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Identification and Categorization of Refugees' Integration Prospects in the Greek Socio-Economic System. Case Study in Mytilene and Crete Islands

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Abstract

The refugee problem, which Greece faces since 2015, comprise one of the key challenges for policymakers in terms both of immediate measures to protect refugees in host centers and of the prospects for their smooth integration into the socio-economic system. The research project entitled "Detection and classification of perspectives for the inclusion of refugees in the Greek production system. Case study in Crete and Mytilene", in which this paper is based, focuses on these perspectives.



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Therefore, within the framework of the triangular research process which was followed, quantitative research through a structured questionnaire was conducted to refugees in the selected area of Mytilene¹, which has received huge refugee inflows since 2015 and still has a significant refugee population in the host centers. In a second phase, the dimensions, prospects, shortcomings and barriers on the integration of refugees into the labor market were explored through semi-structured interviews in Crete² and Mytilene with entrepreneurs and social partners' representatives (75 interviews in each island). The selection of these two geographical areas was carried out in order to investigate the different dimensions and potential opportunities for integration, as long as Mytilene has received extensive refugee inflows while Crete has not received refugee flows and is an appropriate field of entrepreneurship and potential integration of refugees in the production process. Furthermore, 40 narrative interviews were conducted in Crete with "old" integrated refugees and immigrants in order to investigate the problems and challenges they faced during their integration process and the conditions for current refugees in terms of integration. This research is expected to provide useful material for constructing intervention and incentive directions, benefiting refugees' social integration and the evolvement of their social and human capital.

Keywords: refugees, immigration, social inclusion, socio-economic integration, human capital

1. Introduction

Wars, discrimination, natural disasters and financial hardship are just a few of the causes that lead people to leave their countries of origin and become refugees. In 2015, according to United Nations' High Commissioner estimates (2016), more than 65 million people became refugees worldwide. During this period, migratory flows to Greece grew extensively (McKinsey & Company, 2016). Indeed, according to UNHCR's latest estimates, from January 2015 to May 5, 2018, 1,080,656 refugees entered the Greek territory (Fragouliotis, 2018). According to recent UNHCR estimates (2018a), in May 2018, the number of refugees and immigrants in Greece amounted to over 60,000, including about 14,000 refugees in the Greek islands (UNHCR, 2018b).

In this context, the challenge, especially for Greece, is to seek optimal solutions for fostering the smooth integration of refugees into the Greek socio-economic system. Often, the short-term effects of this phenomenon are sought and highlighted without focusing on the long-term dynamics and consequently there is insufficient focus on the exploration of actors that could develop a strategy that, through refugees' and production units' needs assessment in Greece, would work towards social and economic development.

Developing a long-term strategy for the socio-economic integration of refugees is a key priority in order to avoid the high cost of a possible failure as far as their integration is concerned. In particular, the failure to integrate refugees into the productive system of the host country can create a) economic, b) social and c) political problems (Ratha et al, 2011). In this respect, the high rates of long-term unemployment and underemployment, and the inability to link qualifications to employment are some of the most important current economic problems which pose barriers to refugees' integration. In this respect, inadequate integration of refugees into the production system can lead to the disruption of social cohesion, while the increase of this problem can lead to extreme political expressions. Conversely, a successful integration strategy can bring positive results in the country's GDP but also in public finances, since the working population is a source of raising tax revenues and contributions for a pension system that faces critical

¹ Formally, Mytilene is the capital town of the island Lesbos but the name "Mytilene" is commonly used also to describe the whole island, which is located in the northeastern Aegean Sea and it is the third largest island in Greece with approximately 86,000 inhabitants. Our research was conducted in the whole island (which comprise one regional unit) and not only in the capital town.

² Crete is the largest and most populous of the Greek islands, it is located in the southern border of the Aegean Sea, with a population of 623,065 inhabitants. Our research was conducted in the whole island, which is divided in four regional units and the sample was taken based on the population of each regional unit.

problems of economic sustainability. As Finotelli & Ponzo (2017) argue, the average age of migrants and their high labor market participation tend to improve the welfare systems of the host countries.

Yet, except from analyses revolving around legal policies and individual evaluations of statistical data, relatively few studies exist that specifically focus on the afore-mentioned parameters. Mainly, the impact of European aid programs on refugees as well as specific governmental programs are assessed but it becomes obvious that there is a lack of qualitative surveys and case studies focused on social and economic integration. Also, there are not yet accurate statistics on the number of refugees absorbed by the labor market, especially in the low-paid sectors.

