

2017/18

# Migrants' perspectives book

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**A**s part of the URBACT methodology, the Arrival Cities partners have all established Local Support Groups (LSG's). One of the criteria that the network established at the outset was to ensure that each LSG had the involvement of people from the target group(s). Bringing people from the target group into the work of the network ensured that the Local Action Plans, that each LSG produced as the key outcome of their work, would have their inputs. In each edition of its newsletter the Arrival Cities Network presented some of the LSG members through their migration stories, this is the book that collects all the stories that have been published in the second phase of the project.

*We begin with three members Angela from Riga, Aidan from Thessaloniki and Harry from Oldenburg<sup>1</sup>. The three stories in effect encapsulate the wide disparity of experience that migrants have had since arriving in the EU. What's really striking is how the dominant image that we have of migrants currently, namely arriving on boat from either Turkey or from North Africa, in fact fails to recognise the ongoing flow of migrants who have arrived through more conventional means.*

So Angela who migrated to Riga from South Africa less than one year ago, arrived by plane. Harry who in fact has been in Germany for over 34 years came via the former GDR. Only Aidan has come by boat into Greece and since the closure of the border has ended up in Thessaloniki.

The reasons for migration are also diverse. Angela is in Riga because her husband got a job there and she simply followed. For Harry (Lebanon) and Aidan (Syria) it was to escape civil war in their respective countries.

For Angela the process of "arrival" has also been much smoother than for Harry and Aidan.

"The employer helped us to find a place to stay at the beginning. Then we found another apartment, in which we can stay long-term."

"We sorted out our documents at Citizenship and Migration board. Me and my husband speak English and we got all documents from Latvian employer. Therefore, we did not have a lot of problems with official recognition in the country."

In contrast for Aidan and Harry the process of arrival was not easy.

Aidan arrived in Greece in February 2016 and went straight to Idomeni in order to cross the Greek-FYROM border and make his way to northern Europe. He had no connection in any European country. When the Balkan route was closed in the beginning of March 2016, he stayed in Idomeni, hoping that the border would be open again. But it didn't so he was transferred to

Softex camp, one of the worst refugee camps in northern Greece, a few km out of Thessaloniki.

Harry also encountered difficulties upon arrival: "I had also 5 years prohibition of work and residence restriction, my asylum application was rejected, general feeling of uncertainty. I had no notion what comes up now to me....I initially lived in refuge residence, after that I looked for an apartment by my own". There was "no official support, only private support and own initiative

However it would be a mistake to assume that Angela has not faced problems.

"I face problem with getting too much attention due to being visually different from local population. I cannot enter the bus and disappear among other people in a bus. Once I was going by bus with my little son and I was attacked by a man who spit on my face and started shouting at me. Since then I am afraid to use public transport."

For Aidan, the process of arrival has had a heavy toll on his mental health.

In the camp he did nothing but waiting. No opportunities to socialize and get outside the camp. He felt isolated and this had a negative impact on his health. Stability is the only thing he needs: "I want to start my life but I need to know where this will be!"

Despite these difficulties all three are however, upbeat regarding the future. Angela likes her new city.

"I consider Riga to be a good and safe place for children and I am happy about the kindergarten my son goes to. I am studying in one of the universities in Riga and I get a lot of support from local and international students. I hope to find a job after I graduate from university."

Harry also very much likes aspects of his new home. "I like the way that there is an ordered structure, relative firm and open political debates, freedom of expression, the benefits of social protection and social services"

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<sup>1</sup> The names have been changed to protect the identity of the three individuals

Aiden has also had some good news. In January 2017 he moved to a house funded by an American organization for refugees. A month later he found a job as a cultural mediator with a big organization for refugees in Thessaloniki which makes him feel better. In March 2017 he received his relocation decision for France. He expresses a desire “to move forward in his life, to rent a good house, to feel creative, useful and alive. “ He is also dreaming to start his own business.

