

What Options Exist to Promote Migrant Inclusiveness in Southern Mediterranean Countries?

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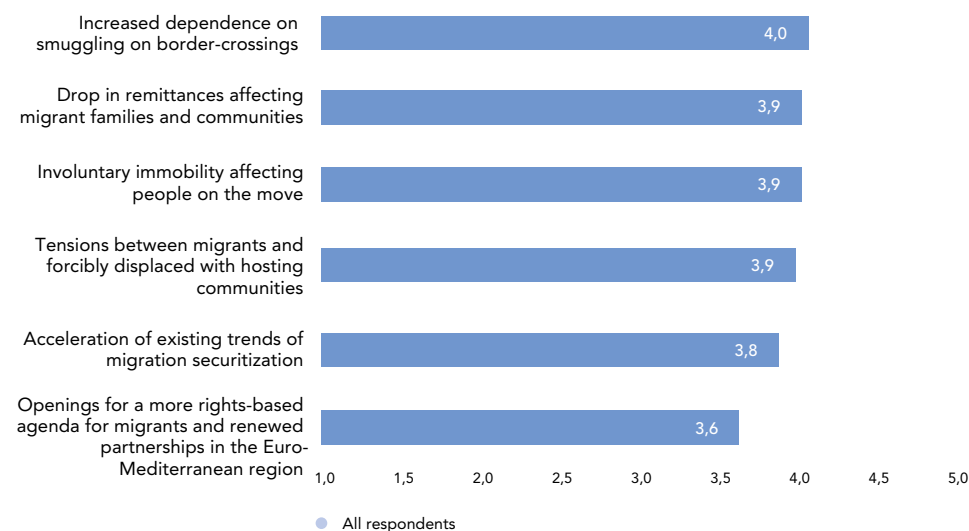
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Introduction

Migrants and refugees in Southern Mediterranean Countries (SMCs) are vulnerable to various forms of exclusion. Social exclusion can take the form of racially-motivated hostility and violence, and discrimination in the labour or housing markets. A recent example is in Tunisia, where black African migrants have experienced violence, robberies, evictions and job terminations by employers after the President targeted black Africans in a speech in February (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Finding decent work is also a challenge, given scarce job opportunities as well as poor access to the labour market and formal work. Migrants can also have difficulty in gaining access to public services, especially if it is necessary to have regularised immigration status. The situation for migrants became even more hostile during the Covid-19 pandemic, as indicated in the graph below. For many migrants, particularly those who were attempting to transit through SMCs to Europe, the pandemic increased the reliance on smugglers and worsened involuntary immobility of people when international borders closed. In light of these challenges, this article explores some of the possible avenues for promoting migrant economic and social inclusion in SMCs.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many migrants, particularly those who were attempting to transit through SMCs to Europe, increased their reliance on smugglers, and involuntary immobility worsened.

Graph 1: Q.15 Migrants, as a vulnerable group, have particularly been hit by the socio-economic consequences and mobility restrictions of the pandemic. In your opinion, to what extent has Covid-19 impacted the following migration-related elements in SMCs? (Mean 1-very low, 5-very high)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 13th Euromed Survey

