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Food Consumption Habits and Food Security Challenges among Immigrants

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Abstract

There is no single behaviour path for migrants after arrival in the destination country. The cases of their successful integration in the host country social environment are not rare, and healthy immigrant effect, indeed, often occurs showing that not always shift to the new living conditions, culture and food traditions preclude healthy food habits of the migrants. However, there are still many factors, both individual and social environment-related, which increase overweight and obesity risk. Quantitative and qualitative research findings have shown that food insecurity can be simultaneously a cause and a consequence of migration. Including religious identities, food has largely become a distinctive factor of the identities of individuals and communities. The distribution of eating habits from migrant source countries, in particular, from Africa to the host European countries is dramatically changing the European cultural dimension. Food has appeared to be one of the main factors of migrants' integration in European countries. Food insecurity is a critical push factor. Current research emphasised that integration programmes should rely not only on basic language and cultural aspects but also on food, improving the contribution of the food traditions of migrants, while also inspiring in this field interactions and contributions via this medium among long-standing and newly-forming societies. This article focuses on key food challenges, which migrants face in destination countries and factors as causes of these challenges. We also discuss barriers to migration policy change and provide possible ways to mitigate these barriers.

Keywords: migrant's food consumption; food habits; food behaviour; food traditions; nutrition, Europe.

Introduction

According to the World Food Programme (2017) the link between migrations, food and conflicts is convincing: outflows of refugees per 1.000 inhabitants increase by 0.4% for each additional year of conflict, by 1.9% for each percentage rise of food insecurity, while "higher levels of undernourishment contribute to the occurrence and intensity of armed conflict". Furthermore, a global analysis of the drivers of

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international migration between 1995 and 2015 implies that an increase of 10 per cent in the income differential between two countries increases the number of migrants between the two by 3.1 per cent, on average. Quantitative and qualitative research findings have shown that food insecurity could be simultaneously a cause and a consequence of migration.

Including religious identities, food has largely become a distinctive factor of the identities of individuals and communities. The distribution of eating habits from migrant source countries, in particular, from Africa to the host European countries is dramatically changing the European cultural dimension (Morkūnas et al., 2018).

Food has appeared to be one of the main factors of migrants' integration in European countries. Food insecurity is a critical push factor driving international migration, along with economic factors, population growth and the existence of established networks for migrants. Further, the act of migration itself can cause food insecurity, given the high costs involved, as well as lack of income opportunities and adverse travel conditions along the journey.

It is not just a question of specific diet or preferences, but the introduction of new cultural properties through the new ingredients and rules imported by immigrants. This results in the new tendencies of the development of the food industry in the European markets. In many European cities, the number of ethnic enclaves is increasingly growing. Enclaves suggest benefits of community and social support, greater accessibility of ethnic food and goods, and centres of worship and other community foundations. The number of ethnic enclaves is rising mainly in the urban regions of developed countries, resulting in middle-class migrants and whole neighbourhoods where migrants live indefinitely rather than being in transit (WEF, 2017). However, migrants after arrival in destination countries often face new diet patterns, which may considerably differ from their food consumption habits in the origin country.

Migration patterns are a subject of many studies considering opportunities and challenges of migration for European countries. However, low adaptation level, including food traditions of the destination country, often causes negative outcomes of migration, which finally may lead to overall dissatisfaction with the new living conditions. The current article focuses on key food challenges, which migrants face in destination countries and factors as causes of these challenges. We also discuss barriers to migration policy change and provide possible ways to mitigate these barriers.