2. Background and Objectives

As far as Greece is concerned, it is reasonable to assume that most refugees are primarily unemployed and cannot be quickly integrated into the labor market because, firstly and most importantly, they do not speak the Greek language. Moreover, as surveys in other EU countries show, over 70% of the refugees do not have professional qualifications. However, it is a fact that even experts on integration issues do not have information about the skills of newly arrived refugees. Nevertheless, it is estimated that most of the refugees are at a working age (*Deutsche Welle*, 2016).

There are some basic findings, inter alia, on the structural involvement of refugees in society (particularly in employment and education sectors), on specific standardized services and programs, on physical deprivation and lack of access in health care and housing, on socio-cultural exclusion, and also partly on education and training structures as well as on the health status of refugees before they arrive in Greece (Kousoulis et al, 2016). In any case, existing surveys and data only allow the development of assumptions about the situation experienced by refugees and the determinants that positively and negatively affect their effective improvement.

As far as the economic integration of refugees is concerned, this is a particularly interesting area for research due to the fact that little is known about their integration into the EU labor market and especially of the Greek one, in the years 2015-2018. As it has already been mentioned, this time frame is particularly important due to the fact that the refugee crisis that commenced in 2011 with the civil war in Syria, has been dramatically increased after 2015. Yet, only recently academics have turned their attention from the economic crisis and migratory flows to the process of integration - in all its forms - of immigrants in the host countries (European Commission, 2017).

For instance, Matsaganis's (2015) research focuses on the consequences of the economic crisis on the integration of migrants into the labor market in Greece. A number of other studies deal with the issue of illegal immigrants that reside and work in Europe as well as with the major socio-economic challenges they face (Triandafyllidou, 2016). In addition, a number of other studies also focus on how individual characteristics of refugees (such as nationality, skills and gender) contribute to the integration process in the labor market of host countries in times of crisis (Andrejuck 2017; Dubucs et al., 2017; Duru & Trezn 2017; Duru et al , 2017; Lulle & Jurkane-Holbein 2017; Marchetti 2017;).

For Trezn and Triandafyllidou (2017) the deep economic recession had not drastically disrupted the labor force migration, but rather it led to the differentiation of migratory flows as well as the integration approaches concerning migrants and refugees. Therefore, the dynamics of integration became more volatile and fluid. At the same time, the crisis increased the importance of economic inequality against that of cultural diversity, with an emphasis on social differences between migrant groups.

In this respect, according to Cheliotis (2017), the integration of illegal immigrants into the Greek informal labor market has been intensified through a combination of three dynamics: a) the supply of a

large number of illegal migrants in the Greek labor market, b) strict access to employment, health services and political rights for undocumented migrants and c) systematic violence and intimidation against immigrants at and beyond the workplace. Similarly, according to Maroukis (2017), the highly fragmented Greek labor market has played an important role in worsening the general situation of foreign workers in periods of deep economic recession. Therefore, regarding the group of young immigrants, according to Eurostat (2017), Greece recorded the highest unemployment rates (38.7%) in 2015, after Spain (42.0%) in the EU.

According to another study by OECD (2018b), the high unemployment rates in Greece and the poor labor market situation make it very difficult to implement policies that facilitate the integration of migrants and refugees. As stated in the OECD study (2018b), both recognized refugees and asylum seekers can work from the moment they apply for international protection and receive the relevant Applicant's Bulletin, but there are limited mechanisms to facilitate their entry into the market such as skills and validation mechanisms.

In conclusion, despite the growing research on the prospects of immigrant integration in host countries, and in this case in Greece, the literature on the integration of refugees into the labor market of Greece, especially for the period 2015-2018, is limited compared to the magnitude of the refugee crisis. The limited number of studies on the prospects of refugees' integration into the labor market in the regions of Greece, which is particularly impressive given the large number of literature on integration that has been produced so far, constitutes an impediment regarding the production of empirically based proposals as well as of analytical frameworks that will lead research into safe conclusions for the Greek refugee and immigrant reality.

In other words, there is no sufficient data both in terms of the impact that refugees' inflow has in Greece in terms of care provision as well as in terms of the readiness and suitability of the Greek socio-economic system to meet the refugees' needs and to secure their decent living conditions, welfare and their social integration. Similarly, there is a huge gap of data on the extent to which refugees are involved in important sectors of society, along with insufficient data concerning their aspirations as well as their qualifications in terms of integration. Therefore, the collection of specific quantitative and qualitative data is considered necessary for the design of policy proposals-strategies and interventions for the integration of refugees into the Greek society and economy.

