



# Building Welcome from the Ground up

European small and rural communities engaging in  
refugee resettlement

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## Executive Summary

Across Europe, refugee and migrant populations tend to be concentrated in urban centres. Yet small and rural communities are increasingly receiving newcomers as well—including as part of national dispersal policies for spontaneously arrived asylum seekers, refugee resettlement programmes, and refugee sponsorship schemes—and they have become more diverse as a result. This trend has sparked research and policy interest in the experiences and potential of ‘rural welcoming’ efforts. However, important knowledge gaps remain, due at least in part to the fact that small and rural communities are highly heterogeneous; some are thriving socially and economically, while others face population ageing, emigration (particularly of young residents), and deprivation.

Cultivating small and rural communities’ role in receiving resettled refugees may help European countries make resettlement more sustainable, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic casts clouds of uncertainty over its future. Increasing these communities’ involvement in resettlement may allow governments to fulfil their protection responsibilities while avoiding an overconcentration of newly resettled refugees in cities, particularly those where housing is in short supply and there are bottlenecks in public services. Avoiding such pitfalls can help maintain public trust in a government’s resettlement efforts and may also hold advantages for refugee integration—for example, thanks to more personalised support from local institutions, the wider availability of affordable housing, or the presence of informal networks to help refugees access jobs. Some research has also highlighted ways in which resettlement may bring benefits to receiving communities, noting that it may promote social engagement and a sense of openness, help diversify local economies, and lead to the strengthening of local public services as demand for them increases. In some small communities, for example, refugee arrivals are credited with preventing schools, pharmacies, and local businesses from closing, or with helping meet labour demand in sectors such as agriculture and nursing.

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Yet reaping these benefits is no easy endeavour. Relative to refugees who are resettled in cities, those in small and rural communities may face additional challenges as well as opportunities. Social ties can be harder to build due to the tight-knit social fabric of such communities, often based on linguistic, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity. Rural areas with scarce public resources and limited experience with diversity may also find it difficult to provide tailored integration support to newcomers. Other challenges are structural: remoteness, weak transport and communication infrastructure, limited access to public services (e.g., hospitals), and scarce or less varied education and job opportunities. These barriers can affect refugees’ integration trajectories and may prompt some to move elsewhere. Meanwhile, growing diversity in a community without adequate reception and integration frameworks can backfire. Cultural misunderstandings and fears of competition may fuel a backlash; for example, the creation of tailored support services for resettled refugees may be perceived as prioritising their needs over those of other residents.

This study aims to deepen understanding of how refugee resettlement to small or rural localities is experienced by both refugees and receiving communities, drawing on interviews with local stakeholders and refugees in four EU countries (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden). These interviews pointed to a number of strategies and policy approaches that have emerged at the local level to create sustainable integration pathways for refugees resettled to small and rural areas and to help receiving communities reap the potential benefits of engaging in resettlement:

- ▶ **Kickstarting refugee integration before arrival.** Most pre-departure orientation programmes for refugees waiting to be resettled focus on providing general information about their destination country. But familiarising those likely to be placed in small and rural communities with the realities of life there can help manage their expectations and prevent frustration upon arrival. Organising contact between refugees and local stakeholders before departure—as done by Norway—can help convey locality-specific information and create continuity before and after refugees’ arrival. A less destination-specific but easier option is to explain key differences between urban and rural areas in the country—an approach adopted by Finland.
- ▶ **Preparing receiving communities and service providers.** Adequately informing receiving communities about the rationale and goals of local resettlement projects, as well as about the background and profile of incoming refugees, is particularly important in (often less diverse) small and rural localities. Doing so can assuage existing residents’ concerns and engage them in the reception process. The small population size and close ties between institutions and residents in such communities may enable local authorities and service providers to identify opinion leaders and address concerns in personal conversations. Meanwhile, national authorities can help prepare local service providers for the specific needs of newcomers—a particularly important step in rural areas where welfare systems may be stretched thin—by collecting biographical, medical, and social information on refugees before they depart from the first-asylum country and conveying it to municipalities, as is done by the Netherlands.
- ▶ **Encouraging sustained interactions between newcomers and other residents.** The generally tight-knit informal networks in small and rural communities have both pros and cons. They may be initially hard to enter for those perceived as outsiders; once accessed, however, they can work as an effective gateway to other resources, such as job opportunities and accommodation. Special community-building opportunities—such as intercultural dinners and events based on shared interests or experiences—can help break the ice between existing residents and refugees, but they may be hard to sustain in localities with limited integration funding. Promoting encounters within the existing ‘social infrastructure’ of associations (such as a Swedish project encouraging newcomers to join sports associations based in a village) or through everyday routines and institutions (schools in particular) may be more sustainable.
- ▶ **Supporting refugees’ long-term integration.** In small and rural communities, integration pathways risk being disrupted once refugees exit resettlement support, particularly if there is a lack of opportunities for further growth (e.g., in training or employment). To avoid these ‘cliff edges’, charities supporting resettled refugees have sought to build stronger ties with mainstream service providers. For example, in the Italian village of Sant’Arcangelo, the local resettlement service provider has shared

responsibility for helping refugees settle in with a network of schools, faith-based organisations, and other local institutions. Meanwhile, convincing local employers to participate in (subsidised) on-the-job training could help build trust in refugees as potential hires, while also leading to better language-learning and skill-development outcomes for newcomers less used to formal learning settings.

- ▶ **Weaving refugee resettlement into local development.** As reception and integration challenges are closely linked to rural development issues, such as weaknesses in local infrastructure, addressing the two in concert can help promote better living conditions for both ‘old’ and ‘new’ residents. In Italy, a network of rural municipalities involved in refugee reception has launched community-based social enterprises through which newcomers and existing residents join forces to create productive activities in sectors such as viticulture and tourism. To get initiatives that seek to align ‘welcome’ and ‘welfare’ off the ground and give them a good chance at success, policy frameworks, funding tools, and exchange platforms are needed to help local decisionmakers explore potential synergies.

The picture of a rural welcome is a mixed one. While small and rural communities have shown remarkable initiative and creativity in devising solutions to support resettled refugees’ integration, these are often informal and therefore precarious as political and funding environments change. Moreover, creating the conditions for long-term integration has sometimes proven difficult for socioeconomic and infrastructural reasons. Meanwhile, resettlement’s potential benefits for receiving communities are not automatic; reaping

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them depends on deliberate, strategic efforts in this direction. Small-scale local resettlement projects may have little impact in and of themselves, but they can make a difference if viewed as an opportunity to set other activities in motion.

Crucially, achieving sustainable resettlement in small and rural communities rests on coordinated action at multiple governance levels. National and EU policymakers could, for example, invest in building stronger networks of these communities—including by connecting resettlement to more ‘general’ rural networks, so as to address refugee reception in concert with other challenges and opportunities. Further coordination efforts could focus on simplifying funding instruments to make them more accessible to small municipalities with limited administrative capacity, or on devising more sophisticated placement systems to match the profiles, needs, and aspirations of arriving refugees with receiving communities based on their resources and other characteristics.

The stories and experiences shared as part of this study confirm that ‘rural welcome’ indeed holds significant promise. As a refugee living in a small Swedish town put it: ‘At first it was difficult [...] but having lived here for one year, we see that people are nice and friendly. And we think of our children, who will learn the language faster in a small community. [...] It’s a life you have to get used to, but our conditions are improving in time.’ Similarly, expecting too much too quickly of resettlement’s influence on receiving communities—for example, that creativity alone will solve gaps in services and infrastructure, or that refugee arrivals will immediately and single-handedly drive rural regeneration—will likely lead to

disappointment. But with patience and long-sightedness, these potential benefits to both refugees and European communities can begin to materialise and become sustainable.

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust European refugee resettlement efforts into uncertain waters, after years of increasingly ambitious admissions goals and extensive exchange of best practices among EU Member States.<sup>1</sup> Although the European Commission asserted its ongoing commitment to promoting resettlement in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum it released in September 2020,<sup>2</sup> the pandemic prompted the near-suspension of refugee admissions, and it is unclear whether it will be possible to simply flick the switch and return to pre-pandemic levels—especially in a context of economic uncertainty, budgetary pressure, and political volatility. On the other hand, this forced pause could be an opportunity for European countries to take stock of past experiences and reflect on ways to bring resettlement into a new era.

In the wake of the pandemic, Member States' continued engagement in resettlement will depend, more than ever, on public trust. The emerging role of small and rural communities in resettlement (and in refugee reception and integration, more broadly) may prove an important piece of this puzzle for several reasons. It can allow national governments to fulfil their protection responsibilities without placing refugees in urban areas already facing housing and service bottlenecks. Meanwhile, welcoming refugees into small and rural areas may inject new life into communities facing population ageing, out-migration, and economic decline. And while the pandemic has laid bare gaps in health care and other services in many non-urban areas, participating in resettlement could potentially improve the resilience of local infrastructure by bringing in additional workers, service users, and funding.

But despite revived interest in Europe in local perspectives on refugee inclusion in recent years, knowledge gaps abound. Larger and more experienced cities' voices still dominate these discussions. And while the 'rural side of the story' has attracted more attention of late—often with a focus on small and rural communities' specific integration resources and capacities, and particularly in countries strongly affected by the large-scale arrivals of asylum seekers and other migrants in 2015–16<sup>3</sup>—most policy and research discussions have focused on spontaneous arrivals, rather than resettled refugees.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, governments have made greater investments in the monitoring and evaluation of their resettlement and

1 Susan Fratzke and Hanne Beirens, 'The Future of Refugee Resettlement: Made in Europe?' (commentary, Migration Policy Institute Europe, Brussels, February 2020).

2 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum' (COM [2020] 609 final, 23 September 2020).

3 For an example of this in Germany, see Hannes Schammann et al., *Zwei Welten? Integrationspolitik in Stadt und Land* (Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2020); Tabea Rösch, Hanne Schneider, Johannes Weber, and Susanne Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen* (Nuremberg: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2020); Rainer Ohliger, Raphaela Schweiger, and Lisa Veyhl, *Auf dem Weg zur Flüchtlingsintegration in ländlichen Räumen: Ergebnisse einer Bedarfsanalyse in sieben Landkreisen* (Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2017). At the EU level, see Euracademy, *A Capacity Building Manual for NGOs: Promoting the Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Rural Areas* (Athens: Euracademy, 2016).

4 Most recently, long-standing players in the resettlement field have started tackling this gap. For example, a 2019 study published by the SHARE Network has looked at the experience of resettled refugees in selected rural localities in France. See Mathieu Tardis, *Another Story from the "Refugee Crisis": Resettlement in Small Towns and Rural Areas in France* (Paris: l'Ifri, 2019).

refugee sponsorship programmes, assigning greater importance to integration indicators, but few of these evaluations look specifically at how refugees fare in small and rural communities.<sup>5</sup>

This report seeks to contribute to filling this gap and improving understanding of the challenges and opportunities that refugee resettlement to such communities entails. While its focus is on resettlement, some of the experiences, tradeoffs, and policy options this study explores are common in small and rural communities receiving humanitarian migrants through other channels. The report starts by highlighting the main features of small and rural communities as destinations, and the challenges and opportunities of resettlement to such areas—both from the perspective of refugees and receiving communities. The report then examines policy approaches that can help small and rural communities create the ideal conditions for refugee reception and integration, and how they can use resettlement for local development.

## BOX 1 About This Study

This research was conducted as part of the European Union Action on Facilitating Resettlement and Refugee Admission through New Knowledge (EU-FRANK) project. The project, which is led by Sweden and financed by the European Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), aims to facilitate cooperation, coordination, and peer-learning among states in order to increase knowledge about how to successfully manage the different steps of the resettlement process. For more information on the EU-FRANK project, see: [www.eu-frank.eu](http://www.eu-frank.eu).

In addition to a review of relevant literature, this study draws its findings from nearly 60 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe in small and rural areas in Belgium (Maldegem and Martelange), Italy (Petraro Irpino and Sant’Arcangelo), the Netherlands (Peel en Maas and West Maas en Waal), and Sweden (Kungsbacka and Vilhelmina). These municipalities were selected on the basis of several criteria: population size (less than 25,000 inhabitants), situated in rural areas, and within countries with varying levels of resettlement experience. Interviewees included local authority officials, public service providers, representatives of voluntary organisations and social enterprises, volunteers, and resettled refugees.

This research was carried out after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Due to travel restrictions and social-distancing regulations, all interviews were conducted remotely, via either online platform or phone. The inability to visit the research sites in person limited somewhat the research team’s ability to approach interviewees directly (without local authorities or organisations acting as intermediaries) and to capture nonverbal reactions to questions asked. While the researchers followed data protection protocols and ethical standards, at times the only way to interview refugees was for the refugees to take the researchers’ call in a local authority or charity office; although this was done in a private area within the office, it may nonetheless have had an influence on the answers some refugees provided. Notwithstanding these limitations, the research secured valid results through the mixture of interview techniques used.

5 Caritas Italiana, *Oltre il Mare: Primo rapporto sui Corridoi Umanitari in Italia e altre vie legali e sicure d’ingresso* (Milan: Caritas Italiana, 2019); Amnesty International, *Community Sponsorship of Refugees: New Zealand’s Pilot Programme and Its Potential* (Auckland: Amnesty International, 2018); Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI), ‘A New Model for Community Refugee Sponsorship in Australia’ (position paper, CRSI, n.p., May 2019).



## 2 Refugee Pathways to Small and Rural Communities in Europe

While important gaps exist, the available data tell us that immigration is still primarily an urban phenomenon in Europe. In 2017, non-EU migrants represented less than 3 per cent of the total population of rural areas across the European Union, compared to 10 per cent in its cities.<sup>6</sup> There are, however, some notable exceptions. In some Member States, non-EU nationals make up significantly higher shares of residents in rural communities—such as Sweden (nearly 10 per cent), Luxembourg (more than 7 per cent), and Germany and Italy (each with between 5 per cent and 6 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

The picture is different when focusing specifically on humanitarian migrants. The (still scarce) data available indicate that small and rural communities have recently taken on a greater role in welcoming asylum seekers and refugees. For example, a 2017 study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 18 European countries found that, on average, asylum seekers are less concentrated in urban regions than the general population (42 per cent vs. 46 per cent)—with peak differences in countries such as Belgium, Ireland, and Norway.<sup>8</sup> The study also suggests that the share of asylum seekers living in non-urban areas within Europe went up between 2011 and 2015, although this is based on only five countries for which data could be compared over time;<sup>9</sup> this is likely to have increased further since then, given the 2015–16 spike in mixed-migration arrivals to Europe.

