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Project Management Approaches for Refugee Integration in the United States: A Qualitative and Quantitative Review

SUMMARY

The United States has historically been a country that opens its doors to refugees. However, refugee integration presents many challenges for both local communities and newcomers. This paper aims to examine the project management approaches in the refugee integration process in the United States. By utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the effectiveness of projects aimed at refugee integration was assessed, with a focus on the successes and challenges of different management approaches. The paper seeks to understand the management strategies of various refugee integration projects and the social outcomes of these projects in the broader societal context.

Keywords: project management, project management approaches, refugee integration, project success, united states, qualitative research, quantitative research, social integration

JEL codes: O32, M10, M11, L86, Q56

INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of refugees worldwide has compelled many countries to develop integration strategies to address the social, cultural, and economic challenges posed by the refugee crisis. Since the mid-20th century, the United States has played a historic role in accepting refugees, diversifying its demographic structure through programs initiated after the Refugee Act of 1980. Despite these efforts, achieving successful integration remains a complex and multifaceted challenge involving education, labor market participation, social services, language learning, and cultural adaptation (Capps et al., 2015; Kerwin, 2018). Project management involves planning, executing, and monitoring activities to achieve specific goals. In refugee integration projects, effective management focuses on time, cost, resources, and risk while emphasizing transparency, flexibility, and community collaboration. Tailored strategies addressing refugees' unique needs are essential for success (Rumbaut, 2014).

The acceptance of refugees into the U.S. became legalized through the Refugee Act of 1980, and since then, various administrative and social integration policies have been put in place. Based on this law, many federal, state, and local governments have developed various projects aimed at improving the quality of life for refugees. However, the effectiveness of these projects depends on factors such as the social challenges encountered and how project management is carried out. The management of refugee integration projects should not only include project planning and resource management but must also consider social cohesion, psychological support, and cultural sensitivity (Harold, 2021; Portes & Rumbaut, 2024). In this context, the success of refugee integration projects should not be measured solely by economic success but should also be evaluated with social indicators such as social cohesion, psychological recovery, and interaction with the local community (Ellis et al., 2019).

This study aims to examine refugee integration projects in the United States from the perspective of project management approaches. In the literature, there are numerous studies on the challenges refugees face during their integration processes and the projects developed to address these challenges. However, there is a lack of systematic reviews on the management of these projects and the impact of project management approaches on the integration process. This paper aims to analyze refugee integration projects in the U.S., both qualitatively and quantitatively, evaluating the success levels of different project management approaches. Additionally, by discussing the social, cultural, and economic factors affecting refugee integration, the paper seeks to provide insights for future projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical background

Refugee integration is a multidimensional process encompassing economic, social, cultural, and psychological domains (Lee et al., 2020). Effective integration depends on policies and strategies that help refugees adapt, access services, and contribute to society. Key themes in the literature include settlement, cultural adaptation, education, employment, and social participation (DE ACOSTA, 2018; Strang & Quinn, 2021).

Rumbaut (2014) emphasized that integration involves not only language learning and education but also social identity and local interactions. Kerwin (2018) linked successful adaptation to host society acceptance and cultural preservation. Similarly, Yun et al. (2016) noted that fostering belonging is vital to integration.

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Capps et al. (2015) highlighted challenges in U.S. refugee programs, stressing the role of community attitudes and collaboration with NGOs. Donato & Ferris (2020) compared U.S. and European projects, noting that labor market integration is hindered by language and cultural barriers. Evans & Fitzgerald (2017) argued that employment access and community connections are key to integration success.

Studies by Camarota (2016) and Benton & Glennie (2016) emphasize labor market access, education, and psychological support as critical to economic and social inclusion. Refugee traumas and cultural differences can complicate integration (Albakri & Shibli, 2019; Samara et al., 2022). Content analysis methods (Graneheim et al., 2017) are often used to evaluate refugee projects, providing insight into attitudes and effectiveness. Weldon (2021) note that project management approaches can support cohesion and better manage integration processes

Research Gap

While integration has been studied extensively, few works examine refugee integration projects through a project management (PM) lens. Most research emphasizes social and economic aspects without assessing PM methodologies such as planning, stakeholder coordination, or resource management. This creates an opportunity to explore how structured PM approaches improve refugee integration outcomes.

