



Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet

Madam Chair,
honourable and distinguished guests, excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to the Autumn Academy. It's an honour to have the opportunity to participate and address all of you on matters of such importance for all of us.

Last year, Sweden experienced the largest per-capita inflow of asylum seekers ever recorded in an OECD country.

I am proud that Sweden, in the midst of an enormous task in providing security to people fleeing war, persecution and oppression, is taking a great responsibility for refugees, especially children, in need of international protection.

Bearing in mind that Sweden has a population of around 10 million, last year we received 163 000 applications for asylum.

In a European context, Sweden alone, received more than one in five of the asylum seekers to the EU/EES during October and November 2015.

Over 70 000 of the asylum seekers that came to Sweden were children and 35 000 of them were unaccompanied minors.

This means that Sweden last year received 36 percent of the total number of unaccompanied minors coming to the EU/EES.

And in the last months of 2015, Sweden alone received more than half of the total number of unaccompanied minors coming to the EU/EES.

As a mother, I cannot even begin to imagine how I would feel if it was my son who travelled on dangerous roads or waters alone from Afghanistan or elsewhere to Europe.

The distress felt by a child in such a situation and the experiences of trauma and violence often involved is inconceivable.

As the receiving country, it is of course crucial, to try to compensate for the parent's absence in the best way possible. We must make sure to provide guidance and support to make it possible for these children and youngsters to get a safe upbringing and a bright future.

I am happy that the Swedish people showed such an enormous empathy during the most dramatic months last year.

The multitude of responses seeking to support and help refugees was heart-warming.

In addition, impressive new initiatives such as Refugees welcome took on great responsibility as well as Swedish Civil society organisations, private companies, public agencies and individuals.

But I am equally saddened by the fact that many EU Member States, showed an upsetting failure of respect towards the values of humanity and cooperation upon which the European Union is built, when exact these values were needed the most.

I am disappointed that the European Union last year, out of the staggering amount of 60 million people forcibly displaced, failed to receive on an equal basis the 1 million people that applied for asylum within the Union.

If the number of asylum seekers had been distributed according to the population size, Sweden would have received roughly 20 000 asylum seekers.

It is my and the Government's strong belief that if the European Union would have managed to offer a collective response to the refugee crisis we would have managed the situation perfectly well.

I believe that it is absolutely crucial that all of EU's Member States take their responsibility to create an orderly reception system.

But of course, the international refugees crisis can only be fought together.

Against this backdrop, one can easily understand that even though Sweden has a flexible reception system (for asylum seekers) of good quality that normally adapts to large numbers of asylum-seekers, the capacity of our reception system was stretched to its limits.

As a consequence, at the end of 2015, the Swedish Government announced that the Swedish asylum legislation needs to be changed for a limited period.

The temporary migration act introduced temporary residence permits, limits to the right to family reunification and new maintenance requirements for permanent residency and family reunification.

The temporary migration act will be in effect for three years, with the aim to create a more fair and sustainable distribution of refugee reception within the EU.

As of this year, 20 000 people had applied for asylum up until the beginning of September, a 61 percent decrease compared to the same period last year.

This being said, challenges – and opportunities – still lay ahead, as the Swedish Government now must ensure good conditions for jobs, education and housing both in short-term and long-term for the many refugees who are granted asylum.

Human beings are a resource. Newcomers are a resource. However, it is up to us to provide sufficient tools and opportunities for people to fulfil their potential and contribute to society.

The challenges that the Government is facing in order to raise the capacity in the asylum system – and in society at large – are demanding and will be so for years to come. They are however systemic and manageable.

I am pleased that we have been relatively free of racist discourse, such as Islamophobia, in the public debate in Sweden.

However, the Swedish people are concerned about the consequences that follows by increased costs in different parts of the welfare sector when the population grows this rapidly.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, among those applying for asylum last year, 70 000 were minors. Evidently, this will have effect on the Swedish School system.

For the Government, it is a main priority to give these children education of good quality and equal opportunities to build their future in Sweden.

Giving every child a fair chance will also lead to increased economic growth and social cohesion in the long perspective.

If we succeed to realise the great potential of newcomers, this will be an exceptional advantage in meeting the demographic challenges with an ageing population.

Madam Chair,

The key to successful integration is a strong and general welfare and an equal and sustainable society. A strong society is created through strengthened people with secure jobs and good living conditions.

