

The Present System of Integrating Refugees in Slovenia

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the current state of the integration system in Slovenia for refugees, who arrived after 2015, the time of the so-called European migration crisis, and received international protection in the Republic of Slovenia. The paper will present the characteristics of the system, including the legal environment, research on the system, projects implemented as of time of writing, and organizations active in the field, as well as attitudes of refugees obtained through interviews. The main focus will be on the system, and on the experiences of refugees already granted protection. Some aspects of the system's impact on the condition of asylum-seekers will also be discussed

Keywords: forced migration, refugees, international protection, integration, Slovenia

Introduction

As an independent country, Slovenia first experienced a large inflow of migrants in the early 1990s (starting in 1992) when people from Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia fled their home countries during armed conflicts that erupted after the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Yugoslavia). This resulted in thousands of refugees arriving in Slovenia, who faced the choice of waiting for the war to be over to return home, settling in Slovenia, or continuing on to third countries in northern and Western Europe and beyond in pursuit of a better, safer life. In that time Slovenia's politicians and citizens recognized the humanitarian crisis and worked together to start collecting the necessities for incoming refugees (food, toiletries, clothes, etc.). Thousands of beds were placed in provisional shelters to provide at least temporary accommodation. Later, apartments were made available for those who stayed in Slovenia for longer periods.¹ Although the refugees could count on being treated in a humanitarian manner by ordinary Slovenians, on the legal and state front they were completely without rights. They were not allowed to work, go to regular schools, or

¹ Vrečer, Natalija, Integracija kot človekova pravica: prisilni priseljenci iz Bosne in Hercegovine v Sloveniji, Založba ZRC, 2007, p.9

receive residence permits. It was not until the end of the 1990s that Slovenia passed its first refugee protection legislation, some, five years after the end of the Yugoslav War.²

Until 1995, many refugees chose to pass through Slovenia to make their way to Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, North America and beyond. Some returned to their war-torn homelands to help reconstruct their towns and villages after four years of merciless fighting, others opted to stay in Slovenia, to slowly build lives in the capital or in some other city, make friends, find a job, create a family, and attempt to carve out a normal existence.

In September 2015 no one could anticipate the scale of the migrant wave that would flow into Europe largely as a consequence of an escalation of the conflict in Syria. This turned out to be the second largest migration flow in the history of the Republic of Slovenia.

Migrants were arriving to Europe on foot or by sea, landing in the South of Italy or on Greek islands and continuing their way through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. The latter, however, started closing its border with Serbia already in the summer of 2015 by erecting a wall, laying barbed-wire, beefing up border patrols, and installing electronic surveillance devices. In October 2015, Hungary finally closed its border with Croatia as well.³ This caused the flow to be redirected from then current established path to one from Serbia to Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria.

When discussing the routes which thousands of migrants and refugees took in 2015 and 2016 on their journey to a better life in Europe, we should define two main terms. The first is “the Balkan route” which had been established and used for many years. However, the term “Balkan corridor” represents a semi-legal way through Europe, which according to the Dublin and Schengen agreements, should not even exist. The Balkan corridor lasted from autumn 2015 until March 6, 2016.⁴ After that it was closed and all border crossings by undocumented migrants were designated as illegal and if caught by border patrol or police, migrants could be returned to the country of previous stay.

² Z vključenjem beguncev soustvarjamo novo družbeno realnost, <https://www.filantropija.org/z-vkljucevanjem-beguncev-soustvarjamo-novo-druzbeno-realnost/>, 29.5.2019

³ 2015-2016 (re)borderization, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/about/background/>, 28.5.2019

⁴ The long year of migration and the Balkan Corridor, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/mediterranean-journeys-in-hope/long-year-of-migration-and-balkan-corridor/>, 29.5.2019

Although the desired destinations of most migrants were Germany, Austria, France, Great Britain, or the countries of Scandinavia, some still opted to apply for international protection in Slovenia. If their applications were approved, they entered the Slovenian integration system which is the focus of this paper. For sake of convenience, we will be using in this paper the term “refugee” to indicate someone granted international protection in Slovenia.

