

Policy and experiences of professional integration of young immigrants in the Walloon region (Belgium)

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This paper aims to identify obstacles to integration of young foreigners in the Walloon region and more generally in Belgium as a whole while presenting in a critical manner the actions undertaken by the local and/or regional actors and the public policies aimed at overcoming these obstacles. Since the 1960s, North Africans, Turkish and Sub-Saharan immigrants and their families have constituted the major component of non-European inflows into Belgium. It has been proved that youths of immigrant descent, in the absence of positive parental role models, often experience difficulties in breaking into the work arena. In order to go beyond local pilot initiatives and the experimental phase, the Walloon Region has set up integration policy measures for foreigners in the framework of the Centres régionaux d'intégration (CRI) , created under the Decree of 4th July 1996. The action of professional social integration handled by the CRI gives an impression of vagueness in the accomplishment of its role: frontline or rearguard, socio-professional or general integration, local or "trans-regional work".

1. Introduction and presentation of the population groups concerned

The objectives of this paper are: (1) to identify the obstacles to job market access for young foreigners and young people of foreign descent, of both sexes, in the Walloon Region (French speaking part of Belgium) and, more generally, in Belgium as a whole; and (2) to showcase local and/or regional initiatives, along with public policies to help overcome these obstacles. The reference

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population groups are primarily North African, Turkish and Sub-Saharan immigrants and their families.

These three groups account for the bulk of the inflows into Belgium since 1960, as well as for most of the country's non-European immigration. Turks and North Africans were part of the last wave of migrant workers recruited prior to 1974, when all massive immigration was theoretically halted. The migratory patterns through which sub-Saharan Africans (hereinafter "Africans") entered Belgium were more diverse. These different groups show similarities and differences in their interactions with the Belgian job market, the analysis of which can help to assess the overall strategies that immigrants use to break into employment, but also the various barriers to their entry (Manço, 2001).

Based on statistics of the number of persons holding Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian citizenship (150 000 people in Belgium as a whole), and in the light of certain patterns in the acquisition of Belgian citizenship by these people and their families, it can be estimated that nearly 225 000 persons of Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian descent are living in Belgium, representing a quarter of the population of foreign descent which itself accounts for one out of ten of the Kingdom's residents (Targosz and Manço, 2000). The gender balance of this population group is relatively even. The immigrants in this group settled in Belgium relatively recently and on the whole are very young, since half of them are below 25 years of age. More than half of Belgium's North African population lives in Brussels (Kesteloot, 1990). In 1998, it is estimated that some 35 000 North Africans or persons of North African descent were present in the Walloon Region. According to a summary of the occupational status of Moroccans in the Region by Targosz and Manço (2000), the activity rate of young people aged 19 to 35 was 64% (in the overall adult Moroccan population in Belgium the rate was 71%, 22% of the workers being women). Amongst Moroccans in the workforce, 71% were working. These survey data are consistent with the situation of the overall Moroccan population as shown in the Belgian census of 1991: the unemployment rate is therefore substantial and has been stable over a decade. Over 70% of Belgium's Moroccan workers are unskilled, the proportion being 65% for Moroccan women.

A population of immigrant Turkish workers was established in Belgium by as early as 1961 (Morelli, 1992), foreshadowing the far greater movements of labour that continued to grow until 1974. From 1975, the numerical growth of Belgium's Turkish population was maintained by the arrival of women, family reunification and childbirth. Driven by this natural momentum, the number of Turkish citizens in Belgium eventually peaked at over 88 000 in the early 1990s, before beginning to decline, as it still is, due to naturalisations. However, experience has shown that the vast majority of people who become naturalised maintain both their traditional lifestyles and very close ties with the immigrant Turkish community, continuing to participate in their original cultural networks, etc. They also continue to have special relations with Turkey, as well as particular difficulties finding jobs in Belgium (Manço U., 2000). Half of Belgium's Turkish community has settled in Flanders, and a quarter is concentrated in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of north Brussels. The remaining quarter (30 000 people) live in the Walloon Region. The process of assimilation, and linguistic assimilation in particular, is slower for Turkish families than for North Africans. North African families can thus be credited with having made a considerable effort with regard to their children's schooling (Feld and Manço, 2000): while the educational level of the fathers of young North Africans is hardly any higher than that of Turkish parents, students from North African families seem to have bridged much of the schooling gap between them and most of the other (European) immigrant groups in Belgium. This situation has an obvious impact on the success of entry into working life: indeed, 37% of the Turkish workforce is unemployed, and the situation is even more troubling in the Walloon Region (40%) which is experiencing an employment crisis.⁷ These facts illustrate the originality of the vibrant Turkish population, which despite a handicap in terms of schooling is working hard to break its way into the community, in particular through increasingly active involvement in commercial and associational activities (Manço, 2000).

