

**Solidarity Village(?)! –
Communal Action for Inclusion of Refugees in Rural Areas**

Essay (englische Fassung)

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Where Spatial Potential meets Social Rejection - Arrival Culture in the German Countryside

Public and Scientific debates on migration and inclusion of citizens with foreign origins, whether they are immigrants or refugees, tend to deal with urban contexts. This possibly leads back to the fact that labor migration such as the one of the “Gastarbeiter*innen” from Turkey took mostly place in the industrial centers of Germany, which often were middle- to large- scale cities. Plus, there has existed the perception that cities offer more possibilities and present the better suit for newly arrived people wishing to find a job and integrate into a new society.

Since the refugee crisis, however, the focus has shifted. The Königsteiner Schlüssel distributes refugees all over Germany, including states that are characterized by their decentralized settlement patterns such as Thuringia or Brandenburg. Thus housing refugees has become a new task for many rural municipalities. Additionally, the “Integrationsgesetz” of 2016 gave states the power to force refugees to stay within certain regional borders (Glorius et al). As this law affects freedom of movement it is strongly criticized. Yet, it has to be pointed out that its aim was to relieve overchallenged areas and direct migration flows to rather structurally weak areas with plenty of housing opportunities and underused public services (Aumüller, Gesemann 2016). Consequently many rural municipalities are nowadays faced with the new task of finding long-term solutions for effective inclusion of refugees.

Sadly, press releases paint a rather dark image of refugee hosting in small towns and rural areas: burning reception camps, assaults on refugees and public harassment present news headlines often received from eastern-German villages such as Bautzen or Freital. Many inhabitants of rural communities with low percentage of population with a foreign background, especially in long-time separated eastern Germany, hadn’t have much experience with foreigners in their environment and lack intercultural competences (Heckmann 2016: 171). Often the sociodemographic context (older generations with traditional values) aggravate the issue of refusal of strangers in rural areas (Glorius 2019: 134) - putting responsible municipalities in front of a greater challenge. Yet, at the very same time, refugee migration is discussed as a chance for many rural areas affected by demographic aging, population shrinkage and a lack of labor force (ebd.). How can integration of refugees be accomplished given the characteristic circumstances in the countryside? The following essay aims to take a closer look at the framework of migration in rural areas and discusses strategies for creating the “solidarity” village.

General Advantages and Disadvantages for Refugees in Rural Areas

Of course rural areas differ from each other concerning their structural properties, finances and society. Yet some common features for migration into rural areas were possible to determine.

Starting with the negative aspects it shall be mentioned that municipalities of rural areas generally struggle with providing appropriate and differentiated services for integration (Deutscher Landkreistag 2016: 23). Low population density and spatial distances make it difficult to sustain efficient services even for the original population, let alone refugees that often require specific services such as language courses, halal butchers, religious place of worship or other social services. Also municipalities often

lack in financial means or human resources for developing strategic integration policies. These disadvantages are often complemented by bad accessibility through a lack of public transport(ebd.) which especially affects refugees that don't have access to private means of transport.

Nevertheless the countryside also offers a wide range of advantages in comparison to the seemingly more popular urban centers. For example, accommodating refugees sometimes can be done better than in the city where German citizens themselves struggle to find housing for affordable prices. Now that the time of housing hundreds of newly arriving refugees in overcrowded emergency shelters has passed, it is necessary to provide adequate long-term housing solutions according to the refugees' needs. While in large and often more expensive cities, refugees are forced to continue to live in container settlements or crowded dorms, rural municipalities have more possibilities to decentralize refugees amongst apartments as the rent market is usually more relaxed (Glorius et al 2019: 128). In this context, rural areas are less likely to develop segregated areas and, in theory, offer better conditions for integration amongst the original population. Because rural areas have less anonymous environments than the city, many sources state that original inhabitants and migrants or refugees get possibly more chances to come in contact in their daily lives – it may be at the local grocery school, at parent-teacher conferences, during athletic activities or community festivities.