International protection in Slovenia

When refugees come under international protection in Slovenia, it means they have been granted one out of two possible statuses: refugee status or subsidiary protection status. First is granted to third country nationals who are residing outside their homeland and who can prove to have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality or membership in a specific social or political group, as a result of which they cannot enjoy the protection of the state of which they are a citizen. Refugee status can also be granted to a stateless person who has a justifiable fear of persecution and cannot or does not want to return to the country of his or her regular residence.⁵

Each state decides for itself its attitude toward immigrants and their relationship with host country nationals. There are four options: 1) complete rejection of immigrants’ ability to assimilate; 2) radical demands for absolute denial of the immigrant’s own culture and identity; 3) acceptance of the dominant culture and ethnic identity, including a melding of immigrant and host country cultural and ethnic identities; and 4) cultural pluralism (commonly referred to today as interculturalism).⁶

Refugee status in Slovenia means having almost all of the same rights as Slovenian citizens (free access to labor market, social benefits, health care and education). An officially recognized refugee can also obtain a permanent residence permit. This is the most visible difference between refugee and subsidiary protection status. The latter does not provide permanent protection, and is initially granted for a period of three years. It is assumed that such a person is only temporarily unable to remain in his or her home country but will be able to return in future when conflicts there have been resolved. For this reason, someone

⁵ Zakon o mednarodni zaščiti, Uradni list Republike Slovenije, št. 16/17, <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7103#>, 27.6.2019

⁶ Lukšič-Hacin, Marina, Teorije , politike in strategije sobivanja v raznolikosti, Založba ZRC, 2011, p. 127.

receiving subsidiary protection needs to obtain a temporary residence permit which must be renewed before expiration. With each renewal, however, the status-holder must re-apply to the Ministry of Interior to ascertain that the reasons for the granting of protection are still in accordance with legislation.⁷

Refugees under international protection in Slovenia are included in different schemes: regular statuses, relocation, or resettlement. The decision on the refugee's status is made by government officials of the host country. A refugee given regular status will not have been included in the quota system of burden distribution among EU member states, coordinated by the EU Commission as that relocation or resettlement scheme covers only those refugees who entered Europe during the 2015 migration crisis. The EU relocation scheme involves transferring refugees already granted asylum seeker status in front line countries such as Italy and Greece which have accepted more than their fair share of refugees. Refugees arriving as part of the relocation scheme are granted international protection status nearly automatically in Slovenia upon arrival since the whole process is coordinated by the government in cooperation with the EU. Refugees relocated in this manner still need to undergo processing as asylum seekers, however, the procedure lasts only two or three months. Refugees applying for regular status, may have to wait years for approval. Resettlement, also part of the quota system, entails permanently moving a person who has already been granted some sort of refugee status by a third country, usually Turkey.

Table 1 shows the number of applications, indicating total numbers recognized and rejected, from the end of armed conflict on the territory of former Yugoslavia, until 2019.

Year	No. of all applications	RECOGNIZED STATUS	DECLINED APPLICATIONS	REFUGEE CRISIS	RESETTLED	RELOCATED
1995	6	2	4			
1996	35	0	0			
1997	72	0	8			
1998	337	1	27			
1999	744	0	87			
2000	9244	11	46			
2001	1511*	25	97			
2002	640	3	105			
2003	1101	37	123			

⁷ Zakon o mednarodni zaščiti, Uradni list Republike Slovenije, št. 16/17, <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7103#>, 27.6.2019

2004	1208	39	317			
2005	1674	26	661			
2006	579	9	561			
2007	434	9	276			
2008	260	4	145			
2009	202	20	89			
2010	246	23	55			
2011	358	24	78			
2012	304	34	75			
2013	272	37	82			
2014	385	44	51			
2015	277	46	87	141		
2016	1308	170	96	1184		124
2017	1476	152	89	0		108
2018	2875	102	135	0	40	21
2019	777	24	19	0	0	0

Ministry of Interior 2019, http://www.mnz.gov.si/mnz_za_vas/tujci_v_sloveniji/statistika/

Slovenia does not have either an official migration or integration strategy. It has only Economic Migration Strategy for the period of 2010-2020.⁸ In June 2019 public discussions were held with a view to introduce for the first time a migration strategy consisting of six parts: 1) legal migration; 2) international protection; 3) illegal migration and deportations; 4) security component; 5) integration; and 6) internal dimension.⁹ Needless to say, Slovenia, which recently became independent requires such a strategy as it is a country of both emigration and immigration, and therefore urgently needs guidelines to manage both effectively.

