

We’ve seen that no matter what we’ve done, around 60 per cent are in work or education the following year [after the introduction programme] – around 70 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women. We’ve made various efforts without seeing great effects. (WP3NO3)

The same informant argues that the introduction programme, whose primary focus is on language and work training, should be organized to enable participants to gain formal education and qualifications to give them a better chance in the employment market. The informant says:

Formal education/qualification is important whether you have immigrant background or not… figures from Statistics Norway show that it is often the education that counts more than perhaps that you have immigrated. The statistics show if you compare immigrants who have taken upper secondary education in Norway, they have approximately the same employment rates as the rest of the population.
These are the steps you must take. This is something we’re trying to do through the integration reform. (WP3NO3)

Another informant also raises the importance of educational programmes to elevating immigrants’ formal competence and skills:

Municipalities are struggling with population decline and general trends – people are getting older and so on, but more specifically, it’s about accessing skilled labour. This is a huge challenge – recruitment, especially within health and care. There are huge discussions on this regarding labour market inclusion, how to ensure that those who are excluded and don’t want to be can gain competence/skills that enable them to contribute. Qualification paths [educational programmes] adapted to the needs of different groups are needed that teach skills that can actually be used, so I’m very positive about this. (WP3NO6)

It is also important to facilitate the recognition of immigrants’ skills, competences, and formal education acquired in their country of origin. Stakeholders said the current mapping of immigrants’ formal and informal skills was a lengthy process that imposed certain limitations on TCNs’ employment opportunities, (World Café, Nord-Østerdal, see also Røhnebæk et al. 2022). The world cafés identified the frequent lack of recognition of immigrants’ informal or undocumented qualifications. Stakeholders mentioned that a good mapping of these qualifications would have been useful for matching the available competences and job opportunities in the regions.

Living in a rural and remote region can bring additional challenges related to education. For example, in both workshops the participants highlighted that logistics and transport had major implications for integration in rural and remote regions characterized by dispersed settlements (Røhnebæk et al. 2022). Having access to a car can be important for participation in social arenas and the labour market. As one informant says, transport limitations can prevent some from attending classes:

The educational opportunities are so scattered. If you live in XX, you must travel to XX to study. Many of these who arrive lack the opportunity to do so. If you move here with four kids and do not have a driving licence … We know the bus service isn’t good enough. (WP3NO16)

Language skills are considered a vital component of immigrant labour market integration and inclusion. They are also necessary for accessing knowledge that brings participation opportunities. One informant elaborates on this multifunctional role of language:

They [immigrants] have the same rights, but I don’t think that’s where the problems are. It isn’t easy to navigate the public systems. … Evidently, newly arrived immi-
Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe

Grants don’t know the language or culture – they won’t have the same prerequisites at least from a short-term perspective, and there may be many challenges. … It isn’t just about equal formal rights but about understanding how society works, what the governments’ role is, and so on. (WP3NO6)

In addition to hampering communication, a lack of language proficiency can prevent immigrants obtaining a driving licence in Norway, which indirectly affects their employment potential. Challenges in obtaining a driving licence were mentioned in the world cafés (both in NØ and MG). Although the theoretical driving test is available in several languages, driving theory courses are only available in Norwegian in these regions (Røhnebæk et al. 2022). Regarding this issue, most participants suggested that offering such theory classes in different languages would have made it easier for immigrants to pass the exam. It is important here that the emphasis is on the extent to which the overall system can be expanded to include immigrants, rather than pressurizing immigrants to intensify their effort to excel in their language proficiency.

SWEDEN

Immigration to Sweden

Historically, Sweden has been an attractive destination for both voluntary migration and forced migrants (refugees). Liberal labour migration policies and asylum policies are among the common explanations for the large number of immigrants coming to Sweden (Parusel 2016). Until the end of the 1960s there was high demand for labour migrants in small and medium-sized manufacturing industries throughout the country. Between 1970 and 1985 refugee and family migration became more important, and immigration to Sweden since the mid-1980s has been dominated by the refugee ‘crisis’ (Migration Policy Institute 2018). The Swedish authorities were unprepared to accommodate the arrival of 163,000 asylum seekers, which constituted the largest number of asylum seekers per capita of any European state (International Migration Outlook 2022).