Also labor seems to be an important criteria when discussing migration to rural areas. As young people tend to leave the countryside with its aging population behind to move to the bigger city, many jobs, especially in the handcraft-sector, are left vacant. This presents a chance for migrants because these kinds of jobs are more accessible as they do not require higher education and a profound knowledge of the German language from the start. Yet, it is the government's responsibility to allow refugees who wish to work to obtain the necessary permits.

Even if integration amongst the original population is achieved it has to be kept in mind that an important factor that rural areas often cannot offer is the connection to fellow compatriots or people of the same ethnicity or mother tongue. The contact to people of the same ethnic background plays an important role for processing experienced traumata (Deutscher Landkreistag 2016). Refugees that lack such connection might experience social isolation – even if they are surrounded by a solidary community.

Between obligatory tasks and individual strategies for refugee inclusion - what municipalities should be doing

How do refugees end up in rural areas? Firstly, once entered into the Federal Republic of Germany, refugees are being distributed by the Königsteiner Schlüssel amongst the states. After staying at a "Erstaufnahmeeinrichtung" (preliminary first shelter) by the assigned state, state authorities distribute refugees amongst the municipalities of the "Landkreise" (which usually applies for rural areas) or "kreisfreie Städte" according to estimated capacities. The distribution takes place randomly and the refugees do not get asked for location preferences (Aumüller, Gesemann: 2016) – so no refugee actually chooses to live in the countryside.

The actual integration of refugees into the German society can be generally divided into two forms. A formal one – that is backed by the law and an

informal one - which depends on the capabilities and policies of the individual municipality. While the question of asylum grant is staying within the responsibility of Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), it is the task of the "Landkreise" to provide housing and the social services (Deutscher Landkreistag 2016). Thus, they take the prime responsibility for the practical enforcement of integration on a local level. In the following the key obligatory tasks are listed.

-Housing:

The municipalities* are to provide housing. Very few municipalities offer refugees a choice in housings.

-Health:

The municipalities* are responsible for ensuring health care.

-Social Welfare:

Financial Aid is given by the municipalities*.

-Labor Market:

The local "Job center" is responsible for integrating accepted asylum seekers into the labor market. Work permits are given by local "Ausländerbehörde" and highly depend on the asylum status (accepted/not accepted).

-"Jugendamt":

Takes responsibility for underage unchaperoned refugees.

-Education:

The municipalities* are responsible for providing primary and secondary education. "Volkshochschulen" play a key role as they provide language courses and the obligatory "Integrationskurs" for (only those) refugees that were granted asylum or have high chances of receiving asylum status.

*="Landkreise"

This obligatory service-infrastructure cannot possibly be well-equipped for refugees' needs as it is rather suited for original inhabitants. For example, language and bureaucracy can be a barrier that makes services less accessible to refugees. Also the obligatory measures mostly cover the physical well-being of the refugees staying in the rural areas. Yet it is not enough to create a mentally-perceived solidary environment because, in my opinion, solidarity is expressed in voluntary actions and not actions that are forced upon by the law. Thus municipalities should be adapting and expanding offered services beyond the obligatory scale. According to the law, municipalities are able to carry out additional voluntary tasks ("freiwillige Selbstverwaltungsaufgaben"). But what can a municipality do in order to create the "solidarity village"? From experiences of different rural areas, documented in the 2016 Report of the German "Landkreistag", four key strategies can be summarized and should be adapted by many other rural areas that deal with this question.

STRATEGY I: Qualifying Services through Moderating “Rural Governance”

Many refugees, especially those with unclear asylum status have just limited access to obligatory services like language courses that are financially covered by the state (ebd.: 73). This is where municipalities have to step in and create additional options for the ones without a clear status. Often solutions can only be organized by collaborating with other stakeholders such as educational institutions, private businesses and organizations, associations (“Vereine”), chambers of crafts or trade, individuals, etc. Beside the municipalities there are really many other stakeholders that can or should contribute to integrating refugees in a host area and create an overall solidary environment. The great challenge is yet to coordinate the potentials and moderate a network of stakeholders that can work together efficiently. Municipalities should take the position of a mediator amongst these stakeholders. Some communities in Germany have put on an “integration concept” or even an integration manager for this matter (ebd.: 99). Also cooperation with different municipalities should be taken into consideration.