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A look at the different protection channels that exist in Europe can help explain the rise of small and rural communities as destinations for humanitarian newcomers:

- ▶ **National dispersal policies for spontaneous arrivals.** As EU Member States faced large spontaneous arrivals of asylum seekers in 2015–16, dispersal policies became a key responsibility-sharing instrument in major destination countries, such as Germany and Sweden. While there are differences in design, the common goal of these policies is to avoid the overconcentration of asylum seekers and

<sup>6</sup> Fabrizio Natale et al., *Migration in EU Rural Areas* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, while the native population residing in rural areas across Europe decreased from nearly 107 million to 100 million in just six years (2011–17), the migrant population remained stable—pointing to the demographic importance of migration for these areas. See Natale, *Migration in EU Rural Areas*.

<sup>8</sup> Paola Proietti and Paolo Veneri, 'The Location of Hosted Asylum Seekers in OECD Regions and Cities', *Journal of Refugee Studies* (March 2019): 1–26. Moreover, based on an examination of six countries whose data allows for greater geographical detail—namely Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden—the study tends to confirm that asylum seekers are relatively more evenly distributed across places than the resident population. In these six countries, almost 60 per cent of asylum seekers resided outside cities, while this is the case for slightly more than 40 per cent of the total resident population.

<sup>9</sup> These countries are Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. On average across these countries, the share of asylum seekers residing in rural areas increased from 18 per cent to 20 per cent between 2011 and 2015. See Proietti and Veneri, 'The Location of Hosted Asylum Seekers in OECD Regions and Cities'.

those recognised as refugees in large cities already facing housing shortages and service bottlenecks by more evenly distributing them within a country—both for reasons of fairness and to make the best use of locally available resources, housing stocks in particular. The criteria according to which these newcomers are distributed vary, but they generally include local tax revenue, population, labour market prospects, previous intake of asylum seekers and recognised refugees, and housing stock.<sup>10</sup> These dispersal policies have played an important role in spreading refugee populations outside of large urban centres. Largely due to these policies, for example, more than half of all recognised refugees who entered Germany since 2013 live in rural areas. And in some predominantly rural regions of the country, the foreign-born proportion of residents more than doubled between 2012 and 2017, likely due to the arrival of large numbers of humanitarian migrants.<sup>11</sup> Since 2015–16, major European destination countries have further revised these policies to, for example, ensure more even distribution (as in Sweden)<sup>12</sup> or limit secondary movements (as in Germany).<sup>13</sup>

- ▶ **Refugee resettlement.** Resettling refugees from countries where they initially sought refuge to somewhere that can grant them permanent protection and residence<sup>14</sup> allows destination countries to select candidates with proven protection needs (often through referral by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) and to distribute them across the national territory in a predictable and rational way.<sup>15</sup> Governments have used resettlement—which allows them greater control over who comes into their territory (e.g., in terms of numbers and profiles) and when they arrive than is the case with asylum seekers—to spread the responsibility for international protection across the country’s communities, and to mobilise the reception resources of smaller (and comparatively untapped) localities.<sup>16</sup> In Sweden, resettlement has allowed government authorities to place more refugees into rural areas in the north of the country, exploiting the greater availability of affordable housing there.<sup>17</sup> And in Italy, where resettled refugees are distributed to localities participating in the Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI)

10 In Germany, for example, asylum seekers are distributed between the federal states (*Länder*) according to the ‘Königstein Key’, which takes stock of the tax revenue and population of each state. See European Council of Refugees and Exiles, ‘Freedom of Movement: Germany’, Asylum Information Database, accessed 21 October 2020. They may be further distributed within each state based on additional criteria, such as family ties, the presence of a religious community, and labour market prospects. See European Migration Network (EMN), *Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Programmes in Europe - What Works?* (Brussels: EMN, 2016). In Sweden, the allocation of refugees across municipalities takes into account labour market conditions, population size, and the number of newly arrived immigrants, unaccompanied minors, and asylum seekers already living in the municipality. See Regina Konle-Seidl and Georg Bolits, *Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and Good Practices* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2016).

11 Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

12 In March 2016, Sweden introduced a settlement law that makes it obligatory for municipalities to receive a quota of refugees and to organise their accommodation. Prior to this change, municipalities could decide voluntarily whether to participate in refugee reception. See Erica Righard and Klara Öberg, ‘Refugee Accommodation Governance in Sweden: Findings and Recommendations’ (GLIMER Policy Brief no. 1, Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe’s Refugees, n.p., 2019).

13 To limit secondary movement, Germany introduced a new integration law in 2016 that includes a residence requirement (*Wohnsitzregelung*) giving state authorities the option to oblige recognised refugees to remain in the assigned locality for up to three years. See Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

14 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘Resettlement’, accessed 16 October 2020.

15 UNHCR, *The Three-Year Strategy (2019-2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019).

16 Tardis, *Another Story*.

17 ERN, ‘National Resettlement Programmes: Sweden’, accessed 16 October 2020.

network<sup>18</sup>—a voluntary, municipality-led system of decentralised reception and integration services for refugees as well as other beneficiaries of humanitarian protection and unaccompanied minors<sup>19</sup>—an evaluation showed that more than half of all municipalities involved in the programme had less than 5,000 inhabitants in 2018, and of these, more than three-quarters were rural areas.<sup>20</sup> (Note: The SIPROIMI programme was once again reformed and renamed in October 2020<sup>21</sup>).

- ▶ **Refugee sponsorship programmes.** First pioneered in Canada in the 1970s and with a long history in other ‘classic’ resettlement countries, such as Australia, refugee sponsorship programmes (also known as ‘community’ or ‘private’ sponsorship) have proliferated in Europe—often as small-scale pilots and especially in the wake of the 2015–16 spike in asylum seeker arrivals and public interest in humanitarian migration.<sup>22</sup> A specific form of refugee resettlement, sponsorship transfers key responsibilities from state to nongovernmental actors. Private citizens, local community groups, and faith-based or civil-society organisations have the opportunity to welcome resettled refugees and organise their reception and integration, while government authorities retain responsibility for screening refugees for admission and the ultimate success or failure of the programme.<sup>23</sup> The scattered data available suggest that in Europe, refugee sponsorship has been an important tool for getting small and rural communities involved in refugee reception. For example, a recent evaluation of sponsorship programmes in Belgium and France (called ‘humanitarian corridors’) found that a majority of sponsors in each country were local parishes in small towns and rural villages.<sup>24</sup> Despite the generally small number of refugees admitted through such schemes,<sup>25</sup> they have received considerable attention in research and policy debates around refugee reception in smaller communities, with a specific interest in design elements that mobilise these communities’ unique resources. In particular, by immediately linking newcomers to community-based organisations,

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- 18 The SIPROIMI programme originated from a 2018 reform of the previous SPRAR system (Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati, or System of Protection for Refugees and Asylum Seekers), which was introduced in the early 2000s. Both SPRAR and SIPROIMI are decentralised, municipality-led systems of reception, initial care, and integration; as such, they follow a different approach than the centralised CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception) system, a parallel system of reception that is run by the Ministry of the Interior and that hosts the vast majority of asylum seekers (almost three-quarters in 2019), but which some observers have criticised for lower-quality reception and support standards. However, while SPRAR was accessible to both refugees and asylum seekers, SIPROIMI is only accessible to beneficiaries of international protection and unaccompanied children. See Asylum Information Database (AIDA), ‘Short Overview of the Italian Reception System’, accessed 9 November 2020; Annalisa Camilli, ‘Il Decreto Salvini ha favorito il business dell’accoglienza’, *Internazionale*, 17 February 2020.
- 19 In 2018, resettled refugees accounted for about 3 per cent of all beneficiaries of SPRAR/SIPROIMI projects; by comparison, unaccompanied minors accounted for 5 per cent and spontaneous asylum seekers whose protection claims are recognised 67 per cent. See SIPROIMI, *Rapporto annuale SPRAR/SIPROIMI 2018: Sistema di protezione per titolari di internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati* (Rome: SIPROIMI, 2018).
- 20 SIPROIMI, *Rapporto annuale SPRAR/SIPROIMI 2018*.
- 21 In October 2020, a new reform changed SIPROIMI into SAI (Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione, or System of Welcome and Integration), which again includes asylum seekers. See Annalisa Camilli, ‘Come cambiano i decreti Salvini sull’immigrazione’, *Internazionale*, 6 October 2020; Camera dei deputati, ‘Diritto di asilo e accoglienza dei migranti sul territorio’ (fact sheet, 29 October 2020).
- 22 Susan Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection: The Potential of Private Sponsorship in Europe* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2017). Europe has seven refugee sponsorship schemes (those in Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), which is around half of all such schemes worldwide. See Susan Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes: A Global State of Play and Opportunities for Investment* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019).
- 23 Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes*; European Resettlement Network (ERN), *Private Sponsorship in Europe: Expanding Complementary Pathways for Refugee Resettlement* (Brussels: International Catholic Migration Commission Europe, 2017).
- 24 Leïla Bodeux, Maya Perlmann, and Eleonora Frasca, *Fostering Community Sponsorships across Europe* (Geneva: International Catholic Migration Commission Europe and Caritas Europa, 2019).
- 25 Maximum national quotas are generally limited to a few hundred refugees. See Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes*.

sponsorship may help overcome barriers to integration typical of smaller communities that have more limited infrastructure and promote capacity-building in places with little prior experience with refugee reception.

While this study focuses on resettlement, different channels often intersect in small and rural communities. In particular, communities receiving resettled refugees often also receive spontaneous arrivals; the two may even be managed together as part of the same programmes (as in the case of Italy's SIPROIMI programme). At the same time, many of the policy lessons this report discusses, drawing from local resettlement

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experiences, cannot be simply transposed to work with spontaneous arrivals, due to significant differences between these legal channels. Resettled refugees may be better prepared for life in the destination country, thanks to pre-departure orientation sessions that sometimes involve local community representatives. Resettled refugees also generally receive more assistance in finding suitable accommodation and accessing early-integration supports,

and particularly in receiving communities that voluntarily participate in resettlement, they may encounter a warmer welcome. Unlike many asylum seekers, resettled refugees are also usually able to arrive with their families; UNHCR seeks to ensure as far as possible that all members of the refugee's family (including dependent non-nuclear family members) are resettled together and can access protection within the same country and community.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, although resettled refugees' status and rights vary somewhat depending on the receiving country, they generally do not have to endure the same uncertainty as asylum seekers waiting for an outcome in their asylum case.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, compared to spontaneous arrivals—who may settle in small and rural areas after having spent some time in the destination country—resettled refugees may have much more limited familiarity with the local language, culture, and institutions, and they may be unprepared to settle in a locality with low levels of diversity, where none of their new neighbours share their language or culture.

When looking at community and refugee experiences with resettlement in small and rural areas, it is also important to keep in mind that national resettlement schemes vary significantly in design. These variations can have a significant impact on reception and integration at the local level.

- ▶ **Voluntary or obligatory participation in resettlement.** Some national programmes allow municipalities to opt in or out, meaning that those receiving resettled refugees are doing so voluntarily. For example, this is the case in Belgium,<sup>28</sup> Finland, and the United Kingdom,<sup>29</sup> as well as in Italy, where resettled refugees are distributed through the SIPROIMI programme.<sup>30</sup> Other countries require local authorities to participate in resettlement—often following the same logic and criteria

26 UNHCR, *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (Geneva: UNCHR, 2011).

27 For example, refugees resettled to Belgium must undergo an asylum procedure after arrival, although usually they obtain refugee status very quickly. See Fedasil, 'Resettlement: Stages and Actors—Reception in Centres', accessed 11 November 2020.

28 ERN, 'National Resettlement Programmes: Belgium', accessed 21 October 2020.

29 SHARE Network, 'Resettlement in the EU' (fact sheet, SHARE Network, 2020).

30 Government of Italy, *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook: Country Chapter – Italy* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019).

as dispersal policies for spontaneous arrivals. For example, since March 2016, Swedish law requires all municipalities to receive and accommodate asylum seekers and refugees (including resettled refugees) to address housing bottlenecks in certain areas.<sup>31</sup> There are also hybrid models: some national programmes bind municipalities to receiving a quota of asylum seekers and refugees, but the municipalities can decide whether to fulfil part of this quota by participating in resettlement—as is the case in the Netherlands.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, national resettlement programmes generally make refugees' receipt of housing and financial support contingent on them remaining in the area where they are settled in an effort to limit onward movement—one of the recurrent challenges of resettlement to small and rural areas.

- ▶ **Placement criteria and mechanisms.** To determine where to resettle refugees within a country, national schemes that mandate participation generally focus on local housing capacity, economic conditions, population size, previous reception track record, and whether the refugee has family links to a particular locality.<sup>33</sup> In some cases, national authorities may consider more individually tailored criteria. In Portugal, for example, refugees are matched with local hosting entities for 18 or 24 months, taking into account whether the refugees previously lived in an urban or rural environment and their education and previous occupation.<sup>34</sup> A more granular matching of individual refugee profiles with the characteristics of specific localities (for example, matching refugee skills with local labour needs) is the exception, although small civil-society-led pilot initiatives have made some progress in this area. In 2018, the Swiss government began piloting an algorithm—developed by the Immigration Policy Lab using machine learning—that attempts to match asylum seekers with regions where they are most likely to find work.<sup>35</sup> Pairity, another algorithm-based tool, was created in Canada and piloted in the Netherlands; it matches refugees with volunteer groups using surveys to assess the preferences and characteristics of each party, and proposes a match based on the geographic distance between the volunteers and refugees, household composition, the newcomers' vulnerabilities and volunteers' capacity, labour market experience, language and culture, and hobbies and interests.<sup>36</sup> If adopted on a wider scale, similar tools may help increase the integration prospects of refugees placed in small and rural communities.
- ▶ **Pre-departure orientation for refugees.** Some countries' resettlement programmes include pre-departure orientation for refugees about to be resettled while they are still in countries of first asylum;<sup>37</sup> these sessions are generally run in partnership with international organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Yet their scope, duration, and content vary significantly.

31 EMN Sweden, *Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Programmes in Europe – What Works? Country Report Sweden* (Norrköping, Sweden: Swedish Migration Agency, 2016).

32 SHARE Network, 'Resettlement in the EU'.

33 ERN, 'How Do EU Countries Decide Where on Their Territories Refugees Will Live?', accessed 16 October 2020.

34 In practice, however, the matching process, which is conducted by the Portuguese High Commission for Migration, is often hampered by incomplete information about the refugees. See OECD, *Finding Their Way: The Integration of Refugees in Portugal* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019).