According to the National Statistics Institute, there were 7 000 Africans living in the Walloon Region in 1990. Since then, growth

⁷ In fact, 12% of the Walloon Region's workforce is unemployed (Office National de l'Emploi, 1999).

in the number of Africans in Belgium and the Walloon Region has slowed due to a number of factors, including naturalisation. Today in the Walloon Region, there are some 7 500 persons from black African countries, naturalised and non-naturalised alike. In all of Belgium, they number 26 000. But a regularisation process for illegal immigrants, which is currently under way, could double that figure (Gatugu, Manço and Amoranitis, 2001). The Walloon Region's resident African population comprises over 30 nationalities, representing almost every country in Africa. For several decades, however, citizens of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi have accounted for over 60% of Belgium's resident African nationals. They have emigrated to Belgium for a wide variety of reasons (study, internships, political asylum, business travel, etc.), and their population group includes few immigrant workers. Thus, in contrast to other foreign population groups, very few Africans show up in the unemployment statistics. This constitutes a slanted view of the occupational reality of these people who in fact encounter severe employment difficulties despite a very high level of education—half of the adults being graduates of higher education. It is a fact that persons in the “non-European Union” category encounter enormous administrative difficulties obtaining jobs or having their diplomas recognised if they have not attended secondary school in Belgium or if they do not belong to the pre-1974 immigrant worker population. A number of paradoxical situations exclude Africans from subsidised employment because they are not entitled to unemployment benefits. There is a considerable waste of skills and experience among these people, who are forced into under-employment in sectors such as cleaning and catering. In such situations, self-employment is sometimes the only economic way out. As a result, there are approximately 200 self-employed Africans residing in the Walloon Region, 60% of whom are Congolese or Cameroonian. Half of these self-employed persons work in retailing. Others are upgrading their skills: 70% of the African population of the Walloon Region are enrolled in training programmes.

2. Specific barriers to the employment of young people of immigrant descent

In industrialised countries, most of the workforce is potentially at risk from the economic difficulties arising from a changing world and new ways of working (Rea, 1997). But in these countries, workers of immigrant backgrounds experience additional problems because of their status as foreigners or descendants of foreigners (Feld and Biren, 1994). These obstacles to employment are varied, even if it must be noted that the difficulties are not absolute and do not affect all foreign job-seekers to the same degree.

The main obstacles to the employment of foreigners are contextual and tied in with historical, economic, social and geographical aspects of migratory patterns in Belgium and the Walloon Region. As in other European countries, the immigration of workers to Belgium was geared essentially, in the wake of World War II, to the recruitment of unskilled and freshly “de-ruralised” labour, working essentially in the coal and steel-making sectors. But the radical transformations that began in these industries in the 1970s seriously jeopardised the employability of the generations of immigrant descent, most of whom had settled in regions—such as Belgian Hainaut, for example (Francq, 1996)—that were affected severely by these socio-economic changes (Morelli, 1992). This situation has led to a mismatch between the skills (e.g., language ability) of workers of immigrant descent (skills acquired to some extent in Belgium) and the job market’s changing expectations. At the same time, certain skills acquired abroad have also proven difficult to market in the immigrants’ adopted country.

It has also been noted that legal issues of residency and employment are becoming increasingly complex. Even so, the main problem is that of an overall lack of integration into Belgian society: the lack of networks of contacts and information (of relevance to the world of work) of immigrant communities constitutes a real handicap to access to employment in their host region. Workers encounter a variety of difficulties, depending on the particular factors that prompted them to emigrate (economic reasons, family reunification, political asylum, etc.) (Berry, 1987).

Another factor would also seem important: ethnic discrimination against workers belonging to recent waves of immigration. Research (Castellain-Kinet and Es Safi, 1997) has shown that in Belgium, as in neighbouring countries, a great many employers apply discriminatory non-hiring policies against job-seekers be-

longing to immigrant minorities (the study in question dealt with Belgian job-seekers of Moroccan descent).⁸ Another research study (Brion and Manço, 1999) confirms this same finding, based on data from the most recent general population census (1991); it shows that workers of Turkish and Moroccan nationality are statistically far more likely to be unemployed than Belgian or other European workers with the same level of schooling (diplomas obtained in Belgium only). For his part, Martens (1997) shows that employment in government service is virtually closed to persons who have been naturalised.