Refugee Integration

Effective integration spans:

Cultural adaptation: Language acquisition, behavioral alignment, and cultural understanding are essential (Portes & Rumbaut, 2024).

Economic integration: Employment and skills development promote independence and acceptance (Muita & Muchelule, 2024).

Social integration: Relationships and mutual understanding with host communities are key (Van der Helm et al., 2017).

Psychological adaptation: Support for trauma recovery and well-being facilitates adjustment (Zetter & Ruauadel, 2016).

Economic independence: Gaining employment without ongoing financial aid is crucial. Partial independence may involve continued support but indicates progress (Betts et al., 2017; Shacknove, 2017).

Integration also requires alignment between policies, local institutions, and civil society, forming a multi-level support system for refugee well-being.

Project Management Approaches

Project management provides structure for planning, execution, and monitoring (Khalife et al., 2021). In refugee integration, PM covers time, cost, resource, and risk control (Armenia et al., 2019; Meredith et al., 2017). Effective integration projects emphasize transparency, adaptability, and community collaboration (Szuhai & Poor, 2015; Zwikaël et al., 2018).

Key PM elements include:

Needs analysis: Identifying language, education, healthcare, and employment needs (Betts & Bloom, 2014; Davis, 2016).

Goal setting: Clear benchmarks for integration outcomes (Capps et al., 2015)(Anderson et al., 2019; Bathallath et al., 2016).

Time and budget management: Ensuring sustainability and responsiveness to evolving needs (Rasnacis & Berzisa, 2017)(de Oliveira & Rabechini Jr, 2019).

Additional priorities include cultural sensitivity, evaluation systems, and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

Importance of Project Management Approaches for Refugee Integration

Applying PM tools enhances efficiency, resource use, and cohesion. Multi-actor collaboration government, NGOs, and communities is essential (Donato & Ferris, 2020; Golini et al., 2015). PM enables continuous monitoring, outcome evaluation, and strategic improvement (Breidahl & Brodtkin, 2024; Ma et al., 2017).

Ultimately, project management offers a scalable, systematic framework for refugee integration. It supports adaptable, evidence-based strategies that align with evolving needs and sustain long-term integration success.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to evaluate project management approaches in refugee integration across selected U.S. cities. It combined qualitative interviews with project staff and refugees, and quantitative surveys supported by content analysis of five annual project reports (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Graneheim et al., 2017).

Participants and Data Collection

A **purposive sampling strategy** targeted individuals directly involved in refugee integration:

Refugees (50): Provided firsthand insights into the impacts of integration services.

Implementers (30): Delivered services like language training, counseling, and job support.

Project Managers (20): Oversaw project design, coordination, and resource use.

Participants were recruited via NGO partnerships, email invitations, and onsite visits to refugee centers. The study focused on five major cities with active integration programs: New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, and Seattle ((USCRI), 2023; Bishops, 2022; RCUSA, 2020). This selection ensured representation across different geographical and socio-economic contexts.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 project managers and 15 implementers. Interviews lasted ~45 minutes and explored key topics such as:

1. Initial project challenges
2. Effective refugee support measures
3. Project success evaluation methods
4. Community-refugee interaction strategies
5. Approaches to social integration

These interviews aimed to uncover strategic and operational perspectives, especially on planning, stakeholder engagement, and integration barriers.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were obtained from:

- **Annual reports** of 5 refugee-focused organizations (e.g., in New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, Seattle), which specialized in workforce, housing, health, and education services.
- **Surveys** administered to 100 participants (50 refugees, 30 implementers, 20 managers) to assess satisfaction and project impact using a **Likert scale (1–5)**.
Surveys were distributed both online and on paper to ensure broad accessibility. The design aimed to capture perceptions of service quality, management effectiveness, and integration outcomes (Rahman & Mukhtadir, 2021).