Rights of refugees in Slovenia

As mentioned above, refugees in Slovenia are entitled to almost all the same rights as Slovenian citizens, the two exceptions being the right to vote and the right to reside in public housing.¹⁰ The rights refugees share with Slovenian citizens include the right to: reside either on a permanent or temporary basis depending on status of international protection; to work for

⁸ Strategija na področju migracij končno v pripravi, <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/strategija-na-podrocju-migracij-koncno-v-pripravi/>, 22.6.2019

⁹ Hočevar, Barbara, Nabor ukrepov za upravljanje migracij, <https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/nabor-ukrepov-za-upravljanje-migracij-200090.html>, 1.7.2019.

¹⁰ Integracija oseb z mednarodno zaščito, http://www.mnz.gov.si/si/mnz_za_vas/tujci_v_sloveniji/integracija_oseb_z_mednarodno_zascito/, 20.6.2019

pay; to benefit from the social welfare system; to free access to the public education system (from kindergarten to university) ; and free access to the public health care system.¹¹

Employment

Next to knowledge of the local language, financial self-sufficiency is seen as one of the most important factors of independent life. Being gainfully employed is also an indispensable part of successful integration of both adult migrants and refugees. In Slovenia employment issue is one of few systemic arranged fields of integration. Employment Service of Slovenia currently has on staff two consultants¹², specializing in arranging work for refugees. They are active in the field, constantly looking for employers wishing to provide work for refugees. The Employment Service also maintains an ongoing program, called “workplace training”, which it provides refugees for six months; for Slovenian citizens the same program is available for three months. The program is administered directly by employers who train refugees for specific positions which they then offer to those who demonstrate during the training period that they can do the job. Since most refugees come from developing countries, the program offers them the opportunity to receive wages and achieve financial independence.¹³ As asylum seekers must wait for nine months to be granted international protection, obtaining a job is usually their first wish. However, finding employment is not easy for refugees who do not speak Slovenian, or who may be illiterate.

Accommodation

There are other rights available to refugees granted international protection which apply to them on the basis of their legal status. Their first right is to receive accommodation. Upon arrival, refugees are housed at one of three asylum centers in Ljubljana or its surroundings: Ljubljana Vič, Ljubljana Kotnikova and Logatec. At all locations they are entitled to regular daily meals, 18€ per month in pocket money, and participation in activities aimed at encouraging their integration into Slovenian society, such as language lessons, various workshops, and fairy tale hours for children.¹⁴ Refugees granted status can choose depending

¹¹ Ladić, Maja et al., Nacionalni mehanizem za evalvacijo integracije Slovenija, poročilo za 2016, <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>, 9.6.2019, p.5-12

¹² One is employed in the Ljubljana office and one in Maribor, since these are two cities that refugees live in.

¹³ Goldin, Ian et al., Exceptional people: how migration shaped our world and will define our future, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 193.

¹⁴ Most of these workshops and starting integration activities are part of different projects and are not part of systemic measures for integration of refugees, provided by government. They are implemented by NGOs and are in most cases based on volunteer work.

on availability between private accommodation or staying at one of three so-called integration houses- in Ljubljana, Maribor and Velenje, the last one at present being empty due to the absence of active supporting organizations in the area.¹⁵

Family reunification

Family reunification is in theory another right of refugees, but practical experience from the field shows that the percentage of approved requests is extremely low. A case in point is that of Eritreans accepted by Slovenia under the European Commission's quota system. Many arrived alone, leaving their families in Eritrea or in refugee camps in Ethiopia or Sudan. However, in most cases their requests to have their families join them are denied because of the absence of official papers proving a connection with family members. The refugees file complaints about the lengthy and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures but these often serve to make the process even more difficult and the chances of reunification even more remote, causing many to lose their motivation to learn the local language, fall into depression, and experience anxiety and psychosomatic diseases.