3. Methods

Hence, this research project has followed a methodological strategy that is based on the principles of quantitative and qualitative research. Mixed methods, constitutes a research tool, the outcomes of each one of its instruments reinforces the findings of the other in use (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Thus, for the purposes of this research three (3) different data collection techniques were used. Firstly, a structured questionnaire was distributed in 102 refugees in Mytilene. The questionnaire was divided in five (5) parts (personal information, educational level – skills, employment and integration prospects, health issues and concluding remarks) and included fifty one (51) questions, using inter alia, the Likert Scale. The questionnaires were also translated into Arabic and Farsi for greater ease in comprehension. The second instrument in use was a semi-structured interview in a sample of 150 business executives, interest groups and social partners in Mytilene and Crete (75 interviews in each island). The semi-structured interviews were also divided in five (5) parts (introductory part, personal information, entrepreneurship issues, migration issues and concluding part). Lastly, 40 narrative interviews were conducted in Crete with selected

“old” immigrants and refugees who have been integrated into the socioeconomic system, in order to identify the prospects, barriers and challenges that they have faced or currently face. The quantitative research was conducted from September 30 to October 10, 2018, the semi-structured interviews in Mytilene from September 30 to October, 10, 2018 and in Crete from October 15 to December 30, 2018 and the narrative interviews in Crete were conducted from January 15 to February 20, 2019.

In addition, this research used the principles of Grounded Theory, which, according to Tsiolis (2014), constitutes a methodological tool that aims at the production of theory concerning the object that is under investigation. In other words, it is a theory based on empirical data which are collected and analyzed in a systematic manner.

The research process focused on two (2) different selected areas so as to identify the distinction in the distribution of needs and to include the geographic factor into the design of the intervention proposals. The geographical areas include the island of Crete, which has not received waves of refugees but is an active field of entrepreneurship, and the island of Mytilene (Lesvos), which has received the largest number of refugees and faces immense socio-economic problems as well as challenges.

The rationale behind the choice of these specific research methods is that it makes it possible to highlight the perspectives for the integration of refugees into different socio-economic environments, which can, in turn, provide a guide as far as their integration at national level is concerned. In this way, it is possible to create a first categorization, in terms of incentives, problems and challenges in social and economic contexts in order to form empirically grounded policy proposals and thus, achieve long-term economic and social benefits (Suddaby, 2006).

4. Analysis of selected descriptive quantitative research data

4.1 Basic demographic characteristics and causes of migration

As it has already been mentioned, 102 structured questionnaires were distributed to refugees at the Greek island of Mytilene between September 30 and October 10, 2018. Starting with some basic demographic characteristics (Table 1), 55.1% of the sample was male and 44.9% female. The overwhelming majority of respondents were from 18 to 35 years old, highlighting the fact that a large enough young population has moved from the Middle Eastern countries and is clearly a potential workforce that needs to be smoothly integrated into the host societies. It should also be noted that 51.1% of the respondents state that they have children, the majority of whom (59%) are currently living together with their parents in Greece and therefore should be protected and integrated into the Greek education system. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents indicate that they stay in Greece for up to about one year, which is particularly important considering that they should, on the one hand, be granted asylum and, on the other hand, join the education and employment institutions.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents-refugees

Gender and Children	Men	Women	With Children		Without Children	
	55.1%	44.9%	51.1%		48.9%	
Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	65+
	42.9%	33.0%	12.1%	6.6%	4.4%	1.0%
Family Residence	Greece	Other European Country		Home Country	Country Outside Europe	

	59.0%	8.4%		18.1%	14.5%	
<i>Duration of Residence in Greece</i>	<i>More than 3 years</i>	<i>3 years</i>	<i>2 years</i>	<i>1 year</i>	<i>7-11 months</i>	<i>0-6 months</i>
	2.2%	1.1%	16.3%	43.5%	23.9%	13.0%

Of particular interest are the indicators related to the causes that led these people to immigration. Interestingly, there is a variation of responses among respondents. In all the variables used, a large percentage is at both ends, namely it considers the individual factors either “extremely important” or “no at all important” (**Figure 1**). Of course, we should not underestimate that war is the main and basic cause of migration for the vast majority of them. However, the diversion in all the other variables (political reasons, education, social security, income, unemployment, further economic reasons) highlights two possible issues (**Figure 1**). On the one hand, the fact that the war affected different socio-economic groups in the same way, and on the other hand, that many of the respondents had no choice but to migrate, even though before the war they might have been in a satisfactory socio-economic situation.

