

LIVES Impact



Regularising Undocumented Migrant Workers: What Does it Mean for Their Well-Being?

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Undocumented migrant workers (UMWs) are particularly vulnerable in a high-income country like Switzerland. Independent of their current situation, most migrant workers

consider their quality of life higher than in their origin country, an assessment reflecting the multiple difficulties with which they struggled before migrating. Compared to regularised migrant workers, however, undocumented migrant workers experience satisfaction with life that is significantly lower.

Driven by aspirations for a better life, UMWs are often heavily constrained by their limited rights in the destination country. However, once regularised and after some time, many migrant workers struggle to attain the general population's standard of living and thus contend with feelings of societal alienation, given their often contrastingly disparate economic conditions and ramifications.

In 2017 – 2018, the Canton of Geneva implemented a major regularisation programme (Operation Papyrus) to provide ➔

annual renewable work and residency permits to several thousands of strictly reviewed long-term UMWs. We thus developed a quasi-experimental project to assess regularisation's impact on the socioeconomic state, health conditions and well-being of UMWs, the majority of them women originating from South America or the Philippines and working in the domestic sector (Jackson et al., 2019).

Questions about objective and subjective well-being find a particular echo in research on migration. Considering the diversity of migratory tracks and destination country integration, objective measures of well-being hardly seem justifiable. Subjective assessments, accordingly, might offer a preferable way to identify post-migration individuals' actual conditions in accordance to their aspirations. Indeed, economic motives predominantly prompt migration; however, empirical results show only a weak association between increased income post-migration and higher levels of well-being (Bartram, 2011; Safi, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to examine these transitory aspirations from a dynamic perspective, as real-life incongruities and challenging conditions become realities.

What Is Well-Being?

To tackle individual well-being, a range of determinants, including socioeconomic resources (income, housing and employment) and quality of life areas (family situation, health, work-life balance, education, social connections, civic engagement, environmental quality, personal security and subjective well-being) are typically considered. These analyses conclude that objective and subjective well-being are not systematically correlated, hence illustrating the importance of assessing them separately and considering non-material resources (Bartram, 2012).

Economic conditions only marginally affect life satisfaction in any group included in our study, thus confirming the importance of assessing the quality of life not only along monetary lines. However, there is a clear distinction concerning remittances between documented and undocumented migrant workers. The UMWs seem more intent on having enough income to be able to send money back to their home country rather than preoccupying themselves with specific personal income.

A Multitude of Challenges Facing UMWs

The absence of residency permits exposes UMWs to low wages, no social insurance benefits and insufficient health care. To avoid deportation, UMWs are forced to adopt low profiles in society. Compared to country-of-origin socioeconomic status, destination country status often reveals downward occupational mobility as UMWs' work opportunities end up in the lower spectrum of occupations, typically in construction or domestic work. Moreover, in destination countries, previously

gained educational degrees are not acknowledged, resulting in academically accredited UMWs taking on work for which they are overqualified.

Compared to Swiss standards most of them live below the poverty level, however undocumented migrant workers often benefit from a higher level of income when compared to their country of origin. While earning a potentially higher income, many UMWs believe their situation either to be temporary with an expectation to return to their country of origin or to eventually acquire residency status in the destination country.

Social Connections for UMWs

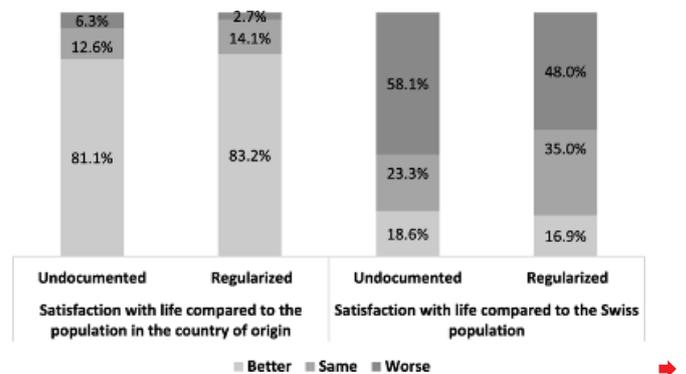
In looking deeper into the migration-related factors, we find that discrimination and social participation both play prominent roles. The negative impact of self-reported discrimination among undocumented migrant workers is particularly noteworthy compared to the regularised migrant workers who experience it less and whose satisfaction with life is typically not impacted by it. Discrimination also plays a role in undocumented migrant workers' fear of deportation, thus reflecting the importance of progressive and legitimate integration in the host society.

In addition to fair and equal treatment, social participation also appears vital for satisfaction with life for UMWs. The instrumental and emotional support associated with social participation might be particularly consequential for those with no legal rights and weaker social connections.

How Regularised Migrant Workers Differ

Newly regularised migrant workers and regular local residents experience somewhat similar levels of well-being. For migrant workers, obtaining host country official status permits legitimate social membership that increases control over one's life and facilitates the capacity to plan for the future, which all likely enhance well-being (Kraler, 2019; van Meeteren et al., 2015).

Figure: Satisfaction with life compared to the population in the country of origin and to the Swiss population by groups. Data sources: Parchemins study



As shown in the above figure, for both undocumented and regularised migrant workers satisfaction with life is better compared to the population in the country of origin. Concerning their satisfaction with life compared to the Swiss population, a majority of regularised migrant workers report the same or even better satisfaction with life than the Swiss population.

In Conclusion

Satisfaction with life reflects subjective appraisals of the adequacy between aspirations and living circumstances. Both aspirations and living conditions depend on opportunities provided by different contexts. People who migrate not only compare places but put their ambitions for a better life into practice through the decision to leave (Carling & Schewel, 2018). However, their capacity to meet their expectations will be constrained by conditions available to them in destination countries. These contrasting elements indicate the importance of assessing well-being directly from people's own perspective, in line with studying quality of life.

For UMWs, becoming regularised is associated with new material and non-material preoccupations, including paying taxes, accessing health care and insurance, and completing administrative responsibilities. Thus, in trying to assimilate and feel accepted in society within the destination country, UMWs, with often vastly different economic conditions than those of regular local residents, face enormous socioeconomic and personal challenges. At the same time, becoming regular residents – a turning point in their migratory trajectory – puts an end to years of struggle through which these migrants managed to stay. The positive assessment of those who recently gained legal rights should not deflect from the overall persistent and difficult socioeconomic circumstances of these migrant workers occupying crucial but barely valued positions, notably in the domestic care sector (World Health Organization, 2017). Beyond the academic interest for non-material criteria in well-being measurement, our findings thus call for policy interventions addressing the changing needs of those remaining vulnerable amidst a context of overall affluence. ■

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