Lastly, other obstacles to job market access are psychosociological. A number of studies (Manço, 1998) show that young people of foreign backgrounds, from families that are also disadvantaged vis-à-vis employment, experience severe difficulties breaking into the job market. The lack of positive parental role models and/or a fear of betraying one's own people by achieving occupational success are realities revealed by a vast quantity of clinical literature (Manço, 1999). The public's negative perception of certain immigrant communities can induce in them an identity-positioning reaction entailing substantial acculturative stress (Berry, 1987), anguished pessimism (Sayad, 1991) and an attitude of anticipated rejection (Bourhis and Leyens, 1994). At the same time, being jobless in their land of exile is a profoundly paradoxical status for immigrants forced to emigrate for economic reasons (Sayad, 1991). A variety of researchers (Aycan, 1999) have been able to measure the impact of protracted unemployment, the lack of occupational advancement prospects and underemployment (employment beneath workers' actual qualifications) on the general level of integration and the psycho-social welfare of immigrants.

3. General and specific integration initiatives

In the Walloon Region, there are a large number of institutions striving to combat economic discrimination and promote the socio-

⁸ In the Walloon Region, in 27% of the 201 recruiting situations examined (men, mid-level skills), the employer gave preference to an "ethnic Belgian" candidate rather than to a Belgian applicant of Moroccan descent, despite strictly equal qualifications.

professional integration of persons from ethnic or immigrant minorities. They can be placed into two groups: general initiatives and specific ones.

General initiatives are ones that address the entire population group experiencing difficulty with employment. They involve vocational training and school-to-work transition policies, policies to reduce unemployment (subsidised jobs, limitation of the tax burden for certain low-skilled categories, etc.) and guidance for active job-seekers (job search workshops, decentralised information services, online services, etc.). There are also programmes and assistance for persons wishing to start their own businesses. These initiatives are implemented by public institutions such as the Walloon Office for Employment and Training (Office wallon pour l'emploi et la formation, FOREM) or socio-professional integration associations such as work-training workshops, literacy networks, the Union des Classes Moyennes, etc.

However, a number of studies such as the ones cited above show the unsuitability and/or inadequacy of available programmes to promote the socio-professional integration of persons of foreign descent having particular difficulties finding work. Actually, most of the initiatives currently taken in this area are limited to integration goals within established frameworks, pursuing a greater or lesser degree of assimilation of the foreign worker within an employment market considered uniform and restrictive in its treatment of cultural differences. It can also be seen that general programmes attract few young people from underprivileged or foreign backgrounds, and women in particular. Increasingly, then, pilot initiatives are taking targeted approaches to employment-disadvantaged immigrants, even if such programmes are still in a minority and have scant resources.

For example, an initiative undertaken by FOREM (1998-2001) in Hainaut (the Symbiose project in connection with the European Social Fund) has enabled participating job-seekers to come to two understandings: first, of their place and their possibilities in the job market—which, for most of them, is tantamount to acquiring fresh motivation and renewed confidence; and second, of the possibilities in terms of systematic job-search procedures offered by placement agencies—possibilities that had been largely unknown to most participants. Another essential contribution of the approach

was to (re)vitalise networks of solidarity and information for foreign job seekers. Participants were introduced to persons of similar backgrounds who had achieved “occupational success” and given access to other, more institutional, resources. A spill-over effect can also be seen, with new training projects and job opportunities for most participants in the initiative in question. It is also important to note that some participants who had been victims of job-market discrimination were oriented productively towards strategies for making the most of their special skills and intercultural capabilities. They therefore strive to harness their own values to serve the common good. Such an attitude can gradually break down barriers and other examples of mutual prejudice between non-native job-seekers and native employers. The strategy involved is one of proper positioning within the host country labour market, as an alternative to normative and labour-driven entry. The initiative also gave economic integration professionals a deeper understanding of the difficulties and special resources of persons of foreign descent in the labour market and enabled them to adapt their instruments and support processes accordingly.