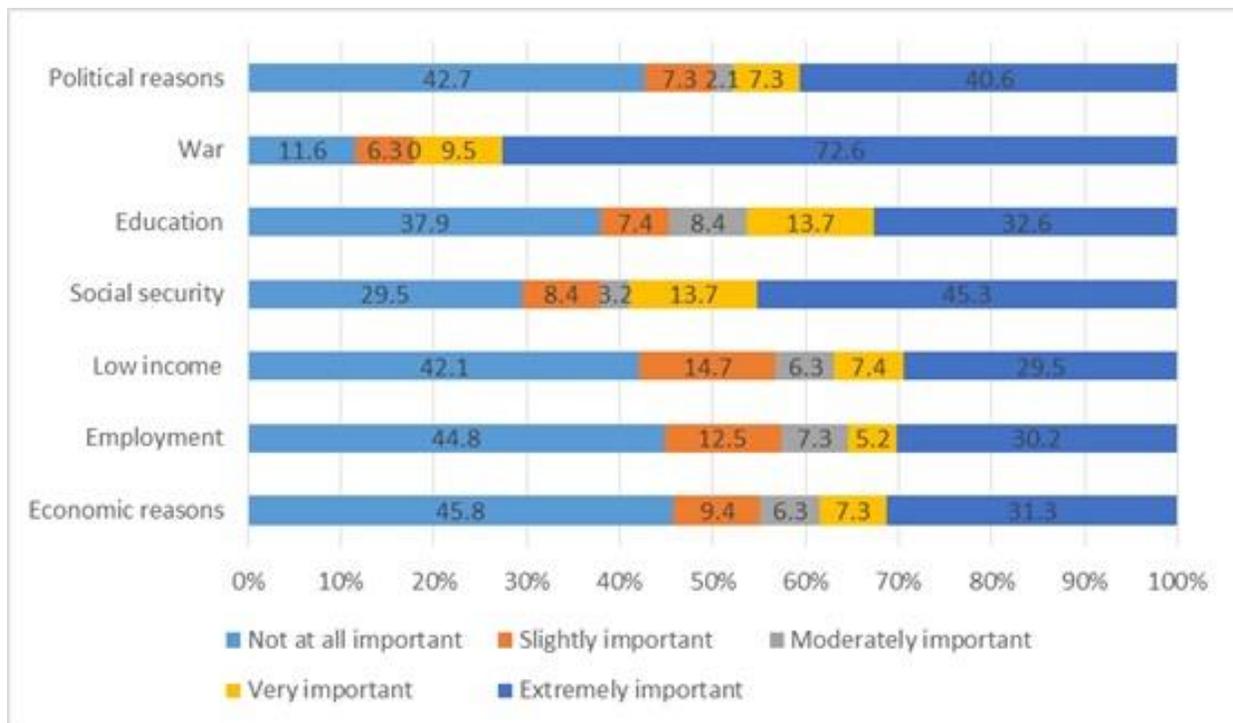


Figure 1.
Immigration Causes.

4.2 Educational background and skills

The educational level of the majority of respondents seems to be particularly low, a fact which highlights the need for public policy intervention in order to improve it and provide the required skills. About 17.3% of respondents state that they have not at all received school education while 34.6% have only completed primary education (Figure 2). Only 22.1% have completed High School, 23.5% Lyceum and only 2.5% a Vocational School. Only 14% of those who have completed secondary education have received a university degree (Figure 2). It should also be noted that only 15.6% of the respondents indicated that they are currently attending school education in Greece.