Related literature

Earlier and recent research findings on the links between migration characteristics and food consumption have shown that the most crucial factors affecting migrants' food preferences are a place of residence, age, sex, and education level. Kleiser, Mensink, Neuhauser, Schenk & Kurth (2010) explored the food consumption of young immigrants in Germany. The authors identified that there are significant differences in the dietary habits of young immigrants. Less preferable diet customs were associated with low or middle socio-economic status, male sex, higher age, being a migrant from Russia, and living in rural territories. Bansal et al. (2010) evaluated the influence of migration from rural areas to urban territories on the whole food consumption patterns in India. The authors have concluded that increased influence of media and greater penetration of marketing activities, as well as better transportation facilities in urban territories, have led to greater availability of food items and higher consumption of food in urban territories than in rural areas. Nguyen & Winters (2011) investigated the influence of migration on food consumption patterns in Vietnam. The authors have found that short-term migration had a positive influence on food consumption in Vietnam, as a country experiencing considerable economic growth, and that increase in the wage gap between the urban and rural population resulted in significant improvements of nutritional status, increased per capita food expenses and greater calories per capita consumed. Authors have concluded that households with short-term migrants increased food consumption and calories, whereas, long-term migration did not appear to increase per capita calorie consumption and increase in per capita food expenditures or food diversity.

Zeza et al. (2011), Bucevska (2011), Strielkowski et al. (2018) have highlighted that remittances from migration may have a positive and direct income effect on food consumption and the use of nutrition services by the sending households and indirect income effect through the potential easing of required liquidity and insurance restrictions and following impact on production and investment decisions.

Casali, Borsari & Marchesi (2015) researched changes in lifestyle and food habits of an employed woman in Italy. The authors have found out that more than half of the sample was characterised by overweight, and 58% reported an increase in weight after the arrival in Italy. Age of women, African ethnicity, lower education level, increased post-migration consumption of snacks and cheese were associated with weight gain.

Costa, Dias & Martins (2018) have compared the consumption of fruits and vegetables by immigrants and native inhabitants in Portugal and analysed factors associated with consumption of fruits and vegetables among immigrants. The authors have concluded that only 21.1% of immigrants and 18.5% of native Portuguese inhabitants followed the recommendation of the World Health Organization to consume five or more portions of fruits and vegetables daily. The research has also emphasised the necessity of the development of strategies to increase fruits and vegetable consumption. In this article, we consider in more detail the factors which often lay behind those which figured out in the above mentioned studies but shape the overall problem of unhealthy diet patterns and overweight in the migrant population. In the next section, we consider the important role of the migrant population in mitigating negative tendencies of demographic changes in Europe.

The role of immigrants in addressing European demographic challenges

According to the European Investment Bank (de Lima et al., 2016) "Europe's population is ageing fast: no single variable can reverse this trend, and no country is spared from this phenomenon. Without international migration, the demographics of Europe would be much worse". In this context, it should be noted that growing old-age dependency is a challenge for all the EU member states. For some countries, old-age dependency increased considerably during the last decades. In particular, old-age dependency ratio in Lithuania increased from 18.5 to 29.3 during 1995 to 2017, in Malta – from 16.4 to 28.1, in Czechia – from 19.3 to 28.6, in the Netherlands – from 19.3 to 28.4, in Poland – from 16.6 to 24.2, in Romania – from 17.6 to 26.7, in Slovenia – from 17.4 to 28.6, in Finland – from 21.1 to 33.2 (Eurostat, 2018). It is anticipated the population in the EU to increase from 508 to 526 million by 2050, and to decline to 520 million by 2080. General forecast is that the European population will be higher, however, much older. Thus, this tendency represents a challenge for welfare sustainability and prospective growth.

Old-age dependency is anticipated to double whereas total working-age population is anticipated to decline by 0.3% per year by 2060. Furthermore, working-age population will decrease from 64% to 44% of the total population until 2060 (de Lima et al., 2016).

There is a variety of studies devoted to the research of the impacts of immigrants on the developed economies. More recent studies report that immigration has a negligible average influence on the wages and employment on native employees. However, different effects from immigration can be observed in the short run and the long run.



In the short run, it can lead to an increase in expenditures associated with the need to provide shelter, food, and first aid. Among the positive outcomes of immigration, in the long run, is that it can contribute to reducing the shortages of labour in the countries, sectors or regions.

Nevertheless, migrants are not perfect substitutes of the native population, due to cultural ethics background, as well as language proficiency. However, migrants can develop the adjustment capacity of regional differences by accepting jobs in sectors where the native population is not unwilling to work (Guzi, Kahanec & Kureková, 2015). Moreover, immigrants can also contribute to entrepreneurship, innovation, budgetary gains and GDP growth¹. In the light of these conclusions, it is important, thus, to support migrants after their arrival in destination countries.