Thus, the hypothesis that cultural differences can be a source of enrichment within business enterprises is an idea that is beginning to be borne out by research and the practical results of initiatives. In this area, the Liege-based Institut de Recherche, Formation et Action sur les Migrations (IRFAM) is striving to contribute to the development and transposition of innovative experiments in aiding and guiding immigrants through employment difficulties and thus to contribute to the training and awareness of persons who work with them (teachers, social workers, trainers, neighbourhood leaders, local representatives, mediators, officials of community associations, etc.).

In contrast to the prevailing trend, the innovative objective here is to try to capitalise on cultural differences in the area of employment. This leads not to general placement actions but to assistance with strategic positioning in the labour market. IRFAM, for instance, proposes to develop a programme of ongoing training for employment “counsellors” in a placement methodology for workers from immigrant backgrounds called Valorisation Identitaire et Professionnelle (VIP), which seeks not to “overcome”, but rather to put forward and exploit the immigrant’s identity and socio-

cultural originality. First, this entails dynamic exploration of the job-seeker's identity (evaluation of personal, family and community potentialities, etc.). Ultimately, this results in the setting of specific occupational objectives. Second, job market opportunities and assistance mechanisms for social and occupational integration, new business creation, etc., must systematically be envisaged so that they can be harnessed for individual projects (synergy with general integration programmes, etc.). Here, the development of information and solidarity networks is an important point for the "VIP" action, which must itself fall within a framework of a local partnership involving a variety of parties active in socio-professional promotion and local organising.

The purpose of the programme is to train placement officers and social workers in local institutions (such as youth centres) in a methodology for guiding job-seekers. The aim is to make employment counsellors more sensitive to the needs and problems of people from different cultural backgrounds and to project those differences in a positive light on the job market. The principle is to give foreign job-seekers and those from foreign backgrounds a positive and aggressive attitude that seeks, in a crowded job market, to harness and spotlight those of their individual characteristics they feel to be unique, relevant and distinctive. In practice, this entails supplying guidance for vocational initiatives and individual projects. It means instituting a participatory and interactive socio-psychological conditioning exercise: it is not only possible but also effective to highlight one's cultural identity as a distinguishing argument in the labour market or some of its segments (import/export, social action, intercultural endeavours, development co-operation, trade in various products, language-related occupations, tourism, transport, etc.). Moreover, one of the effects of the initiative is to help develop a culture within placement agencies—and, more generally, beyond—that attaches a positive value to the identity and projects of their clients from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion: towards a special policy of occupational integration for persons of foreign descent ?

In order to go beyond local pilot initiatives and the experimentation phase, an institutional framework is required. In the Wal-

loon Region (Belgium's French-speaking south), the main policy instruments for the job-market integration of foreigners and persons of foreign descent are the seven "Regional Integration Centres" (Centres Régionaux d'Intégration, or CRI), created and licensed under the Decree of 4 July 1996 concerning the integration of persons of immigrant descent, which develop co-ordination, incentives, regulatory and evaluation activities for local social and occupational integration projects and mechanisms for the Region's immigrant communities.

In 1997, the CRIs jointly framed a policy of regional actions to promote the socio-professional integration of foreigners and persons of foreign descent. Their actions, in their entirety and until 2003, fall under the European Social Fund's Employment initiative (the "Integra" and "Now" strands), and will subsequently be conducted as part of the Fund's "Equal" initiative. These actions, formulated in synergy with public bodies (such as FOREM) and private research centres (such as IRFAM), seek to institute ad hoc systems of training, guidance, counselling and employment.

The actions to be developed within this general framework seek to promote the socio-professional integration of disadvantaged persons into the Walloon Region's urban communities. The concept of socio-professional integration is used here in its most comprehensive sense, as a cross-cutting and multi-dimensional notion encompassing all facets of the social and economic life of immigrant communities in the industrial areas of the Walloon Region. These actions are presented in a spirit of "research and development" and can be seen as "rearguard" initiatives, i.e. as activities for the co-ordination, support, mobilisation and evaluation of local projects and mechanisms for the social development, training and guidance of persons of foreign extraction. The CRIs' work is therefore almost exclusively involved with "front line" institutions, associations and socio-cultural workers actively promoting the welfare and socio-professional integration of immigrant groups. These actions address three political priorities: the socio-professional integration of persons of foreign extraction; the training of professionals in contact with such persons; and support for local efforts to promote their integration. The proposed actions are therefore inspired by four basic postulates, enriched by observa-

tion and extensive experience of the Walloon Region's migratory context.

