Nature-based integration - a solution for immigrant integration in Nordic countries

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Published in:
Syke Policy Brief

Publication date:
2018

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
New approaches for the integration of immigrants are needed

Immigration to the Nordic region has increased fast during recent decades. Simultaneously, the immigration flows have changed and a large portion of the newcomers come to the Nordic countries as asylum seekers. These developments promote the need for revisiting and developing approaches for the successful integration of migrants into the Nordic societies. The traditional integration policies emphasize education, employment, and access to basic services. Nature-based integration can offer a new perspective to meet these challenges.

EU presses for more nature-based solutions to societal challenges

EU promotes nature-based solutions as an efficient way to address simultaneously environmental, economic and social problems especially in urban areas. Nature-based solutions are inspired and supported by nature, are cost-effective and provide environmental, social, and economic benefits. Nature contributes to people’s quality of life and happiness. Natural areas offer important sites for leisure and recreation and bring people together. Further, nature improves public health and can play an important role in health promotion and diseases prevention as a part of the public health plans and actions.

Nature as an “obvious” solution in Nordic countries

Nature is an important asset to the citizens in the Nordic countries. Outdoor recreation is considered as a part of the cultural identity, e.g., reflected in the Scandinavian term “friluftsliv”. Nature is used for recreation, restoration, and a place for various activities throughout the four seasons. Nordic people use nature to be alone, but also use it to socialize. Nature is often included as a component of education, health care, and welfare. Living a healthy life close to nature are values embraced throughout the Nordic region. Nature is a key to the Nordic society and culture.
Innovative bottom-up practices paving the way for nature-based integration

Interest in nature-based solutions for immigrant integration has expanded rapidly in Nordic countries. Various NGOs and community groups have developed practices to introduce the newcomers to Nordic nature and its various benefits. The results of these practices have been promising and the practitioners in outdoor recreation and immigration work have raised several benefits of nature for integration.

Examples of innovative Nordic practices

**Biotopia’s adventure groups**

![Image](www.biotopia.nu)

Biotopia's adventure groups improve integration of young immigrants through nature and outdoor activities. Biotopia offers a broad palette of activities from building nest boxes for birds to climbing and has arranged more than 60 events since Feb-2017. Biotopia’s Facebook group with more than 100 participants attracts new members frequently. Several of the immigrants have attended activities more than once and found a new hobby through the organized activities.

**Outdoor life for minority groups**

![Image](www.midd-agderfriluft.no)

Outdoor life for minority groups introduces asylum seekers and immigrants to outdoor recreation. First immigrants are introduced to the near-by nature in cities and then taken further to the forests, sea and mountains. The practice has been running since 2002 with support from the Norwegian Government. Through learning about nature, how to use it and laws and regulations related to nature, immigrants increase their knowledge about Norwegian culture and lifestyle.

**Esikoto project**

![Image](www.metsa.fi/esikoto)

Esikoto project provides outdoor voluntary work for asylum seekers while waiting for a decision on the residence permit. Working outdoor in nature reserves and national parks make the participants familiar with nature and Finnish outdoor culture. Besides knowledge about Finnish nature and culture, the participants value high feeling useful by doing conservation work and learning new skills.

**Fakti’s garden**

![Image](www.fakti.dk)

Fakti’s garden is a therapeutic garden for adult immigrant women in a vulnerable health condition with limited education, low Danish language skills and low socio-economic status. Gardening and cooking together and the simple restorative and stress reducing exercises in the garden reduce social isolation and improve the participants’ quality of life. The women describe how the garden improves their mental state, increases their social networking and that they feel proud of creating and growing the garden.

Benefits of nature for integration according to practitioners

- Nature is for free and there is free admittance
- Nature is a calm environment and gives the professionals the opportunity to observe the participants
- Nature can improve mental and physical health
- Nature is a meeting place for locals and immigrants
- Nature is part of Nordic traditions and culture
- Nature is flexible and can be used for a variety of different activities
Evidence is growing on the benefits of nature for immigrants

Nature promotes social interactions and place attachment

Research has shown that parks are inclusive places that stimulate social interactions and mixing of people with different ethnic backgrounds, both minority and majority populations. Public green spaces are the most important places for children and youth to make friends across ethnic groups. Green spaces are important for developing feelings of place attachment and familiar natural elements create a link between home and host countries.

Nature improves health and well-being

Importantly, nature is in many ways linked to immigrants’ quality of life and well-being. Urban nature helps immigrants to feel comfortable and enjoy their living environment. Natural environments promote immigrants’ psychological and emotional well-being. Nature directly improves health of immigrants and other population groups through disease prevention, exposure to beneficial natural microbiota and encouraging physical exercise.

The three pillars of nature-based integration:

1. Building **identity** through enhancing social interaction and creation of positive place attachment.

2. Providing positive **experiences** through nature activities that stimulate mentally and physically.

3. Improving **capabilities** through education, teaching job skills and promoting health and well-being.

**Three pillars of nature-based integration**

There are several ways nature can support the integration of immigrants in Nordic countries and beyond. Through nature-based integration immigrants get familiarized with the local environment, but more importantly, nature-based integration empowers them to take part in their new society.
Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) has funded project ORIGIN (2016-2018) to increase the understanding of the role of nature in the successful integration of immigrants into the Nordic societies. ORIGIN has launched Nordic cooperation within “nature-based integration” and established a network bringing together researchers, third sector organisations and public and private actors working in the fields of immigrant integration, nature and outdoor recreation. ORIGIN has launched annual Nordic workshops on nature-based integration to bring together practitioners and researchers. The results of the project and several examples of Nordic practices are presented in the project publications:


REFERENCES


STATISTICS

National statistical institutes: Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and the Swedish Migration Board.

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Photos: Sandra Gentin, Aleksandra Riki & Anu Seppälä.

Layout: Satu Turtiainen and Aleksandra Riki, SYKE. 2018