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis:

- Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data. Steps included:
- Reviewing transcripts
 - Coding responses into categories (e.g., language barriers, psychological challenges, cultural integration)
 - Developing and refining themes through collaborative review
 - Using direct quotes to support interpretations
 - This process highlighted challenges such as limited resources, cultural differences, and the importance of tailored educational and mental health support.

Quantitative Analysis:

- Survey data were analyzed using **SPSS**. Methods included:
- **Descriptive statistics** for summarizing trends
 - **T-tests** for comparing groups
 - **Correlation analysis** to examine relationships between integration indicators and project management practices
- The analysis identified statistically significant links between language training, employment access, and the effectiveness of management strategies (Kallio et al., 2016).

FINDINGS

Qualitative Findings

Interviews with 10 project managers and 15 implementers highlighted critical integration challenges, with language barriers ranking highest (Table 1), followed by cultural tensions, trauma, and resource gaps. Three strategies proved most impactful: language training (rated most effective), employment/education support, and counseling.

Table 1. Coding and Thematic Results

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Challenges Faced at the Start of the Project	Language Barrier, Cultural Differences, Psycho-social Challenges	Language Barrier, Cultural Adaptation, Trauma, Anxiety
Effective Supports	Language Support, Employment and Education Support, Social and Psychological Support	Language Courses, Employment, Psychological Support
Success of Project Management	Resource Insufficiency, Coordination Issues	Financial Resources, Communication, Team Coordination
Strengthening Relationships with the Local Community	Cultural Activities, Community Participation	Events, Community Participation, Workshops
Solutions to Social Integration Problems	Education and Awareness, Psychological Support	Language Training, Psychological Support, Group Therapy

Successful initiatives included Chicago’s multicultural festivals and Seattle’s language exchanges, with one manager noting, “*Language barriers were our biggest obstacle*” (Table 2 illustrates theme interactions).

Visual data reinforced these insights: Figure 1 confirmed language barriers as the top challenge, while Figure 2 showed psychological support as the leading success factor. Despite progress, resource constraints persisted, with managers advocating for “*better coordination*”. Priorities include scaling language/mental health services, strengthening team coordination, and expanding cultural bridge-building activities.

Table 2. Thematic Coding and Support Strategies for Refugee Integration

Theme	Effective Supports	Challenges Faced at the Start of the Project	Success of Project Management	Strengthening Relationships with the Local Community	Solutions to Social Integration Problems
Language barrier	Language Support	One of the main challenges was the language barrier	Language barriers affected project success	Language teaching programs for the local community	Tailored language training solutions provided
Cultural differences	Cultural Activities and Education Programs	Cultural differences caused conflicts with the local population	More support was needed for cultural adaptation	Cultural activities facilitated integration	Integration was achieved through cultural education
Psychological challenges	Psychological Support and Rehabilitation	Psychological Support and Rehabilitation	It was difficult to deal with these challenges in project management	Psychological counseling services were provided	Post-traumatic stress support was provided

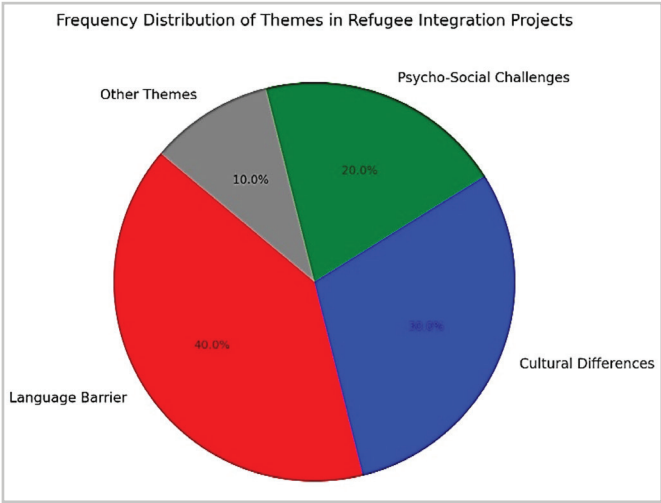


Figure 1. Frequency Distribution Graph.