First, it would seem absolutely necessary to make a clean break with a certain culture of handouts that in the past has all too often characterised policies for the integration of immigrant communities. Immigrants striving for integration must henceforth assume and proactively promote their identity, harnessing their experience and individual abilities (especially those related to their culture of origin) within the framework of integration projects geared towards the host society. Immigrant communities and their many groupings should be involved in the design and implementation of social and economic policies: through this context of negotiation—of which the CRIs can constitute one of the most active links—workers can be allowed to put forward their potentialities (pedagogy of the socio-professional project).

Second, the institutions that are supposed to facilitate the general and socio-professional integration of persons with foreign backgrounds would seem ill-suited to the particular needs of the population groups that have settled recently in the Walloon Region. Moreover, a substantial number of these institutions are requesting ad hoc services for information, awareness-building and training (in intercultural transactions, the cross-disciplinary nature of occupational practices, and so on).

Third, the road to economic integration seems too often like an obstacle course, given the extent to which the various institutions involved seem to be fenced off from each other. What is needed is to accentuate the continuity and co-ordination between the services that deal with arriving immigrants, general social services, educational institutions, pre-training and training schools, the world of work and its many structures and, lastly, businesses themselves, so as to work together to promote economic integration and the socio-professional stability of immigrant communities.

Fourth, lastly, and correlatively to the first three postulates, it would seem necessary to invigorate and generalise the mobilisation and solidarity that characterise certain immigrant communities. For example, one of the proposals for action formulated by certain CRIs is to establish a system of occupational tutoring (training and guidance from local labour support units) that it is be-

lieved could address individuals' lack of integration into the Belgian labour market—a shortcoming that generally affects young people from families that have immigrated fairly recently.

Each of the CRIs endeavours to implement a series of concrete and co-ordinated initiatives tailored to the policy priorities and sociological postulates presented. Efforts are made to ensure comparability and complementarity between the various local initiatives. However, if the same spirit unites the various projects undertaken by the CRIs, the contours of the operations take on different hues, depending on local realities. The areas served by the Centres have different social and institutional histories and reflect contrasting economic and political realities. Moreover, the various CRIs comprise different bodies and staff that are attuned to the need to match the philosophy of general policy measures with local needs and expectations. The bibliography at the end of this paper lists a series of publications by these institutions and from within the Walloon Region that could provide the reader with more details.

A cross-disciplinary reading of the CRIs' socio-professional integration actions can convey an overall viewpoint on the Centres' achievements. They seem to have properly identified their roles in providing local, institutional and intercultural impetus (respectively co-ordination, training and promotion of cultural differences), even if not all of them have as yet developed significant actions in each of these fields. While the Centres have clearly defined their roles and objectives, their achievements give an impression of vagueness, which is partially due to administrative factors external to the Centres (e.g., the vagueness of the 1996 decree, etc.) and eminently understandable in view of the experimental approach that they have adopted. This lack of precision emerges in particular in the difficulties positioning the CRIs vis-à-vis the following dichotomies: front line or rearguard ? Socio-professional or general integration ? Local or "trans-regional" work ? Another question concerns the participation of persons and associations from the immigrant community in the life and work of some of the Centres. However, the CRIs' employment initiatives often provide an opportunity for new dynamics and original partnerships likely to add useful innovation to certain general approaches that lack creativity in addressing the special employment problems facing immigrant communities.

An illustration of this new dynamic is given by the VITAR (Valorisation Identitaire, Transfert, Autonomie, Réalisations) project undertaken jointly by IRFAM, the Walloon Region's Ministry for Social Action and the CRIs (Gatugu, Manço and Amoranitis, 2001). The VITAR project combines research, action and training in the realm of socio-economic integration of African immigrants. The core hypothesis being tested out is that the socio-professional integration of a number of immigrants is possible thanks to the promotion of their diverse abilities in employment sectors such as intercultural action, development co-operation and new business creation. The partners plan to identify, on the basis of preliminary research, the profiles of Africans to be promoted in connection with professional activities related to trade, international relations and enterprise creation. The work involves training, supervising and guiding selected interns from employment contexts involving relations—and particularly economic relations—between the Walloon Region and States, regions and populations of black Africa. Moreover, it is important that the operational procedures worked out by all of the partners be put into words and conveyed to the organisations and businesses with which the project is to be carried out, thus ensuring that the new practices for integrating and promoting workers of foreign descent will be disseminated. The final objective is the creation in the Walloon Region of an agency for developing and transferring skills.

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