Food challenges for migrants

When immigrants arrive in a host country, they usually face many difficulties; nutrition challenges are among them. These challenges comprise learning about new kinds of food, where to select ingredients and how to handle social environments in terms of transport and the proximity of food retailers to the immigrant's home (De La Peña Esteban & Peña-Miguel, 2018; Klamár & Gavalová, 2018; Wang, 2019). For migrants from non-English speaking origin countries sustaining traditional food practices in combination with exposure to new nutrients can be challenging. Apart from food security, ethnic food can also epitomise the myth of home and re-establish the role of national identity among migrants, as Rabikowska (2010) probed in the case of Polish immigrants in the UK.

Food security is often problematic for immigrants who are disadvantaged in the employment and housing markets. Low-income levels and lack of transport may dramatically effect on the ability to access and purchase food. Immigrants may rely on television advertising, assisting them to indicate normally eaten foods. However, the types of foods advertised tend to be fast foods, processed foods and soft drinks. Living in the territories with limited availability of fresh foods or the expensive cost of fresh foods when compared with processed foods can have a substantial impact on food consumption behaviour.

Sedentary lifestyle, high energy diets, and rise in the standard of living are associated with weight gain and obesity. After arrival in the host

¹ Recent studies on this theme include Danaj, Lazányi & Bilan, 2018; Davidavičienė & Lolat, 2016; Deskar-Škrbić, Drezgić & Šimović, 2018; Hudcovský, Lábaj & Morvay, 2017; Kancs & Lecca, 2017; Škuflić & Vučković, 2018

country, many immigrants choose high energy meals, snacks and sweetened beverages. Often, in their origin countries, energy dense and highly processed meals are perceived as high-status meals, which not many people can afford. These types of meals in the destination country are more available and contribute to enhancing dietary acculturation, which occurs when members of a minority group accept the food choices and experience of the destination country. However, at the same time, the shift from traditional eating behaviours to those in the host country may signal about decreased fruits, vegetable consumption, and lower physical activity level.

Table 1: Factors associated with the risk of unhealthy weight gain in migrant populations

Risk factors	Risk reasons
Genetic and physiological factors	Several genetic differences may cause the vulnerability of different ethnic groups to obesity
Historical and continuing trauma	Individual cases of injury on the job, disabilities caused by disasters
Epi-genetic factors	Migrant populations are more likely to increase obesity risk when they exposed to an obesogenic environment
Dietary behaviour	Not healthy initial migrants diet habits
Physical activity	Migrants on average have more occupational, physical activity and physical activity for travel, but face barriers to engaging in leisure-time physical activity
Body size preference	Preference or tolerance of larger female body sizes often affects food traditions, especially for female migrants. This may increase obesity risk for the female migrant population through reduced motivation to maintain or lose weight in some migrant groups
Acculturation	Nevertheless, migrants often maintain their original food choices. However, acculturation may negatively affect eating preferences and increase obesity risk
Socio-economic status	The social and economic disadvantage may increase obesity risk in migrants in the destination country
Stress	Stress related to arrival in a new environment, disappointment at work, loss of links with the home environment may also increase obesity risk
Employment and housing markets disadvantages	May cause limited access to fresh and healthy food and greater availability of fast food
Urbanisation	The increase in urbanisation level may increase obesity risk if compared to rural territories
Television advertisement in the host country	Advertising of fast foods, sugar-sweetened beverages through television channels may generate and increase the interest of high energy foods and, thus, increase obesity risk
Lack of education	Lack of education according to many studies may cause higher obesity risk
Marital status	Single marital status for women may increase obesity risk



Source: Developed by the author based on (Carrillo-Larco et al., 2016; Murphy, Robertson & Oyebode, 2017; Samouda et al., 2018)

However, migrants from high-income origin countries are likely to have lower body mass index than the population of the destination country. Immigrant groups with higher education levels are likely to have a lower increase in lower body mass index and gain an increase in the index at a slower rate than immigrant groups with lower education levels. Sustaining the food behaviours of the source country and a greater degree of integration into ethnic group networks contributes to slowing the process of getting a higher body mass index. The immigrants' cultural values, beliefs and norms considerably affect eating diet habits and physical activity behaviours (Hauck, Hollingsworth & Morgan, 2011). Persons who are likely to be obese are at higher risk of cancer, heart diseases, diabetes and other chronic health illnesses. Migrants from Mediterranean and Asian regions are more likely to have diabetes or heart disease (Mui, Hill & Thorpe, 2018). Thus, it is vital to figure out possible reasons, which can cause higher obesity risk among migrants and find out the ways to mitigate them (Table 1).