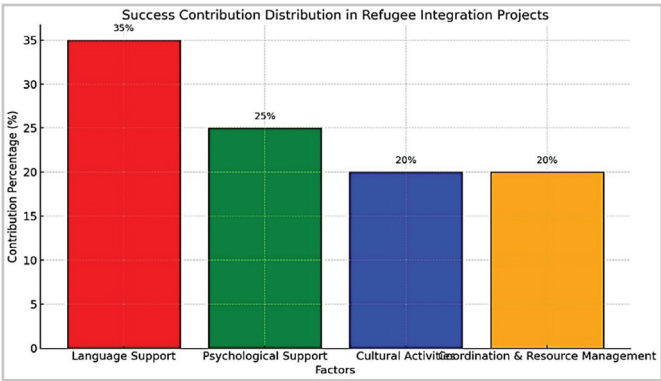


Figure 2. Success Contribution Chart

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings reveal significant progress in refugee integration efforts based on data collected from 100 participants across three stakeholder groups. As shown in Figure 3, project success rates improved dramatically from 45% in 2013 to 85% in 2023, demonstrating the effectiveness of current integration strategies. The refugee participant data (Table 3) shows a young population (40% aged 18-30) with 50% unemployment, highlighting ongoing economic integration challenges despite these overall improvements.

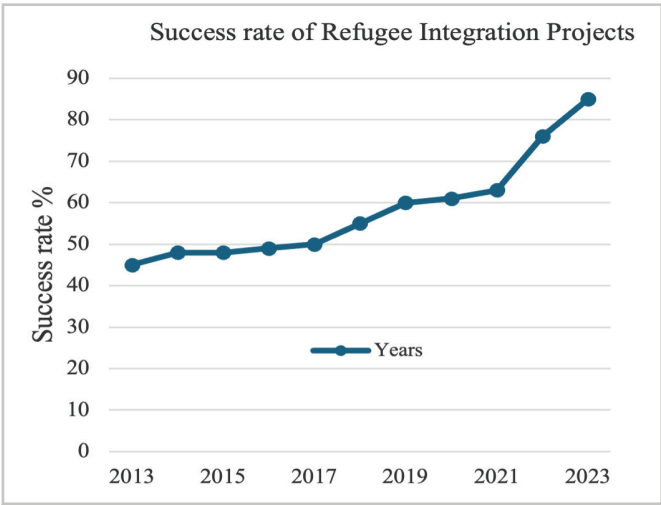


Figure 3. Success rate of Refugee Integration Projects (2013-2023)

Key metrics in Figures 4 and 5 illustrate this progress in detail. Language barriers decreased substantially from 81% to 23% over the decade, while participation in education programs increased from 41% to 89%, showing the impact of language training initiatives. Economic outcomes improved correspondingly, with 40% of refugees achieving full independence and 35% reaching partial independence by 2023. However, Figure 6 indicates persistent obstacles, with language barriers (35%) and cultural differences (25%) remaining the most significant challenges to integration.

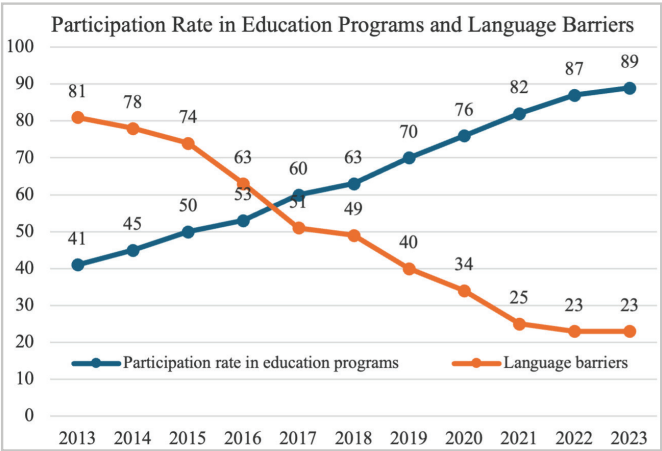


Figure 4. Language Barriers and Participation Rates in Education Programs (2013-2023)