That is why the Government will continue to improve and safeguard the Swedish welfare system and make sure it is reliable.

The Government must ensure that people can find housing where there are jobs, that equal health care service is available for everyone, that youth and adults are well equipped to meet the demands of the labour market through equal education and that caring responsibilities for sick, elderly and disabled relatives does not become a barrier for work.

We all share the same basic human needs and that is why the Swedish public welfare system - ranging from pensions and healthcare to parental allowances and employment related insurance - is designed to cover all Swedish residents equally.

In order to achieve successful integration, the Government is determined to ensure equal education, full employment for both men and women and to invest in sustainable housing.

Investing in health care is of course important when it comes to caring for newcomers surviving from oppression, torture, persecution and war.

Let me also stress that a successful integration involves a feeling of belonging to society. This plays an important role for the individual's health and well-being.

To me it is crucial that the whole society takes responsibility for integration; both civil society and social partners need to engage strongly in this process.

Now, I would like to turn to the Government's policy measures in these areas.

Madam Chair,

Work is the key to integration.

Since the Government took office employment has increased by 120 000 people, while unemployment has decreased.

The employment rate in Sweden is higher than before the financial crisis and highest in the EU, both for men and women.

Sweden has a high labour force participation, but even though a large number of people are available for work, many have difficulties entering the labour market.

This is especially true for many of those who have been in Sweden a short period of time and to those who lack secondary education.

The number of people with a short residential period in Sweden that enter the labour market is expected to increase in the years ahead.

At the same time as unemployment is high in some groups, employers in some sectors are experiencing difficulties recruiting people with the right skills.

This means that action is needed to counteract imbalances in the labour market, in order for unemployment to continue to decline and for employment to continue to increase.

The social partners play an important role here, particularly in helping people with a weak foothold in the labour market to get a job.

Madam Chair,

In May this year, the OECD published a report with an Immigration Integration Review of Sweden. The report gave a largely positive picture of Swedish integration policies. According to this report Sweden has highly-developed and longstanding integration policies. The conclusions and recommendations of the OECD are in line with already implemented or planned actions.

The report also suggested areas where improvements can be made. A highly valid point made in the OECD review is that efforts should be focused on newly arrived youth.

There is an urgent need to ensure that children and youth who arrive at the end of obligatory schooling get sufficient support and guidance to complete upper secondary education. Another conclusion is that specific attention should be paid to the labour market entry of newly arrived women.

The OECD further stresses that integration must be perceived as a whole-of-society responsibility. This is a view that I fully share.

As minister for Employment and Integration, my main priority is to ensure that every step of the reception process aims towards improving the chances of getting a job and using one's skills.

This being said, employment rates are still significantly lower among foreign-born than among the Swedish-born population.

Especially among foreign born women we find that the unemployment rate is higher and the labour force participation and employment rates are lower, than among Swedish-born.

Achieving better results in this area is crucial to efficient and successful integration of newcomers in to the labour market.

Madam Chair,

Of those applying for asylum in Sweden during 2015 more than 40 percent were younger than 18 years and more than 70 percent were younger than 30 years.

Therefore, if the integration process can be facilitated and the right policies are put in place for newcomers not only to access the labour market, but also gain the education and training required to remain on the labour market in the long run, this is a great investment for our welfare society.

Today we are reforming Sweden's integration policies and a number of investments will be made during 2016–2019 intended to lead to faster integration into the labour market and into the whole of society.

I would like to point out that these initiatives build on Sweden's welfare system. Developing and investing in the welfare state is an investment in society that leads to higher growth for society as a whole.

Integration must be perceived as a whole-of-society responsibility.

Thus, the Government's integration policy objectives are to be achieved primarily through general policy measures for the whole population, supplemented by targeted support for the introduction of newcomers.

Thereby we will ensure equal rights, obligations and opportunities for all, irrespective of their ethnic and cultural background.

Madam Chair,

As research shows, early measures are key to successful integration.

With this in mind the Swedish government has announced initiatives for early language learning and mapping of skills and experience already for asylum seekers.

Civil society organisations will maintain their already important role in creating activities for asylum seekers in this effort.

In addition, to improve the introduction of newcomers in the labour market, the Swedish government has introduced mapping of educational background and work experience of newcomers (which is offered by the Swedish Public Employment Service already during the asylum-seeking period).

Considering that Sweden faces labour market shortages in some areas, especially in the welfare sector, I believe that mapping of educational background and work experience in order to facilitate matching towards sectors with labour market shortage is essential.