Of course those who arrive also find things that they do not like about their host cities. Angela misses the colour and optimism that she found at home. If she could change her host city then it would be about changing “The attitude of people, who do not smile a lot. We arrived in autumn and the city looked gloomy and grey for us. We think that Riga should have more colourful buildings. In South Africa we have a lot of colourful buildings. Now we hope that the spring will bring more optimism into our lives.

Likewise for Harry he would like to change the way that people complain too much.

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This publication has been realized with the support of the ULG Members of the Municipality of Oldenburg, Riga and Thessaloniki, who conducted the interview which inspired the stories.

*The three stories that we are going to present have a lot in common, they are three women coming from Cape Vert, Cuba and Guatemala who came to Portugal, France and Germany to join their families who already lived there. What we remark in collecting migrants stories is that on the contrary of what the media and the public opinion show, most of the foreign nationals that come to settle in Europe arrive with a regular permit, mostly by plane. These stories confirm a trend that we are registering since the beginning of our research; indeed the three ladies interviewed have relatives in Europe and could count on them and their network as a support to settle and integrate in the hosting country.*

Adira, Litz and Celia<sup>2</sup> arrived in Europe for three different reasons, Adira who comes from Cape Vert had her family already living in Portugal, she went there to continue her studies and to have better professional opportunities, Liz from Guatemala went to Germany to join her husband and Celia from Cuba went to France to join her family who was already living there and looking for better job opportunities.

The three of them arrived with a regular visa and could benefit of a regular permit, nonetheless the impact with the new society with different language, habits and social rules hit them a lot.

Alina tells that the first time she went alone in the City to deal with her permit documentation, she was disoriented and could not find the way back, and only after having asked to several people she managed to receive some help: *“It is a very different reality compared to Cape Verde, where people are more willing to help and listen to others and where everything is simpler.”*

Both Liz and Celia identify the language as the main obstacle for their integration, until they managed to speak the hosting country’s language they felt isolated, with no possibility to work or interact with people: Liz says *“I didn’t have*

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<sup>2</sup>Some of the names have been changed to protect the identity of the three individuals.

*friends and in my professional life I had to start all over. I was dependent of my husband” the only support received was “the love and moral support of my husband. I had to start studying German very hard every day and I am still doing it.”*

As underlined by OECD, there is a need of counteract brain waste of migrants resident in the EU Member States<sup>3</sup>, this aspect that also emerged from the consultation process within our network, one of the main challenges for integration is providing the recognition of qualifications (formal and informal) and the inclusion of migrants in the cultural life of the City. The isolation is one of the most common problems faced by migrants in arriving in a new country and this is the reality of many migrant women that often face more difficulties in going out from the home comfort zone.

The arrival process and more the integration one were difficult for the three of them, even if they were regularly resident the access to health care and social services, has not been easy. Celia for example identify in the paperwork for administrative procedures and the delay in getting a medical appointment the aspect that least likes in the host country. On the other hand she is the only one that affirms that she received support by local public institution for her integration: *“I have been supported by my husband and family and the work placement and professional traineeship offered by the Municipal Migrants Office”* which has been crucial for her to find a job.

Concerning the challenge to find a job, both Celia and Aleida received support from local associations who helped them in the process of entering in the labour market. After the school Aleida received support from a youth association that helped her in the process of professional insertion, she said that the sole obstacle at the

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<sup>3</sup> “Recognition of Qualifications and Competences of Migrants”, OECD 2013, edited by Anke Schuster, Maria Vincenza Desiderio and Giuliana Urso.

moment for her to find a job was the long wait for her long stay residence permit: *“At the moment I find myself unemployed, being difficult to get a job. However I do not feel that I am discriminated because I am immigrant in relation to the labour market, which I think is very positive. The main difficulty I have is in relation to my documentation, which has expired since 04.2016, the renewal process is very time consuming, and only in January 2017 I was able to deliver all the documentation that was requested. I have been waiting for my document since then. This is a fact that greatly affects my professional integration.”*

Anyway for the three of them the support of their families was crucial. At the time when Aleida arrived she was going to school and she did not have any specific support to integrate in the system: *“Adapting to school was the main difficulty I had. My Colleagues usually made fun of me, and I had no specific support. It was a very difficult time.” “I did not receive any particular*

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*support from services, only from the family and the social network, which greatly facilitated my integration.”*For Liz the presence of her husband and its family was crucial, even though she said: *“I missed my family, my friends and my old way of life”*. In this process of adaptation to the new life she found very useful the participation to the Integration Courses that gave her the possibility to meet people and to learn the language.

