

Briefing Paper

Committee: UNHCR

Topic: The Question of Assimilation of Refugees into Destination Cultures

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Summary

The question of assimilation of refugees into destination cultures represents one of the most significant and sensitive challenges facing the international community today. As global displacement reaches unprecedented levels, host states must balance humanitarian obligations with domestic social cohesion, political stability and economic capacity. Assimilation refers to the process by which refugees are expected to adopt the cultural norms, values, language and social practices of their host country, often at the expense of their original cultural identity.

This is a highly contested issue. Proponents of assimilation argue that holding shared values and cultural norms promote national unity, reduce social tensions and facilitate economic participation. Critics argue, however, that forced or rapid assimilation can lead to marginalisation, discrimination and the erosion of cultural identity, undermining refugee wellbeing and long-term integration outcomes. International organisations, including the UNHCR, increasingly emphasise integration as a two-way process rather than one-sided assimilation.

Definition of Key Terms

Refugee – A refugee is defined under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as a person who is outside their country of nationality and unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.

Assimilation – a process through which refugees are expected to fully adopt the cultural identity of the host society, including language, values, traditions and social norms, often resulting in the loss or suppression of their original cultural practices.

Integration – refers to a long-term, two-way process whereby refugees become full members of the host society while maintaining elements of their original culture. This approach recognises mutual adaptation by both refugees and host communities.

Multiculturalism – a policy framework that promotes the coexistence of diverse cultures within a single society, encouraging cultural expression, tolerance and equal participation.

Host or Destination Country – the state that receives refugees and provides them with protection, legal status and access to basic services.

Social Cohesion – the strength of relationships and sense of solidarity among members of a society, often cited as a key concern in refugee assimilation debates.

Background Information

Forced displacement has increased dramatically over the past decade due to armed conflicts, political instability, climate-related disasters and human rights violations. Major conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza have resulted in large refugee flows into neighbouring regions and beyond. As a result, host countries face increasing pressure to manage the social and cultural impacts of refugee settlement.

Historically, many states, particularly in Europe and North America during the 20th century, have pursued assimilationist policies. These policies often required migrants and refugees to abandon their cultural identities in favour of a dominant national culture. While such approaches aimed to create uniform national identities, they frequently resulted in social exclusion and inequality.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, multicultural and integration-based approaches gained prominence. However, recent political shifts, such as rising nationalism and public concerns about security and identity, have brought back calls for stricter assimilation measures. Refugees often face barriers such as language difficulties, limited access to employment, discrimination and cultural misunderstandings, which complicate both assimilation and integration efforts.

Children and young people generally adapt more quickly to host cultures through education systems, while older refugees often struggle due to entrenched cultural ties and limited opportunities. This generational divide can create challenges within refugee families and communities.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Germany – Germany has accepted over 2.5 million refugees (data from mid-2023). It has implemented extensive language, employment and civic education programs, while also facing domestic debates over cultural adaptation and national identity.

Turkey – Turkey hosts the world's largest refugee population of 3.5 million, the majority of which are Syrian. Its approach has evolved from temporary protection to longer-term integration measures, though assimilation remains politically sensitive.

United States – The US focuses on economic self-sufficiency, employment and civic participation. Assimilation expectations vary by state and are influenced by broader immigration debates.

Canada – Canada is internationally recognised for its multicultural model, emphasising inclusion, cultural preservation and community sponsorship programs. Since 1980, Canada has received over 1 million refugees. The unemployment rate for refugees is 9%, only 3% difference to that of Canadian born citizens at 6%.

Sweden - Sweden provides comprehensive welfare support but has recently tightened integration and language requirements amid concerns about segregation.

UNHCR – Leads global refugee protection efforts, advocating for rights-based integration policies and supporting host governments.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) – Supports migration management, integration programs and policy development.

UNICEF – Focuses on refugee children’s education, protection and social inclusion. Currently it is estimated that 46% of refugee children (5.7 million children) are out of school.

Non-Governmental Organisations – Organisations such as the International Rescue Committee and national refugee councils provide legal aid, language training and community support.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1945 – Charter of the United Nations: The UN Charter establishes the promotion of human rights, dignity and international cooperation as core principles. While not refugee-specific, it provides the normative foundation for later refugee protection and debates about inclusion and treatment within host societies.

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): Article 14 recognises the right to seek asylum from persecution. Articles 2, 18, 19 and 27 are particularly relevant to assimilation debates, as they protect freedom of religion, expression and participation in cultural life, limiting the extent to which forced cultural assimilation can be justified.

1951 – Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: The cornerstone of international refugee law. The Convention obliges host states to respect refugees’ rights to religion (Article 4), education (Article 22), employment (Articles 17–19) and freedom from discrimination. These provisions imply integration rather than enforced assimilation.