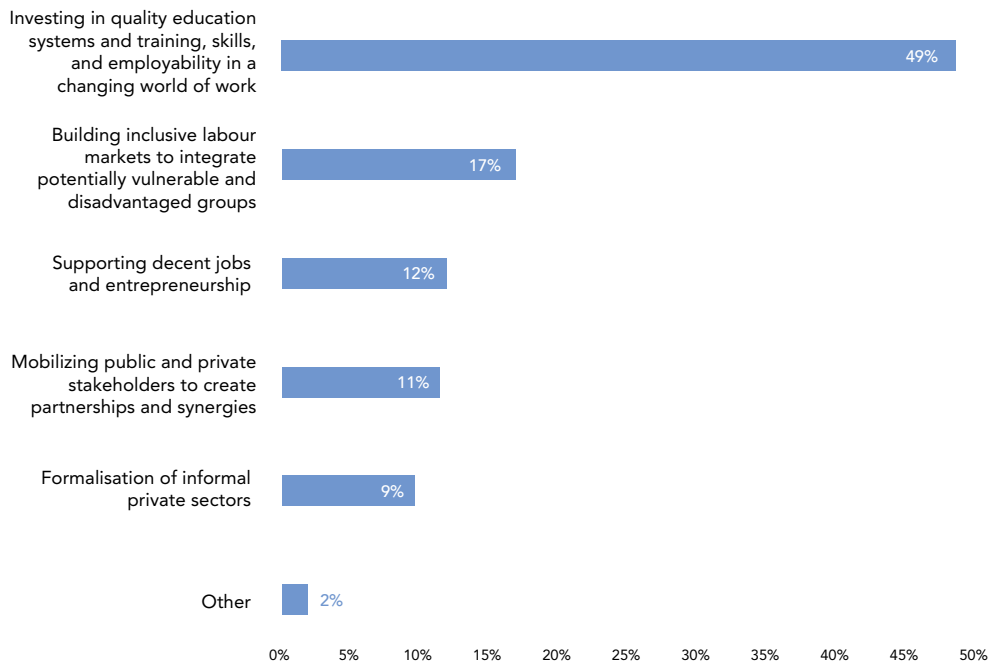
Job Creation for Migrants

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One of the reasons why migrants and refugees struggle to find decent work in SMCs is because of insufficient job opportunities. Limited job opportunities has been a defining feature of SMCs' development in recent years, a problem affecting not only migrants and refugees. The 2008 global financial crisis and the political instability after the Arab Spring contributed to a period of poor economic performance in SMCs, specifically slow economic growth, financial instability, low levels of innovation and private sector development, and low levels of job creation. This recent economic history, which has been worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine, has meant that SMCs have experienced some of the highest unemployment rates in the world.

Therefore, to improve migrant inclusion in the labour market new jobs need to be created. However, there is no silver bullet for creating jobs in SMCs. The EuroMeS-Co survey has shown that 49% of respondents find investment in quality education systems and training, skills and employability as the most important priorities to promote job creation in these countries.

Graph 2: Q.8 What should be the main EU-SMCs cooperation priority to promote job creation?



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 13th Euromed Survey

However, although improvements in education, training, and employability will increase levels of human capital in the workforce, this may not necessarily result in increased employment if no new jobs are actually created (Tzannatos, 2022). This is especially true in countries like Tunisia for example, where unemployed highly trained graduates are leaving the country due to a lack of job opportunities (Grundke & Goldstein, 2022). The short answer to how to promote job creation in SMCs, is to support private sector development, invest to create jobs that are more productive and improve skills forecasting to ensure training and education are geared towards future skills needs (UNESCO, 2021; Tzannatos, 2022). Although, in the current climate of economic stagnation and large government deficits, there will be less room for government interventions for job creation.

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Access to the Labour Market

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Even if there is greater job creation however, migrants and refugees need to be able to access the labour market in the host country. Yet having full or even partial access to the labour market is not always the case for migrants and refugees. Access to the labour market can be granted through the issuance of work permits or as part of having regular immigration status in the host country. Not having the correct papers is an important reason why migrants are forced to take up informal work, which does not give access to social protection and is a risk factor for exploitation. Experts who responded to the EuroMeSCo survey agreed that providing work permits and regularising immigration status is a key priority for improving migrant inclusiveness.

One example of a good practice is the Jordan Compact in 2016, which granted full access to Jordan's labour market for Syrian refugees. The policy has successfully increased the employment of Syrian refugees: between 2014 and 2021, the unemployment of Syrian refugees fell from 60% to 33% and their labour force participation went from 29% to 35%. The number of work permits also increased drastically, which subsequently allowed for the formalisation of 40% of Syrian workers by 2021 (Ait Ali Slimane & Al Abbadi, 2023).

However, there are some barriers which limit the impact of these policies in Jordan. Although work permits are a good indicator for measuring the legalisation and formalisation of work, they do not reflect the actual level of job creation nor the quality of work; indeed, an ILO impact assessment report in 2017 concluded that the creation of work permits was only the first step for Syrian refugees' labour market inclusion in Jordan (ILO, 2017). Despite the provision of work permits, there are still not enough jobs being created in Jordan, with about 80% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line (Ait Ali Slimane & Al Abbadi, 2023). Moreover, even with work permits giving access to the labour market, Syrian refugees in Jordan did not necessarily experience an improvement in working conditions (Kattaa & Byrne, 2018). Finally, although increasing migrant workers' protection through the provision of work permits was feasible in Jordan, the political climate in other countries, such as Tunisia, means policies to give greater work protections for migrants in the form of formalisation of work are highly unlikely.

Alongside measures to improve job creation and access to the labour market, there are other possible smaller-scale interventions to improve migrant inclusion in SMCs' labour markets.