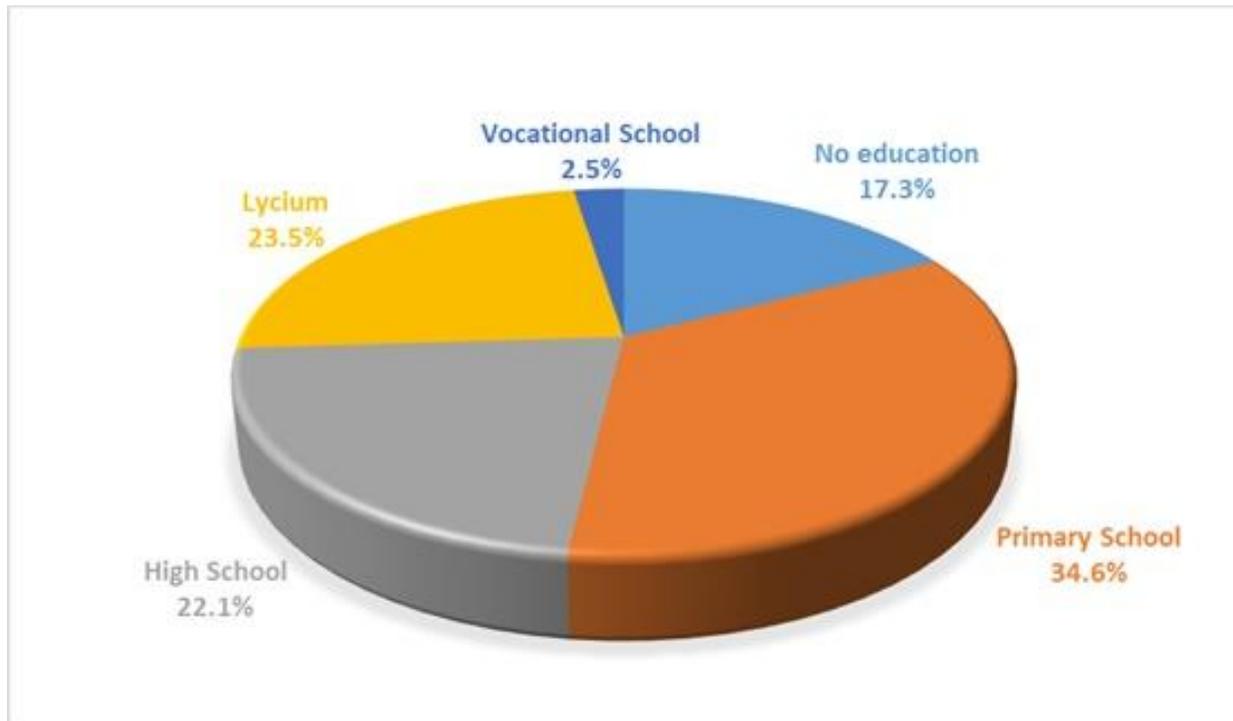


Figure 2.
School Education

The assessment of refugees' skills is particularly important in order to gain a comprehensive view of their social and human capital and, consequently, of the prospects for inclusion and the possibilities for skills' improvement in order to facilitate integration. Regarding the computer-based knowledge (Figure 3), only about 20% of the respondents indicate that they have good or very good knowledge, while the remaining 80% report that their cognitive level is not sufficient, and particularly 34.4% indicate that has no knowledge on electronic computer usage (IT). As far as foreign languages are concerned (Figure 3), it seems that the majority speaks English insufficiently while about half indicate that they speak Greek but not in satisfactory level. Moreover, 51% indicate that it does not speak at all Greek. This is a finding which highlights the important of the linguistic problem that clearly hinders their smooth integration. As for other languages for which they were asked, only a few speak either French or German.