By the late 1990s the Swedish government had set the goal and direction for the country’s integration policy, with a focus on equal rights and opportunities for all, regardless of ethnic and cultural background. The national policy moved from ‘migration’ to ‘integration’, with clearly stated goals (Prop. 1997/98:16, 1):

The goals of the integration policy shall be equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of ethnic and cultural background, a society with society’s diversity as a basis and a societal development characterized by mutual respect and tolerance,
and for which everyone, regardless of background, shall participate and share responsibility.

While a range of policies concerns employment and aspects of housing, the country lacks a national integration strategy *per se*, and there is a general emphasis on equality, obligations, and possibilities for everyone regardless of ethnic or cultural background. Concerning the integration of ‘new citizens’, it is possible to link the concept to participation in society and working life and to society’s efforts to adapt to the new citizens.

Sweden has a universal welfare system that aims to provide high-quality welfare services to all its citizens ‘from cradle to grave’ (Government of Sweden 2017). Migrants with residence permits also qualify for these services, including child allowances, parental benefits, a housing allowance (if they have a low income), sickness benefits, and pensions (European Commission 2020). Since 2013 those without a residence permit are entitled to the same emergency healthcare as asylum seekers (Swedish Migration Agency 2020). Children without a residence permit have a right to full healthcare and dental cover (ibid.).

A new legal framework entered force in 2018 (Prop. 2016/17:175). The previously established programme saw a range of changes concerning its running. Among other things there were now further provisions and regulations, and new arrivals were assigned to a labour market policy programme [Etableringsprogram] with an individual action plan and a proportionate action system that included a warming and shutdown. The processing of establishment compensation was moved to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

No Swedish ministry or authority focuses specifically on integration. At a governmental level two departments share integration work: the Department of Employment (Ministry for Equality) and the Department of Justice (migration). The Swedish Migration Agency is the agency responsible for both residence and work permits. The Swedish Migration Agency also provides temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, or they can arrange their own housing by staying with relatives or friends, for example. Swedish immigrant integration legislation and policies are designed at a national level, while the geographical focus of policy implementations may vary from the national to the local. The *Aliens Act Ordinance* (2006, 97), regulating immigrants’ conditions for entering, staying, and working in Sweden, exemplifies a nationally designed and implemented policy. In contrast the *Initiative for Asylum Seekers and Certain Newly Arrived Immigrants*, entering into force on 1 February 2017, is largely implemented at the local level. This policy aims for asylum seekers’ better and faster integration in society and working life. It also targets those who have been granted a residence permit and live in the Swedish Migration Agency’s facility accommodation. County Administrative Boards are assigned
the task of coordinating the actors and working with resources allocated for various initiatives, especially regarding asylum seekers’ integration. Examples of early interventions are the skills mapping of asylum seekers, various initiatives offering language training from the first day in Sweden or knowledge about Swedish society and the labour market, and health promotion.

Having received a residence permit, all adult migrants in Sweden have the right to participate in the SFI, a state-subsidized basic Swedish language programme. Municipalities are responsible for providing SFI courses. In November 2020 the government proposed that to be entitled to social assistance [försörjningsstöd], an individual must be working or actively seeking work. The proposal clarifies that the applicant is also obliged to participate in the SFI to be eligible for maintenance support. There were previously no requirements for participation in the SFI beyond being above 16 years of age, living in Sweden, and possessing a basic knowledge of Swedish. Foreigners residing in Sweden are eligible for generous education benefits, including free Swedish courses for immigrants (Education Act 2010, 800). They can also apply for grants and loans from the Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN) to enrol in adult education or at higher education institutions (CSN 2020).