Now, after more than 6 years living in Europe the three of them overcame most of the difficulties and adapted to the host Country, they also appreciate it and see the positive side of living there.

Aleida says *“I like Portugal very much, it has better living conditions and opportunities than Cape Verde”*; Celia appreciate the sense of freedom and equality that French society gives to her and Liz likes Oldenburg *“because it’s not too small and not too big”* and because *“It’s a very clean city.”*

*In this edition we will tell the story of three migrant women participating in the Nicehearts' Neighbourhood Mothers project, illustrating a few of the various contexts in which immigrants may experience the integration process. Nicehearts is an NGO based in Finland which aims to promote multicultural activities, gender equality, and active participation of women and girls in the society. The Neighbourhood Mothers project offers a series of empowerment training modules where migrant women learn both about the various services available in Finland, as well as exploring themes concerning social issues of family and daily life.*

**Integration is not just about learning the language and finding work - it is an individual journey.**

Winnie Mwova, born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, came to Finland for studies, and has now been living in Finland for over 10 years. She is a single mother of two boys, and has previously worked as a Pharmaceutical Assistant in Helsinki.

The daily struggle of being a single mother and a migrant led Winnie to proactively search for information and activities that would help her in understanding the new environment that she now calls home. She became an active participant in support groups that promote the health and well-being of women, and it was a great bonus for her that she was able to take her children with her while participating in these groups.

Since completing the Neighbourhood Mothers training in May 2016, Winnie was inspired to look for possibilities in order for her to influence in the society: "I have received so much knowledge that I didn't have before, even though I have been living here for so long. I know of a few women who have almost no knowledge of how anything works in Finland, just like me in the beginning. I am ready to spread this knowledge and to try to help others and give information where it is needed." She

has also initiated and is currently leading a peer support group for immigrant single mothers in Espoo.

We can see in Winnie's story a good example of the individual journey towards integration. She began in Finland with studies, and whilst raising a family, worked and continued on her path to integration through personal and professional development with the support of various third-sector services offered for migrant women.

**Employment as an outcome of empowerment**

Analyn Wagas was born in Davao City, Philippines. She had initially applied for a Finnish residence permit whilst on a tourist visa. She has now been living in Finland for over 3 years, with her young daughter. Analyn has studied Finnish language and is presently working as a school assistant in a vocational college in Espoo.

Analyn believes that it is important to help others. "What might be a really small thing to you, can be a really big thing to someone else - and you never know," she says, "one day you may be the one who needs some help." Analyn has experienced many challenges navigating the system in Finland, and that she has found the support she needed from the women she met at Nicehearts. Analyn feels that she has learned a lot from the information provided during the neighbourhood mother training sessions, and from the group activities. "Learning about what services are available in Finland is very important," she says, "especially when you have children."

"There are really a lot of women and mothers in Finland who are really stuck because they don't know how the system works." says Analyn. She believes that the best way she can help others out of this predicament is to empower them by sharing her knowledge and experience of having learned to navigate the system in Finland.

Analyn's story illustrates well how employment can be the consequential outcome of empowerment, in this case through the source being the Neighbourhood Mother's training as well as support provided by an NGO specializing in women's issues. Focusing solely on the issue of migrant employment, especially in the case of women, may neither be the most effective approach to utilize the available resources, nor for achieving the desired results.