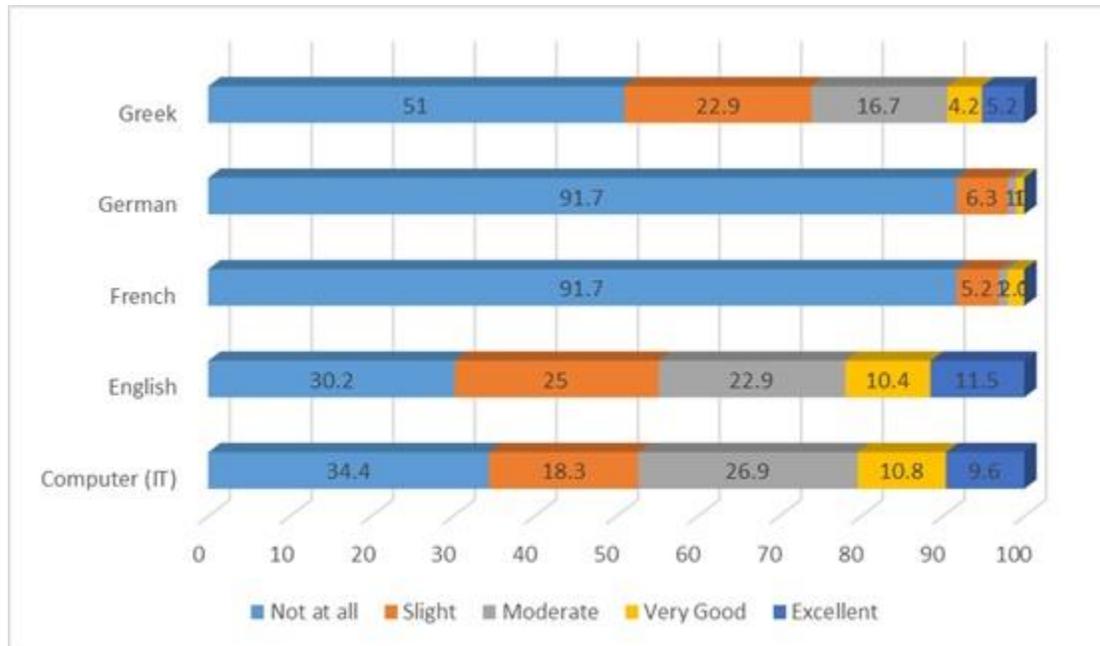


Figure 3.
Foreign language and IT knowledge.

Only 20% of the respondents report that they have previously participated in training programs based on their expertise, either funded by the state or by the company in which they worked in their country of origin. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of respondents expect to join education, but because of the low level of their current education, their main preference is primary and secondary school education and secondly a vocational-technical school or a higher institution.

4.3 Employment issues

The knowledge of the labor market and the ways in order to participate in it, is very important especially in a foreign country. Thus, the exploration of refugees' knowledge about the Greek labor market, the ways to seek job as well as their job experience in their country of origin as well as in Greece, is crucial. Under this prism it turns out that the majority of the respondents (75.6%) state that they are unaware of the situation and problems of the Greek labor market while only 10.4% report that they are currently working, almost exclusively with an income at very low levels (up to 300 €).

However, the very low income does not prevent the majority of the precarious working refugees from reporting that they are either too much or quite satisfied (**Figure 4**). This, of course, is also justified by the very difficult situation that they have experienced lately. Undoubtedly though, advisory support - counselling for job seeking and employment opportunities, become imperative as long as almost every refugee reports that she/he either do not know at all or know little about the ways that they can use in order to seek for work in Greece (**Figure 4**). In any case, 87.1% of the respondents indicate that they would like to work in Greece either on the secondary (49.3%) or the tertiary (45.3%) sector.

