

**Presentation by Montserrat Feixas Vihé, PhD,
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at the EMN National Conference on integration of refugees: 25 years of experience of the
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When I joined UNHCR back in the 80s, all the new staff was briefed about the three durable solutions for refugees: Voluntary repatriation, the preferred one, local integration, and resettlement. My first post was in Sudan and I still remember being involved in the logistics of organizing the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians refugees using donkeys as there were no roads and refugees were too sick and too weak to carry food and agricultural tools.

For years the emphasis was on repatriation while integration was rather exceptional and resettlement was limited to life threatening situations.

Since then the world has changed, we now live in the era of technology and globalization, and the world has changed also for refugees. While voluntary repatriation continues to be a desirable solution when feasible, we need to acknowledge that the duration and intensity of the current conflicts make it very difficult to achieve for most refugees. To mention but two ongoing conflicts, Somalia and Afghanistan, they have been raging for decades. Several generations of Afghan and Somali refugees have been born in exile and the possibility for most of them to repatriate in the near future is slim. Not only conflicts persist, but the intensity and the level of destruction experienced in conflict zones is such that reconstruction will be long, arduous and very expensive.

So effectively, for many refugees, integration in their countries of asylum is the most likely durable solution.

But integration is not an easy process. Integration is long, complex, costly, and sometimes even painful. It demands commitment and determination from the refugees, the host authorities and the community that welcomes them.

It is especially hard currently in Europe when there are so many forces against refugees, forces that manipulate information to convey the impression that refugees and migrants are the same thing, that refugees are nothing but irregular migrants and as such they are criminals. Some go as far as to claim that refugees are terrorists when in fact they are victims of conflict, victims of terrorism, in need of protection.

It is indeed very worrisome that some use the arrival of people fleeing from conflict or terrorism to promote xenophobia, conveniently forgetting that many of them, or their parents or grandparents, were refugees themselves not so long ago.

It is true that Europe is confronted to a huge challenge with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers last year and potentially the arrival of many more in the future.

But this challenge is not an European one, it is a global one. One that can only be addressed by working together to address the root causes of displacement, acknowledging the disparities between regions and countries, investing on solutions to reduce the need for dangerous irregular onward movements, delivering humanitarian aid and development aid with a refugee focus from the onset of a crisis, and by providing protection to those who need it. Europe should remember that for decades many countries, some with a lot less resources than the EU member states, have been hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees. Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan, Iran to name a few. And in most recent times Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, ...

A challenge that can only be resolved by showing solidarity among the EU member states and to the refugees.

This is why it is reassuring when countries like the Czech Republic show a firm and determined commitment to welcome and integrate refugees.

When I first arrived in Central Europe to take over the responsibility as UNHCR's Regional Representative for Central Europe my colleagues briefed me. They told me about the different countries we support, the ongoing initiatives, and they insisted that when it came to integration, I had to visit the Czech Republic as it was truly special.

So, one of my first visits was to the Czech Republic and I visited an integration home in Brno-Židenice where the staff explained to me all about the integration programme. And I was truly impressed.

A good integration programme covers many areas, language tuition, health care, access to education and employment, housing etc. All of which are included in the Czech State Integration Programme. But there are other elements a bit less obvious but truly important, like facilitating family reunification and establishing sound and effective partnerships between state institutions, local community, civil society, including NGOs and volunteers, UNHCR, and the refugees. UNHCR welcomes that the Czech Republic is incorporating this approach into its national integration schemes.

To go back to the integration home in Brno-Židenice, what impressed me in addition to the programme itself, was that there was a well-equipped music room. And it impressed me because of the thinking behind it, which saw integration not just as a mechanical exercise where you have to tick the boxes, but a process that looks at refugees as human beings with needs beyond the basic subsistence. It made me realize that refugees were welcomed in the Czech Republic and they had a real chance to become part of their new society and eventually contribute to it. The Czech Republic is still continuing to provide strong support to the integration of refugees and I would like to thank the government at all levels, civil society, and all those who contribute to it and encourage all other countries in the EU to do the same.