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Diversity Dialogue Fora Sweden

"The role of NGOs in the integration of immigrants-practical examples"

On the 10th of June 2021, [SweTurk](http://www.sweturk.org) (Swedish Turkish Business Association) organised the first session of its online Dialog Diversity Fora (DDF). The topic was "The role of NGOs in the integration of immigrants- practical examples". The main guests of the session were Natassia Fry, (founder of Kompis Sverige), Mubarik Abdirrahman (business developer from the Malmö National Department, Unit Socially Sustainable Cities), Adnan Gundogdu, (founder of Snabbareintegration), and Ergin Yucel, (lecturer from the Blekinge University).

It is well known that networking is crucial for immigrants to establish themselves in the social-cultural and economic part of the host society. Via these networks, immigrants can be a part of the society they live in. The role of the public sector is to create conditions for everyone to participate in the society on equal terms. However, NGOs also play a key role as "ice breakers" on social integration.

In *The Outsider* (1942), his classic existentialist novel, Albert Camus explores "the alienation of an individual who refuses to conform to social norms". As he perfectly summarises, "the hero of my book is condemned because he "doesn't play the game".¹ In other words, an immigrant becomes "the outsider" in a society just because he/she "doesn't play the game" or "he/she doesn't know how to play the game". Thus, NGOs are crucial to 'teach' immigrants how to play the game.

Natassia Fry is the founder of Kompis Sverige. Buddy Sweden (Kompis Sverige) was found by Natassia and her friend Pegah in 2013, with the idea of connecting on individual level new and established Swedes with a buddy program. People can sign up via their website and register by answering a quick form about themselves. The Kompis Sverige team helps to connect the applicant with an established Swede who may have the same interest, professional background, aspirations, or family situation. In 2020, they got ten thousand applications across Sweden and two thousand are still waiting to be matched with the new Swedes. Besides Buddy program, they also organize digital language cafes and some other social programs. The organization is built on a broad range of collaborations with the private, public, and civil society sector, including collaborations with several Swedish municipalities.

¹ [Modern Classics the Outsider by Albert Camus | Penguin Random House Canada](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/100000000/modern-classics-the-outsider-by-albert-camus/)

According to Natassia, the natural zones where the new and established Swedes can meet are rare in Swedish society. This situation hinders integration, and the lack of integration is one of most pressing challenges that Sweden is facing today. Integration requires long-term perspective: there is no quick fix to it. Integration is also a two-way process. If somebody is knocking the door, there should be somebody to answer on the other side. Therefore, she mentioned, “we need more established Swedes joining our programs”.

Kompis Sverige has the vision of a society where people feel connected to each other and participate on equal terms. All Kompis Sverige programs aims at connecting new and established Swedes, broad the network, increase the level of trust in society and give the new Swedes the possibility to improve their language skills. Kompis Sverige team also measures the outcome of their activities. They set four categories namely, network, engagement, trust, and language skills. Their recent research suggests that 84 percent of the new Swedes who engaged on a frequent basis with their kompis (buddy) and met several times feel that they have a stronger sense of belongingness to society. It is an important indicator showing that continuity and social interaction contribute positively to integration of immigrants.

According to Natassia, the climate against immigration and integration has changed in recent years. Unfortunately, this negative image makes people less inclined to these kinds of activities. Despite the negative climate, Kompis Sverige will continue building a cohesive society.

Mubarik Abdirrahman (business developer from the Malmö National Department) has presented his own story as practical example. He came to Sweden in 1993, escaping from civil war in Somalia. Now he is working as business developer, and he is politically active in Social Democrats in the city of Malmö.

According to Abdirrahman, to be engaged in NGOs is important for the integration process. Sweden is a country with more than 200,000 NGOs registered and more than 2 million people are members of such organisations. NGOs help to enlarge the network to build of a sense of belonging. “Here in Sweden, people usually ask me about Somalian culture, nobody asks me about the Swedish culture. The first time I got a question about Sweden and Swedish culture I was in an exchange program in another country: I was in Turkey when for the first time, I talked about the Swedish traditions and culture. I wouldn’t have had these chances if I wasn’t active in such organisations”.

Being active in NGOs is a very natural way to meet each other, because you have a common goal and interest: the background loses importance in NGOs. Therefore, he suggests choosing NGOs where people wish to work with issues they are interested in.

Abdirrahman also suggests that the perception of Sweden should change. Sweden is not as it was 100 years ago. His idea of society is a diverse one, as it happens in London or New York. He says that Norway has oil, but Sweden has immigrants. If we invest on them, we will get high return in short term.

Adnan Gundogdu, founder of Snabbare Integration, was active in the bank sector before he came to Sweden. Short after his arrival, he applied for asylum. In 2020, he started the Snabbare Integration (Faster Integration) Facebook page. He went through a difficult process when integrating the Swedish society. For two years, Adnan started sharing tips with his friends via WhatsApp. In 2020, he decided to create a Facebook group and started sharing all this information with all new arrivals across Sweden. This is how the Snabbare Integration was born. Snabbare Integration aims at increasing the number of people rapidly integrating to Swedish society. The group has over 2,200 active members and more than 750,000 visitors during the last sixteen months.

According to Adnan, Sweden is a very informative society. There is information everywhere, but as a newcomer, there is the need of more processed information. People need to find exactly what they are looking for. To help newcomers, Adnan organised a series of webinars about the asylum process, how to find accommodation, how to get a driving license, how to apply for a job, how to make an income tax return, information about mortgages, private loans, car loans and many more. His motto is “none can help all, but all can help someone”.

Ergin Yucel, lecturer from Blekinge University approached the issue of integration in Sweden from an academic perspective. According to Yucel, like for all issues, there is a positive and a negative side, media tends to focus on the negative side of immigration rather than on the positive one. The immigrant community is usually portrayed as a social burden to welfare system. Reports however suggest a different story. The Swedish Agency for Growth published a report in 2019 indicating that immigration has positive effect on productivity and economic growth. Immigrants boosts Sweden’s performance in international trade. Without immigration, some sectors, such elderly care, healthcare, and the service sector would have significant labour shortages.

Yucel suggests that NGOs play a key role in filling the gaps left by the public sector by supporting immigrants to access knowledge, contacts and resources. In addition, with their knowledge and skills, immigrant communities can enlarge their network, broaden horizons, seek opportunities, and reach their true potential. It is a win – win situation.



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