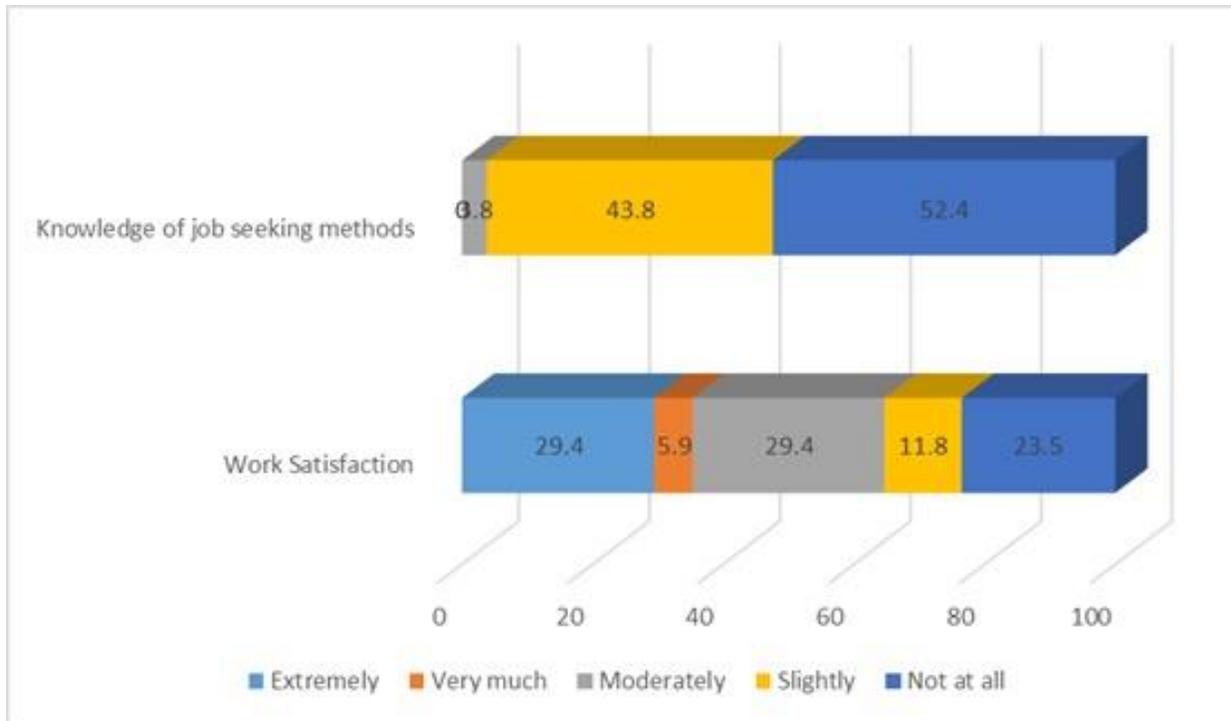


Figure 4.
Work satisfaction and knowledge of job seeking methods.

4.3 Health issues

Health is one of the most important prerequisites for every human and its improvement is crucial especially for the optimal and effective integration of refugees into the new society. As shown in **Figure 5**, the health condition of the majority of respondents seems to be improved after arriving in Greece, as long as 80% declare that they have suffered a psychological or physical trauma during their migratory transition. However, a finding that should raise the awareness of public authorities is that 32% of the respondents state that their health is in a poor or very poor condition. Moreover, their satisfaction with the health services offered is recorded as moderate, while for about one-third (1/3) of the respondents the language appears to have been a significant obstacle for consultation with healthcare professionals.

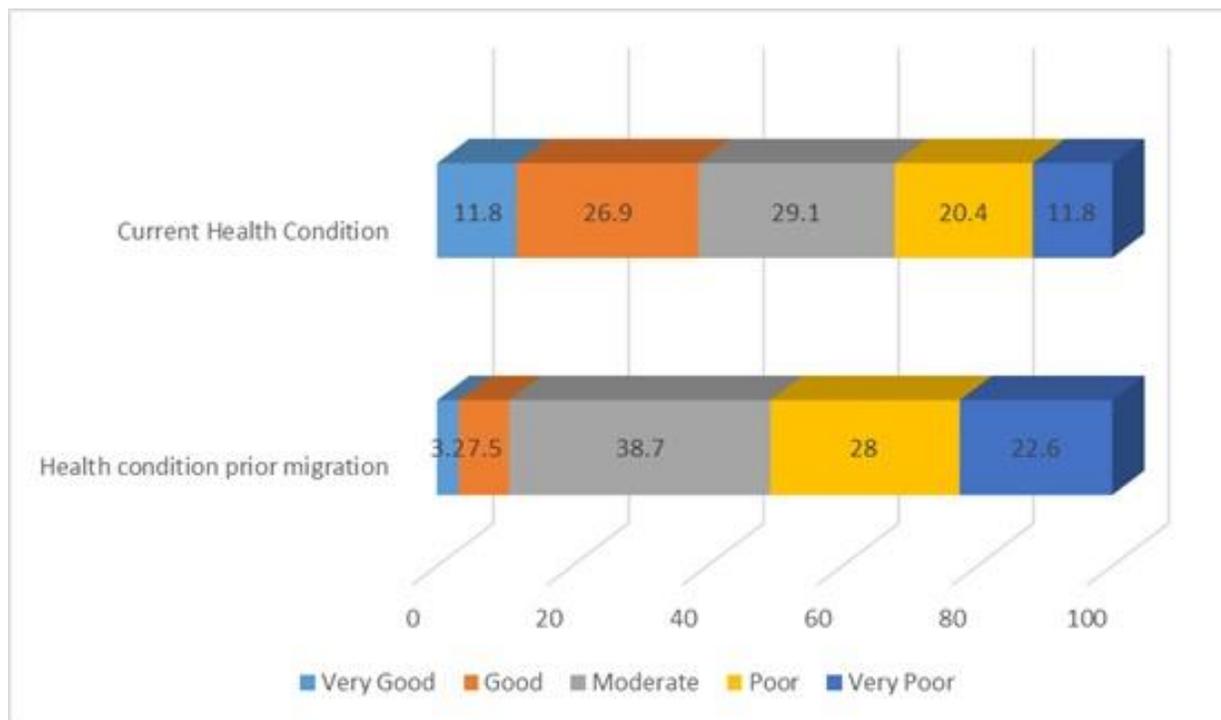


Figure 5.
Health condition prior and after migration

5 Basic outcomes from the qualitative research

The qualitative research included the conduction of 150 semi-structured interviews in Crete and Mytilene with entrepreneurs, that is 75 in each island, and 40 narrative interviews in Crete with “old” refugees and immigrants who have been already integrated.

