

Integration pathways of forced migrants in rural settings. Access to resources and agency

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Abstract – During the last refugee movements numerous municipalities and small cities in rural regions gained experience with receiving and integrating international migrants and increased intercultural co-existence in daily life. To better analyse the social and economic effects of international immigration in rural and mountain areas the EU research project MATILDE was initiated. This paper focusses on social integration aspects of forced migrants in three rural municipalities in Vorarlberg (AT) and how these might lead to more permanent settlement. It is concluded that building social relationships during the asylum procedure provides an important starting advantage when it comes to find employment and housing after recognition, enabling permanent settlement in a rural municipality.

INTRODUCTION

The following analysis of integration pathways of asylum seekers and refugees (hereafter referred to as forced migrants) is based on research conducted within the EU funded project MATILDE (Horizon 2020 programme, grant agreement No 870831).

Although migration and integration have been studied for a long time, particularly in urban contexts, there is now increasing interest on international migration in remote and mountain regions areas (see for an overview: Kordel and Weidinger 2020). Based on the conceptual discussion by Ager and Strang (2008), this paper focusses on the importance of social relationships for all kinds of integration aspects (e.g. housing, employment, education or health), concentrating on the perceptions of forced migrants and the meaning of social relationships for their life in rural areas. Hereby the role of local structures, such as associations, volunteer networks and communal offers, is analysed, with a focus on their contribution to social integration, enabling and establishing social relationships between forced migrants and the local population. Questions about how forced migrants perceive their life worlds, relationships within the community, access to resources and sustaining migrants' agency should give some insights how these activities impacted on a more permanent settlement of forced migrants in rural municipalities (Herslund 2021).

METHODS

Social mapping is a participative method and suitable for research questions with regard to life perceptions, community involvement and agency, and access to resources (Kumar 2002). To gain deeper knowledge of the perceptions of forced migrants 16 social mappings (each with one or two persons, in sum 25

forced migrants, 14 female and 11 male) were conducted in three rural municipalities of different sizes, territorial features and distinct socio-economic characteristics in the Federal State of Vorarlberg (AT). Within the scope of using the method of social mapping the aim was to find patterns of (un-)successful social integration of forced migrants by exploring their activities and detecting important contact persons since their arrival in Vorarlberg. By mapping the content of the interviews through presenting icons for activity fields, the method adds visibility and allows the relationships of the interviewees to be shown more clearly. Social mappings were transcribed and analysed according to the main principles of the Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1996).

RESULTS

Local structures of social integration offer a variety of challenges and opportunities to promote social contacts and exchange between forced migrants and the local population. However, these processes are heavily influenced by timing and the status of the asylum procedure. *Living conditions, needs and demands differ considerably between the period of asylum application and the time after receiving first recognition and right of abode.*

Many interviewees in the three municipalities arrived during the high influx of migration in 2015 and 2016. At that time municipalities were highly alert to the needs of incomers and voluntary aid was offered. Thus, forced migrants found a mostly open and welcoming attitude by locals and many offerings for social integration at that time (Machold and Dax 2017). With regard to the needs and demands of forced migrants during the asylum process the following aspects were of high importance.

Learning of the German language

Due to the large number of new arrivals in 2015 and 2016 official learning structures were overwhelmed with the acute demand for German classes. Therefore, many low-threshold courses were established immediately after the arrival. Volunteers, many of them retired language teachers, supported forced migrants by teaching a basic set of the German language. In other cases, language learning happened to be on a more individual basis, others preferred to visit an even more informal setting, such as language cafés. Depending on the intensity of the support for language learning, close relationships between forced migrants and locals were established.

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Coping with affluent amount of spare time during this period of waiting

To have plenty of time and literally nothing to do but waiting for the application interview and recognition is a difficult psychological challenge. It is even harder if forced migrants arrive without family, which was the case for many (young) men. Offerings by local volunteers, such as sports activities or get togethers were a welcome distraction for migrants. During all these activities personal relationships may be developed and maintained. Forced migrants were also looking for some kind of work or employment to make some sense of their time and be of use for the local society. Many of the interviewees were engaged in temporary job opportunities with the program "neighbourhood aid". These activities offered appropriate possibilities to be active in the local community, especially when forced migrants were not (yet) in paid employment.

Attaining status of recognised refugee

In some cases, the asylum procedure was exceedingly difficult and a right to abode could only be achieved through high supportive efforts of volunteers, either with regard to legal advice, or accompaniment and support at interviews and other activities that put forward the asylum process. Moreover, volunteers enabled forced migrants the link to local activities and to build bridges to the receiving society in many aspects of integration.

Educational success of children

Many forced migrants came as families and naturally the educational success of their children play a major role for their quality of life in the new surroundings. Again, informal and individual voluntary work was of crucial importance, as well as the support of primary and secondary school teachers.

When forced migrants get their right of abode needs and demands of social integration gradually change. As an immediate task they have to look for some kind of livelihood and housing as basic care provisions come to an end. In this regard relationships cultivated and elaborated during their asylum process were of crucial importance. Particularly individual support by volunteers was often decisive when it came to job placement, finding an apprenticeship placement and also when looking for a new apartment. However, focus of forced migrants increasingly changed from meeting basic needs to general well-being of the whole family. This included particularly a socially attractive neighbourhood, possibly with access to common meeting places, where neighbours can meet at an equal footing, as well as good support in school and local integration opportunities for children. While male migrants tended to develop some command of the German language, women often lacked contacts and language exposure due to child care, child birth, limited skills and employment integration and illness periods. Most of them were not employed and had little contact opportunities with locals. Thus, particularly for women community offers like language cafés, sewing cafés or any other low threshold offer are an

important possibility to socialize and practice German language acquisition.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social relationships are an important aspect of integration and local structures offer a variety of opportunities to promote the establishment of social contacts between forced migrants and the local population. Even if the contacts loose in relevance over time, the social network built during the asylum procedure happen to exist also beyond official recognition. Those contacts can be reactivated when needed and reveal to be relevant for many aspects of daily life (job or apprenticeship placement, housing, health treatment, etc.). Thus, it can be concluded that a diversified social network consisting of local and regional gatekeepers, volunteers, neighbours, friends, etc. is an "anchor" for permanent settlement of forced migrants in rural municipalities as these often build bridges and links to local and regional offerings.

A thorough knowledge of the diversity and relevance of local structures of social integration strengthens awareness building of regional stakeholders who coordinate and manage coordination activities. This might be of particular relevance when it comes to the current increase of migrants – be it refugees from Ukraine or asylum seekers from other destinations.

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