Healthy immigrant effect

Some authors refer to so-called concept "healthy immigrant effect". According to this concept, migrants are on average healthier than the native-born population. The concept is supported by the fact that the wealthiest and the healthiest migrants are more likely to migrate. Kennedy et al. (2015) researched healthy immigrant effect in USA, Australia, UK and Canada. Their analysis found strong support for the concept in all four host countries. Ichou & Wallace (2019) figured out the healthy immigrant effect in France and showed that the average educational level of the destination country could not account for the healthy immigrant effect. The authors provide evidence that "educational selectivity constitutes a significant factor in explaining health disparities between migrant and non-migrant populations".

When researching the healthy immigrant effect in Canada, Australia and USA, Markides & Rote (2019) found out that in all three countries "there is evidence of a health convergence of immigrants relative to the native-born population over approximately 10-20 years". Authors highlighted that immigrant health selection is the key reason for the immigrant health advantage. Immigrants to European countries turn out to be healthy as well, however, not as consistently as in Australia, USA and Canada. Immigrants confer health benefits in the USA among older Hispanics; however, gain negative outcomes in European countries. Popovic-Lipovas & Strasser (2015) found that the healthy migrant advantage was observed during a short period in

Canada and the USA and that dietary practices and health behaviour became similar to the host country and more diverse as well. Galbete et al.(2017) when researching the dietary behaviour and its socio-demographic drivers among Ghanaian immigrants in Europe and their compatriots living in Ghana, have concluded that “in rural Ghana, diet concentrated on starchy foods; in urban Ghana, nutrition was dominated by animal-based products; and in Europe, diet appeared to be highly diverse”. It should be mentioned that addressing nutrition issues of migrants should start from the overall change in the perception of migration that is often difficult to do due to lack of a proper attitude to migrants and their needs by public authorities. In the next section, we discuss the main barriers to migration policy changes and possible ways to address them.

Barriers to migration policy change

There is no single behaviour path for migrants after arrival in the destination country. The cases of their successful integration in the host country social environment are not rare, and healthy immigrant effect, indeed, often occurs while the shift to the new living conditions, culture and food traditions not always preclude healthy food habits of the migrants (Rehák & Dudová, 2018). However, there are still many factors, both individual and social environment-related, which increase overweight and obesity risk. In this section, we have discussed the possible ways to mitigate the potential unfavourable effect of the new environment of destination country by which migrants appear to be affected after arrival.

Generally, the greatest barrier to sufficient policy change may be counteracting public attitudes about migration overall. In this context, it should be noted that the discrimination often puts limitations to the effective contributions that migrants can make to food security, nutrition traditions and economic development of the territory.

Among the main barriers to policy changes in the field of food habits and nutrition is the lack of funding for policy implementation. The key measure here is to detect possible funds within the public finance and externally among partners, research innovative financing mechanisms. Important mechanisms here are diaspora support investments and contributions of migrants. For instance, in Spain, authorities have developed ECOWAS-Spain Fund on Migration and Development in 2012. This fund aimed to maximise positive effects and limit negative outcomes that migration brings to the host countries as well as to migrants and their families. Authorised institutions included migrants associations, academic institutions, regional networks, research centres, NGOs, diaspora organisations (Wolff & Opoku-Owusu, 2017).



Another considerable barrier to promoting policy changes is competing interests among migration and food security and nutrition authorities and lack of inter-sectoral coordination. A possible addressing of this barrier is the development of multi-ministry or inter-sectoral coordination clusters and integrate food security and nutrition migration policy-makers (Beall & Puertas, 2017).