35 Swissinfo.ch, 'Switzerland to Test Algorithmic Asylum Placement', Swissinfo.ch, 10 May 2019. Over the next few years, the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration is placing 1,000 asylum seekers across Switzerland's cantons using the algorithm, while a control group will be distributed according to the existing and randomised quota system. See Immigration Policy Lab, 'Switzerland Launches Program to Test IPL Algorithm for Refugee Integration' (news release, 26 May 2018).

36 Pairity, 'Platform Details', accessed 11 November 2020.

37 Susan Fratzke and Lena Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown: Designing Effective Predeparture Orientation for Resettling Refugees* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019).

While some schemes (such as the Netherlands') offer specific information about where refugees will live, and others (such as Finland's) try to sensitise refugees to the idea that their destination may be a village rather than a city, most do not focus on conveying information about specific destination localities. Instead, they focus on information that may be useful nationwide, such as refugees' rights and responsibilities, the country's culture and values, and practical advice (e.g., on opening a bank account or using public transport).<sup>38</sup>

- ▶ **Support to receiving communities.** Resettlement programmes come with different forms of support for receiving communities and service providers. The most common is funding, often channelled directly from the national level to local institutions and service providers. In Italy, for example, municipalities participating in the SIPROIMI programme receive direct funding for three years from the Ministry of the Interior (National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services), covering staff costs, facilities, equipment, legal counselling fees, and integration services involved in the local reception and integration project.<sup>39</sup> In some countries—such as the Netherlands<sup>40</sup>—national authorities offer assistance to help localities prepare to receive refugees, something that may be especially important for small and rural communities with less prior exposure to migration, humanitarian or otherwise. Meanwhile, in Norway and the United Kingdom, IOM staff provide orientation sessions for municipal workers and community members who will work with resettled refugees, such as social workers and teachers.<sup>41</sup> And in Belgium, the national asylum agency (Fedasil), local authorities (Public Centres for Welfare Services), and nongovernmental service providers (Caritas) discuss and implement specific agreements on local-level service provision, which allow the national resettlement programme to be adapted to local realities.<sup>42</sup> Yet so far, most national programmes stop short of offering advice and support specifically tailored to small and rural receiving communities.

These variations in the design of resettlement programmes set the stage for policy choices at the local level. For example, in voluntary models, local authorities may be better able to credibly make the case to residents of communities unused to diversity that resettlement holds potential

benefits, and even stimulate a sense of local ownership over the process. On the other hand, in obligatory models, local service providers may be more willing to invest in capacity-building, believing that support for resettled refugees will be part of their operations long term. Making refugee reception mandatory may also relieve local authorities from having to justify investments in integration to their constituents.<sup>43</sup> Where pre-departure trainings for refugees are more thorough and include (relatively) detailed information on the community of destination, this may save local authorities and service providers in small and

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*Variations in the design of resettlement programmes set the stage for policy choices at the local level.*

38 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

39 SIPROIMI, 'Aderire alla rete SPRAR: La presentazione della domanda per accedere allo SPRAR', accessed 11 November 2020. When providing support for resettled refugees specifically (as opposed to SIPROIMI's other beneficiaries), the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services receives and dispurses to localities funding from the EU Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF). See SIPROIMI, *Rapporto annuale SPRAR/SIPROIMI 2018*.

40 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

41 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

42 Fedasil, *Resettlement in Belgium* (Brussels: Fedasil, 2020); EMN, *Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission in Belgium* (Brussels: Belgian National Contact Point of the EMN, 2016).

43 Schammann et al., *Zwei Welten?*

rural communities considerable investments in the initial reception phase—including by managing the frustration of refugees who were expecting to live in an urban environment.<sup>44</sup> And experimenting with more granular matching processes may help direct to small and rural communities those refugees with skills that are in line with local labour demands, thus reducing the need for extensive and costly integration measures. Therefore, although small and rural communities can take part in a range of initiatives and policy measures (as Section 4 will explore), the sustainability and effectiveness of resettlement to such localities often hinges on decisions made at higher levels of governance.

### 3 Challenges and Opportunities for Resettled Refugees and Receiving Communities

Refugee reception in small and rural communities holds promise on several levels—for refugees (better integration outcomes), receiving communities (population growth and economic revitalisation), and destination-country governments (fulfilling protection quotas in a more effective way). Yet this ‘triple win’ is by no means guaranteed. Several challenges, if not proactively addressed, can undermine the idyllic picture of rural welcome. For example, tight community bonds in small localities can help refugees tap into strong interpersonal networks and build social capital—or, at worst, condemn them to remaining on the fringes of the community. The absence of established co-ethnic minority communities may act as an incentive for refugees to learn the local language, but it also risks (further) isolating them. And a locality’s participation in resettlement may be met with a range of responses, from a warm welcome to indifference or even resistance, that will colour the experiences of both arriving refugees and local residents.

Small and rural communities are far from a monolithic reality.<sup>45</sup> Differences in their geographical locations, population density, socioeconomic characteristics, as well as their history and culture will have a strong impact on how resettlement programmes are perceived and implemented. The experience of refugees in remote villages, for example, will differ significantly from that of refugees in localities within close commuting distance of large urban centres—in terms of access to amenities, services, co-ethnic networks, and economic opportunities. And community reactions to newcomers may be quite different in localities that have experienced socioeconomic decline and sustained emigration,<sup>46</sup> compared to those with a thriving local economy and/or experiencing population growth.

44 In the Netherlands, the national agency in charge of resettlement (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) gives receiving communities written information about the profiles of incoming refugees, while special trainers are available to conduct informational meetings for community members. See Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

45 One model to classify rural areas has been proposed by the Thünen Institute in Germany, and it was used by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in a study on the integration of refugees in rural areas. This model classifies rural areas both by their degree of ‘rurality’ (including factors such as settlement density, the proportion of agricultural and forestry land, and the reachability of larger centres) as well as by their socioeconomic characteristics. See Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

46 Vasilis Margaras, ‘Demographic Trends in EU Regions’ (briefing note, European Parliament Research Service, Brussels, 2019). In central and eastern Europe, for example, about 60 per cent of rural regions experience population shrinkage (compared to 25 per cent in the EU-15). See European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON), ‘Shrinking Rural Regions in Europe: Towards Smart and Innovative Approaches to Regional Development Challenges in Depopulating Rural Regions’ (policy brief, ESPON, Luxembourg, 2017).

*Success or failure is not predetermined by the receiving community's characteristics. To a large extent, averting risks and seizing opportunities will depend on carefully planned interventions.*

Still, success or failure is not predetermined by the receiving community's characteristics. To a large extent, averting risks and seizing opportunities will depend on carefully planned interventions, informed by a strategic analysis of gaps and resources (e.g., concerning refugees' initial reception and orientation, training

offerings, social and cultural activities, and bridges to education and jobs). Especially for small communities with limited integration experience and infrastructure, welcoming refugees through legal pathways such as resettlement—which allows a greater degree of planning and monitoring of outcomes—may work as an effective 'incubator' that enables them to build the capacity and know-how to manage future migrant and refugee reception and integration.

## A. Opportunities and challenges for resettled refugees

While the characteristics of a receiving community are only one set of factors among many that shape the experiences of resettled refugees in a new country, they are nonetheless important. And despite the wide variation of what constitutes a small or rural community, there are some recurring challenges and opportunities.

### Access to integration support and relevant services

In small and rural communities, integration support can be both more personal and less specialised. Such localities may face greater challenges providing specialised assistance to newcomers with complex needs—such as physical disabilities or a history of trauma—due to a lack of infrastructure and expertise.<sup>47</sup> And even where appropriate services are available, language barriers may become an insurmountable obstacle for newly resettled refugees seeking to access them if there are bottlenecks with interpreting services. In interviews conducted for this study, refugees resettled to small communities in the Netherlands and Sweden mentioned having to travel long distances to obtain specialised treatment for themselves and their families.<sup>48</sup> One married couple resettled in a Swedish village mentioned having to travel approximately three hours by car on a regular basis so their son could see a specialist in a larger city for his special needs.<sup>49</sup>

Limited access to services (but also to economic opportunities, amenities, and co-ethnic networks) is often compounded by mobility constraints—one of the most salient integration challenges for many refugees in rural areas. Small and rural communities may have poor public transport connections to larger towns, and for refugees lacking a recognised driving license or a car, the inability to move can fuel a sense of

47 Tardis, *Another Story*; Meghan Miller Cronkite, Eleni Galatsanou, and William Ashton, 'Refugees in Manitoba: Small Centre Settlement' (discussion summary from a 22 October 2016 roundtable, Brandon University, Winnipeg, Canada, May 2017).

48 Author interview with resettled refugee, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 1 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.

49 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.



frustration<sup>50</sup> and hamper their pursuit of autonomy.<sup>51</sup> In the words of a cultural mediator in the small village of Petruro Irpino, Italy:

*'It would be important to invest more in transportation. [...] Transportation is our problem. You don't know how to move around, it's a remote area. Speaking of 'autonomy' if you need me to drive you to the police, to the doctor, to look for jobs [...] There is no autonomy.'*<sup>52</sup>

And while some small and rural communities have tried to alleviate this obstacle by setting up dedicated transportation services, these may create a pattern of dependency between resettled refugees and the social workers (or volunteers) who run them,<sup>53</sup> a risk vividly illustrated by the suspension of such services after the outbreak of COVID-19 in communities across Europe.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, the smaller size of institutions in small and rural communities, which often comes with a higher degree of informality, can allow for a swifter exchange of information, a more flexible mobilisation of resources, and more personalised support.<sup>55</sup> Resettled refugees interviewed in Italy mentioned being able to learn Italian within a few months of arriving in Petruro Irpino because of the intensive and tailored support services offered there.<sup>56</sup> And in Vilhelmina, Sweden, one resettled refugee was able to start a business thanks partly to informal support from his Swedish language teacher, who helped him take care of the administrative formalities.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, feeling a closer, more 'human' connection to public authorities and service providers—such as being personally welcomed by the town mayor upon arrival,<sup>58</sup> cultivating a strong bond with local social workers,<sup>59</sup> or receiving direct support from a headmaster when enrolling children in school<sup>60</sup>—can provide a greater sense of welcome that is hard to replicate in crowded urban centres.<sup>61</sup> In the words of a resettled refugee in Belgium, 'in a small community, offices [...] can take care of you in a quicker and more humane way, they can look after you better than in the larger cities. In a smaller community, maybe there are fewer choices, but it's easier to understand.'<sup>62</sup>

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- 50 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 24 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020.
- 51 In rural communities, having a driving license may not only be important in order to reach larger centres, but also to work in locally relevant sectors. As a resettled refugee trying to establish a small agricultural business in Martelange (Belgium) explained, 'It seems that the driving license is an obstacle in my life. If I had a driving license, I could work with the municipality to find land and cultivate it. It would be an opening for me. It's not so important to have capital. I have zero capital, but it affects me less than not having a driving license.' Author interview with resettled refugee, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020.
- 52 Author interview with cultural mediator, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Petruro Irpino, Italy, 25 August 2020.
- 53 Author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 24 August 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.
- 54 Author interview with teacher, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 18 August 2020.
- 55 Ohliger, Schweiger, and Veyhl, *Auf dem Weg zur Flüchtlingsintegration*; Tardis, *Another Story*.
- 56 Author interview with resettled refugees, Caserta, Italy, 25 August 2020.
- 57 Author interview with resettled refugee, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.
- 58 Author interview with resettled refugees, Caserta, Italy, 25 August 2020.
- 59 Author interview with SIPROIMI operator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 1 July 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.
- 60 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 24 August 2020.
- 61 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.
- 62 Author interview with resettled refugee, Maldegem, Belgium, 18 September 2020.

However, there can be downsides to informality. Informal solutions, if not adequately anchored institutionally, may be hard to sustain and grow, and they can be more vulnerable to changing political tides.<sup>63</sup> For instance, an interview with an Italian social worker directly involved in refugee reception and integration through the SIPROIMI programme revealed how sharper anti-immigrant rhetoric in the national political arena has led to occasional tensions with front-office employees of public service providers:

*'We hear comments [from some front-office staff] such as "why do they come here, why don't they stay where they come from?" [...] It is a bit disconcerting, because they never told us these things before. Previously, they were always helpful to us as social workers, helped us navigate changes in administrative regulations.'*<sup>64</sup>

Changes in political leadership and public discourse have also led some local organisations to offer fewer events to promote encounters between locals and newcomers to avoid backlash; in the words of a social worker: 'The change of government has upset the plans of many projects [in the area of refugee integration and community building]. We would like to do more, but since we know that the atmosphere is not favourable, we limit it to the indispensable minimum.'<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the relative absence of integration strategies and policies in small and rural communities compared to larger cities—as noted, most recently, by a German study<sup>66</sup>—may make it harder for small communities to sustain integration investments once individual refugees exit post-resettlement support programming.

### Forming social connections

An oft-mentioned advantage of resettling refugees in smaller communities is that their tightly knit social networks may help compensate for some gaps in infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> These community networks can help refugees practice using a new language on a more regular and informal basis, learn about cultural norms and habits, and even bypass some of the formal entry barriers to local labour markets. For example, a resettled refugee based in a small community in the Netherlands, mentioned that the local authorities he approached when searching for a job helped him find one in a pancake restaurant—a small step that proved essential in helping him build social capital and a sense of empowerment: 'the boss became a friend; he helped me learn the language and gave me the right direction to integrate in the village.'<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, a resettled refugee in a Swedish village said that while he had not yet been able to find employment, the support he experienced from other residents made him hopeful about his future prospects: 'I told my contacts in the community here that I want to work as a carpenter and they were happy. They are trying to help me, they are very good people.'<sup>69</sup> A strong sense of community may also give resettled refugees a greater feeling of safety,<sup>70</sup> which is especially important for those coming directly from overcrowded and

63 Tardis, *Another Story*.

64 Author interview with SIPROIMI operator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, 1 July 2020.

65 Author interview with cultural mediator for ARCI Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 29 June 2020.

66 Schammann et al., *Zwei Welten?*; Ohliger, Schweiger, and Veyhl, *Auf dem Weg zur Flüchtlingsintegration*; Hannes Schammann, Christin Younso, and Diana Meschter, 'Lokale Migrationspolitik in ländlichen Regionen Deutschlands: Ausgangspunkte für empirische Forschung' (working paper no. 142, Thünen, Braunschweig, Germany, March 2020).

67 Tardis, *Another Story*; Cronkite, Galatsanou, and Ashton, 'Refugees in Manitoba'.

68 Author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020.

69 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.