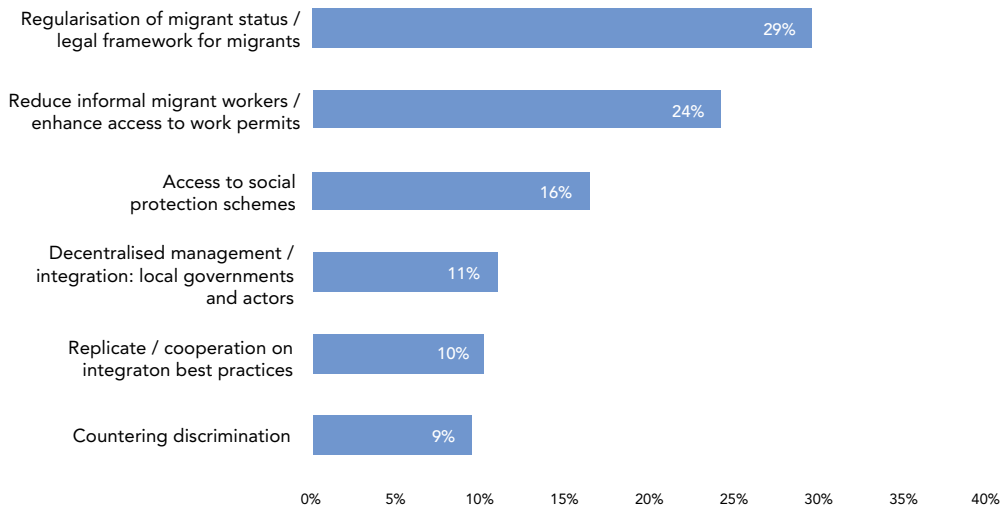
Alongside measures to improve job creation and access to the labour market, there are other possible smaller-scale interventions to improve migrant inclusion in SMCs' labour markets. One possible option, which was emphasised in the EuroMeSCo survey, could be to improve the recognition of foreign workers' skills and qualifications to allow migrants to find work at the appropriate skill level. In addition, migrant entrepreneurship could be boosted as a means to contribute to job creation.

Improving Access to Services Through Regularisation

Enabling access to public services, such as healthcare, education and housing, is a good way to promote migrant inclusiveness. Yet access to public services is often contingent upon having a regular immigration status in the host country. Many migrants do not have this regularised status and are thus excluded from key public services. In the EuroMeSCo survey, respondents said that regularisation should be one of the key priorities for promoting the integration of migrants in SMCs social protection systems (see graph 3).

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Graph 3: Q.16 In your opinion, what should be the main EU-SMCs cooperation priority to promote the integration of migrants in SMCs social protection systems? (Categories developed from open-ended answers)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 13th Euromed Survey

The issue of migrants' access to services was brought to light during the Covid-19 pandemic, when some undocumented migrants were unable to access healthcare in the country they were in owing to their immigration status. This problem was further exacerbated by the fact that migrants who did try to access healthcare were at risk of being detained and potentially deported by immigration authorities if there was no firewall agreement to prevent data-sharing between different public institutions (PICUM, 2022). Even if undocumented migrants do have access to public services, there is often a high level of distrust, which leads to hesitancy in trying to access services to which they have a legal right.

Therefore, regularising migrants and refugees is fundamental for their inclusion in social protection systems in SMCs. Regularisation is a policy tool that has already

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been used in some SMCs, for example in 2013 in Morocco, when a regularisation policy successfully regularised around 25,000 people, or the recent plan to regularise 19,000 undocumented migrants from Bangladesh in Lebanon (CNDH, 2013; Mahmudd, 2022). However, while regularisation is important, it may not be politically viable in countries with anti-immigration governments, such as Tunisia (Cassarino, 2023). Even when there is a path to obtaining regular immigration status, immigration procedures in SMCs are typically very slow. Recent research has shown that, in Tunisia, administrative procedures for the regularisation of migrants and refugees are lengthy and bureaucratically challenging (Ensari et al., 2023). Long periods in irregular situations can hinder inclusion in the host country and can also cause migrants who wish to travel to Europe to accrue fines if they have overstayed their visa. Therefore, alongside implementing regularisation mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures in SMCs need to be streamlined.

Having a regular immigration or refugee status does not provide a complete safeguard however.

Having a regular immigration or refugee status does not provide a complete safeguard however. Refugees with status in Tunisia are still subjected to racially-motivated hostility and discrimination (Ensari et al., 2023). In Tunisia, providing some additional layers of protection to refugees could help, for example work permits to limit labour market discrimination, but societal racism will continue so long as the government carries on scapegoating migrants and refugees. One suggestion for how to counter anti-immigrant narratives in Jordan is to bolster labour market data collection, which can help to disprove anti-immigrant claims about competition for jobs (Ait Ali Slimane & Al Abbadi, 2023). Furthermore, where there is minimal support for state-level action, supporting smaller-scale initiatives can have good results. In Lebanon, where state-led humanitarian support to Syrian refugees has been minimal, civil society has played an essential role in providing social support for Syrian refugees as well as promoting social cohesion between groups (Chatty, 2022).

Conclusion

Promoting migrant inclusiveness in SMCs is a very challenging task, particularly given the considerable economic and political constraints. Given the complexity of the issue, there is a need for coherence between different policy areas. Economic policy needs to step in to increase job creation in these countries, which will increase the employment opportunities for migrants. There is also a need for interventions at different levels of governance. Interventions at the national level, for example to provide pathways to regular immigration status, are essential but may not always be politically feasible. Civil society should be supported in filling in the gaps in service provision not covered by the state. There is no silver bullet for addressing migrant inclusion in SMCs, and EU-SMC cooperation should consider a wide range of actions in order to address such a complex, but urgent issue.

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