Access to citizenship

Refugees can apply for citizenship after residing in Slovenia for five consecutive years. Other migrants, are required to live in Slovenia for ten years to qualify for citizenship. Other conditions also must be met, such as financial stability, proficiency in Slovenian, absence of criminal record, etc. But these conditions apply to all foreigners.¹⁶

Learning the language

Refugees have the right to obtain instruction in the Slovenian language. Courses are financed and coordinated by the government office for the support and integration of migrants and are outsourced to either private language academies or public adult education centres, depending on the outcome of a bidding process. .

¹⁵ Naloga Urada RS za oskrbo in integracijo migrantov, <http://www.uoim.gov.si/si/naloga/>, 15.6.2019

¹⁶ Slovensko državljanstvo, <https://infotujci.si/drzavljanji-tretjih-drzav/slovensko-drzavljanstvo/>, 9.6.2019

After status recognition, refugees are able to obtain 300 hours of language study, but should they wish, they can apply for additional 100 hours in the same institution.¹⁷ Also, there are several organizations and programs offering additional courses with the help of language teachers, volunteers, and other qualified staff.

Social integration

People who have left their home town or home country, need to learn to adapt to a new environment, society, or community, whether they chose to move of their own free will or were forced to do so. In order to become an equal member of society, they need (at least at the beginning) some mechanisms for assistance and support to find their way around.¹⁸ As government support for refugees in Slovenia focuses mostly on basic needs and areas, additional integration activities tend to be neglected. Hence, this area is generally covered by project solutions and irregular funding. Projects are implemented by NGOs such as Slovenska filantropija, Društvo Odnos, Inštitut za afriške študije, and public institutions such as adult education centres, youth cultural centres, municipalities, and research centres. Financing is either by government offices¹⁹, European Union programs or other schemes. In Slovenia, status recognized refugees are entitled to three years of support, including access to Slovenian language courses and the official integration-aid program, usually implemented by NGOs. Although in the International Protection Act calls for individual integration plans, understaffing at NGOs and other organizations makes individual implementation virtually impossible. Three-year support also includes financial support for accommodation.²⁰

Giving refugees a voice

Normally, decisions on migration and integration issues tend to be left to professionals such as policy makers, senior administrators, academics, volunteers and activists working in the field. Very seldom do discussions include the migrants and refugees themselves even

¹⁷ Uredba o načinih in pogojih za zagotavljanje pravic osebam z mednarodno zaščito, Uradni list Republike Slovenije, št. 72,

<https://www.uradni-list.si/glasilo-uradni-list-rs/vsebina/2017-01-3497/uredba-o-nacinih-in-pogojih-za-zagotavljanje-pravic-osebam-z-mednarodno-zascito>, 9.6.2019

¹⁸ Hanlon, Bernadetter, Vicino, Thomas J, Global Migration: The Basics, Routledge, 2014, p. 57

¹⁹ The core institution for managing integration issues in Slovenia is Government office for support and integration of migrants, while most of the calls for applications in the field of integration are issued by the Ministry of Interior.

²⁰ Zakon o mednarodni zaščiti, Uradni list Republike Slovenije, št. 16/17, <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7103#>, 27.6.2019

though they are the only ones who can express first-hand their reactions with their involvement in the asylum system and later, should they be granted status, with integration programs.

In order to understand and hear their opinions and recommendations, we conducted interviews with seven refugees of different nationalities and ages. The conditions were: 1) residence in Slovenia for at least one year in order to already have some integration experiences and 2) having international protection status.