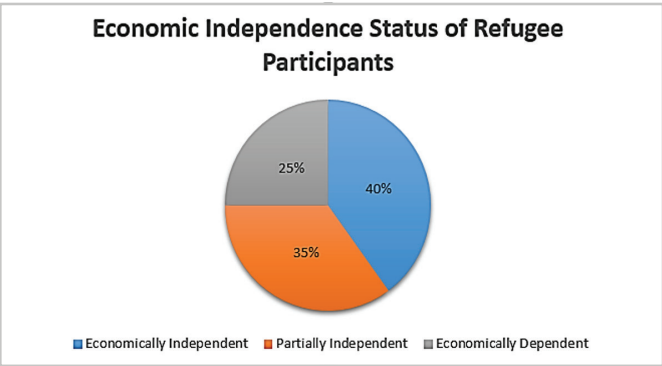


Figure 5. Economic Independence Status of Refugee Participants

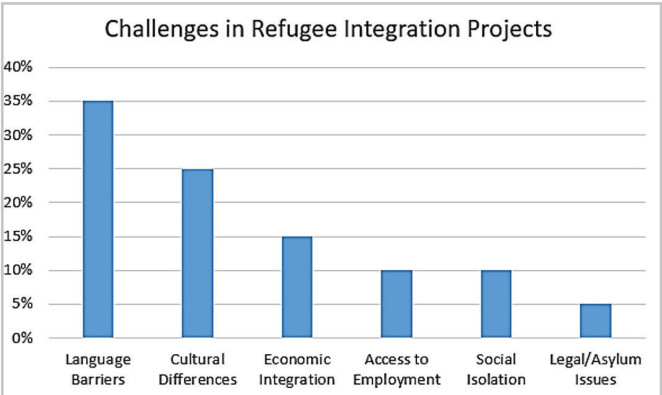


Figure 6. Challenges in Refugee Integration Projects

Figure 7's demonstration that higher participation rates lead to greater success (80% participation – 90% success) provides clear evidence for expanding program access while maintaining quality.

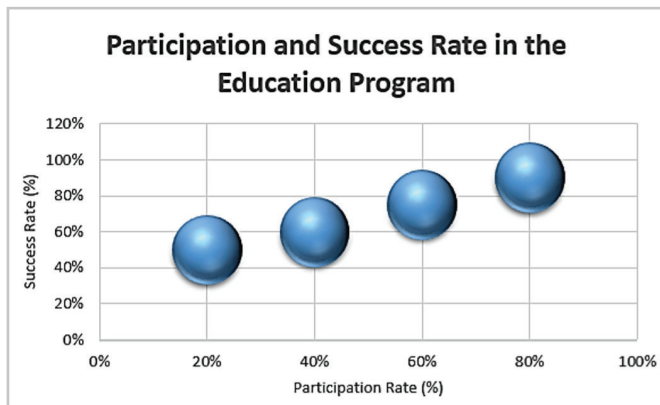


Figure 7. Participation and Success Rate in the Training Program

The survey results presented in Tables 3-5 provide insight into program effectiveness from different perspectives. Refugees rated language training at 3.72/5 (Table 3), suggesting room for improvement in this critical area. Implementers gave high marks to education support (4.05/5 in Table 4) but identified resource limitations (3.60/5) as a constraint. Managers expressed confidence in their strategies (4.10/5 in Table 5) while acknowledging coordination challenges.