STRATEGY II: Communication and Participation

This strategy should especially not be underestimated in areas with inhabitants showing signs of homophobia, racism, etc. Municipalities are to take a clear political stance about the refugee crisis and communicate their role, interests and targets clearly with the public. Mayors can play an important role in this context as they are often respected authority figures (Glorius et al. 2019: 134).

A very important task is to keep inhabitants informed – informed on key figures of local migration, reasons for fleeing, housing situations, local integration strategies but also laws and systems for asylum in Germany. It should be the municipality’s responsibility to prevent from misinformation to be spread by homophobic groups and extremist-right-winged individuals. Maybe it is not possible to change some people’s minds but it is necessary to prevent hatred and misconceptions from spreading. Skepticism can often be already decreased through personal contact with people responsible (Heckmann 216: 171)- therefore adequate means of mediation should be found. If possible, inhabitants should be able to partake in integration-related decisions/concepts – this could contribute to higher acceptance amongst the population (Deutscher Landkreistag 2016: 186). The usage of modern means of communications such as social media can act as a medium for information.

STRATEGY III: Activating and Reinforcing Volunteer Work

The refugee crisis showed that both in rural as well as in urban areas the population was able to spontaneously develop new structures of volunteering for arriving refugees in need (ebd.: 156). While in the beginning, delivering first emergency aid and supplies for refugees were not bearable without the help of volunteering inhabitants, today the long-term task of integrating refugees relies just as much on these people. Municipalities should yet again take the role as a mediator who enable the entire potential of a local population to actively and efficiently engage into voluntary work. They should offer information on volunteering possibilities and connect those in need with those willing to act. Some municipalities offer intercultural trainings and practice a culture of gratitude by organizing special events like “Helferfeste”. It should also lie within the responsibility of the municipality to connect the different actors of volunteer work, whether it’s aid agencies, Hobby clubs (“Vereine”) or individuals. Once connected,

different stakeholders can profit from synergy effects. Including refugees in volunteering that have already gained momentum in an area can be very helpful.

Concluding thoughts

In certain perspective, it could be summarized that the countryside needs refugees as much as refugees need the countryside. The requirement though is, that refugees have to be offered a solidary environment in which they feel safe, welcomed and have access to services that they need. The countryside for that matter, has many advantages in comparison to the city, and I believe, for many groups amongst refugees could be the better suit. Especially families could profit more from the calmer, potentially safe and more personal surrounding if they do not specifically suffer much from the countryside downsides (such as bad access to higher education, finding peers of the same ethnic groups, etc.). Yet, each refugee's or refugee family's needs or interest have to be looked at individually. This is why I suggest the distribution processes to take refugees needs stronger into consideration and develop a system that allows refugees to partake in those decisions.

Nevertheless, the key issue of financing is left to discuss. Many rural areas, especially in eastern Germany often suffer from household shortages and are not as able to offer a great range of additional services for immigrants. An idea by the Akademie für Raumentwicklung (ARL) suggested to establish a fund that all states or municipalities pay in, in order to support areas that are in need for financial support for their integration-related programs (Aumüller, Gesemann 2016). This way cities or other rural areas that are already at the end of their structural (not financial) capabilities can be relieved from tasks they are not able to carry out (like providing housing).

And finally it has to be kept in mind that hosting refugees is a humanitarian task and cannot be simply instrumentalized as a tool for regional development. Yet I believe giving refugees a chance to build a life in their new surrounding, become a part of the society and being able partake as a valuable member in the development of the hosting area can be seen as an act of solidarity and improve the feeling of participation.

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