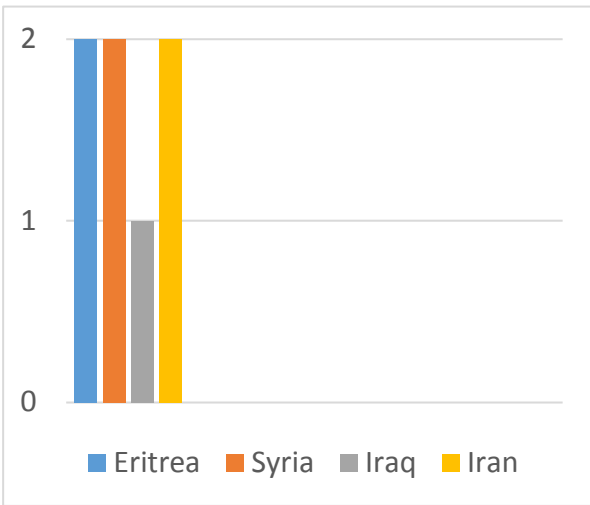


Figure 1: Country of origin

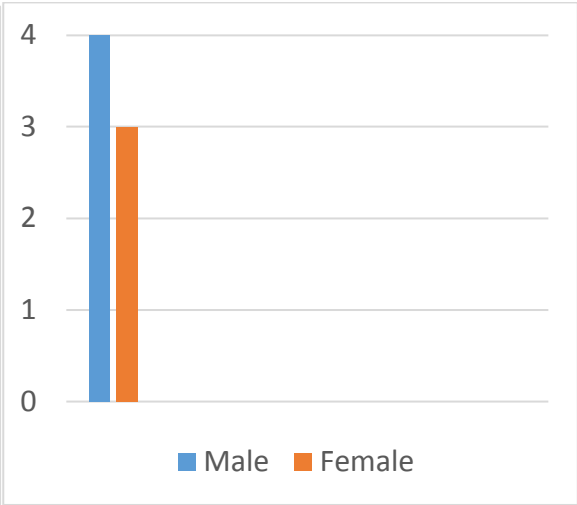


Figure 2: Gender of participants

Initially we approached two refugees who then recommended their friends and acquaintances who might also be interested in participating.

At first our interviewees were worried if the questions would be related to their personal lives and reasons for leaving their home countries. We explained that this would not be the case and they could interrupt or terminate the interview at any time. Our primary interest was not personal issues or reasons for their departures but their experiences as participants in the integration process in Slovenia. After this was explained, subjects' responses were extensive, descriptive and vivid, representing their emotions and experiences.

First, we discussed employment which was closely intertwined with language learning. The unemployed participants (4) expressed their concern about finding a job, which was

strongly related to their struggle to learn the language. Even though they were enrolled in the official Slovenian language course, their knowledge was far from adequate for employment. Out of seven, two were employed, one was still in high school and the other four were looking for work. Two participants were extremely worried about their knowledge of Slovenian, having been in Slovenia for almost two years. They said that the official language course was not very efficient since they were all put together in one group and the coordinators did not take into account any prior knowledge or level of literacy. This resulted in decreased motivation on their part. Both ended up dropping out of the course, going instead to Slovenska filantropija (an NGO that implements a program called “Daily centre for migrants” and a three-month orientation program for relocated and resettled refugees), where volunteers helped them to study in smaller groups, working with them individually to improve their speaking, reading and writing skills. Those who had better experience with the official language course said they wished for more hours, indicating that 400 hours was insufficient to acquire language skills needed in a work environment. All interviewees realized that for any job position, they have to be able to speak, understand and write Slovenian at least at a basic level.

In discussions about language preparation for their children and younger siblings, three participants who had come with family members were ambivalent regarding the language knowledge of younger relatives. They pointed to the fact that migrant and refugee children, when they enter the official education system, are entitled to only 20 hours of introductory language lessons. This is far too little to even start understanding and grasping language characteristics. Moreover, this level of support seems to ignore the fact that some children never went to school and are perhaps illiterate even in their mother tongue. They are immediately included in the regular classes where they listen and learn under the same circumstances as their Slovenian peers. The difference is, that for the first two years they are exempt from the assessment system which means they do not receive grades, only descriptive assessment. All participants shared the opinion that the children have no problems speaking and understanding Slovenian, a consequence of interaction with their classmates and friends inside or outside school. However, problems begin to occur when refugee students are required to write in Slovenian and perform more demanding tasks, such as reading books and studying history, geography, physics etc.

Making friends and social connections turned out to be a difficult and traumatic topic. Participants, especially those, who had come to Slovenia without their families said they often felt sad and lonely. For those, who had come alone but had found jobs, the situation was a bit better because they spend their days occupied with work, and have a social network centered on their workplace. But still they do not feel satisfied. One participant had applied for family reunification, but his situation being complicated seemed unlikely to be resolved for a while. Being separated from his family has triggered bouts of depression. He indicated that his worries had led to psychosomatic disorders.