Table 3. Questions About Refugees

Question	Average (Refugees)	Standard Deviation
1. How would you rate the quality of the language training you received as part of the project?	3.72	1.12
2. How would you rate the effectiveness of the services that assisted you in your integration into the local community?	3.85	1.01
3. Do you feel that you received support in finding a job and employment when participating in the project?	3.50	1.17
4. Do you think the social support provided during the project was sufficient?	3.65	1.09

Table 4. Questions for Project Implementers

Question	Average (Practitioners)	Standard Deviation
1. How would you rate the support provided for the educational needs of the refugees participating in the project?	4.05	0.91
2. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the activities conducted for refugee and local community integration?	3.90	1.00
3. How would you assess the adequacy of the resources used in the project?	3.60	1.12
4. How successful do you think the project strategies were in terms of refugees' economic adjustment and workforce integration?	3.95	1.08

Table 5. Questions for Project Managers

Question	Average (Managers)	Standard Deviation
1. What are the biggest barriers you've encountered in achieving the overall goals of your projects?	Open-ended	-
2. How effective do you think the strategies used in your projects have been in facilitating refugee integration?	4.10	0.95
3. How successful do you think you have been in ensuring refugee integration with the local community?	3.85	1.04
4. How do you measure the success of refugee integration projects?	Open-ended	-

Statistical analysis (Table 6) reveals important relationships between program elements and outcomes. The strong correlation between language training and integration success ($r=0.72$) and between resources and economic outcomes ($r=0.74$) underscores their fundamental importance. However, the weak link between cultural adaptation and economic independence ($r=0.45$) suggests these areas may require distinct approaches.

Table 6. Variables and Correlation Coefficient

Variables	Correlation Coefficient
Effectiveness of refugee language training and integration services	0.72
Educational support and refugee workforce integration	0.68
Social support and local community integration	0.65
Resource adequacy and refugee economic integration	0.74

These findings collectively demonstrate the success of U.S. integration policies while identifying specific areas for improvement. The data particularly emphasizes the need for enhanced resource allocation (as noted in Tables 4-5) and more effective cultural bridging (evident in Figure 6's findings). The inverse relationship between declining language barriers and rising education, and the trends observed in this study are consistent with the findings of Trueba and others (2022), who emphasized the importance of language education in promoting workforce reported by Trueba (2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights the critical role of targeted language programs ($r=0.72$) and proper resource allocation in improving refugee integration outcomes, as evidenced by rising success rates (45% to 85%) and declining language barriers (81% to 23%). However, the weak correlation between cultural adaptation and economic independence ($r=0.45$) suggests integration strategies must simultaneously address two distinct dimensions: workforce readiness through vocational training and social cohesion through community engagement. While project managers have demonstrated effectiveness in strategic planning (4.10/5 rating), persistent challenges like resource limitations (3.60/5) and cultural barriers (25% prevalence)

indicate the need for more comprehensive approaches that balance immediate employment needs with long-term social integration. The findings advocate for enhanced coordination between language education, economic support, and cultural programs to create sustainable integration pathways.

Study Limitations

The study's purposive sampling and geographic focus on select U.S. cities may limit generalizability. Language barriers and cultural diversity among refugee participants also posed data-collection challenges. Future research should employ broader sampling and regional inclusion.

Recommendations

To enhance refugee integration outcomes, project managers should prioritize integrated strategies that address both immediate and long-term needs. First, resource allocation must be optimized through detailed planning and continuous monitoring to address current shortages. Language education should be directly linked to vocational training programs, creating clear pathways to employment while meeting labor market demands. Simultaneously, cultural adaptation initiatives should be designed to complement economic integration efforts, rather than being treated as separate components. Community engagement must be strengthened through localized partnerships and joint activities that foster mutual understanding between refugees and host communities. Finally, robust monitoring systems should be implemented to regularly evaluate project effectiveness, using feedback loops to adapt strategies in real-time. These coordinated approaches—combining resource efficiency, education-to-employment pipelines, cultural-economic synergy, and community inclusion will create more sustainable integration models. Future research should test these recommendations across diverse geographic and demographic contexts to refine best practices.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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