70 Author interview with resettled refugee, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 1 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020.

sometimes violent refugee camps as well as for families with children.<sup>71</sup> Finally, established community networks may provide opportunities for refugees to quickly earn the trust of local residents, for example through informal volunteerism—such as supporting senior citizens with their shopping.<sup>72</sup>

Yet without careful mediation, strong social bonds within homogeneous and conservative communities risk turning into an exclusionary mechanism. Multiple refugees mentioned in interviews that their interactions with locals rarely go beyond shallow politeness.<sup>73</sup> One noted, ‘Smaller societies can help you more. But at the same time, in smaller societies everyone is busy with their own problems, so this can limit your social life.’<sup>74</sup> Such barriers can have a demographic dimension, as young newcomers may find it harder to build friendships in rural communities with high shares of senior residents.<sup>75</sup> In the words of a resettled refugee living in the Belgian village of Maldegem, ‘Social contacts for young people are limited here. It is different in a large city like Ghent, which has many spaces for interaction. But in a small community, it is limited to going to work, doing the shopping, and coming back home.’<sup>76</sup> Another factor may be a lack of opportunities to bring refugees into contact with the wider community—beyond the immediate circle of the ‘already converted’ (those residents involved in refugee assistance and support).<sup>77</sup>

To improve resettled refugees’ access to community networks, one promising solution—especially for communities with limited integration resources and expertise—is to rely on the existing social infrastructure typical of small and rural areas,<sup>78</sup> such as local associations and cultural or religious community events. As a resettled refugee in Maldegem noted: ‘This is a small society. Also with other foreigners, there are opportunities to meet, occasions, celebrations. You can make contact quite quickly, you can meet people often. [...] For example, this week there is a carnival.’<sup>79</sup> Yet as other interviews highlighted, promoting refugees’ involvement in these activities often requires sustained support—for example, to bridge language or cultural barriers<sup>80</sup>—and may abruptly stop once these investments end.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, while small and rural communities often have a rich

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71 Author interview with resettled refugees, Caserta, Italy, 25 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020.

72 Author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020.

73 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 2 September 2020.

74 Author interview with resettled refugee, Maldegem, Belgium, 18 September 2020.

75 Author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020.

76 Author interview with resettled refugees, Maldegem, Belgium, 2 October 2020.

77 Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020. A recent evaluation of the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme in small communities with low levels of diversity found that, while local residents who came into direct contact with refugees largely overcame their fears and concerns, changes in the perceptions and attitudes of those who did not were negligible. See Marisol Reyes and Jenny Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool: The Effect of Community Sponsorship on Knowledge about, and Attitudes to, Refugees in Less-Diverse Communities* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2020).

78 Jean-Pierre Gauci, *Integration of Migrants in Middle and Small Cities and in Rural Areas in Europe* (Brussels: European Committee of the Regions, 2020).

79 Author interview with resettled refugee, Maldegem, Belgium, 18 September 2020.

80 Rainer Ohliger and Lisa Veyhl, *Mitwirkung, Mitgliedschaft, Bindung: Zugänge für Neuzuwanderer in die (ländliche) Zivilgesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2019).

81 Author interview with municipal refugee coordinator, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 31 August 2020.

landscape of associations and community events, in comparison to cities these may be rather conservative and lack intercultural awareness.<sup>82</sup>

Resettled refugees may see the lower levels of diversity in many small and rural communities both as an advantage and as a limitation. While the absence of large co-ethnic communities may offer chances and incentive to interact more with other locals and practice the local language (both for themselves and their children),<sup>83</sup> interacting with other refugees and having access to ethnic shops can be important for refugees' well-being.<sup>84</sup> Particularly in the initial period upon arrival, not having the possibility to communicate in a familiar language may feel very isolating, especially on top of the relative lack of public spaces in small and rural communities to facilitate social interactions, as compared to what is available in cities.<sup>85</sup>

### Financial autonomy and economic inclusion

Another frequently mentioned advantage of resettling refugees to small and rural communities is the availability of affordable accommodations<sup>86</sup>—especially for larger families.<sup>87</sup> While some recent studies have questioned the general assumption of 'cheap rural housing',<sup>88</sup> many refugee families interviewed for this project highlighted the benefits of living in more spacious accommodation, sometimes with attached outdoor space:<sup>89</sup> 'The houses are bigger and they are townhouses, not apartments.'<sup>90</sup> Yet apart from housing, not all interviewed refugees described life outside of the city as being less expensive. In Vilhelmina, Sweden, and in Petruro Irpino, Italy, refugees mentioned the high cost of groceries and other goods as a problematic aspect of their day-to-day life in small and rural communities—with some attributing these prices to lower levels of market competition in such localities as compared to cities.<sup>91</sup>

However, the key underlying issue many interviewees pointed to as challenging the affordability of small and rural areas is the scarcity of jobs (and professional advancement opportunities)<sup>92</sup>—an observation in line with the findings of most studies on refugee integration in such communities. While this challenge is

82 Stefan Kordel and Tobias Weidinger, *Wechselwirkungen, Steuerungsmaßnahmen und Handlungsempfehlungen: Vielfalt von Zuwanderung und Entwicklung ländlicher Räume* (Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2020); Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

83 Author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.

84 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 1 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 2 September 2020.

85 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 24 August 2020.

86 According to Eurostat, across the EU-28 in 2015, the percentage of population for whom housing costs accounted for more than 40 per cent of their total household income (the so-called 'housing cost overburden rate') was lowest in rural areas (9.1 per cent), compared to 10.6 per cent in towns and suburbs, and 13.3 per cent in cities. See Margaras, 'Demographic Trends in EU Regions'.

87 Stacey Haugen, "'We Feel Like We're Home': The Resettlement and Integration of Syrian Refugees in Smaller and Rural Canadian Communities', *Canada's Journal on Refugees* 35, no. 2 (2019): 54–64.

88 Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

89 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020.

90 Author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020.

91 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.

92 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 24 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Maldegem, Belgium, 18 September 2020; author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

not exclusive to these areas,<sup>93</sup> entering the labour market can be harder in smaller, less sectorally diverse, and sometimes less dynamic economies. Different factors may account for refugees' trouble accessing employment. In communities with difficult socioeconomic conditions, the main barrier is often an overall lack of jobs—for refugees and other residents alike. Where jobs are available, other challenges can include a mismatch between newcomers' skills and available vacancies;<sup>94</sup> hesitation to hire refugees on the part of employers unused to having a diverse workforce;<sup>95</sup> and limited training and language-learning opportunities to help refugees overcome hiring barriers.<sup>96</sup> In interviews, some refugees expressed concerns about being unable to provide for themselves and their families once resettlement-related supports end. Apart from jeopardising their financial self-sufficiency, an inability to work can also have other effects on refugees' integration—reducing their social interaction opportunities, slowing down language learning,<sup>97</sup> causing skills to atrophy, and generating a sense of helplessness and frustration.<sup>98</sup> In the word of a resettled refugee in Sweden:

*'I used to be a carpenter [...] I know there is a factory nearby and I asked if I could work there. I have been sitting at home for one year and I'm feeling very bored [...] I only went to primary school in my country, and I have no way of learning Swedish theoretically. That's why I would like to start working.'*<sup>99</sup>

While resettled refugees with higher skill levels often struggle to find job opportunities that match their work profiles in rural areas,<sup>100</sup> those with lower levels of formal education and training may find it somewhat easier to access such opportunities. This is due both to informal networks of support as well as to the presence of economic sectors offering jobs that have relatively low barriers to access,<sup>101</sup> from

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- 93 Jenny Phillimore, Marisol Reyes, and Sara Hassan, *Community Sponsorship in the UK: Formative Evaluation 2017-2020* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2020).
- 94 Susanne Schech, 'Silent Bargain or Rural Cosmopolitanism? Refugee Settlement in Regional Australia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 4 (2014): 601–18; Kordel and Weidinger, *Wechselwirkungen, Steuerungsmaßnahmen und Handlungsempfehlungen*.
- 95 Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*; Madeleine Sauer and Judith Vey, *Sozialräumliche Integration von Geflüchteten im ländlichen Raum* (Jena, Germany: Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft, 2019); author interview with local entrepreneur, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 27 August 2020.
- 96 Tardis, *Another Story*; Schech, 'Silent Bargain or Rural Cosmopolitanism?'
- 97 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.
- 98 Author interview with resettled refugees, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.
- 99 Author interview with resettled refugees, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.
- 100 For example, a trained physician resettled to a small community in the Netherlands expressed doubts about whether he would remain there after his professional qualifications are recognised. Author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020. See also Diana Meschter, "'Auf dem Dorf hast du einen Namen, in der Stadt eine Nummer" – Geflüchtete in ländlichen Räumen', Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 29 April 2020; Schech, 'Silent Bargain or Rural Cosmopolitanism?'; European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), 'How to Support the Social Inclusion of Migrants and Asylum Seekers' (fact sheet prepared for a workshop, ENRD, Brussels, 2016).
- 101 Louisa Vogiazides and Hernan Mondani, 'A Geographical Path to Integration? Exploring the Interplay between Regional Context and Labour Market Integration among Refugees in Sweden', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 23–46. The study attributes this to typical socialisation processes in rural areas that can be beneficial for refugees in their job-seeking and to the sectoral composition of rural economies, which often lower skilled occupations that may provide opportunities that are a better fit for refugees. See also Schech, 'Silent Bargain or Rural Cosmopolitanism?'; Rösch, Schneider, Weber, and Worbs, *Integration von Geflüchteten in ländlichen Räumen*.

agriculture to hospitality.<sup>102</sup> In Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, a small hydraulic systems entrepreneur who employs refugees as apprentices stressed how his relationship of trust with local civil society has played a key role in encouraging him to hire refugees, and his more direct, informal knowledge of his clients has allowed him to directly respond to their potential concerns and hesitations, in a region still partly unused to diversity: ‘When the clients ask me who the boy is, I always tell them they should ask him directly. I tell them he’s a participant in a reception and integration project [...] and that they are very kind and well-behaved youth.’<sup>103</sup> Still, some low-skilled resettled refugees may find that small and rural communities do not offer sufficient future prospects—if not for themselves, then for their children, due to a lack of education (and therefore, social mobility).<sup>104</sup> In recent years, some studies and projects have pointed to the potential of entrepreneurship as a livelihood option for refugees in such communities.<sup>105</sup> Yet in interviews, several newcomers as well as local authorities and stakeholders did not consider this a realistic pathway, whether due to a lack of demand, infrastructure, or specialised support.<sup>106</sup>

Where jobs are available, one advantage of small and rural communities is that the greater proximity between local authorities and employers may help get employers involved in labour market integration efforts from the outset—something that is currently underexploited. Local authorities could leverage the fact that employers in these communities may see themselves as having a social as well as an economic

*Local authorities could leverage the fact that employers in these communities may see themselves as having a social as well as an economic function.*

function; for example, some may be willing to take on a more informal ‘mentoring’ role towards resettled refugees.<sup>107</sup> Involving local employers more actively in refugee integration could also help create effective opportunities for skill-building and compensate for gaps in formal offerings—for example, collaborating with employers to provide

job-based, practical language learning may be more effective than classroom-based courses for refugees with low levels of schooling.

## ***B. Opportunities and challenges for small and rural communities***

Particularly when compared with the expanding literature on the integration capacity of localities across Europe, systematic research into the impact of refugee arrivals on receiving communities has remained somewhat limited. Some governments have increased investments into the monitoring and evaluation of

102 Sectors of employment vary across countries, highlighting once again the diversity of rural characteristics and experiences. For example, while work opportunities in Italian rural areas are often concentrated in agriculture, refugees in German small and rural communities may find employment in hospitality, retail, and in vehicle repair and maintenance. See Kordel and Weidinger, *Wechselwirkungen, Steuerungsmaßnahmen und Handlungsempfehlungen*.

103 Author interview with local entrepreneur, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 27 August 2020.

104 Author interview with resettled refugees, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 28 August 2020.

105 Marco Eimermann and Svante Karlsson, ‘Globalising Swedish Countrysides? A Relational Approach to Rural Immigrant Restaurateurs with Refugee Backgrounds’, *Norwegian Journal of Geography* 72, no. 2 (2018): 82–96.

106 Author interview with volunteer, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 12 August 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

107 Author interview with resettled refugee, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 27 August 2020; author interview with local entrepreneur, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 27 August 2020.

resettlement programmes,<sup>108</sup> but these efforts have generally focused on either assessing procedures and programme delivery<sup>109</sup> or on individual refugees' integration outcomes.<sup>110</sup> In recent years, and especially outside of Europe, there has been a growing interest among researchers and policymakers in how resettlement and refugee sponsorship can benefit receiving communities—including rural and remote ones.<sup>111</sup> In Europe, on the other hand, the more limited efforts to link migration and rural development have so far focused mostly on non-humanitarian migration, though some more recent studies and policy papers have also looked at the potential impacts of asylum seeker arrivals<sup>112</sup> and, in a few cases, refugee resettlement and sponsorship programmes.<sup>113</sup>

Measuring the impact of refugee resettlement on receiving communities is extremely complex. Operationalising blurry concepts such as 'social cohesion' or 'social capital' into measurable indicators is challenging—despite important progress in recent years towards more systematic sets of indicators.<sup>114</sup> And while economic impact may be easier to define and measure, drawing a causal link between refugee arrivals and certain outcomes is extremely difficult, due to numerous intervening factors and asynchronous timeframes (as some economic impacts may take a relatively long time to appear). While there is still a lot to learn in this area,<sup>115</sup> existing evidence—including the research conducted for this report—allows for the distillation of a set of opportunities and challenges for small and rural host communities receiving resettled refugees. Understanding what they are and the conditions under which they may appear can help policymakers devise the tools to make the engagement of such communities in resettlement more sustainable.