Policies and programmes are often not addressing vulnerable groups of migrants. This problem can be solved by the development of projects aimed at dealing with the regions with considerably dynamic migration patterns. Such project, for example, was developed by the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, US Department of State for the implementation period of 2010-2014. The project focused on vulnerable migrants including asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, unaccompanied minors, refugees, trafficked women, men and children for sexual exploitation and/or forced labour. The project main outcomes had improved capacity of governments in the Greater Mekong sub-region and Malaysia to provide higher protection and direct assistance to vulnerable groups of migrants. The project also contributed to rising awareness among migrants of the risks of un-safe migration. Particularly vulnerable migrants, obtained timely and efficient support via national and cross-border response mechanisms. Measures to reinforce regional, cross-border cooperation, pool expertise for the protection of particularly vulnerable groups migrants were also taken (IOM, 2014).

Lack of overall understanding of migration, labour and social protection, food security and nutrition issues often take place in different countries. These problems can be effectively solved by conducting training and workshops on food security and nutrition for migration authorities. During the workshops and trainings, the participants develop knowledge on important migration and food security issues, in particular, refugee law, refugee protection, migration and detention issues, trafficking in persons, nutrition challenges. Furthermore, the participants also exchange information and discussing the possibilities of inter-agency cooperation and networking (UNHCR & IOM, 2016).

The relation between migrations, food and conflicts is strong. Thus, programmes addressing migration and food security issues are needed. In Table 2, we have presented a typology of programmes which could be implemented by the destination country to provide a more favourable environment for migrants.

It should be noted, that effective implementation of measures towards migrants integration and promotion a healthy lifestyle and

food behaviour may result in some cases in the revitalisation of territories. In particular, there are a number of studies demonstrating that the support of migrants' food traditions may extend business benefits. According to AMES (2015), the role of immigrants in the revitalisation of a small rural town in Western Victoria was considerable. The report researched the influence of staged employment and settlement of the Karen people in the area during a number of years. One of the issues that the investigators faced was

Table 2: Programmes to address migration issues in destination country

Labour market and financial services programmes	Skills development programmes	General support of migrants
Temporary labour and/or seasonal schemes	Highly skilled migrant requirements	Temporary migration assistance
Access to financial services	Compensation for skilled migrants	Ethical recruitment codes
Specialized financial products and tools	Skills development	Diaspora engagement
Facilitating investment	Tertiary education	Allowing dual citizenship
Addressing the health of migrant employees, occupational health and safety measures, as well as improving working conditions and implementing workforce strategies	Knowledge transfer initiatives	Making social security benefits and benefit agreements portable
		Reintegration and return facilitation
		Supporting the right to the enjoyment of the highest possible standard of physical and mental health, equality and non-discrimination migrants
		Supporting people-centred, gender-, refugee-and migrant-sensitive health programmes

Source: developed by the author based on the World Food Programme (2017) and the World Health Organization (2018)

the need for the Karen to access culturally appropriate food. Primarily, the Karen residents would source some food from outside of Nhill in Melbourne. They also sustained their custom of growing their own



vegetables. The local supermarket realised a business opportunity to broaden its range of goods and include particular food items for the Karen. Preserving traditional food practices was a significant urgency for these newly settled residents.

Conclusions

Integration of migrants remains one of the key concerns of many migration policies. Current research emphasised that integration programmes should rely not only on basic language and cultural aspects but also on food, improving the contribution of the food traditions of migrants, while also inspiring in this field interactions and contributions via this medium both long-standing and newly-forming societies. This should particularly be done among second generations, where the decisive 'game' regarding integration is played out. There are significant differences in food habits between young individuals of diverse origins. This emphasises the significance of focusing on ethnic groups in nutrition interventions.

Our results emphasise a range of food challenges and factors, which increase obesity risk among the migrant population as one of the main threats causing a variety of diseases. Our results are vital to detect the gaps in the current migrant populations' health promotion in Europe and suggest that programmes to support migrants after their arrival in their destination countries may also contribute to reinforcing good dietary patterns, which, in turn, may be the key in precluding unhealthy weight gain. Understanding immigrants' beliefs, culture, and traditions of their origin country, and food acculturation as well, is crucial to ensure the efficiency of these programmes.

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