1966 – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): Protects freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expression. These rights are directly relevant to debates on cultural assimilation, as they restrict state interference in personal and cultural identity.

1966 – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR): Affirms the right to work, education and participation in cultural life. The covenant supports inclusive integration policies that enable refugees to contribute economically while maintaining cultural identity.

1967 – Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees: Removes the geographic and temporal limitations of the 1951 Convention, expanding refugee protections globally and increasing the relevance of assimilation and integration debates worldwide.

1969 – OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa: Broadens the refugee definition and emphasises solidarity and burden-sharing. The Convention encourages host states to treat refugees humanely, influencing integration approaches in African host countries.

1979 – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): Highlights the gendered dimensions of assimilation, recognising that refugee women may face compounded cultural and social barriers in host societies.

1989 – Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): Guarantees refugee children access to education, cultural life and protection. The CRC strongly influences integration policies by prioritising the best interests of the child over rigid assimilation demands.

1990 – International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families: Although not universally ratified, it reinforces principles of non-discrimination and cultural rights that inform refugee integration debates.

2000 – UN Millennium Declaration: Links human development, social inclusion and equality, indirectly shaping integration-focused refugee policies.

2015 – European Refugee Crisis: Large-scale arrivals to Europe intensify political and social debates over assimilation, national identity and multiculturalism, prompting stricter language and civic integration requirements in some states.

2016 – New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants: Marks a shift towards responsibility-sharing and recognises the importance of inclusion and social cohesion in host communities.

2018 – Global Compact on Refugees (GCR): Explicitly promotes refugee inclusion in national systems, access to education and labour markets and social cohesion, favouring integration over assimilation.

2020 – UNHCR Strategic Framework for Integration: Provides guidance to states on fostering inclusion while respecting cultural diversity.

2022 – Ukrainian Refugee Response

Temporary Protection regimes in Europe demonstrate flexible, rights-based integration approaches without cultural assimilation requirements.

2023 - 2025 – Contemporary Developments: Rising global displacement and political polarisation renew debates on assimilation, with the UN increasingly emphasising rights-based integration, community cohesion and refugee participation in policymaking.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Many host countries have attempted to address the issue through state-led policies which focus on rapid cultural and economic adaptation. Approaches such as mandatory language acquisition and education programmes are common and are based off the assumption that linguistic competence and education of national values accelerate social cohesion. Initiatives centred around employment are also central as they aim to promote self-sufficiency and reduce the perceived economic burdens on host societies. Dispersal and relocation policies have also been tried to prevent refugees being concentrated in specific urban areas, thus seeking to avoid the formation of cultural enclaves and encouraging interaction with host populations.

However, such approaches are not always fully successful. While it is true language and employment programmes have improved access to labour markets for some, such programmes fail to account for trauma, discrimination and structural barriers such as non-recognition of qualifications which may have been earned outside of the host country. Dispersal policies can lead to increased social isolation and decreased access to community support networks. Attempts to reduce social tensions have demonstrated potential, with multicultural education helping to inform communities, however due to inconsistent funding and insufficient involvement of refugees in policy design, their impact is limited.

Possible Solutions

A sustainable approach to refugee inclusion requires a shift away from rigid assimilation models and one towards integration frameworks which focus on human rights and mutual adaptation. Integration could instead be understood as a two-way process where refugees are supported in accessing education, employment, healthcare and civic life, and host societies adapt institutions and services to accommodate diversity. Language education could be expanded to allow refugees to access high-quality, age-appropriate language education complemented by inclusive education systems which address both academic and social integration. Employment support could be given and foreign qualifications should be recognised in line with the host country's equivalent qualification.

Additionally, community-based initiatives which promote meaningful interaction between refugees and host populations can strengthen long-term social cohesion. Governments and international organisations could invest in anti-discrimination legislation and public awareness campaigns to counter misinformation and xenophobia. There could be increased international financial support for host countries to ensure adequate service provision to refugees. Crucially, refugees should be actively involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of integration policies to ensure that solutions are responsive and effective.

Useful Links

1. [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Is Turning 75: Here's What You Need To Know](#)
2. [The 1951 Refugee Convention | UNHCR UK](#)
3. [The 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees](#)
4. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights | OHCHR](#)
5. [The Global Compact on Refugees | UNHCR UK](#)

Bibliography

1. [Refugee Data Finder - Key Indicators](#)
2. [Bi-annual-fact-sheet-2023-09-GERMANY.pdf](#)
3. [Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye | UNHCR Turkey](#)
4. [Refugees in Canada - United Nations Refugee Agency | UNHCR Canada](#)
5. [Refugee Statistics | USA for UNHCR](#)