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- 108 For example, the European Union Action on Facilitating Resettlement and Refugee Admission through New Knowledge (EU-FRANK) project has focused extensively on improving monitoring and evaluation. See Hanne Beirens and Aliyyah Ahad, *Measuring Up? Using Monitoring and Evaluation to Make Good on the Promise of Refugee Sponsorship* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2020).
- 109 Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR, and RAP)* (Ottawa: IRCC Evaluation Division, 2016); Pairity, 'Platform Details'.
- 110 The definition of integration is itself disputed. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Home Office distinguishes 14 key domains, which range from employment to housing, digital skills, and stability. In New Zealand, on the other hand, integration is described using five domains: self-sufficiency, participation, health and well-being, education, and housing. See Carolyne Ndofor-Tah et al., *Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019*, 3rd ed. (London: UK Home Office, 2019); Immigration New Zealand, *Refugee Resettlement: New Zealand Resettlement Strategy* (Auckland: Immigration New Zealand, n.d.).
- 111 Rural Ontario Institute, *Measuring Rural Community Vitality: Newcomer Engagement and Social Capital in Rural Communities* (Guelph, Canada: Rural Ontario Institute, 2017); David Smerdon, 'When Refugees Work: The Social Capital Effects of Resettlement on Host Communities' (working paper, University of Nottingham, 9 June 2016); AMES and Deloitte Access Economics, *Small Towns Big Returns: Economic and Social Impact of the Karen Resettlement in Nhill* (N.p.: AMES and Deloitte Access Economics, 2015); Beirens and Ahad, *Measuring Up?*
- 112 See for example Gauci, *Integration of Migrants in Middle and Small Cities and in Rural Areas in Europe*; Kordel and Weidinger, *Wechselwirkungen, Steuerungsmaßnahmen und Handlungsempfehlungen*; Manfred Perlik, Giulia Galera, Ingrid Machold, and Andrea Membretti, *Alpine Refugees: Immigration at the Core of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019); Nicolò Marchesini, Monia Giovannetti, and Luca Pacini, 'L'accoglienza di richiedenti asilo e rifugiati nelle aree interne: una strategia per il rilancio del territorio', Percorsi di Secondo Welfare, 25 February 2019.
- 113 Jenny Phillimore and Marisol Reyes, *Community Sponsorship in the UK: From Application to Integration* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2019); Reyes and Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool*.
- 114 Rich Janzen et al., *Outcome Inventory: Evaluating Refugee Programs* (Waterloo, Canada: Centre for Community-Based Research, 2019).
- 115 A number of ongoing projects promise to shed more light on some of these gaps. For example, the EU-funded project MATILDE (Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Areas) aims to measure the social and economic impact of migration on rural and mountain regions, and to develop appropriate policy toolboxes to link migration and rural development. See MATILDE, 'About MATILDE', accessed 4 November 2020.

## Social revitalisation

Some commentators have hypothesised that refugee arrivals (especially through sponsorship programmes) can revitalise small and rural communities at risk of depopulation and social decline.<sup>116</sup> Some have suggested, for example, that involving local residents in supporting the settlement process can allow these locals to learn new skills, expand their networks, and gain a sense of fulfilment—while developing a sounder understanding of refugee issues and a greater openness to diversity in general.<sup>117</sup> In Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, one interviewee described how interacting with newly resettled Syrian refugees helped locals gain a more direct understanding of the war in Syria and its effects on people in the region, topics they only knew from following the news.<sup>118</sup> Another interviewee, from a small town in the Netherlands, stressed the important function of schools in promoting mutual openness:

*‘It is good when kids are enrolled in school, for example then they would say “this is my friend Muhammad, he’s from Syria.” Kids share stories and promote awareness and understanding. [...] I always lived in the city and I was working with refugees there, and when I came here some people would say “oh, you work with refugees, there’s a lot of them, why did they come here?” Now that more people are coming, it is helpful that children share stories and create mutual understanding.’<sup>119</sup>*

Similarly, some studies have found that resettlement can help (often more traditionally oriented) small and rural communities become more outward oriented and develop a more global perspective.<sup>120</sup> In the Swedish village of Vilhelmina, to address and alleviate residents’ initial suspicions as the community began receiving resettled refugees, local civil-society groups organised intercultural encounters around cooking:

*‘We met in a big house here, we had people from eight or nine different countries. We bought food for them and told Vilhelmina residents to come and visit, to eat food from [the refugees’] countries. After that, for many years it kept happening. It was a big time for Vilhelmina people.’<sup>121</sup>*

Refugees have also helped some communities adapt to new challenges, including those related to the pandemic. In Petruo Irpino, Italy, for example, a new social cooperative linked to the local SIPROIMI project

116 See for example Bodeux, Perlmann, and Frasca, *Fostering Community Sponsorships across Europe*; Rural Ontario Institute, *Measuring Rural Community Vitality*; Smerdon, ‘When Refugees Work’.

117 AMES and Deloitte Access Economics, *Small Towns Big Returns*; Smerdon, ‘When Refugees Work’; Reyes and Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool*.

118 Author interview with SIPROIMI operator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant’Arcangelo, 1 July 2020.

119 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020.

120 Author interview with mayor, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020; author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020. A recent evaluation of the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme (introduced in 2016) in five small towns characterised by low levels of ethnic diversity found that the scheme improved local residents’ understanding of refugee issues and helped them develop a more global perspective and become more ‘outward looking’. See Reyes and Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool*. An Australian study on the impact of refugee resettlement in a rural community found that locals developed more trust and positive attitudes as a result of exposure to resettlement—in line with the predictions of contact theory. See Smerdon, ‘When Refugees Work’.

121 Author interview with workers from the Salvation Army, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 25 September 2020.



and jointly run by resettled refugees and other residents helped distribute protective masks and deliver medicine to elderly residents.<sup>122</sup>

However, it is difficult to tell from these anecdotal examples whether resettlement is living up to its promise. Unlike in refugee sponsorship, where bottom-up engagement is an essential part of programme design, ‘classic’ refugee resettlement programmes may require greater public intervention and steering to avert strain on the social fabric of communities—let alone to achieve the ambitious goal of strengthening social capital. If communities are not adequately prepared, for example, the settlement of newcomers may lead to intergroup conflicts. Ongoing mediation may be required, as even small occurrences—such as refugees being perceived as occupying ‘too much space’ in local buses, or disagreements over garbage disposal—may ignite tensions.<sup>123</sup> And while most interviewees suggested that fears and tensions tend to rapidly diminish with personal encounters, the frequency and intensity of intergroup interactions may drop once structured community-building efforts come to an end (e.g., because funding for them expires).<sup>124</sup>

The evidence thus points to the need for thoughtful and proactive community engagement that can outlast short-term funding. It also highlights the need for day-to-day, casual exchanges based on common interests or experiences, rather than interactions centred on folklore and cultural exchange; the latter may produce only temporary curiosity or even reinforce a sense of difference in less diverse communities.

### Boosting local services for the whole community

Advocates of resettlement have long argued that receiving resettled refugees can help small and rural communities maintain or strengthen local services, thanks to increased and more diverse demand (in terms of age, nationality, cultural and religious background, and educational and professional profile of service users). And indeed, this has been demonstrated by some studies in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, which have shown that resettlement can strengthen the provision of health-care services and skill-building opportunities; attract funding that can be channelled into community-building activities; lead to the development of additional interpretation and other settlement services that can help small and rural communities manage future immigration;<sup>125</sup> and even give employment service staff greater pride in their work.<sup>126</sup> In many countries, the national government transfers a lump sum to communities participating in resettlement, which some small and rural communities may see as a way to supplement funding for local schools or social services—especially in systems where conventional welfare redistribution is based on population levels, and therefore tends to leave smaller localities with more limited funding.<sup>127</sup>

122 Author interview with mayor, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020; author interview with president, community cooperative ‘La Pietrangolare’, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 26 June 2020.

123 Author interview with director and coordinator of integration programming for newcomers, CRILUX (Centre Régional d’Intégration de la Province du Luxembourg), Martelange, Belgium, 3 August 2020.

124 Author interview with workers from the Salvation Army, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 25 September 2020; author interview with municipal refugee coordinator, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 31 August 2020.

125 AMES and Deloitte Access Economics, *Small Towns Big Returns*.

126 Reyes and Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool*.

127 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020; author interview with school headmaster, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 24 July 2020.

Interviews provided numerous examples of this ‘boost’ to local services. As described by local authorities as well as representatives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) involved in resettlement, sustained refugee arrivals can, over the years, help secure the survival of schools, pharmacies, post offices, and supermarkets, which may otherwise close due to low demand.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, refugee resettlement can lead to the creation of additional infrastructure that improves the quality of life for all residents. For example, a new medical centre (*maison médicale*) was opened in the Belgian village of Martelange, partly in response to the heightened health-care needs of resettled refugees.<sup>129</sup>

*Refugee resettlement can lead to the creation of additional infrastructure that improves the quality of life for all residents.*

And in Petraro Irpino, Italy, the arrival of refugee families with children in a community characterised by a high number of senior residents led to the creation of a summer centre for children and a games library, as well as to more frequent public transport links with neighbouring localities—amenities likely to benefit existing residents as well.<sup>130</sup>

Engaging in resettlement may also spark a change within institutions and service providers in small and rural communities, prompting them to adapt their working practices to be more inclusive of diverse populations. For example, a recent evaluation of the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme (introduced in 2016) in five small towns characterised by low levels of ethnic diversity found that the scheme helped make schools more sensitive to the needs of learners of diverse backgrounds.<sup>131</sup> This was echoed in interviews with NGO workers and school personnel in this study. In Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, the local school has a designated teacher who, in collaboration with the headmaster, works with the local refugee reception project and social services to understand and design the best integration support strategies for each refugee student. Moreover, local teachers have received training on teaching Italian as a foreign language, something that may benefit other newcomers as well.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, municipal social workers interviewed in the Belgian village of Martelange indicated that, in response to new refugee arrivals, municipal schools have adopted a special learning programme for newcomer pupils, including additional courses in French and mathematics.<sup>133</sup>

On the other hand, without adequate preparation and ongoing mediation between local service providers and resettled refugees, trying to address new and diverse needs may turn into a highly stressful experience for both sides. It also risks placing undue pressure on generic social services. Studies of resettlement to rural areas—both in Europe and elsewhere—have repeatedly highlighted challenges in providing services

128 Author interview with director and coordinator of integration programming for newcomers, CRILUX, Martelange, Belgium, 3 August 2020; author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020.

129 Author interview with social workers, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

130 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020.

131 Reyes and Phillimore, *Like Pebbles in a Pool*.

132 Author interview with school headmaster, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 24 July 2020; author interview with SIPROIMI operator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant’Arcangelo, 1 July 2020.

133 Author interview with social workers, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

as different as language and skills training<sup>134</sup> and health care.<sup>135</sup> This dynamic was described by some interviewees. For example, if local institutions and service providers fail to obtain key information from national authorities when arriving refugees have medical conditions that require specialised treatment—as has been an issue in two of the examined municipalities<sup>136</sup>—local actors have to quickly plan alternative solutions while managing dissatisfaction and potential health-care risks among refugees. In Martelange, Belgium, the local public welfare centre (Centre Public d'Action Sociale) established a 'social taxi' driving service to accompany resettled refugees to medical or administrative appointments, but one interviewee said those running the service felt overwhelmed at times, due to the impatience of refugees as well as the challenges of working with those who had experienced trauma.<sup>137</sup>

Another risk is that, if funding for services is strictly targeted to a certain group, such as refugees, other residents may feel resentful and worry about competition. In Petruo Irpino, Italy, the SIPROIMI project enabled the local municipal administration to purchase a van, but on the condition that it could only be used to transport project beneficiaries—a restriction that local authorities say they fear may not be understood by other residents and risks fuelling a public narrative that unfair advantages are being granted to refugees.<sup>138</sup>

In short, while local services can be enhanced by the additional demand that comes with the arrival of refugees, challenges can arise if funding does not expand to meet their often complex needs—or, where services are seen as prioritising refugees, even fuel a public backlash. This points to the need to consider the impact of resettlement funding and new services on broader local populations and, where possible, to improve services for the receiving community as a whole.

## Rekindling and diversifying local economies

With a growing number of rural communities struggling from socioeconomic decline and depopulation, researchers and policymakers have become interested in how refugee arrivals may benefit rural economies. The possible economic benefits of refugee reception range from immediate ones—such as the creation of new jobs linked to supporting newly arrived refugees as well as increased revenues for local shops and businesses<sup>139</sup>—to more indirect ones, such as the revival of certain trades or the fostering of a more lively and diversified local business environment.<sup>140</sup>

134 Haugen, "We Feel Like We're Home"; Michelle Lam, 'Language Education for Newcomers in Rural Canada: Needs, Opportunities, and Innovations', *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 14, no. 1 (2019): 77–97; Brooke McDonald-Wilmsen et al., 'Resettling Refugees in Rural and Regional Australia: Learning from Recent Policy and Program Initiatives', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 68, no. 1 (2009): 97–111.

135 See for example Tardis, *Another Story*; Haugen, "We Feel Like We're Home"; Lam, 'Language Education for Newcomers in Rural Canada'; McDonald-Wilmsen et al., 'Resettling Refugees in Rural and Regional Australia'; Scott Sypek, Gregory Clugston, and Christine Phillips, 'Critical Health Infrastructure for Refugee Resettlement in Rural Australia: Case Study of Four Rural Towns', *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 16, no. 6 (2008): 349–54.

136 Author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020; author interview with volunteer coordinator, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 10 September 2020.

137 Author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

138 Author interview with mayor, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020.

139 Author interview with director and coordinator of integration programming for newcomers, CRILUX, Martelange, Belgium, 3 August 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

140 Author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020; Kordel and Weidinger, *Wechselwirkungen, Steuerungsmaßnahmen und Handlungsempfehlungen*.

Local stakeholders interviewed for this study pointed to examples of a number of these benefits. In Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, one interviewee described how the reception of refugees through the local SIPROIMI project has given an important lifeline to struggling businesses—from supermarkets to clothing shops and furniture producers—thanks to increased commissions and private consumption.<sup>141</sup> Some local authorities have smartly tapped into nationwide public employment supports to improve the employability of newcomers while filling local skill gaps. In Vilhelmina, Sweden, a regional programme of publicly subsidised placements is training resettled refugees for elder-care positions—a sector that is booming due to population ageing, but that is plagued by a shortage of locally available human capital.<sup>142</sup> And in Petruo Irpino, Italy, the local SIPROIMI project generated a small number of jobs—in social work to support refugees—that helped keep (or reattract) young skilled workers in a community otherwise deeply affected by youth emigration and brain drain.<sup>143</sup> In a nearby village, the establishment of a social cooperative alongside the SIPROIMI project has allowed locals to share with refugees skills in trades at risk of disappearing—such as traditional viticulture.<sup>144</sup> In the words of a civil-society interviewee:

*‘We’ve learned viticulture from a local elderly man. The first day he laughed in our face. The second day he got angry. The third day he gave us a lesson and from the fourth day onwards, he was the one waiting for the [resettled refugees] every day. Soon after that, young locals started joining the Ghanaians and Gambians in the vineyards. [...] Today we sell a local wine.’<sup>145</sup>*

However, outside of countries experiencing rural decline and depopulation—such as Italy, where the discourse about leveraging migration for rural revitalisation has deeper roots and is clearly recognisable in the logic of the national SIPROIMI programme (see Section 4.E.)—aspirations of using refugee resettlement to support local economic development are still sporadic and vague. When asked explicitly in interviews, service providers involved in resettlement projects generally downplayed expectations of economic revitalisation. For example, two municipal social workers in a Belgian village, when asked whether there had been any discussion of leveraging resettlement and immigration as an economic resource, said that this link does not play a central role in the local resettlement project, and that there are no specific aspirations or investments in it.<sup>146</sup> Civil-society interviewees in the Netherlands and Belgium pointed to structural limitations. For example, interviewees acknowledged that refugee entrepreneurship could in principle help diversify rural business environments, but also pointed to low local demand, limited specialised support, and regulatory barriers as inhibiting factors.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, filling labour gaps is made difficult by a frequent mismatch between refugees’ skills and limited available opportunities.<sup>148</sup> And even when resettled refugees

141 Author interview with SIPROIMI operator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant’Arcangelo, 1 July 2020.