Madam Chair,

The Swedish labour market is characterised by strong, independent social partners that take great responsibility for the functioning of the labour market.

When I became Minister for Employment, I took the initiative to meet with the social partners to ask them if they could help to improve the integration of newcomers. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

Consequently, in March 2015, the Government launched a first round of tripartite talks on “fast tracks”. Talks have since then been held between the Government, the social partners, the Swedish Public Employment Service and other relevant government agencies.

The result has been the creation of fast tracks for several professions where there is a shortage of qualified labour in Sweden.

The fast tracks help employers finding skilled workers, and newcomers with the right skills, but not yet the Swedish language, gets a smoother and faster way into a job in their profession.

Madam Chair,

Spurred into action by the tragic death of Alan, many individuals and organisations mobilized to help and support refugees.

In addition, many Swedish employers have taken responsibility to open up their workplaces for newcomers. At the same time, employers see the great potential of newcomers in a situation where there is a lack of workforce in some sectors.

However, many jobs on the Swedish labour market are facilitated through personal connections. Having connections is often key to getting a job and this is something newcomers often lack.

I believe that employers – private as well as public – need to think about competence in a broader perspective. Naturally, competences can be upheld in many different ways, and obtained in many different places.

To reflect this, the Swedish Public Employment Service will launch a new e-service for matching of employers and employees this autumn.

The service includes matching through mentioning of competences, rather than only occupation or profession.

I think this reflects a new way of thinking of competences and the needs of the labour market in a more open-minded manner.

Madam Chair,

As I pointed out earlier, the Swedish government is strengthening the efforts to quickly and efficiently put to use the knowledge and skills of newcomers.

Many newcomers are well educated. However, many newcomers, especially women, lack compulsory education.

In Sweden, upper secondary education is often seen as a minimum requirement for entering the labour market.

Therefore it is a challenge to get more people with little education, many of them women, into the labour market.

Needless to say, to succeed in these efforts is crucial for many reasons other than that it enables for people to provide for themselves.

Work give us independence, and in the case of newcomers, it also provides the opportunity to develop language skills and learn more about the Swedish society.

I also believe that it from a gender equal perspective is important for children to see both their parents go to work.

That is why, the Swedish Public Employment Service, within the Government's long-term reform programme to reduce segregation, is tasked with increasing employment among foreign-born women.

So, although Sweden has a well-developed municipal education system for adults, adjusting the education to the large number of newcomers with various needs is a challenge. For instance, measures need to be taken to enable newcomers to combine education in Swedish with vocational training or other forms of adult education.

Putting it simply, different groups/individuals will need very different measures depending on previous education.

I think that it is an unacceptable waste of talent and resources that many highly-educated newcomers with foreign education see their qualifications largely discounted.

Therefore, in order to better use the potential of newcomers (with qualified educational and professional skills), the Government is strengthening the efforts to facilitate validation of skills and assessment of foreign education by for example allocating funds for validation programmes.

Madam Chair,

A main bottleneck for successful and rapid integration is the lack of housing prolonging the stay in the Migration Agency's accommodations, after being granted residence permit.

Therefore, in March this year the Swedish Parliament approved a new law. The law implies that all municipalities are required to receive newcomers for settlement.

The allocation of migrants between the municipalities shall take into account local labour market conditions, population size and the overall number of newly arrived immigrants, unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers already living in the municipality. The aim of this legislation is not only to increase the capacity of the reception system but also to create a more fair distribution amongst municipalities.

Finally,

Sweden has a proud history of welcoming migrants but the large number of asylum seekers that came to Sweden last year was unparalleled.

What we are now experiencing, welcoming so many new Swedes in such a short time, is a fantastic opportunity for economic growth and positive changes in society. The number of Swedes who have experiences, relatives and language skills from other parts of the world keep increasing.

Now, the Government's focus is to offer as good opportunities as possible for newcomers to rebuild their lives in Sweden.

Our goal must naturally be that our new citizens will be as active and influential in developing our society to the better as the native born population. Sweden is and must remain a modern society that keeps changing and developing our way into the future.

In a wider perspective, the Swedish government believes that we need an efficient common asylum system within the European Union where the responsibility to receive asylum seekers is shared collectively by all Member States.

If we work together, we can manage this.

Madam Chair, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening. I look forward to our discussion.