### **Integration is about finding one's place in the society**

Friba Majeed is from Balkh, Afghanistan. She came to Finland in 2014 as a refugee. In Afghanistan, Friba graduated from University with a Bachelor's Degree in Literature. She worked as a high school teacher, and then as Director in the Ministry of Women's Affairs for 9 years. As part of her work, Friba would travel to cities and villages in Afghanistan as an advocate for women's rights and gender equality.

Friba has been invited to many countries, such as USA, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, among others, to speak about her leadership and advocacy work with women. She was also invited to Finland in 2012 to participate in a seminar on the subject of immigrant rights. It was at that time that her brother called her and told her she could not return to Afghanistan, because if she did, she would be killed. Since then she has been unable to return to her home country. "I had everything," she says, "a good job, a nice house, and family and friends."

In 2013, one of her brothers, a 22 year old University student at the time, was kidnapped and murdered by religious extremists. Friba's mother and younger brother fled to Pakistan, where they are living now. Her mother has health issues and cannot work, and her younger brother is unable to attend school in their present life situation. Since Friba's father

had passed away many years ago, her family have been financially dependent on her.

Friba wants to improve her Finnish language levels, and to apply for a Master's Degree Programme in Social Work. She says that it is her dream to create an organization for women and girls, to empower them to solve their own problems, and to build their own capacities.

This year, Friba was employed as a project worker at Sininauhasäätiö, an NGO offering services and support for people who are homeless, as well as for those with mental illness or addiction challenges. Her main work is with undocumented immigrants.

The receiving society has a lot of responsibility in ensuring that there is 'space' for migrants to grow and find their place. In Friba's case, she was offered a place to grow - employment in a field compatible with her skills and experience. Even if an immigrant is empowered with education, language skills and vocational training, if the receiving society doesn't provide a space for him or her, such efforts can not produce the desired results.

### **When a single story of integration is not enough**

According to the Act on the Integration of Immigrants in Finland, the law defines integration as the "personal development of immigrants, aimed at participating in working life and society while preserving their own language and culture" and includes "the measures taken and resources and services provided by the authorities to promote and support such integration, and consideration for the needs of immigrants in planning and providing other public services and measures (Finlex 362/2005, 2§).

It is commonly believed that integration can be achieved by increasing individual labour market participation, and attitudes towards the integration of immigrants in many countries,

including Finland, seem to share this principal focus. This is reflected in the services available for immigrants within the public sector, in which the main emphasis is placed on learning the language and finding work, as a means to integration. However, there are many more elements than these which need to be addressed in order to achieve the successful integration of an immigrant into their new country, not the least of which should include strategies promoting two-way integration, something which is important for the growth and evolution of the whole society.

It might be helpful to consider that every migrant's situation relating to integration is different. The integration experience of a migrant who has come to Finland for work will differ for one who has come as an asylum seeker, as opposed to coming for family

reasons. Also, two refugees' backgrounds and experiences will differ from each other, and so on. By making efforts to understand and acknowledge each individual's subjective well-being according to their situation will help us to broaden our understanding how we as a society, and especially for those who are working with immigrants, can positively influence the integration process. Furthermore, by approaching integration from a resource-based (the individual's skills, strengths and experience), rather than a deficit-based perspective (lack of language skills) both the individual and their new society are likely to benefit significantly.

#### Authors:

**Michelle Kaila** is a Canadian-born Bachelor of Social Services graduate, and a Neighbourhood Mother, who has been living in Finland for over 13 years.

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Finlex Data Bank 2009. Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers. 493/1999; amendments up to 324/2009 included (Unofficial translation). <https://www.finlex.fi>

*The stories that we are going to present are very different from each other for background and migration path, but all of them contribute to remind us that Europe apart of being the destination of many economical migrants is also a place where people can feel safe from persecution and enjoy their rights despite of the difficulties, encountered by all of them, in having legalized their status or reaching the economic independence.*

Bahar and Fahim<sup>4</sup> belong to the Egyptian Christian Minority, they had to leave Egypt in 2014 because of religion persecution. In Egypt there are twelve officially recognized Christian denominations, among them the majority of Christians in Egypt are members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Despite the Egyptian government's improved religious freedom conditions in several areas, condemning sectarian attacks and pressing for assistance for victims and accountability for perpetrators they still face discriminatory treatments in accessing services and equal opportunities.