142 Author interview with municipal refugee coordinator, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 31 August 2020; author interview with employee of the Public Employment Agency, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 23 September 2020. The programme has been temporarily suspended due to COVID-19.

143 Author interview with mayor, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020.

144 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020; author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020.

145 Author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020.

146 Author interview with teacher, Martelange, Belgium, 18 August 2020; author interview with educator, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 30 August 2020.

147 Author interview with volunteer, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 12 August 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d’Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

148 Author interview with volunteer coordinator, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 10 September 2020.

bring relevant experience, they may lack the necessary certificates to join skilled trades in highly formalised labour markets—especially in small and rural communities offering limited upskilling opportunities.<sup>149</sup>

In communities that do hope to maximise the potential of refugee resettlement, the immediate focus mostly lies with ‘softer’ social-capital benefits, and local stakeholders may see economic gains as a desirable but further off goal. In Petruro Irpino, Italy, the creation of a social cooperative through the SIPROIMI project has reportedly brought a notable indirect effect: the introduction of a more entrepreneurial mindset in communities described as being bogged down by resignation or frustrated by an unrealistic sense of entitlement.<sup>150</sup> But as an Italian civil-society interviewee with expertise on linking refugee reception to local resources noted, ‘The timeframe of protection differs from the time [the local community] needs to make investments into local development.’ And while local SIPROIMI projects could be said to have ‘set in motion a system of development’, the link is neither direct nor immediate. ‘Maybe 25 to 30 per cent [of hosted refugees] will stay, but at the same time it would be wrong to read this as 70 per cent failure. Instead, it should be seen as proof of the fact that the investment should continue. The engine has been started, but it is a long-term plan.’<sup>151</sup>

Low expectations among local stakeholders for the ultimate economic contributions of resettled refugees may be a sign of a particularly thorny labour market integration challenge. Such realism may be a strength in managing expectations in receiving communities, but it may also reflect limited ambitious or strategic thinking about the potential big wins.

## 4 Promising Policy Approaches for Sustainable Resettlement

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The small yet growing body of research in this area highlights that, far from passively tolerating refugee resettlement (and more broadly, the reception of newcomers), small and rural communities can—and often do—proactively shape it, in line with local realities, resources, and expectations. This requires thoughtful policy interventions, some of which can happen at the local level, while others require the support of national or EU-level systems. The subsections that follow explore six major areas of policy action in which promising practices already exist, as highlighted in interviews as well as in other studies.

### A. *Kickstarting refugee integration before arrival*

For resettled refugees—who, unlike many asylum seekers and those recognised as refugees after reaching Europe, generally spend little to no time in the destination country prior to settling in a small or rural community—the immediate post-arrival period is often unsettling. Arriving in such communities can come as a particular shock if, for example, refugees expected to be resettled to a city, or if the lack of amenities, co-ethnic networks, and specialised services comes as a surprise. If not carefully managed, this may result in

149 Author interview with volunteer, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 20 August 2020.

150 Author interview with mayor, Petruro Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020. One interviewee observed that this spirit also sparked new ideas among residents on how to revalue local resources, such as reopening an astronomical observatory in a neighbouring village (Chianche). Author interview with coordinator of SIPROIMI projects, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Petruro Irpino, Italy, 19 June 2020.

151 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020.

frustrations on the part of newly arrived refugees and, at times, can upset the relationship between existing residents and newcomers. In the words of a social worker involved in the SIPROIMI project in Petruro Irpino, Italy:

*'Our greatest difficulty with [newly arrived Syrian refugees] was that they did not accept the small size of the community. They told us they had been presented a different situation in Jordan [in the pre-departure orientation]. They had been told they would go to a larger town. They found themselves in a context they had not been adequately prepared for. This situation made us suffer. [Initially] they wanted to return to Jordan. This transition definitely needs to be managed better.'*<sup>152</sup>

To soften this landing, pre-departure orientation programmes can help prepare refugees for the life that awaits them in their new locality—one that they often had little choice in selecting. Most pre-departure programmes mainly provide general information about the country of destination (e.g., rights and responsibilities, cultural background, and general practical information, such as about public transport and payment methods). However, some destination countries—such as the Netherlands, Romania, and the United Kingdom—provide specific information on where refugees will live.<sup>153</sup> A more engaging way to prepare refugees is to involve local authorities and stakeholders. For example, programmes may give local stakeholders the opportunity to interact with refugees awaiting resettlement—as Norway does, with cross-cultural trainers from destination municipalities (some of whom are themselves resettled refugees) delivering some orientation sessions.<sup>154</sup> However, these models have potential drawbacks: in particular, extra revisions to the pre-departure orientation programme and extended or tailor-made sessions incur higher costs. Some also face organisational difficulties, as training sessions sometimes occur before national authorities determine a refugee's exact destination.

More simply, pre-departure orientation programmes could include more information about key differences between urban and rural areas within the country. The Finnish programme, for example, does not include information about the municipality in which individual refugees will resettle, but it provides general photos of villages to signal that their destination might not be a large city.<sup>155</sup> A further option is to explain the typical 'adaptation curve' that many refugees resettled to rural areas experience. In interviews, several local stakeholders described resettled refugees going through a phase of pessimism and disillusionment concerning their prospects for starting a new life in a small or rural community, but also how some start appreciating the benefits of living outside a large city once their language proficiency improves and they start building a network of acquaintances and friends. In the words of a Dutch social worker: 'Once they settle down, they see that they are starting a new life in a new country, without their family. Sometimes they say they want to be in a city with more diversity [...] But eventually they also see that it is good and quiet and safe [here].'<sup>156</sup>

Some countries, such as the Netherlands, have tried to incorporate the experience and feedback of previously resettled refugees—collected through home visits and other evaluation tools—into the design

152 Author interview with SIPROIMI employee, Petruro Irpino, Italy, 25 September 2020.

153 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

154 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*.

155 Fratzke and Kainz, *Preparing for the Unknown*, 10.

156 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020.

of pre-departure programming. In some cases, they have even been involved as mentors who answer questions via Skype during the pre-departure training.<sup>157</sup> Ensuring that some of these voices come from refugees living in small and rural destinations could help build a picture of positive settlement experiences in such locations.

## *B. Preparing receiving communities and service providers*

In communities less used to diversity, early and proactive preparation can help residents understand the rationale behind resettlement, foster a trust- and transparency-based relationship between authorities and residents, and prevent potential misunderstandings and tensions. Thanks to the smaller size of local populations, ensuring that information about newcomers' backgrounds and the logic driving the resettlement project reaches the entire community (either directly or via word of mouth) prior to refugees' arrival can be easier than in larger receiving communities. Closer ties between residents and local authorities can also allow for a more open exchange about concerns and doubts.<sup>158</sup>

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In Petruo Irpino, Italy, the mayor and service providers have worked to prepare the community through face-to-face conversations and events.<sup>159</sup> And in the Netherlands, service providers in charge of reception and integration support approached the future neighbours of arriving resettled refugees, providing information and allowing them to ask questions.<sup>160</sup> Local authorities and civil-society stakeholders pointed to the importance of targeting opinion leaders—that is, community members with prominent standing and high credibility—and, if possible, enlisting them as 'multipliers' to inform their peers and address potential concerns.<sup>161</sup> However useful, though, any attempt to delegate this outreach will require adequate preparation to avoid reinforcing rifts between 'advocates' and 'opponents' of resettlement.

Some localities have experimented with approaches to encourage a more empathy-based understanding of the resettlement project. An Italian civil-society volunteer explained in an interview that presenting refugees' stories within a narrative that resonates with locals' experiences can go a long way in promoting solidarity: 'It's mostly older people who pay the most attention and who help if needed. Elderly residents are familiar with emigration, they saw their relatives emigrate. Therefore, they are more sensitive than 20-year-olds.'<sup>162</sup> In the Dutch municipality of Peel en Maas, one interviewee pointed to how a documentary about

157 UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform, 'Dutch Professionals & Former Resettled Refugees Cooperate to Help with Pre-Departure Orientation and Training', updated 15 July 2020.

158 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020; author interview with mayor, Petruo Irpino, Italy, 18 June 2020.

159 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020.

160 Author interview with volunteer and with volunteer coordinator, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 12 August and 10 September 2020.

161 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020; author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020.

162 Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

one resettled refugee family's initial half year after arrival helped promote greater awareness and solidarity among community residents—particularly pupils, as the local authority agreed to show the documentary in schools—and reduced resistance to the arrival of newcomers.<sup>163</sup> In the same locality, authorities have also brokered connections between local journalists and newly arrived refugees, allowing the latter to introduce themselves in the local press:

*'It's easier to talk to the neighbours when new people have a name and a story instead of just being a Muslim family. Otherwise, it can be scary having new families. One single mom had a story in the paper, and then the whole village was saying hello to her in the street.'*<sup>164</sup>

Preparatory measures should also target local service providers—from schools to employment agencies to medical centres. This is all the more important in small and rural areas, where these actors generally have more limited capacity and know-how to address the needs of diverse service users. Adequate preparation can help them think pragmatically about which resources to mobilise—for example, by coordinating with counterparts in nearby localities or leveraging the support of volunteers. Municipal representatives interviewed in Sweden described organising meetings with school principals, church members, members of migrant communities, and even the manager of the local supermarket to provide information about refugees' arrival and discuss how to best support them.<sup>165</sup> Interviewees in Maldegem, Belgium, similarly described contact with schools as an important pillar of community outreach, as it prepares teachers for the arrival of new students.<sup>166</sup>

Specialist knowledge of how to support resettled refugees may not be always available locally in small and rural communities. To fill gaps in expertise, one approach is to involve previously resettled refugees, for example by recruiting them as interpreters, volunteers, and cultural mediators.<sup>167</sup> This can also give refugees an opportunity to get active, build their skills, and possibly gain a job where other economic opportunities may be scarce. The national level also has a key role to play in providing relevant local stakeholders accurate and timely information about the profiles and needs of refugees—especially those requiring immediate attention, such as acute medical conditions.

A promising approach can be seen in the Netherlands, where national authorities collect biographical and social information on refugees in 'social intake' interviews at the pre-departure stage, and then transfer it to receiving municipalities.<sup>168</sup> Dutch interviewees also spoke favourably about the country's Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) sending officials to municipalities to provide in-person information on arriving refugee families and their needs to a group of gathered stakeholders, including representatives

163 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020.

164 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020.

165 Author interview with local official, municipality of Ljusdal, Sweden, 30 January 2020.

166 Author interview with head of Citizen and Welfare Department, Public Centre for Social Welfare, Maldegem, Belgium, 11 August 2020.

167 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020; author interview with cultural mediator, ARCI Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 29 June 2020; author interview with cultural mediator, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Petruo Iripino, Italy, 25 August 2020. On the role of cultural mediators with a refugee background in sponsorship schemes, see also Bodeux, Perlmann, and Frasca, *Fostering Community Sponsorships across Europe*.

168 ERN, 'Country Profile: The Netherlands', accessed 21 October 2020.



of primary schools and social services.<sup>169</sup> Still, interviews suggest that timely communication of this type between national and local authorities is often the exception rather than the rule.

### C. *Encouraging sustained and meaningful interactions*

Investments to promote positive intergroup encounters are especially important in small and rural communities, where the absence of neighbours with a similar cultural or linguistic background can spell isolation for newcomers. Such investments can help newcomers access the informal social networks that may in turn facilitate their access to job opportunities, financial loans, accommodation, and more.

In the aftermath of the 2015–16 spike in arrivals of asylum seekers and other migrants, a plethora of community-building initiatives emerged across Europe, aimed at bringing locals and refugees together in meaningful ways.<sup>170</sup> Many of these types of programmes—from intercultural dinners to workshops on theatre and photography<sup>171</sup>—can be found in smaller communities receiving resettled refugees, according to interviewees. In localities with limited integration budgets, these projects have been mostly run by organisations directly involved in resettlement, and thus they tend to occur most frequently when refugees are in the initial phase of post-arrival support.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, these initiatives are often small in scale, can be tokenistic, and if explicitly framed as occasions for intercultural encounter, they risk attracting only those local residents who already view resettlement favourably and see diversity as an opportunity for enrichment.

One promising approach may be to leverage the social infrastructure already available locally—from sport associations to faith-based organisations. This can bring refugees and other residents together as peers sharing positive experiences, while also injecting new life into local associations at risk of decline. A project

*This can bring refugees and other residents together as peers sharing positive experiences, while also injecting new life into local associations at risk of decline.*

in the village of Vilhelmina, Sweden, for example, was very successful at involving refugees in sports associations and in activities such as swimming, football, and hunting; these leisurely intergroup encounters, in addition to enriching the local association landscape, also allowed resettled refugees to make quick progress on their language acquisition.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, in Petruo Iripino, Italy, rather than investing in brand new community-building measures,

local authorities and their civil-society partners have worked to include refugees in traditional events, such as a feast for the village’s patron saint and a festival for local wine production.<sup>174</sup> Ensuring continued involvement of refugees in such associations and traditional events, however, may require prolonged

169 Author interview with volunteer coordinator, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 10 September 2020.

170 Liam Patuzzi, Meghan Benton, and Alexandra Embiricos, *Social Innovation for Refugee Inclusion: From Bright Spots to System Change* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019); Liam Patuzzi, *Driving Migrant Inclusion through Social Innovation: Lessons for Cities in a Pandemic* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2020).

171 Author interview with executive director, Fondazione Città della Pace per i Bambini Basilicata, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 7 August 2020.