All participants had rather good experiences with the Slovenian health care system and had words of praise for the treatment they had received from doctors. Some expressed surprise at the very long waiting periods for specialist treatment. As explained before in the paper, refugees have the same free access to the public health care system as Slovenian citizens, and the problem with long waiting times is a common and long-lasting problem in Slovenia. One issue that, however, did come up during the discussion on the health care system, was lack of cultural mediators and translation during appointments and other medical situations. There is no system in place with regard to cultural mediation. What does exist is tied to the budgets of various projects that are limited in duration. .

When talking about where they found friends, and what they could do by themselves to improve their integration or achieve happiness, some said they made friends at school or work, or during integration activities implemented as part of various projects. One participant had volunteered as a translator on the border crossing between Slovenia and Austria during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis. By that time, he had already been granted protection as a refugee in Slovenia, so he established contact with an NGO and at first helped with distributing clothes and food, but since his knowledge of Slovenian had improved, he started working as a Slovenian-Arabic translator which was his job at the time of the interview.

We were most anxious to hear recommendations by the refugees for easier and better integration. One of the most commonly heard complaints concerned the inefficient official Slovenian language courses. The refugees expressed a wish for either more hours of language instruction or better coordination of participant needs such as taking into consideration their prior knowledge of Slovenian language and their level of literacy.

The next recommendation referred to the additional integration and extracurricular activities for children and young adults that are designed to help them meet new friends, gain new skills and earn Slovenian more easily. Throughout the interviews the participants pointed to an absence of individual approach towards them. Three interviewees had especially in mind help with involvement in sport, cultural and music activities for children. They said that the biggest problem was lack of activities in the afternoon and during school vacation days and holidays. During such times children stayed at home doing nothing. Five participating refugees stated they wished to improve their interaction with the local population, to get to know their neighbours, perhaps chat sometimes, even visit or cook or share a meal together. This is something they miss from their home countries (Syria, Iraq and Eritrea), where neighbours are friends and not foreigners in the words of one of the participants.

Instead of a conclusion: systemic or project solutions for successful integration?

Slovenia has established and developed an integration system, however its mechanisms succeed only to a limited extent. But evaluation depends on how we define integration. In the narrow sense basic needs of refugees granted status in Slovenia are being met. They can work (economic integration), receive social benefits, have free access to both the health care and education systems, can receive support to some extent regarding social integration and a certain amount of financial help for accommodation for the first three years after being granted status.

There are, however, many downsides especially in the broader sense of integration. The main problem is understaffing of organizations and institutions active in integration. The fact is that most projects and programs designed to offer solutions in the form of additional integration activities are not systemically funded and as a result are unsustainable. As refugees represent a particularly vulnerable group, it takes time, sometimes months or even years, to establish a relationship of trust. Changing and transferring projects from one organization to another fails to take into consideration the needs of refugees for security and stability. In addition, too little attention is paid to an individual approach, psycho-social support, extracurricular activities for younger children as well as sports and cultural activities for teenagers and young adults.

It is true that integration is a two-sided process, but welcoming and accepting societies, communities and countries, should be willing to offer a hand and provide the necessary

infrastructure needed for an effective integration process. This means a sufficient number of professionals of multiple profiles in the field, an extensive network of cultural mediators, as well as NGOs to provide additional integration activities and support.

To sum up, in Slovenia there are very few systemic solutions to address integration issues. There is support in labour market inclusion, social welfare, health care and enrollment in the formal education system but without any additional integration or support activities. Each school decides for itself how much weight they wish to give to this topic with the result that the needs of children requiring extra support and care are not always addressed.

Hosting a relatively low number of refugees, Slovenia has had an opportunity to create a success story and become an example of best practices in the field. We realize there are countries that offer far less to refugees, but we should not be comparing ourselves to those who do a bad job, rather, we should strive to emulate those who can set a good example for us. And as soon as we start to see refugees as people with stories to tell, rich experiences, kind words, skills, and knowledge, they too will feel that they are welcomed and accepted members of society – a society that offers opportunities for contentment, independence and security for themselves and their families.

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