Attacks against the Egyptian Coptic Christian religious minority have escalated since 2013; Coptic churches and homes have been set on fire, members of the Coptic minority have been physically attacked, and their property has been looted<sup>5</sup>. This was the case of Bahar and Fahim that in 2014 decided to leave the Country. They could reach France thanks to the support of the association *Les Amis des Coptes* that provided them the invitation and allowed them to have a regular visa to leave the country. Later the association *French Host Family*, that supports refugees' first reception by matching them with a hosting family, found a couple in Annecy which hosted Bahar and Fahim for some months. Soon after their arrival they applied for the international protection and in 2015 they received the recognition of the refugee status.

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<sup>4</sup> The names have been changed to protect the identity of the three individuals.

<sup>5</sup> Egypt – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 30 May 2017 Re: Request for up to date information on the situation for Coptic Christians in Egypt what difficulties they face. Also particular issues if returned after being away for 15 years.

<https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/ireland/PLIb/143583.pdf>

The *Centre Communal d'Action Sociale* was responsible for their case files at municipal level and the *National Employment Office* provided them with a monthly allowance before their refugee status was granted. As they didn't have friends or relatives in France they could only count on the network of associations and public services that support new comers in reception and integration stages. In the framework of the integrated assistance provided by local associations, in collaboration with social services Bahar and Fahim received personalized assistance in order to find a job and were orientated to language courses (*GRETA MTE 94*); professional guidance (*Fondation Agir Contre l'Exclusion*); coaching and skills assessment training (*Bank Executive*); support in validating their Egyptians degrees (*Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques*); support in finding an enterprise where to make a short working experience (*Pôle Emploi*) and promoted the participation in Professional Training relevant for their professional profile (*Association Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes and La Cravate Solidaire*).

Despite the strong support received in the last four years the couple is still facing problems in finding accommodation; without permanent contract or a rental guarantor for their apartment lease, they could only find a provisional solution. Meanwhile they presented a request to obtain social housing and are waiting for a response on their request. Bahar and Fahim are very happy in France, they feel safe and they found that the people are friendly; they are free to profess and practice their religion and they don't feel alone as they have met several social institutions which support them.

The story of Jallo reminds us the stories of the thousands of minors arrived in Europe in the last five years. Following UNHCR UNICEF and IOM data<sup>6</sup> the 16% of all the arrivals in the first six months of 2017 were children and among them the 72% were unaccompanied minors. During the first half of 2017, European countries recorded 96,882 asylum claims involving children - a third of all asylum claims. During the first half of 2017,

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<sup>6</sup>

[http://migration.iom.int/docs/Infographic\\_Children\\_and\\_UASC\\_2017.pdf](http://migration.iom.int/docs/Infographic_Children_and_UASC_2017.pdf)

a total of 174,020 decisions on asylum claims involving children have been issued. Of them, 65% were positive and 35% rejected. Among children with positive decisions, 50% were granted refugee status, 32% received subsidiary protection and 17% received humanitarian status.

Jallo is a young guy coming from The Gambia; he arrived in Latvia one year ago. He had to flee from his country because severe conflicts in his family didn't allow him to go to school. Before deciding to flee from his country he has not gone to school for three years. Even though the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been signed by 196 countries and the access to education is among the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) is still not widespread. According to UNICEF 9% of primary school-age children and 17% of adolescents of lower secondary school age are excluded from education<sup>7</sup>, and in West and Central Africa the percentage of "out of school minors" rise at 27%<sup>8</sup>. Analyzing the push factors that lead minors to flee, a recent UNHCR info-graphic shows that *"in almost one third of cases, children coming from West Africa decided to leave because of violence at home (as high as 47% of children coming from The Gambia)*. According to the same statistics The Gambia is the second country of origin of non accompanied minors arrived in Italy in 2017<sup>9</sup> and the 63% of them are recognized with a Humanitarian Status.