172 Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

173 Author interview with employee of the Public Employment Agency, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 23 September 2020.

174 Author interview with general director of Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 10 June 2020.

mediation by experienced bridge-builders—particularly as rural associationism is often characterised by high levels of cultural homogeneity.<sup>175</sup>

Localities thinking more ambitiously would do well to foster interactions through general institutions and everyday routines, as these may have greater reach than specific leisure activities. One option is to maximise the potential of exchanges in neighbourhoods and schools, which are ideal settings for informal encounters<sup>176</sup> and which many interviewees cited as rife with opportunities for both children and adults to interact. One Dutch interviewee presented the fast enrolment of newly resettled children in local schools—generally within two or three weeks—as a key success factor of integration: it enables refugee families to establish a more regular routine, while also facilitating informal interactions and friendships between refugee and non-refugee children that can help put their parents' hesitations into perspective.<sup>177</sup> A local official in an Italian locality mentioned deliberate efforts on the part of the local SIPROIMI project to accommodate incoming refugee families in (relatively) densely populated areas, resulting in casual interactions with other residents from the outset.<sup>178</sup>

Richer social interactions may also be promoted through 'nudges' across other areas of integration support, from employment assistance to financial inclusion. For example, on-the-job upskilling programmes may be more effective at promoting social interactions and building trust between employers and refugees than more conventional group trainings, and transferring social benefits to refugee women—a group often at a high risk of marginalisation—can encourage them to interact with banks and other local institutions, thus strengthening their autonomy.<sup>179</sup>

The pandemic is likely to take a heavy toll on community-building initiatives—both because they generally depend on in-person interactions, and because they may be the first in line to experience funding cuts.<sup>180</sup> While the public-health crisis has sparked some experimentation in transposing these initiatives to the digital realm, the success of such efforts is unclear and interviewees did not describe such developments in their communities. Indeed, virtual models may struggle to take hold in small and rural areas, due to digital skill gaps among (often comparatively old) local populations, sometimes compounded by weak digital infrastructure.

## D. Supporting refugees' long-term integration

The initial support provided by local resettlement projects—including access to housing, enrolment in language classes, health checks, social benefits, and community activities—is key in helping refugees adapt to their new life. Yet for many, its duration (generally around one year, although support can often be

175 Ohliger and Veyhl, *Mitwirkung, Mitgliedschaft, Bindung*.

176 Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

177 Author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020. Several other interviewees pointed to schools as a key vehicle for social integration, not just for children but for the whole family: author interview with resettled refugee, Maldegem, Belgium, 18 September 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020; author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020; author interview with executive director, Fondazione Città della Pace per i Bambini Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 7 August 2020.

178 Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

179 Author interview with executive director, Fondazione Città della Pace per i Bambini Basilicata, Sant'Arcangelo, Italy, 7 August 2020.

180 Patuzzi, *Driving Migrant Inclusion through Social Innovation*.

extended for cases with special needs<sup>181</sup>) is too short to achieve autonomy. This risks creating a ‘cliff edge’ in refugees’ integration trajectories, a danger that is often more acute in small and rural communities in which the range of available follow-up services and opportunities is more limited than in cities.<sup>182</sup> Local authorities and their partners therefore need to take steps to cushion potential bumps in integration pathways and give refugees and their families enough opportunities to become independent and settled within the community.

### Building networks with mainstream services and engaging volunteers

Refugees’ transition into ‘mainstream’ services—such as those provided by employment agencies, municipal social services, or even community-based welfare institutions—is an important step in successful resettlement to small and rural communities. It is also an area that requires further investment.<sup>183</sup> Successfully making the transition largely relies on trusting relationships between the organisations running the resettlement project and the wider landscape of institutions in the locality. To support resettled refugees in the Italian village of Sant’Arcangelo, the foundation Città della Pace has established a network that includes schools, faith-based associations, and local civil society; it has also been able to build a positive relationship with the local carabinieri (a police force).<sup>184</sup> These broad-based networks can also give greater credibility to the resettlement project in the eyes of local residents, some of whom may view the charities running the project as ideological and partisan.

Resettlement service providers in small communities may also engage local residents as volunteers. Doing so can help forge networks with other associations and service providers, thus weaving a safety net for refugees exiting resettlement support. In the words of one civil-society interviewee from West Maas en Waal in the Netherlands:

*‘Often people who are volunteers [for us] are also engaged in other ways, they are not people who are sitting at home and doing no activities. For example [name of volunteer] used to be [...] the family doctor for one village, so everybody in the village knows her, she has a big network. I also had another volunteer, he was a referee, so many people knew him in this football world. So, if I have new volunteers, I try to use the social network of the volunteers to help the resettled refugees.’<sup>185</sup>*

181 The duration of initial dedicated support for resettled refugees varies significantly across countries and schemes. For example, in Belgium, resettled refugees are first accommodated in reception facilities for six or seven weeks, and then provided housing in a municipality for at least six months (or more for cases with additional support needs), after which local social services assist them in finding independent accommodations. In Italy and France, housing and integration support is granted for one year, but it can be extended for those with additional support needs. In the Netherlands, resettled refugees receive housing and tailored support for 12–18 months, while in Sweden, persons with refugee status (resettled or not) receive financial support from the state during the first two years, provided they follow an ‘establishment plan’ agreed on with the public employment services. The SHARE Network, ‘Resettlement in the EU’; Swedish Migration Agency, ‘Questions and Answers about Resettled Refugees’, accessed 11 November 2020; author interview with provider of social support to refugee status holders, Peel en Maas, the Netherlands, 18 August 2020; author interview with volunteer, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 12 August 2020.

182 In the words of a municipal stakeholder in Italy, ‘[t]he greatest limitation is that when projects end, [refugees] are left to themselves. [...] after the “slide” of projects, what’s missing is the actual insertion’ into the local labour market and social fabric.’ Author interview with local counsellor for culture and immigration, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 3 August 2020.

183 Tardis, *Another Story*.

184 Author interview with executive director, Fondazione Città della Pace per i Bambini Basilicata, Sant’Arcangelo, Italy, 7 August 2020.

185 Author interview with volunteer coordinator, Dutch Refugee Council, West Maas en Waal, the Netherlands, 10 September 2020.

Volunteers play a crucial role in supporting resettled refugees in small and rural localities, where formal support services may be stretched thin, professional social workers may be responsible for several villages, and some forms of assistance may be very time intensive (e.g., driving refugees to nearby towns). As with community-building efforts, COVID-19 has brought new challenges for initiatives that usually rely on volunteers. For one, there are questions as to how to effectively engage volunteers while keeping both them and refugees safe (including elderly and other high-risk persons). While some forms of volunteerism can be transferred to the digital realm or done via phone—such as mentoring or answering questions—others such as transportation assistance cannot. And, as noted in the context of community-building, moving volunteer opportunities online can exclude some locals and refugees who lack digital skills or internet connectivity.

## BOX 2

### Smoothing the Transition from Reception Measures to Mainstream Services

In Sweden, the Establishment Programme, implemented through the Public Employment Service, supports refugees for 24 months within their first three years after arrival. It provides language training, social orientation courses, skills development opportunities, work experience placements, and the validation of competences and skills. In Vilhelmina, for instance, the local Public Employment Service offers refugees who are furthest from the labour market (and who are enrolled in the Establishment Programme) the opportunity to participate in the Extra Chance initiative for up to two years. During this time, the Public Employment Service covers their full salary, which encourages employers—including the municipality—to provide professional development opportunities to refugees. Other forms of employment support are available after refugees exit Extra Chance, such as job subsidies that cover part of their salary.

In Italian municipalities, formal reception supports (e.g., language and adult education courses, apprenticeships, and vocational reskilling opportunities) often end when refugees exit the SIPROIMI projects. Regional initiatives have aimed to address this gap and help refugees fully step into the labour market. For instance, the Com.Pass.O project (Competenze, Passione e Occupazione)—implemented in Italy's southern regions and funded through AMIF—helps resettled refugees enter the labour market. It focuses on identifying refugees' needs, strengths, and preferences; helping them get their formal and informal qualifications recognised; and supporting their development of social and professional networks.

This type of long-term support is critical for helping refugees improve their language and professional skills, become familiar with the local labour market, and establish connections to employers that can result in permanent jobs. Alongside providing access to formal activities (e.g., work experience placements), these initiatives can also reach out to employers and raise their awareness of how newly arrived refugees could fill skills gaps. Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on whether job opportunities exist in the area and how they match up to refugees' skills.

Sources: Swedish Public Employment Service, 'The Establishment Programme', accessed 20 October 2020; ARCI Lecce, 'Progetto Com.Pass.O', accessed 20 October 2020; author interview with employee of the Public Employment Agency, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 23 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugees in Vilhelmina and Kungsbacka, Sweden, 9 September and 30 September 2020; author interview with employee of SIPROIMI, Petruro Irpino, Italy, 25 September 2020.

## Building relationships with employers and promoting entrepreneurship

Another central factor in establishing sustainable, long-term integration pathways for resettled refugees is the creation of connections with employers. Involving local employers in upskilling or language-learning

programmes (e.g., funded through public subsidies) can create training opportunities in small communities with limited formal courses. These may also be more in line with the learning preferences of resettled refugees with less experience in formal learning settings—as highlighted by several interviewed refugees.<sup>186</sup> In regions with relatively high labour demand, this approach may also help ensure that the skills refugees develop are well-aligned with local sectoral priorities and help fill persistent skill gaps (e.g., in agriculture, nursing, and social care).

However, the success of these approaches rests on significant involvement from (national) public authorities and civil-society organisations to prepare, counsel, and reassure employers. Businesses in small and rural communities may include many small and medium-sized enterprises with limited experience with diversity

*National authorities may also wish to consider setting incentives to involve employers in resettlement more closely and at an early stage—an approach still underexplored in Europe.*

and human resources capacity to manage friction within their workforces—factors that can make them risk averse. In Vilhelmina, Sweden, the national Public Employment Service regularly approaches local employers to inform them about the possibility of hiring resettled refugees and about available subsidies.<sup>187</sup> National authorities may also wish to consider setting incentives to involve employers in

resettlement more closely and at an early stage—an approach still underexplored in Europe. This could also help ensure better matching between refugees being resettled and receiving communities, based on the newcomers' profiles and locally available opportunities.

Entrepreneurship can constitute an alternative pathway to economic integration.<sup>188</sup> In theory, many smaller communities may offer interesting entrepreneurial opportunities, thanks to unexploited market niches and empty, affordable buildings. However, as interviews suggested, formal entrepreneurship support in small and rural localities tends to be sporadic.<sup>189</sup> This may push refugees to rely to informal support from acquaintances, family, and (where available) co-ethnic networks for business advice, financial loans, and other types of support.<sup>190</sup> And while this may be enough to get a business project started, the lack of specialised guidance on how to navigate the local market, financial instruments, and administrative requirements can place the endeavour on a shaky foundation.

Recent years have seen the growth of pilot programmes to support refugee entrepreneurs, sometimes with private-sector involvement.<sup>191</sup> One main lesson from this period is that refugee entrepreneurs require comprehensive technical support (in marketing, business management, and product development) and

186 Author interview with resettled refugee in Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020.

187 Author interview with employee of the Public Employment Agency, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 23 September 2020.

188 Recent estimates made in Australia of the economic benefits of refugee entrepreneurship show remarkable potential, whereby starting 1,000 businesses per year could yield up to AUD 1 billion yearly in economic gains within a decade. See Philippe Legrain and Andre Burridge, 'Seven Steps to Success: Enabling Refugee Entrepreneurs to Flourish' (Sydney: Centre for Policy Development and Open Political Economy Network, 2019), 12.

189 Author interview with resettled refugees in Vilhelmina, Sweden, 9 September 2020; author interview with resettled refugee, Martelange, Belgium, 10 September 2020; author interview with social workers, Centre Public d'Action Sociale, Martelange, Belgium, 8 July 2020.

190 Eimermann and Karlsson, 'Globalising Swedish Countrysides?'

191 The Human Safety Net, 'For Refugee Start-Ups', accessed 20 October 2020.

psychosocial support.<sup>192</sup> Incubator-type models risk being too costly for small and rural communities—unless they specialise in just one or a few sectors and integrate entrepreneurship training into a self-sustaining business model. One example of this type of support can be seen in the United States, where the nonprofit Minnesota Food Association provides refugee and migrant farmers with a plot of land, training, access to farm equipment, and support with marketing and distribution to wholesalers, farmers’ markets, and restaurants.<sup>193</sup> Similarly, in Sweden, the EU-funded project ‘The Potato Backyard’ established a social enterprise, as a way to build migrants’ and refugees’ entrepreneurial skills through practical work in an organic shop and a farmers’ market.<sup>194</sup>

## E. Weaving refugee resettlement into local development

Refugee resettlement and rural development are still largely treated as separate policy areas. Yet, as mentioned in Section 3.B., there is a strong case for promoting links between the two, including resettlement’s potential role in shoring up public services and local businesses at risk of closure. Promoting better links to local development could also help communities look beyond classic ‘integration’ policies and make investments in broader infrastructure that serves everyone, potentially raising public opinion of resettlement in the process.

Because resettlement projects in small and rural communities are generally small in scale, they may need to be embedded in more comprehensive strategies if they are to be a lever for local development. This holistic approach is one of the central tenets of the SIPROIMI programme of decentralised refugee reception in Italy: next to supporting refugees, the programme aims to promote cross-community networks; tap into local resources (such as unused land or housing, waning community traditions, and declining crafts and trades); and strengthen local services to the benefit of both immigrants and other residents.<sup>195</sup> For example, a network of rural communities in southern Italy (Piccoli Comuni del Welcome<sup>196</sup>) has used SIPROIMI funds to establish a community cooperative<sup>197</sup> in each locality that will launch activities in sectors such as agriculture, skilled trades, tourism and hospitality, and welfare services—all with the goal of improving local living conditions.<sup>198</sup> A civil-society leader in one village, recounted how the local cooperative opened a small grocery store after the old one closed down:

*‘[T]he only grocery shop in the village shut down. For months, local residents could not buy bread autonomously, they had to leave an envelope with money outside the door and wait for the*

192 Jock Collins, *From Refugee to Entrepreneur in Sydney in Less Than Three Years* (Sydney: UTS Business School, 2016).

193 Legrain and Burridge, ‘Seven Steps to Success’.

194 ENRD, ‘The Potato Backyard, Entrepreneurial Training for Immigrants’, updated 5 April 2017.

195 Daniele Ferretti, ‘Oltre l’accoglienza. Lo SPRAR come possibile fattore di sviluppo delle comunità locali?’, welforum.it, 7 December 2017; Emilian Baldoni and Monia Giovannetti, ‘Gli interventi di accoglienza integrata e la ricaduta sui territori’, Secondo Welfare, 19 July 2019; SIPROIMI, ‘SIPROIMI: History, Objectives and Characteristics’, accessed 20 October 2020.