The 2017 legislation (2017, 584) is an attempt to harmonize integration legislation. The law emphasizes the role played by the Public Employment Service and the County Administrative Boards as responsible agencies for the promotion of cooperation between the various agencies in the field. The education obligation for new arrivals with limited education and deemed distant from the labour market is also connected to the programme and the changes in 2018. The Public Employment Service can therefore assign new arrivals who take part in the Etableringsprogram to apply for and participate in regular adult education to increase their skills. New arrivals can study full-time during their establishment period. Those who do not follow the Swedish Public Employment Service’s instructions on education can lose their benefits (Lag 2017, 584).

Regarding migration and employment, education level and age on arrival are factors influencing integration into the labour market. Forslund, Liljeberg, and Åslund (2017) show that immigrants with a better education settle considerably more quickly. Furthermore, age on arrival significantly affects the opportunity to become established on the labour market. However, in referring to the employment gap previously mentioned, Szulkin et al. (2013) suggested migrants who had been in Sweden longer might have fared better yet struggled with matching employment. In the last three decades rural areas in Sweden have undergone substantial economic and demographic changes: population decline, outmigration, and the working age population have been among the research agenda’s themes (Hedlund and Lundholm 2015). Small rural municipalities have much at stake, as international immigration may
reverse the problems of population decline and contribute to the maintenance of economic and social sustainability (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014). International migration is also perceived as one of the remedies to the labour market vacancies typical of rural areas (ibid.; Hedlund et al. 2017). While the native-born population is increasingly leaving rural for urban areas, Hedberg and Haandrikman (2014) show that foreign-born immigrants are taking their place and living in the countryside. Although some of this flow comprises migrants from other Nordic countries, TCNs especially contribute to the rejuvenation of the population structure of rural areas (Hedberg 2010). Regarding immigrants’ employment prospects, Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) recently showed that the most advantageous regions for immigrants to gain their first employment are at the extremes of the population density distribution: the Stockholm region and small town/rural regions. Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) suggest this is because of the accrued opportunities for socialization with native-born residents, which may be beneficial in the job seeking process. Benerdal (2021) points to the short decision path and the relative ease of finding the right person as advantages for immigrants running a business and working in small municipalities.

Case Description

The Swedish case focuses on Dalarna County (Figure 13.2). One of Sweden’s 21 counties, it is located slightly below the centre of Sweden, bordering Norway in the northwest. The northern part of the county is sparsely populated and is mountainous and covered mainly by forests. The centre of the county, the area around Lake Siljan, is a popular tourism location. While there are several industrial towns in the south, some face economic restructuring. In 2021 the population of Dalarna County was 288,287. It was distributed in 15 municipalities, with populations between 5,000 and 42,000 inhabitants. The MATILDE project focuses on three municipalities in Dalarna County, the municipalities of Älvdalen, Vansbro and Hedemora (see Figure 13.2). The municipality of Älvdalen is in the northern part of the county, with 7,121 inhabitants. Vansbro is in the centre of the county, with 6,807 inhabitants. Hedemora is in the south of the county, with 15,457 inhabitants. In 2021 there were 37,562 foreign-born residents in the county of Dalarna, accounting for 13 per cent of the population. The foreign-born population has grown steadily from 7.9 per cent in 2008. However, despite this increase, the share of the foreign-born population remains below the national average of 19.8 per cent. International migration is important for Dalarna County’s demographic balance. The foreign-born population in Dalarna (as well as in Sweden generally) is significantly younger than the native-born population, and a larger proportion of people is of working age (Region Dalarna 2020a).
Migrants could play a vital role in filling vacancies in the labour market, especially in healthcare and elderly care (Stenbacka 2013). Moreover, the tourism sector usually offers many jobs in diverse services (the tourism sector in Dalarna involves both a winter and a summer season). Syrians (4,812) constituted the most populous foreign-born nationality in Dalarna County in 2021, followed by Finns (4,381), Somalis (3,966), Eritreans (2,039) and Iraqis (1,691).