After having left his country Jallo travelled across Egypt, where he spent some time before arriving in Europe. His brother had to pay a consistent sum of money to smugglers to guarantee for him a safe and relatively short trip; he has been travelling for two months before arriving in Latvia. The sole worrying aspect for him was that

he didn't know in which European Country he would have arrived. Once in Latvia he applied for the International Protection, and was conducted in a center for asylum seekers where he received specific support. After that he has been given in charge to a foster family where he started a process of integration and could access to all the social service's facilities. During the interview Jallo told us that in moving from a country to another it took quite a long time to understand where he was, as he had never heard about Latvia before. He did not speak Latvian language and when he arrived he found very difficult to handle all the paperwork. During the last year he received support from non-governmental organizations which helped him and fostered his integration, he can now communicate in Latvian, he goes to school where almost all of the subjects are taught in Latvian. The foster family has been crucial for his integration as well as the schoolmates which supported him a lot. He has uncertainty about his future as he will turn 18 very soon and probably by then he will have to leave the country.

On the other side of Europe, in Portugal, lives Jandira a young lady from Cape Vert. Jandira arrived in Portugal in 2012, with her daughter, she went there for medical treatment. This is a common case for Cape Verdeans as the European Union has signed an agreement<sup>10</sup> which facilitates the issue of short-stay visas to citizens of the Republic of Cape Verde for some special cases, among which there are the persons which access for medical reasons. The staff of the Embassy could have provided her an accommodation for all her stay, but as she had her uncle already living in Portugal she preferred to stay with her relatives.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UNESCO-OOSC-EXS-Eng-web\\_217.pdf](http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UNESCO-OOSC-EXS-Eng-web_217.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> [http://migration.iom.int/docs/Infographic\\_Children\\_and\\_UASC\\_2017.pdf](http://migration.iom.int/docs/Infographic_Children_and_UASC_2017.pdf)

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<sup>10</sup> AGREEMENT between the European Union and the Republic of Cape Verde on facilitating the issue of short-stay visas to citizens of the Republic of Cape Verde and of the European Union Article 4 Issue of multiple-entry visas, (h) persons visiting regularly for medical reasons. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1024\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1024(01)&from=EN)

Since the first diagnosis and proposal to continue the medical treatment in Portugal it took approximately two months for her to get there. In Portugal she felt safe and welcomed, she was so worried about her health problems that probably the common difficulties experienced by migrants didn't seem threatening her. Once the treatment ended, she tried to stay in Portugal to have better living conditions for herself and her daughter. Getting the residence permit was not easy and she is still waiting for the finalization of the process. Finding a job without a residence permit is more difficult, by now she is still hosted by her uncle, but she dreams about having the possibility to rent an apartment only for her and her daughter. At the beginning she only knew her uncle and the adaptation process was complicated, the reality in Lisbon is very different from Cape Verde; even taking the public transports to get to the hospital has been a challenge for her, but now she become more comfortable with the society and culture, she likes everything of Portugal, especially the weather and she would be happy to have the possibility to settle there. The only negative thing concerns the difficulties that foreigner's faces in doing the paperwork and the length of bureaucracy to get legal documentation.

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This aspect appears to be the most difficult challenge for migrants; all the people we interviewed declared that the length of administrative procedures to obtain the legal status, either international protection or residence permit, is the main obstacle for the access to services and for their integration and economical independence. This aspect is a challenge for the whole European migration and asylum system. The efforts to overcome the Dublin III regulation will be vain if the system itself does not provide penalties for those Member States which refuse to relocate people in need of international protection. On the other side how much is sustainable a system which "return to the sender" thousands of people fleeing to look for better living conditions or threatened by the climate change. Considering also the negative trends of European birth rate and the problems that Member States are facing to pay the pensions of an always older population the role of public authorities and local governments is becoming more and more crucial in order to foster a quick and effective integration migrants.