196 The network aims to promote a vision of rural development and local welfare innovation centred around refugee reception. See Caritas, ‘Il “Progetto PCW”: cos’è e come si articola’, accessed 4 November 2020.

197 Community cooperatives are a form of social enterprise rapidly spreading in Italy, partly in response to a strained system of national social welfare. They aim to regenerate local assets and to establish strategic partnerships with public and private stakeholders. See Michele Bianchi, ‘The Italian Community Cooperative: Analysis of Impact on Local Territories through the Social Capital’ (working paper, Glasgow Caledonian University, November 2017).

198 Caritas, ‘Il “Progetto PCW”’. See also Monia Giovannetti, ‘Il sistema di accoglienza e protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati nei piccoli comuni italiani’, *Contesti, Città, Territori, Progetti* 1 no. 2 (2017): 16–31.

*municipal administration to buy it. In 2018, I saw scenes that I thought I would see only in movies. [...] How can you ask young generations not to leave if they have to travel 20 km just to buy groceries? That's where we got the idea to open a little grocery shop.<sup>199</sup>*

While community cooperatives could generate solutions to pressing social needs in communities that are poorly served by conventional infrastructure and welfare systems, many of these projects are still in their early phase and their success is hard to evaluate. Interviews in Italy suggested they may quickly begin to have positive social effects—for example, promoting ties between locals and newcomers, as well as providing important community-based services. Still, the timeframe to achieve financial sustainability and maximum economic impact (e.g., job creation) is much longer and the likelihood of success uncertain.<sup>200</sup>

For small and rural communities to link resettlement with local development, adequate policy frameworks and funding tools are needed. While SIPROIMI is one of the chief national examples in Europe, some EU-level instruments also exist. For example, the EU Framework for Rural Development Policy (part of the EU Common Agriculture Policy) also encompasses policies for migrant and refugee integration.<sup>201</sup> Meanwhile, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development supports the LEADER programme<sup>202</sup>—through which ‘Local Action Groups’ bring together public, private, and civil-society partners and act as brokers for local stakeholders and resources—and includes migrant and refugee inclusion projects.<sup>203</sup> Yet with the exception of a temporary spike of interest following the heightened arrivals in 2015–16, migrant and refugee inclusion is rather marginal in many of these programmes.<sup>204</sup> What is more, EU funding can be hard to access for smaller towns and rural communities, either due to a lack of awareness of these opportunities or limited administrative capacity to apply for and manage these funds.<sup>205</sup>

Regional, national, or international networks can also help link resettlement and local development. They can help communities understand opportunities and navigate the available funding tools. In Sweden, for example, the Västerbotten County Administrative Board, which brings together 15 rural municipalities, has developed a regional strategy to leverage integration to address the challenges of population ageing and unmet skill needs (see Box 3).<sup>206</sup> The country’s National Rural Network has also established a working group on the social inclusion of migrants and refugees that brings together key players for rural development,

199 Author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020.

200 Author interview with administrative director and head of community cooperatives, Consorzio Sale della Terra, Benevento, Italy, 23 July 2020.

201 Gauci, *Integration of Migrants*.

202 The LEADER local development method engages local actors in designing and delivering strategies and in resource allocation to promote the development of rural areas. LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale, or Links between Activities for the Development of Rural Economy) was introduced in the 1990s as an alternative to traditional top-down policies, which had proven ineffective in addressing and solving challenges common to many European rural areas. Under the broader name Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), since 2014 this approach has been extended to other EU funds beyond the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, including the European Social Fund (ESF). See Hanne Beirens and Aliyyah Ahad, *Money Wise: Improving How EU Funds Support Migration and Integration Policy Objectives* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019); ENRD, ‘LEADER/CLLD’, accessed 4 November 2020.

203 *EU Rural Review*, ‘The Rural Response to Europe’s Refugee Crisis’, *EU Rural Review* 21 (2016).

204 For example, a search through the ENRD project database in November 2020 using the keyword ‘migrant’ yielded less than 20 results in a database of 602 projects (including projects from two funding phases, 2007–13 as well as 2014–20). See ENRD, ‘[Projects and Practice](#)’, accessed 11 November 2020.

205 Gauci, *Integration of Migrants*.

206 Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, *Regional utvecklingsstrategi Integration 2019–2022* (Umeå, Sweden: Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, 2019).

such as the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the Swedish Public Employment Service, and even the Swedish Football Association. And at EU level, networks such as the European Network for Rural Development,<sup>207</sup> the SHARE Network,<sup>208</sup> and the Cities and Regions for Integration initiative<sup>209</sup> provide important platforms for future growth in this area.

European cities have gained clout in migration and asylum governance in recent years—a development that is testament to the importance of well-organised networks. Similar efforts for smaller communities could prove equally essential. Pooling resources would help them to compensate for their more limited capacity, visibility, and experience with resettlement and integration.

### BOX 3

#### Embedding Refugee Integration in Regional Development Strategies

The Swedish county of Västerbotten is working to build on national and regional measures to facilitate the settlement of newcomers (including asylum seekers and unaccompanied children as well as resettled refugees) and to promote community development. The county's regional development and integration strategy for 2019–22 draws on the input and commitment of the 15 municipalities. Key areas of intervention are housing, labour market inclusion, expansion of social networks and active participation in society, social orientation, and improving health. The strategy is supported by regional development funds totalling nearly 1 million euros.

This regional support helps municipalities focus on activities that address specific local needs. For example, Vilhelmina municipality's Immigration Service Department—in cooperation with local partners—has implemented projects aimed at groups facing additional integration challenges, including refugee women of all ages and refugees with low literacy skills. Among the measures that have yielded the highest positive impact are: (1) housing initiatives to increase knowledge about social conventions and avoid spatial segregation; (2) initiatives to build newcomers' knowledge of the Swedish labour market and employers' awareness of the potential refugees bring; (3) community-building activities seeking to expand sustainable social interactions; (4) leisure activities promoting better knowledge of sports and hiking; and (4) activities involving 'role models', such as refugees who overcame challenges by studying, learning Swedish, and working.

Sources: Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, *Regional utvecklingsstrategi Integration 2019–2022* (Umeå, Sweden: Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, 2019); author interview with municipal refugee coordinator, Vilhelmina, Sweden, 31 August 2020; Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, 'In i Västerbotten – projektkatalog 2018' (project catalogue, Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten, Umeå, Sweden, 2019).

207 The ENRD, established in 2008 by the European Commission, is a multi-stakeholder hub for knowledge- and information-sharing on rural development policy and projects, and it supports the implementation of Member States' rural development programmes. See ENRD, 'About the ENRD', accessed 20 October 2020.

208 The SHARE Network, founded in 2012, promotes mutual learning among local and regional stakeholders interested or involved in resettlement. Particularly since 2018, SHARE has been a key player in engaging smaller towns and municipalities in training, peer-learning, and capacity-building around resettlement. See ERN, 'What is SHARE?', accessed 20 October 2020.

209 Launched in 2019 by the European Committee of the Regions, this initiative aims to promote the integration of migrants and refugees as well as cooperation among small municipalities, mid-sized cities, and regions. See European Committee of the Regions, 'Cities and Regions for Integration of Migrants', accessed 23 October 2020.



## 5 Conclusions

Recent years have seen growing interest in small and rural communities' experiences with welcoming refugees and promoting their inclusion. In Europe, much of this attention was initially attributable to the 2015–16 spontaneous arrivals of large numbers of asylum seekers, which prompted the start or expansion of settlement (programmes) in rural areas. Since then, small and rural communities' involvement in refugee resettlement and sponsorship programmes has progressively attracted more focus in research and policy discussions—due both to the growth in number and size of these programmes, and to a global conversation about their potential benefits for receiving communities.

Identifying general trends in small and rural communities' experiences with resettlement is a difficult undertaking; the evidence base remains thin and scattered, these communities are diverse in their characteristics, and there are important differences in the design and operation of resettlement programmes. Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest several common themes. Early supports for refugees resettled in small and rural communities are often high quality, and newcomers may additionally benefit from a more individualised, personal approach on the part of service providers and authorities, as well as from these communities' social warmth. Yet long-term integration is often a challenge. Infrastructural and service gaps, as well as a lack of educational and job opportunities in some localities—particularly those that are remote, ageing, and struggling economically—can make it difficult for refugees to transition from post-arrival supports to mainstream services and self-sufficiency. Many of these underlying challenges, however, are not specific to refugees, and in some contexts they may even promote a sense of solidarity between newcomers and existing residents.

The impacts of resettlement and refugee reception on small and rural communities also appear to be mixed. Demographic effects are generally negligible, given the generally small number of refugees being settled in a community, though they may be felt in extremely small communities and those experiencing emigration and population ageing. The direct economic effects also appear to be very small, in most cases not going beyond a modest spike in returns for local businesses. And while interviewees recounted examples of refugee resettlement positively affecting social cohesion and infrastructure—from fostering greater intercultural curiosity and openness, to rekindling a sense of pride in the local community, to helping avert school closures and drive the creation of new services and amenities—these remain to be reliably quantified.

*Resettlement projects generally remain a phenomenon of modest scale in such communities—but if woven into a coherent strategy of local development, they may act as a lever that sets other activities in motion.*

Perhaps one of the most important lessons to draw from this research, however, is that talking about the 'impact' of resettlement on localities may be misguided, as it creates the impression that receiving communities are a passive character—or just a backdrop—in this story. Interviews with refugees and local stakeholders suggest something quite different: resettlement's potential to benefit small and rural communities is closely linked to these communities'

*deliberate* efforts to pursue such outcomes. Numerically and financially, resettlement projects generally remain a phenomenon of modest scale in such communities—but if woven into a coherent strategy of local development, they may act as a lever that sets other activities in motion. Embedding resettlement into a long-term strategy involving a wide range of stakeholders can frame it as a ‘common project’ and promote a sense of ownership among and active participation by community members.

At the same time, framing refugee resettlement as a resource for local revitalisation is a sensitive endeavour. For one, resettled refugees are a group with strong vulnerabilities and support needs, rather than an immediate ‘welfare boost’. Building up high expectations may not only place undue pressure on refugees, but also spark disappointment among receiving-community members if, for example, refugees decide to move on to larger urban centres, despite local efforts to support their settlement and leverage it for regional development. Betrayed expectations may even lead small and rural communities to not engage in future resettlement efforts (and more broadly, in welcoming newcomers).<sup>210</sup>

When resettled refugees do move on, the decision generally hinges on factors similar to those driving other residents to make the choice to leave. These are often linked to the (limited) availability of educational and work opportunities, previous experiences living in an urban versus rural area, the existence of transport connections to larger centres, and the presence or absence of meaningful social connections.<sup>211</sup> Moving away from misguided expectations of loyalty and towards acknowledgment of resettled refugees’ agency and autonomy will prevent small and rural communities from seeing a refugee’s decision to move as a failure of the programme. It may also encourage communities to strategically review local resources on an ongoing basis, and to develop plans to leverage them to offer both resettled refugees and other residents better prospects for settling down in the area.

Another point that clearly emerged from this research is the value of a networked approach. Notwithstanding the rich variety of local reception and integration efforts—often quite successful at creatively overcoming constraints in funding, capacity, expertise, and infrastructure—achieving sustainable resettlement in small and rural communities rests on coordinated action at multiple governance levels. Learning from the progress achieved by larger cities, national and EU policymakers may, for example, wish to invest in strengthening networks or associations of small and rural communities—ideally, folding resettlement into more ‘generalist’ rural networks, so as to address refugee reception in concert with other local challenges and opportunities. These networks, such as the European Network for Rural Development and the SHARE Network, can be platforms for receiving communities to share, assess, and consolidate (often informal) local practices; gain awareness of funding instruments; and develop a stronger agenda-setting voice with public partners (e.g., national governments, public employment services) and private partners (e.g., employers, civil-society organisations). For example, the SHARE Network has been a central player in developing and promoting capacity-building tools for small and rural communities engaging in (or interested in) resettlement. Its *Preparing Welcoming Communities Training Curriculum*, launched in

210 Author conversation with Petra Hueck, Head of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe, 1 July 2020.

211 Meschter, “Auf dem Dorf hast du einen Namen”. There is a growing understanding among local authorities and stakeholders in rural communities that the factors that determine whether newcomers stay long term, thus allowing the local community to fully leverage their contributions, are not radically different from the local development factors that influence whether locals emigrate. See Schammann et al., *Zwei Welten?*, 62.

2018, has been tested and continuously improved in numerous municipalities across Europe, with feedback showing a keen appetite for solutions adapted to non-urban realities.<sup>212</sup>

Other promising practices for promoting and improving resettlement in small and rural communities include simplifying funding instruments to make them more accessible to municipalities with limited administrative capacity, and designing these funds in a way that allows for connections between integration investments and broader service improvements. Choices about key elements of resettlement programmes can also make a difference. For example, the design of pre-departure orientation programmes can be adjusted to better prepare refugees for life outside an urban area, and more sophisticated placement systems that match refugees' profiles, needs, and aspirations with receiving communities based on their resources and other characteristics could lead to better integration outcomes.

Strengthening the role of small and rural communities in resettlement has gained additional importance in 2020. After an interruption forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, resuming resettlement operations in a climate of budgetary uncertainty may prove politically sensitive. A government's ability to meet its commitments to international protection will thus rely on fair responsibility-sharing within the country, effective use of available resources, and close coordination between government and receiving communities. Recent resettlement initiatives (and related legal pathways, such as refugee sponsorship) in small and rural communities have demonstrated creative, bottom-up solutions to plugging infrastructure and service gaps; these may hold promise as a blueprint for future community-based approaches to integration, particularly as countries grapple with the pandemic's economic fallout. For this to bear fruit, however, policymakers at the regional, national, and EU level will have to move from celebrating the story of 'rural welcoming' to helping write it—a more onerous, but ultimately much more rewarding investment.

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<sup>212</sup> ERN, 'SHARE "Preparing Welcoming Communities Training Curriculum"', accessed 4 November 2020. The piloting phase reached more than 500 participants, with 95 per cent finding the training useful for their work. Evaluation results also suggested that the training filled an important gap, with many respondents reporting a lack of similar opportunities.

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