**Findings**

A recurring theme with respect to TCN migrants’ labour market integration, emerging in both the interviews with stakeholders and with TCN migrants, was the role which *language proficiency* played in relation to employment prospects. To some extent, issues and challenges related to knowledge of Swedish were raised by both interviewees representing private companies operating in the region and employees with a TCN background.
The specific role *language proficiency* played in the employability of TCN migrants varied depending on the type of work position. For example, in a tourism destination where TCNs were mainly employed as cleaners, the manager (WP4SW026) responsible for recruiting new employees mentioned that to be able to perform the job, TCN workers needed to receive instruction in Swedish. A lack of elementary Swedish in the case of cleaners was mentioned as a decisive factor in the recruitment process:

I try to tell those I talk to that they if don’t get a job, they must go and learn Swedish. There are so many who call to complain that they can’t get a job. (WP4SW026)

Similarly, a manager of a local grocery store (WP4SW029) contemplated the challenges of employing TCN workers:

Work in a grocery store is knowledge-intensive, and an ability to speak Swedish is required. We work hard to support our staff to improve their language skills. But if a person barely knows the alphabet, it’s very difficult to integrate them into work that requires you to understand questions about allergies and so on. (WP4SW029)

It was apparent that the level of *language proficiency* varied with respect to the position for which TCN workers applied. For more qualified positions like those in a company producing food and beverages there were also higher expectations of language ability. An HR manager (WP4SW023) of an enterprise producing food and beverages emphasized that TCN workers needed to have a good or very good knowledge of Swedish to avoid mistakes concerning food containing different allergens:

It is absolutely crucial that we get the recipes right, so we don’t mix the wrong type of herbs, allergens, and what have you – there’s a range of issues we need to consider. (WP4SW023)

The HR manager (WP4SW023) also referred to former employees who failed to achieve the acceptable level of Swedish required for their jobs. The homecare sector is another example where good language proficiency is required. In Sweden this sector encompasses a large share of employees with a migrant background, many from TCN countries. In recent years there have been several cases where a lack of Swedish has led to serious issues with staff being unable to read instructions or communicate with individuals in their care (see e.g. Kommunalarbetaren 2018). A manager of a homecare unit (WP4SW021)
Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe

in one of the case study municipalities also referred to the need for language skills/knowledge among homecare workers with a TCN background:

The requirement is that you should be able to speak and make yourself understood in Swedish and read and write in Swedish, which is the main language at work. You can then get help with understanding things – for example, some words. … We may have to explain a little extra. … You must be able to have a conversation. … We often receive criticism that our staff’s Swedish is weak. … It’s a difficult nut to crack – we do everything we can. … We may be able to offer more support for those who are weak. … They may be good at reading, but it’s important to speak Swedish … (WP4SW021)

As previously mentioned, the requirements for language proficiency in the homecare sector are probably more complex than for cleaners. The work’s complexity makes it essential that homecare workers understand caregivers and vice versa. The manager of the homecare unit (WP4SW021) reflected further on the challenges related to language proficiency and emphasized the need for homecare workers to be able to understand and speak the language to interact with clients about medicine and ask them about the food they wanted, for example.

Awareness of the importance of language proficiency was also apparent in the interviews with employees with a TCN background employed in the homecare sector. They mentioned the need to be able to speak Swedish to communicate with the caregivers with whom they worked, as well as with their managers and other employees. Among the interviewees who were employed as factory workers a command of Swedish was also referred to as important and seen as key to both employment and social integration.

Another important issue emerging from the fieldwork was the former qualification/education verification and employment mismatch. The interviews revealed that a mismatch between education and employment of workers with a TCN background existed. One of the interviewees (WP4SW031), a worker with a TCN background currently working in the homecare sector, said that he perceived the work in the homecare unit in the municipality as an ‘in-between-job’ while the Swedish authorities processed his qualification from his country of origin. He anticipated this process to be rather long and planned to use the time to practise his Swedish. The interviewee described his study background from his home country: ‘I’ve studied to be a veterinarian. I’ve also worked as a teacher in (home country). I worked as a university rector.’