It is obvious that in Mytilene there is a sharp difference in opinions regarding the attitude towards refugees, with some being extremely positive in integrating them in the labor market and some other having a directly diverse and negative opinion. In any case, however, the available integration options appear to be relatively limited in comparison to Crete. However, both in Mytilene and Crete, it turns out that the difficulty of absorbing refugees from the labor market is directly connected with the lack of knowledge of the Greek language. From the responses of entrepreneurs in Crete and much less in Mytilene, there is a relative absorption in the rural and tourist sectors as well as in areas of “heavy” work, such as construction. From the entrepreneurs in all the areas examined, it is also confirmed that the vast majority of refugees do not have special professional qualifications. However, there is a clear indication that most of the arrivals are at an age that could work but it is important to foster education and training for them in order to be easily integrated into society and especially into the labor market. In other words, the hypothesis of the research project on the existence of an overall low employment rate for refugees and especially in low-paid, unskilled labor sectors, is fully confirmed by the semi-structured interviews conducted.

It is also clear that there are several obstacles to refugees’ smooth integration into the labor market according to entrepreneurs, which include - inter alia - linguistic deficiency, precarious state of residence,

low recognition rates of skills and diplomas obtained in their country of origin, lack of counseling support for labor market integration and long unemployment spells.

It is true that in key sectors of the economy such as tourism, agriculture and construction, particularly in Crete, there are conditions and significant chances for the economic integration of refugees in the sense that it offers visible benefits to both refugees and the local economy. In this sense, in the example of Crete, it seems that refugee turnout is not only associated with difficulties and problems, but most importantly, offers visible opportunities for the economy.

6 Concluding remarks

The findings of the research show that it is necessary to ensure adequate support for measures aiming at the socio-economic integration of refugees into the labor market, while preventing any form of competition between the most disadvantaged groups in the Greek society as recipients of this support. The reason is twofold: firstly, evidence shows that a healthy labor market in the country of arrival is a key factor in the successful and permanent integration of refugees (Eurofound, 2016; Fratzscher & Junker, 2015). Therefore, policies and investments focusing on the creation of quality jobs and economic growth must continue to be a priority. Secondly, because the shrinkage of welfare or other support measures for disadvantaged groups would have adverse social and political repercussions. As a general principle, equal treatment and the provision of equal opportunities must always serve as a compass in policy-making in the field of social inclusion and integration.

Another element that complicates the development of effective measures of social inclusion and integration into the labor market is related to their often unpopular character for the citizens. Many indigenous people (several of the entrepreneurs interviewed especially in Mytilene) often feel that the arrival of a significant (or even a small) number of asylum seekers and refugees is a threat, as they consider that it may be increased competition in access to services or employment, especially when and where unemployment is high and social conditions particularly harsh. Moreover, the recent increasing support for xenophobic political parties and movements against migrants across the EU marks a dangerous trend that needs to be taken seriously.

The research outcomes show that refugees seem to be low-skilled with low levels of working experience and with insufficient knowledge of Greek or IT. At the same time, it is obvious that they still need counselling and support both for psychological issues and in order to be guided in their next steps to education and employment. Moreover, it is clear that in regions such as Crete there is a necessity of labor force but mainly in areas such as construction or agriculture. The problems in terms of integration in employment are derived mainly from the insufficient knowledge of the Greek language as well as from the difficulties in terms of distribution in the country and support from the related institutions.

Consequently, a successful process of integration of refugees in economic and social terms is the mechanism that will enable important conditions for social well-being for refugees as well as for society and economy as a whole. From the research findings we conclude that the preconditions for integration of the refugees into the Greek socio-economic system exist, especially in specific sectors of the economy but also in specific areas such as Crete, but education, training, counseling support for job seeking and especially language learning are primary issues for intervention. At the same time, it is more than necessary to establish mechanisms to assess and capture both the social and human capital of refugees and to diagnose their needs in order to enable empirically grounded policy proposals and the implementation of interventions. In this way, the opportunities for socio-economic integration of refugees that this research shows us to be under condition will be feasible and mutually beneficial.

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