Another interviewee (WP4SW032) – now working in the municipal homecare sector – referred to working as a liaison officer for aid workers and as an international Red Cross worker. Similarly, an interviewee working in an enterprise producing food and beverages had studied computer sciences at univer-
sity in her native country (the Philippines). Another interviewee (WP4SW032), a woman currently working as a cleaner in the resort, mentioned that she had studied in her home country to become a high school natural sciences teacher.

A manager (WP4SW026) in one of the enterprises in a rather remote part of Dalarna highlighted the challenges concerning public transport and just as in the case of Norway (see above) the challenges of remoteness. She said transport to and from the destination was one of the main challenges for hiring a new workforce. In some peak periods the enterprise needed to organize its own shuttle transport to bring workers with a TCN background from where they lived. According to the manager (WP4SW026) in the 2020/2021 season a large proportion of the cleaners were employees with a TCN background, some of whom lived 120 kilometres from the resort. The manager also mentioned that when a vacancy arose, she often deliberately contacted workers with a TCN background with access to a private car and a driving licence, as this made her job easier.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this chapter we have focused on the challenges and policies related to migrants’ labour market integration in Norway and Sweden. When read together, these two case studies reveal the challenges that inform immigrants’ labour market integration in rural and mountainous regions. Both the Swedish and Norwegian case studies point to key issues such as language proficiency, documentation, and verification of formal and informal skills that determine immigrants’ employment transition. It is important here to note that language remains an essential part of employment integration, regardless of the time spent in the country. Language skills are not only considered necessary to obtain a job, they are also regarded as a vital facilitator for immigrants’ navigation in public: language and communication skills facilitate immigrants’ access to information and a network that provides work opportunities. In this sense both case studies suggest there is a need for the reinforcement of language learning policies, as well as the dissemination of critical information in immigrants’ native languages, at least during the early stages of their resettlement.

Besides language proficiency, the findings of both case studies indicate that the case regions’ geographical structure may have implications for immigrants’ labour integration. Because they are sparsely populated, there are few job opportunities, which makes competition for jobs fierce. In these circumstances immigrants may encounter additional challenges when they cannot document their previous education and experience. This may result in a mismatch between immigrants’ competence and the kind of work they obtain where they settle, as they may be employed in low-skilled occupations.
As a policy recommendation at the national level, we suggest that structured support and recognition procedures for informal qualifications would improve immigrants’ working life participation in these regions. This would help them formalize their informal skills and competences and shorten their transition to the workforce. At the regional level we suggest that establishing job centres as supplements to the regional and local Labour and Welfare Services would lower barriers to the labour market. Functioning as a hub and a meeting place, job centres would provide opportunities for small-scale ad-hoc employment in the regions, which would facilitate access to low-barrier short-term employment opportunities and on-the-job language training.

NOTE

1. The programme was regulated through the Introduction Act, which was introduced in 2003. On 1 January 2021 the Introduction Act was replaced by the Integration Act as part of a major integration reform. The new act places greater emphasis on education, training, and work, more clearly specifying expectations and responsibilities of the national and regional/county authorities and municipalities.

REFERENCES

Structures, trends and turning points of Norwegian and Swedish integration policies

default/files/docs/pages/00_eu_seasonal_workers_study_synthesis_report_en_1.pdf.


Gauffin, K and E. Lyytinen (2017), ‘Working for integration: a comparative analysis of policies impacting labour market access among young immigrants and refugees in the Nordic countries’, Centre for Health Equity Studies (CHESS); Migration Institute of Finland.


Gullikstad, B. (2009), ‘Norwegian national policy on economic citizenship for gender equality and ethnic integration’, FEMCIT report: WP 3 Economic Citizenship, FEMCIT.


Hedberg, C. (2010), ‘“Every soul is needed!” Processes of immigration and demographic consequences for Swedish rural areas’, Stockholm Research Reports in Demography 2010:16, Department of Sociology, Demography Unit, Stockholm University.


Lag (2017), Om ansvar för etableringsinsatser för vissa nyanlända invandrare, 584.


